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

Erin Baggott Carter & Brett L. Carter

To cite this article: Erin Baggott Carter & Brett L. Carter (2021) Questioning More: RT, Outward-Facing Propaganda, and the Post-West World Order, Security Studies, 30:1, 49-78, DOI: 10.1080/09636412.2021.1885730

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2021.1885730

Published online: 24 Feb 2021.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 1055

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 3
Can propaganda produced by foreign adversaries shape public opinion in a target country? Many autocrats apparently think so. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) operates the China Daily, which circulates widely in Washington, and maintains the CGTN news network, which reaches thirty million American households and presents the CCP’s forced labor camps for ethnic Uyghurs as “successful vocational training centers.”¹ The Russian government operates Sputnik and RT (formerly Russia Today), which, in 2013, became the first news platform to surpass one billion views on YouTube.² The Saudi government sponsors Al Arabiya. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan launched TRT World in 2015; it broadcasts, in English, twenty-four hours a day from bureaus in Istanbul, Washington, London, and Singapore. The


© 2021 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC
North Korean government maintains the *Pyongyang Times*. Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez launched Telesur in 2015. “A Latin socialist answer to CNN,” Telesur is also funded by the governments of Cuba, Nicaragua, Uruguay, and Bolivia. We refer to these as outward-facing propaganda apparatuses, and the financial commitments required to sustain them are nontrivial. The Russian government spends more than $300 million on RT annually.3

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

Our core theoretical argument is that outward-facing propaganda should have a stronger effect on opinions about foreign affairs than opinions about domestic politics. We identify two reasons for this. First, individuals tend to have stronger, more persistent opinions about issues of personal importance.4 Because foreign policy is generally less salient to Americans than domestic politics,5 opinions about the former should be relatively more fluid. Second, individuals also tend to have stronger, more persistent views about issues that exhibit partisan polarization.6 In the decades since World War II, America’s foreign policy has exhibited far less partisan polarization than its domestic politics, which again renders opinions about foreign affairs more malleable than those about domestic politics.

---

3Marcin Maczka, “The Propaganda Machine,” *New Eastern Europe* 3, no. 4 (July 2012): 27–32. All dollar figures in this article are in USD.
To probe the effects of outward-facing propaganda by issue area, we focus on one uniquely important outward-facing propaganda apparatus: RT, which the Russian government founded in 2005 and, as of 2017, enjoyed a weekly viewership of eleven million Americans and a total potential audience of 85 million Americans. We show that three topics constitute 60% of all articles disseminated by RT’s Twitter account: coverage of America’s democratic allies, US foreign policy, and US domestic conditions. These articles are overwhelmingly critical. Only 5% of RT content focuses on Russia.

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

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

This paper advances three works of literature. First, scholars have long sought to understand how citizens form opinions about foreign policy.

---

Researchers recognize the relevance of an individual's values, political ideology, economic interests, peers, and cognitive misunderstandings. Individuals also look to the leaders of trusted allies and international institutions. This paper is the first to show that propaganda produced by foreign adversaries can shape citizens' foreign policy views, and in strategically meaningful ways.

Second, this paper illuminates the Russian government's ongoing informational campaign against the United States. Driven by the 2016 election, scholars have sought to understand the Russian government's covert activities undertaken to influence American politics. Researchers have attempted to identify Russian bots, understand their objectives, and measure their

effects. We show that one component of this campaign—both overt and longstanding—may be equally critical. Exposure to RT compels Americans to favor the United States retreating from its position of global leadership, and to privilege the national interest over the interests of America’s democratic allies. Contrary to much speculation, we find no evidence that RT undermines trust in democratic institutions or changes domestic political opinions.

Finally, this paper advances our understanding of autocratic politics. Scholars regard propaganda as central to autocratic survival. They have sought to measure its effects, understand the mechanisms through which it operates, and explain cross-country variation in propaganda strategies. This literature focuses on inward-facing propaganda, designed to manipulate the beliefs of an autocrat’s citizens. Yet despite its ubiquity, outward-facing propaganda remains poorly understood. It is unclear which autocrats employ it, why they do so, who they target, or to what effect. Our theoretical framework addresses these questions. Our empirical results suggest these efforts are fundamental to autocratic politics.

This paper proceeds as follows. The next section presents our theoretical framework. We survey the objectives of outward-facing propaganda, the mechanisms whereby changes in public opinion yield changes in policy, and our hypotheses about which issue areas are most susceptible. After that, we provide an overview of RT. The following section characterizes RT’s content and introduces our survey experiment. The penultimate section presents our results. We then conclude with suggestions for future research.

Understanding Outward-Facing Propaganda

The Objectives

Scholars have suggested two reasons autocrats employ outward-facing propaganda. First, autocrats may aim to shape the beliefs of foreign citizens about themselves: their government, their community, and even their country’s appropriate role in the world. This is how many observers understand the Russian government’s social media campaigns against Western...
democracies. These campaigns have sought to shape citizens’ voting preferences and ultimately elect candidates or support movements or parties who espouse pro-Russia policies or otherwise advance the Russian government’s perceived interests: Donald Trump in the United States,23 Marine Le Pen in France,24 Brexit in the United Kingdom,25 and Alternative for Germany (AfD).26 Other scholars have suggested that the Russian government aims to undermine Americans’ confidence in democratic institutions,27 a view echoed by Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s 2017 indictment against the Russian government’s Internet Research Agency (IRA).28 This may yield a range of benefits to autocratic governments. If citizens in Western democracies can be persuaded that democracy is less worthy of promotion, autocrats abroad may confront less pressure to reform from Western governments. Alternatively, if leading democracies appear dysfunctional,


24Ferrara, “Disinformation and Social Bot Operations.”


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

**The Mechanisms**

Few accounts of outward-facing propaganda explicitly address how changes in public opinion culminate in policy change. Drawing on Michael Tomz, Jessica L. P. Weeks, and Karen Yarhi-Milo, we suggest two mechanisms. First, voters may select candidates whose foreign policy positions are most consistent with their own. Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo refer to this as a selection mechanism, and it suggests outward-facing propaganda aims to shape electoral outcomes by compelling voters to back a preferred candidate, or at least to not penalize that preferred candidate for otherwise unpopular foreign policy positions. In the context of the 2016 American

---

election, for instance, the Russian government’s outward-facing propaganda may have sought to make Republican voters—partisans of Cold Warrior Ronald Reagan—more comfortable with candidate Trump’s embrace of a foreign policy that was consistent with Russian interests: his North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) skepticism or his view that Crimea may be rightfully Russian. The selection mechanism suggests outward-facing propaganda should exhibit clear temporal variation: in particular, that it spikes during the target country’s election seasons.

**The Effects**

Although many autocrats employ outward-facing propaganda, virtually no evidence exists about whether it shapes public opinion. In turn, it remains unclear whether Western democracies should care that the world’s autocrats are attempting to manipulate their citizens’ beliefs. Many observers are skeptical. In 2014, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof dismissed it: “RT is a Russian propaganda arm, and I don’t think it’s going to matter.”

In 2017, the *Washington Post* announced: “If Russia Today is Moscow’s propaganda arm, it’s not very good at its job.” Ellen Mickiewicz’s skepticism rests on the size of RT’s audience, which is uncertain, and its credibility, which is dubious.

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

There are good ex-ante reasons to think that outward-facing propaganda is persuasive, at least under some conditions. First, there is mounting evidence that inward-facing propaganda works. During the 1999 Russian

---

parliamentary election, access to independent television decreased voting for Vladimir Putin’s United Russia party. Pro-regime coverage in propaganda newspapers across the world’s autocracies appears to reduce popular protests. Evidence also shows that partisan media in democracies can shape public opinion. Where broadcast, Fox News yielded an additional 0.6 percentage points for George W. Bush in the 2000 election. In the 2004 and 2008 elections, Fox News generated an additional 3.59 and 6.34 percentage points, respectively, for the Republican candidate. Most recently, a series of papers have documented how Fox News consumption shaped individual health decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Scholars have documented the effects of partisan media in other democracies, including, most notably, Brazil and Italy.

Second, outward-facing propagandists have adopted the tactics that render inward-facing propaganda and partisan media in democracies persuasive. All propagandists confront a singular challenge: rational citizens should discount information as long as its author is its chief beneficiary. We refer to this as the “propagandist’s dilemma,” and propagandists generally employ two tactics to confront it. “Honest propaganda” occurs when propaganda apparatuses acquire credibility by mixing fact with fiction, which gives them some capacity to manipulate citizens’ beliefs. The China Daily, for instance, acknowledges China’s legitimate social problems, but also occasionally claims the 1989 Tiananmen massacre is “a myth.” “Black propaganda” occurs when authorship is concealed, the better to prevent consumers from discounting it. This is why Russia’s IRA and

40Enikolopov, Petrova, and Zhuravskaya, “Media and Political Persuasion.”
41Carter and Carter, “Propaganda and Protest in Autocracies.”
China’s Communist Party employ bots and trolls on social media,\textsuperscript{50} which attempt to pass as members of the target population. This makes sense: Individuals are more likely to update their beliefs based on peer effects from their in-group.\textsuperscript{51}

Our central theoretical argument is that beliefs about foreign affairs are more susceptible to outward-facing propaganda than beliefs about domestic politics. We identify two reasons for this. First, substantial evidence shows most American citizens know relatively little about the world beyond their borders.\textsuperscript{52} In 2017, the Pew Research Center found that just 60% of Americans knew the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union and 37% knew Emmanuel Macron was president of France.\textsuperscript{53} In 2011, Marist found that nearly 25% of Americans were unaware the United States claimed independence from Great Britain. Forbes called the American public “indifferent” about foreign affairs;\textsuperscript{54} the Cato Institute described Americans as having an “attention deficit.”\textsuperscript{55} Reflecting on this, Joshua W. Busby and Jonathan Monten find that foreign policy is far less salient to Americans than domestic policy.\textsuperscript{56} This has key implications for the relative fluidity of foreign policy beliefs. Since issues of personal importance are subject to more deliberation, individuals tend to have stronger, more persistent opinions about them. These opinions, in turn, tend to be stable over time.\textsuperscript{57} Because American citizens are less engaged in foreign policy debates, we should expect their foreign policy beliefs to be more fluid.

Second, America’s foreign policy has historically been far less polarized than its domestic politics. Since World War II, the American government has pursued a relatively liberal internationalist foreign policy, which has enjoyed bipartisan support.\textsuperscript{58} G. John Ikenberry characterized the agenda: “Open markets, international institutions, cooperative security, democratic
community … and the rule of law.”

This bipartisan consensus was challenged in the early 2000s when President George W. Bush initiated costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Still, Stephen Chaudoin, Helen V. Milner, and Dustin H. Tingley marshal a range of evidence that suggests the bipartisan consensus remains intact. Again, this has important implications for the fluidity of foreign policy beliefs. Alexandra Guisinger and Elizabeth N. Saunders find that “the degree to which public attitudes are malleable … depends on … the degree to which the issue already exhibits partisan polarization.” Where polarization is limited, Guisinger and Saunders show, the content of political messaging itself determines its persuasiveness, and many opinion leaders can be persuasive. This creates space for well-crafted outward-facing propaganda.

This yields our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). Since opinions about foreign affairs are more fluid, outward-facing propaganda should have stronger effects.

Though outside the empirical scope of this paper, H1 has an important corollary: Image-laundering campaigns should be more effective when they focus on countries about which the target population knows relatively little. This may be why Rwandan president Paul Kagame has persuaded many international observers of his commitment to “good governance,” despite his poor human rights record. Conversely, when the target population has stronger views about the sponsoring government, image-laundering campaigns should be less effective.

By contrast, our theoretical framework suggests beliefs about domestic politics should be more robust to outward-facing propaganda. Relative to foreign affairs, Americans are better informed about domestic politics, their beliefs tend to be more deeply held, and the issue space is highly polarized. Accordingly, Stephen Ansolabehere, Jonathan Rodden, and James


61 Chaudoin, Milner, and Tingley, “The Center Still Holds.”


63 It is possible US foreign policy will become more polarized in the future (see Kenneth A. Schultz, “Perils of Polarization for U.S. Foreign Policy,” Washington Quarterly 40, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 7–28). If so, the scope for outward-facing propaganda to shape foreign policy views may decline or be driven exclusively by the first mechanism.


M. Snyder Jr. show that Americans’ views about economic policy and moral issues are strikingly stable over time.\textsuperscript{66} We thus expect outward-facing propaganda to have relatively minimal effects on a target population’s opinions about its domestic conditions.

This constitutes our second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2 (H2). Since opinions about domestic politics are generally stable, outward-facing propaganda should have weaker effects.

H2 has important implications for how we understand the Russian government’s informational campaigns against Western democracies: about whether these campaigns undermine public faith in democratic institutions or foster polarization. Our theoretical framework suggests these concerns are overstated. Outward-facing propaganda that aims to manipulate these beliefs confronts the fact that individuals hold strong prior opinions about them.

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

\textbf{The Possibility (and Implications) of Decay}

Even if outward-facing propaganda works, its effects may be short-lived. Social psychologists recognize that the effects of persuasive communication are strongest immediately after consumption and decay quickly.\textsuperscript{67} Accordingly, campaign advertisements can have measurable effects on American voters, but for relatively short periods.\textsuperscript{68} Casualty reports have similarly short-lived effects on whether Americans support ongoing military interventions.\textsuperscript{69} Across autocracies, the effects of inward-facing propaganda on popular protest exhibit a similar decay.\textsuperscript{70}


\textsuperscript{70}Carter and Carter, “Propaganda and Protest in Autocracies.”
Perhaps this is cause for optimism. If outward-facing propaganda induces an opinion shift, the argument might go, the effect should fade before being transmitted through the political system and culminating in policy change. We are less optimistic. Rather, since sponsor governments are strategic, we should expect them to plan accordingly. The possibility of decay suggests not that we should be unconcerned about outward-facing propaganda, but that we should observe temporal variation in its execution. We should expect the world’s autocrats to increase the rate—and perhaps vary the substance—of outward-facing propaganda when public opinion is most important.

This, we believe, is why outward-facing propaganda appears to intensify around the target country’s elections. Russian bot activity spikes during American and European elections, just as the Chinese government launches massive online campaigns to undermine pro-independence candidates around Taiwanese elections. Outward-facing propaganda around other moments of political import is less well documented, though it appears to spike in such cases as well. Russian outward-facing propaganda in Turkey spiked during the Crimea invasion in 2014 after the Turkish military downed a Russian fighter jet that violated Turkish airspace in 2015, and after the 2016 coup against Erdoğan. In Brazil, Russian propaganda spiked during the 2014 presidential election and Dilma Rousseff’s 2016 impeachment. Russian outward-facing propaganda has spiked during other political crises across Europe as well.

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

A Brief Overview of RT

To probe whether outward-facing propaganda can shape citizens’ beliefs—and, if so, about which issues—we focus on a single outward-facing propaganda apparatus: RT, founded in 2005 with $15 million from the Russian

---


government and $15 million from “private” banks. RT was conceived by Mikhail Lesin, Putin’s former media minister, and Aleksei Gromov, his former spokesman. RT markets itself as like the BBC: government-funded but editorially independent. Putin has been more candid. In 2013, he observed that, given its funding source, RT “cannot help but reflect the Russian government’s official position.”

Founded as Russia Today, RT rechristened itself in 2009 to emphasize its global coverage and expand its reach. Shortly thereafter, RT launched its satellite channel, RT America, which broadcasts from Washington and New York. Between 2005 and 2017, RT’s budget increased tenfold, to roughly $323 million. For reference, the 2014 budget of the BBC World Service—the world’s largest broadcast news operation—amounted to $376 million. When RT’s operating budget reached $380 million in 2011, the Duma, Russia’s lower legislative house, reduced funding to $300 million for the following year. Putin promptly prohibited any future reductions. In 2008, the Russian government designated RT as an organization of strategic national importance.

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

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

79Erlanger, “Russia’s RT Network.”
80RT, “RT Weekly TV Audience Grows by More Than a Third Over 2 Years,” reports viewership statistics from a 2017 Ipsos poll.
Its bid for influence has frustrated policymakers. In 2014, Secretary of State John Kerry called it a “propaganda bullhorn” for Moscow.82 In 2017, French President Macron called it “lying propaganda.”83 British regulators called it “materially misleading.”84 These criticisms culminated in November 2017, when the US Justice Department required RT America to register as a Russian government agent. Other outward-facing propaganda outlets condemned the ruling. The China Daily, also registered as a foreign agent, proclaimed that “foreign media outlets in [the] US merit bouquets, not brickbats.” RT, the China Daily contended, was “far better” than CNN.85

Survey Experiment

Identifying Treatment Conditions

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

Twitter is key to RT’s distribution strategy. The Russian government uses bots to drive traffic to RT articles on Twitter, particularly during election seasons in democracies.86 Using the Python computer programming language, we scraped articles disseminated by RT’s Twitter account on a sample of thirty-one days in 2018. RT disseminates roughly 100 tweets per day, so our corpus counts 3,249 tweets. These tweets generally contain links to articles but sometimes feature pictures and videos. After reading a day’s worth of tweets and the articles to which they linked, we developed a set of nine labels that capture the primary topic of each article. We then had research assistants apply topic labels to the balance of RT tweets.

The results appear in Figure 1. For each of nine topics along the x-axis, the y-axis displays the number of articles that RT disseminated. Some 30% of all RT coverage focuses on the United States. Of total US coverage, about 51% focuses on US foreign policy and 49% focuses on domestic

issues. This coverage is strikingly critical. Headlines about US foreign policy include: “Democracy being degraded as US seeks global hegemony by any means;” “US sanctions violate international law & WTO [World Trade Organization] norms, will not be left unanswered;” and “US congressman proposes gold-backed dollar, but does America have enough bullion?” One article about US domestic politics announced: “David and Goliath situation: How New York City poop became a rural Alabama town’s problem.” The article details the frustration of citizens in Parrish, Alabama, whose air was contaminated when a 42-car train filled with New York City waste parked in their town for over two months. RT used the issue to highlight America’s north-south, liberal-conservative divide. The article includes several tweets from individuals who claimed Alabamans “deserved” the “poop trucks” for supporting Donald Trump.

Apart from American foreign policy and domestic conditions, RT focuses overwhelmingly on coverage of America’s democratic allies: countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Israel, and South Korea. This topic accounts for 26% of RT coverage. Also strikingly critical, this coverage typically focuses on terrorism, crime, and corruption. One article covered UK politician Nigel Farage’s accusation that London mayor Sadiq Khan was not doing enough to stem a “crime epidemic.”

Figure 1. RT content from April 2018. We draw treatment articles from the three most common topic areas, shaded in dark gray.
RT devotes substantial coverage to viral content. These tweets are “clickbait” about animals, crime, or bizarre events such as comets or accidents. This content may drive traffic to RT’s political content.

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

**Visualizing Russian Propaganda Narratives**

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

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

From the top left panel, coverage of US domestic politics during the sample period underscored America’s moral decay. Colin Kaepernick, whose national anthem protests left him excluded from the NFL, was routinely cited as evidence of American racism. “Nike” is among the most distinctive terms; RT cited Kaepernick’s Nike endorsement as evidence of his widespread popularity among African Americans, reiterating America’s racial divide. RT covered Brett Kavanaugh’s Senate confirmation battle, and especially the sexual assault allegations against him: “Kavanaugh nomination vote set for Monday, unless accuser testifies on sex abuse claims.” Amazon’s Jeff Bezos figured prominently as well, evidence of America’s massive inequality.
From the top right panel, coverage of US foreign policy was dominated by crises that underscored America’s foreign policy failures. The military campaign in Syria was, by far, the most common topic; “Idlib,” the most distinctive term behind “US,” is a Syrian city that was devastated by the war. One representative tweet linked to an article with this headline: “The Iranian president repeatedly stressed that foreign influence was a major factor in escalating the war in Syria, and called on the US to withdraw the troops that it has illegally deployed.” Other foreign policy coverage focused on US sanctions on Iran and Russia, as well as the tariffs Washington levied as the opening salvo in a trade war.

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

**Survey Design**

Since RT’s substantive content focuses primarily on America’s domestic conditions, foreign policy, and democratic allies, so do we. Our survey design appears in Figure 3. We specified three sets of treatment articles: US domestic politics, US foreign policy, and criticizing democracy. We selected the articles for each treatment condition by randomly selecting four articles from each of the three topic categories. By selecting four articles from each category—rather than a single article from each category—we minimized the possibility that the treatment articles were unrepresentative of the broader population. The online appendix includes all twelve treatment articles.

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

After exposure to a treatment article, respondents were asked a series of questions. These questions, many of which were drawn from Pew Research
Center surveys on foreign policy, solicit respondents’ opinions about a range of topics: whether they favor US global engagement, view its democratic allies as worthy of support, view Russia as an adversary, approve of the president’s job performance, and trust the national government and news media, among others. These questions are deliberately broad. We seek to identify the range of political views that RT shapes and those it does not.

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

**Foreign Agent Disclosure**

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

**Survey Population**

We fielded the survey experiment on 7 April 2018, via Amazon Mechanical Turk, a popular platform for social science research. Validation studies have shown that surveys fielded on this platform have generated the same findings as surveys fielded on nationally representative samples. We received 1,007 responses. After omitting respondents who completed the survey in an unrealistically short amount of time, the sample size was 944. Our sample’s demographic characteristics appear in the online appendix. The sample is reasonably well balanced: 54% female, 82% white, and an average age of 41-years-old. The youngest participant is 19; the oldest 82. The sample is well educated, with over 50% reporting a bachelor’s degree or higher. Politically, the sample skews left, with 51% identifying as...

---


91Because respondents in the treatment group were administered an article to read and respondents in the control group were not, we adopted differential thresholds of 4 minutes for treatment group respondents and 3 minutes for control group respondents. Our results are robust to different thresholds, as discussed below.
Democrat, 25% as Republican, and 22% as an independent. The online appendix reports covariate balance across partisan subgroups.

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

**Do Americans “Question More?”**

*Estimating Equations*

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

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta T_i + \gamma X_i + \varepsilon$$

(1)

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

**Results: What Opinions are Unchanged**

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

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

---

Table 1. Effect of RT on domestic policy views and Russia views.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>Presidential approval (Ordered logistic)</th>
<th>Economic Trajectory logistic (Ordered logistic)</th>
<th>News discernment (Ordered logistic)</th>
<th>Trust in government (Ordered logistic)</th>
<th>Russia favorability (Ordered logistic)</th>
<th>Russia adversary (Ordered logistic)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nondisclosure</td>
<td>-0.178 (0.273)</td>
<td>0.068 (0.270)</td>
<td>-0.002 (0.189)</td>
<td>-0.135 (0.190)</td>
<td>-0.016 (0.199)</td>
<td>-0.096 (0.218)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosure</td>
<td>-0.189 (0.274)</td>
<td>-0.135 (0.269)</td>
<td>-0.190 (0.190)</td>
<td>-0.038 (0.190)</td>
<td>0.073 (0.200)</td>
<td>-0.166 (0.218)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.010 (0.007)</td>
<td>0.013* (0.007)</td>
<td>0.010* (0.005)</td>
<td>0.001 (0.005)</td>
<td>-0.014*** (0.005)</td>
<td>0.011** (0.005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-0.063 (0.069)</td>
<td>-0.089 (0.069)</td>
<td>0.018 (0.048)</td>
<td>0.012 (0.047)</td>
<td>0.013 (0.048)</td>
<td>0.036 (0.052)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>-0.032 (0.054)</td>
<td>0.241*** (0.054)</td>
<td>0.031 (0.037)</td>
<td>0.061* (0.036)</td>
<td>-0.081** (0.038)</td>
<td>0.009 (0.041)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (male)</td>
<td>0.166 (0.177)</td>
<td>0.549*** (0.173)</td>
<td>-0.182 (0.123)</td>
<td>-0.008 (0.120)</td>
<td>-0.158 (0.126)</td>
<td>0.183 (0.135)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship</td>
<td>-1.185 (0.073)</td>
<td>-0.640*** (0.057)</td>
<td>0.178*** (0.036)</td>
<td>-0.375*** (0.037)</td>
<td>-0.293*** (0.038)</td>
<td>0.255*** (0.039)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low quality news share</td>
<td>4.923*** (1.532)</td>
<td>2.128 (1.539)</td>
<td>2.932*** (0.900)</td>
<td>-1.573*** (0.774)</td>
<td>2.768*** (0.776)</td>
<td>-3.112*** (0.981)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.816*** (0.504)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.816*** (0.504)</td>
<td>1.816*** (0.504)</td>
<td>1.816*** (0.504)</td>
<td>1.816*** (0.504)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observations 693 743 890 901 894 859

Note. *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.
difficult to change domestic political opinions at this point in American history.

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

**Results: What Americans Question**

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

From column 1, exposure to RT compels Americans to prefer a less engaged, less active foreign policy. This effect is substantively large. The proportional odds ratio is 0.42 for the nondisclosure treatment group and 0.68 for the disclosure treatment group. To interpret this more intuitively, the first panel of Figure 4 presents the predicted probability that treatment respondents will provide a given categorical answer. For simplicity, we collapse “Strongly agree,” “Agree,” and “Somewhat agree” into a single category; we also collapse “Strongly disagree,” “Disagree,” and “Somewhat disagree” into a single category. Americans generally agree that their government should be more active abroad: this predicted probability is just less than 0.9. Exposure to RT reduces this to 0.8. This effect is somewhat stronger—a reduction to 0.7—when we explicitly disclose to respondents that RT is financed by the Russian government.

Table 2. Effect of RT on foreign policy views.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Active Ordered logistic (1)</th>
<th>Solve world problems Ordered logistic (2)</th>
<th>Interests &gt; allies Logistic (3)</th>
<th>Engagement Index OLS (4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nondisclosure</td>
<td>-0.331** (0.190)</td>
<td>-0.477** (0.213)</td>
<td>0.215 (0.251)</td>
<td>-0.047** (0.023)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosure</td>
<td>-0.548*** (0.192)</td>
<td>-0.571*** (0.213)</td>
<td>0.561** (0.248)</td>
<td>-0.064*** (0.023)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.020*** (0.005)</td>
<td>0.004 (0.005)</td>
<td>-0.019*** (0.006)</td>
<td>0.002*** (0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.117*** (0.047)</td>
<td>0.023 (0.052)</td>
<td>-0.111* (0.060)</td>
<td>0.006 (0.006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>0.040 (0.036)</td>
<td>-0.046 (0.040)</td>
<td>0.046 (0.046)</td>
<td>0.006 (0.004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (Male)</td>
<td>0.060 (0.121)</td>
<td>-0.200 (0.136)</td>
<td>0.242 (0.152)</td>
<td>-0.001 (0.015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship</td>
<td>0.120*** (0.035)</td>
<td>0.322*** (0.040)</td>
<td>-0.443*** (0.047)</td>
<td>0.014*** (0.004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low quality news share</td>
<td>-2.125*** (0.818)</td>
<td>-0.409 (0.838)</td>
<td>2.141* (1.094)</td>
<td>-0.164* (0.093)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.911*** (0.461)</td>
<td>902</td>
<td>0.504*** (0.042)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observations: 899 799 902 798

Note. *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.
The results in column 2 suggest the same conclusion. We asked
respondents whether “the United States [does] too much, too little, or
the right amount in helping solve world problems.” The proportional
odds ratio is 0.62 for the nondisclosure treatment group and 0.57 for
the disclosure treatment group. The second panel of Figure 4 presents
a similar set of predicted probabilities. We estimate that control
group respondents believe the US “does too much” with a probability of 0.27.
Exposure to RT increases this predicted probability to around 0.4 in
both treatment groups.

Exposure to RT not only makes Americans favor a less active approach
to world affairs. It also renders them less supportive of a cooperative for-
ign policy. From column 3, we asked respondents whether “the US
should follow its own national interests” or “take into account the interests of its
allies.” Americans are generally cooperative. Our median respondent—a 38-
year-old woman who holds a bachelor’s degree, earns between $50,000 and
$75,000, and identifies as a leaning Democrat—has a 74% probability of
asserting that the United States should consider its allies’ interests.

Table 3. Core foreign policy survey questions.96

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Possible answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Solve World Problems</td>
<td>In terms of helping solve world problems, does the United States do too much, too little, or the right amount in helping solve world problems?</td>
<td>Does too much. Does too little. Does right amount.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interests &gt; Allies</td>
<td>In world affairs, the United States should follow its own national interests, OR the United States should take into account the interests of its allies.</td>
<td>In world affairs, the United States should follow its own national interests. In world affairs, the United States should take into account the interests of its allies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4. The effect of RT on global engagement. For simplicity, we collapse “Strongly agree,” “Agree,” and “Slightly agree” into a single “Agree” category. We do the same for the “Disagree” responses. We reproduce these figures in the online appendix disaggregated by response categories.
Exposure to RT decreases this probability to between 61% and 69%. The third panel of Figure 4 presents these predicted probabilities.

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

Measuring a Coherent Belief Shift: Principal Components Analysis

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

Put differently, there appears to be an underlying coherence to the belief shift that RT generates.

To identify and measure this underlying coherence, we use principal components analysis. Intuitively, for a set of variables, the first principal component represents the single line that accounts for the largest possible variance among them. This technique has been used to construct underlying indices in a variety of settings. Andy Baker, for instance, uses it to construct an underlying index of racism from a set of survey questions. In our case, the first principal component yields an index that measures the extent to which Americans support a foreign policy of global leadership, based on their responses to our survey experiment.

To create this index, we first confirm that the three outcome variables we discussed above—Active, Solve World Problems, and Interests > Allies—

---

97 Baker, “Race, Paternalism, and Foreign Aid.”
are correlated. The correlation matrix appears in the online appendix. Each correlation coefficient is 0.38 or above. We then compute several additional diagnostic statistics to confirm the correlation: Cronbach’s $\alpha$, Bartlett’s test of sphericity, and the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy. Again, we find evidence of moderate correlation, which indeed suggests an underlying dimension to these stated beliefs. To measure this underlying dimension, we extract the first principal component of the three outcome variables, which yields an index of the underlying belief that gave rise to the correlation among them. To facilitate interpretation, we rescale this measure along the $[0, 1]$ interval, where 1 indicates favoring a more globally engaged foreign policy and 0 indicates favoring a less active, less cooperative foreign policy. Finally, we re-estimate Equation (1), with the outcome variable given by this new index. Since it is continuous on the $[0, 1]$ interval, we use ordinary least squares.

The results appear in column 4 of Table 2. To interpret the substantive magnitude, we simulate the predicted value of the index for the median respondent: a 38-year-old woman who holds a bachelor’s degree earns between $50,000 and $75,000, and leans Democrat. This median respondent prefers a globally engaged, cooperative foreign policy, with a predicted index value of 0.65. Exposure to RT reduces this by about 10 percentage points, to 0.55, or roughly half a standard deviation. If this median respondent identifies as a Republican rather than a Democrat, her predicted index value would be 0.45. Our estimated RT effect is thus about half the difference between Democrats and Republicans.

**Robustness Checks**

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

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

---

98The Cronbach’s $\alpha$ value is 0.62. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy is 0.64. The Bartlett’s test of sphericity yields a $\chi^2$ value of 325.7, indicating that the sample intercorrelation matrix did not come from a population in which the intercorrelation matrix is an identity matrix.
By casting America’s democratic allies as corrupt and America’s foreign policy as destructive, it is straightforward to imagine why RT’s coverage of America’s foreign policy and democratic allies compels Americans to favor a withdrawal from global leadership. Yet even RT’s coverage of US domestic politics compels respondents to favor a less internationalist foreign policy. Readers may wonder whether RT’s coverage of domestic politics causes Americans to look inward: to be more concerned about domestic politics, and thus prefer their government focus on domestic policy rather than foreign affairs. Although the null results in Table 1 suggest this domestic pathway is probably not salient, we employ causal mediation analysis to probe it further.99 The basic idea is that treatment effects can be decomposed into two components: a direct effect, which runs directly from the treatment, and a causal mediation effect, in which the treatment causes the outcome through some mediating pathway. Here, the causal mediator is Americans’ views about domestic politics. Again, we find no evidence that the effect of RT’s domestic coverage on Americans’ foreign policy views goes through the domestic anxiety channel. This suggests RT’s domestic coverage affects Americans’ views on foreign policy through some other channel. Clarifying this channel is an important direction for future research.

The Way Forward

RT may be “Russian propaganda,” as Kristof put it, but we are less confident it will have no geopolitical consequences. The Russian government has acknowledged its efforts to foster a “post-West world order.” Exposure to RT, we find, makes Americans more comfortable with that. Nearly 60% of all RT coverage focuses on three topics: criticism of America’s traditional allies, American foreign policy, and America’s domestic conditions. Exposure to RT makes US citizens roughly 15 percentage points less likely to support an active foreign policy, 20 percentage points more likely to believe the United States is doing too much to solve world problems, and 10 percentage points more likely to value national interests over the interests of allies. These effects obtain across parties and persist even when we disclose that the Russian government finances RT. This constitutes the first evidence that propaganda produced by a foreign adversary can shape public opinion in a target country. Contrary to much speculation, we find no evidence that RT shapes Americans’ views on domestic policy or undermines trust in democratic institutions.

These findings represent an important first step in understanding how the world’s autocrats employ outward-facing propaganda to shape public

opinion in the world’s democracies. Of course, our survey experiment has limitations. Like many experiments, its external validity is uncertain; Americans do not consume RT in a lab. Our experimental approach does not measure how quickly consumers revert to their prior beliefs after exposure or whether endorsement by people within a respondent’s social network conditions RT’s persuasiveness. We are unable to identify the precise mechanism through which exposure to RT compels Americans to prefer their country’s withdrawing from a position of global leadership. We are also unable to probe the effects of repeated exposure to RT, which is potentially critical. During the 2016 US presidential election, Gordon Pennycook, Tyrone D. Cannon, and David G. Rand found fake news headlines on Facebook became more persuasive to readers with repeated exposure, “even when the stories are labeled as contested by fact checkers.”

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

Another avenue of research concerns citizens who consume far-right conspiratorial news, an area of growing scholarly interest. Though few in number, these respondents hold markedly different views in our sample. They report higher presidential approval ratings, view Russia more favorably and are more confident in their ability to discern truth in news. They report lower trust in government, are less likely to view Russia as an adversary and favor a less engaged foreign policy. Russian bots appear to be particularly active in online echo chambers, and partisan discourse disproportionately shapes broader political discourse. If foreign

---

102 Spangher et al., “Analysis of Strategy and Spread of Russia-Sponsored Content in the US in 2017.”
propaganda can shape the views of conspiratorial news consumers, who in turn shape the broader discourse, the scope for foreign propaganda to shape politics in democracies is more profound.

**Acknowledgments**

For helpful feedback, we thank Peter Courtney, Alya Khemakhem, Anne Van Wijk, two anonymous reviewers, and seminar participants at the US Department of Justice, the European University Institute, and the 2019 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association. For excellent research assistance, we thank Megan Angulo, Hector Reyes, Connor Chapkis, Emma Cockerell, Bryant Cong, Lisa De Rafols, Ishani Desai, Nadia Filanovsky, Eva Isakovic, Young-Kyung Kim, Lorenzo Lopez, Tommy Lu, Cyrus McCrimmon, Tolulope Ogunremi, Frederick Owusu-Sekyere, and Joshua Shaw. The survey on which this paper is based was approved by the University of Southern California Institutional Review Board.

**Funding**

This work was supported by the Center for International Studies at the University of Southern California.

**ORCID**

Erin Baggott Carter [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9196-8572](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9196-8572)
Brett L. Carter [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4443-8798](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4443-8798)

**Data availability statement**

The data and materials that support the findings of this study are available in the Harvard Dataverse at [https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/RRTXJJ](https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/RRTXJJ).