CueAnon: What QAnon Signals about Congressional Candidates and What it Costs Them *

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Abstract

Most research investigates why the public embraces conspiracy theories, but few studies empirically examine how Americans evaluate the politicians who do. We argued that politicians portrayed as supporting QAnon would garner negative mainstream media attention, but this coverage could increase their name recognition and signal positive attributes to voters with low trust in media who would feel warmer toward those candidates. Although we confirm that candidates friendly toward QAnon receive more negative media coverage, our nationally-representative vignette experiment reveals that QAnon support decreases favorability toward candidates, even among seemingly sympathetic sub-populations. A follow-up conjoint experiment, varying whether candidates support QAnon, replicates these findings. This paper is one of the first to highlight the potential costs of elite conspiracy theory support and complicates popular narratives about QAnon.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, trust in media, QAnon, candidate evaluation, media bias, text analysis

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Political conspiracy theories have long played a role in American political behavior, but they have recently gained significant academic and popular attention due, in part, to their promotion from within the institutions of American government. For example, in 2020 President Trump spoke approvingly of the QAnon conspiracy theory movement (Miller, Colvin and Seitz 2020), and Media Matters, a left-leaning media watchdog, described 97 congressional candidates in 2020, and 73 in 2022, as "QAnon supporters running for Congress" (Kaplan 2020, 2021). These trends continue today: Jacob Chansley, the "QAnon Shaman" best known for his role in the January 6 riots, has filed paperwork to run for Congress in 2024 (Concepcion 2023). Here, we investigate how Americans evaluate candidates who support QAnon. Does that support cue positive attributes about a candidate to some voters, or do these candidates sometimes win *despite* their controversial affiliations?

Previous research has focused on the underlying predispositions and beliefs that lead some in the mass public to embrace conspiracy theories (e.g., Enders et al. 2022; Miller, Saunders and Farhart 2016; Oliver and Wood 2014; Uscinski 2018). Yet we know little about how Americans evaluate *politicians* who do (but see Arceneaux and Truex 2022; Wu et al. 2022)—a question of increasing importance in the wake of the 2020 elections. QAnon, in particular, is a puzzling case given its low public support (Enders et al. 2022), links to extremist violence (e.g., Paresky et al. 2021), and conceptualization as a 'big tent conspiracy theory' or movement that is rooted in a web of other conspiracy theories (Roose 2021).[1] Given the controversy, we acknowledge that candidates might promote QAnon due to their true, underlying beliefs in the conspiracy theory. Alternatively, they could be acting strategically—taking a political position for electoral benefit (Mayhew 1974) or commercial gain. Consistent with this logic, some suggest that (but do not test

[1]Mainstream media regularly refers to QAnon as a conspiracy theory, but others, such as the Anti-Defamation League refer to it as a movement rooted in a particular conspiracy theory. Some carefully point out the QAnon is a complex concept or "super conspiracy theory" that includes several discrete conspiracy theories under its umbrella. At the time of our data collection, QAnon was often covered as a conspiracy theory, rather than a movement, so we generally refer to it as such here.

whether) candidates endorse conspiracy theories to appeal to anti-establishment and disaffected voters (Douglas et al. 2019; Hahl, Kim and Zuckerman Sivan 2018; Uscinski et al. 2021). Regardless of motivation, the media has incentives to report on candidates' connections to QAnon (Uscinski 2022), and voters will evaluate those candidates in light of that information. What is not clear is whether those evaluations will be positive, increasing the likelihood that those candidates win office, or negative, implying that candidates win *despite* their QAnon connections.

We address this gap in our understanding by investigating how Americans evaluate candidates who support conspiracy theories—QAnon in particular—through a series of pre-registered experiments and observational studies.[2] We focus on QAnon given its relevance to the 2020 cycle and continuing role in American politics. Given that public support for QAnon is low (Enders et al. 2022), we begin our investigation with a theory about indirect electoral benefits of QAnon support that operate through mainstream media coverage. Giving candidates a label as a "QAnon supporter" could have important consequences for how those candidates are evaluated. Although the media's alarmist coverage of QAnon can oversimplify what it means for a candidate to "support" QAnon and what QAnon actually means (Uscinski 2022), the label itself could still serve as a powerful cue for what a candidate believes and what type of representative they would be in office.

We hypothesize that supporting QAnon attracts mainstream media attention (Amsalem et al. 2020; Helfer and Aelst 2016; Uscinski 2022) and increases a candidate's name recognition (Kam and Zechmeister 2013). While we expect this media attention to be negative (Uscinski and Parent 2014), it could counter-intuitively increase candidate evaluations among voters with low trust in media through a backfire effect (Christenson, Kreps and Kriner 2020; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Thorson 2016). Candidates might consider negative coverage from mainstream media as a "badge of honor" or, in Marjorie

[2]We pre-registered our pre-analysis plans at [link removed for peer review]. We include anonymized copies with our submission. Studies involving human subjects were IRB-approved.

Taylor Greene's words, a signal that they have "made all the right enemies" (Greene 2020). To test this argument, we collect all available local and national newspaper coverage of 2020 congressional candidates who supported QAnon and compare it to a matched sample of candidates who did not. We find no evidence that QAnon supporters earned more coverage, but consistent with expectations, coverage of supporters is more negative on average. Using these news stories as a template, we conduct two waves of a nationally-representative vignette experiment in which we randomly assign respondents to read a mock news story about a hypothetical candidate who was described as supporting QAnon or not. We also vary the tone of these stories to isolate the effect of negative coverage distinct from coverage of QAnon support. We find that QAnon support does not increase candidate favorability or name recognition, even among those with low trust in media. However, we find evidence that QAnon supporters are perceived as more ideologically conservative. Thus, our study revealed that being portrayed as a QAnon supporter by mainstream media does not necessarily increase favorability among those who distrust media, but it does signal ideological conservatism.

Following practices encouraged by Ryan and Krupnikov (2021), we reconsidered our theory and conducted a follow-up pre-registered conjoint experiment to investigate the direct effects of QAnon support, absent the context of media coverage. We theorized that QAnon support might be more a bug than a feature. Consistent with this hypothesis, we found that respondents were less likely to vote for a candidate who supported QAnon. This result holds across theoretically relevant sub-populations including: Republicans, strong conservatives, those with low trust in media, and those with anti-establishment beliefs (Uscinski et al. 2021). Self-identified QAnon supporters were the only group to express any positive inclination toward these candidates. We replicate our finding that QAnon support is a strong signal of ideological conservatism, which we relate to the evolving meaning of "conservatism" and the concept's growing association with President Trump (Hopkins and Noel 2022).

Our article is one of the first to move beyond the question of why some in the mass public embrace conspiracy theories by investigating the increasingly relevant question of how Americans evaluate politicians who do the same (see also Arceneaux and Truex 2022; Wu et al. 2022). Across a series of pre-registered studies, we provide evidence that Americans do not evaluate QAnon-supporting candidates favorably. Respondents, even those with low trust in media and anti-establishment beliefs (Uscinski et al. 2021), consistently rate supporters less favorably than non-supporting candidates. And even as QAnon support increases perceptions of ideological conservatism, we find little evidence that it helps candidates win votes among conservatives. Even if supporting a conspiracy theory like QAnon is not helpful to one's candidacy, it is not disqualifying, as individuals continue to show unwavering support for their party.

How do Americans evaluate candidates who support QAnon?

Over the past decade, political scientists have advanced our understanding of what makes some in the mass public more susceptible to conspiracy theory belief (Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka 2016; Miller, Saunders and Farhart 2016; Oliver and Wood 2014; Uscinski and Parent 2014). This research emphasizes that conspiracy theories are not new to American politics (e.g., Atkinson and DeWitt 2018), and they appeal to an anti-establishment dimension of American identity, orthogonal to left-right conflict (Uscinski et al. 2021). Understanding conspiracy theory belief among the mass public is important, but this research does not fully capture the role conspiracy theories play in modern American politics. Politicians propagate them, and members of the public evaluate, and sometimes vote for, these candidates. In their review of the political conspiracy theory literature, Douglas et al. (2019, 23) note that "As political leaders such as Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán increasingly use conspiracy theories to discredit the opposition and win votes, these questions have never been more important."

Recent research suggests that politicians promote conspiracy theories to spur collec-

tive action when out of power (Atkinson and DeWitt 2018), create distrust to preserve the status quo (Bräuninger and Marinov N.d.), or attack the opposition in weak states (Radnitz 2018; Douglas et al. 2019). Why, precisely, candidates choose to support them is beyond the scope of this article. However, we recognize that this choice could stem from sincere belief in the underlying conspiracy theory or it could be a form of strategic position-taking for electoral benefit (Mayhew 1974). Either way, the media reports on candidates' support for conspiracy theories and Americans evaluate them accordingly.

From this perspective, Arceneaux and Truex (2022) experimentally show that Republican candidates who claim Donald Trump won the 2020 election are more likely to win elections, but it is not clear if this finding holds for other conspiracy theories. Wu et al. (2022) show that criticism of Marjorie Taylor Greene and her support for QAnon reduces support for the conspiracy theory but not the congresswoman. How does this finding travel beyond one especially well-known figure? Here, we focus on QAnon (for more information, see Wu N.d.; Uscinski 2022), which has garnered widespread attention and media coverage in the past several years. With a large number of candidates supporting the conspiracy theory in the 2020 elections, we are able to better understand media coverage and evaluations of conspiracy theory-supporting candidates in a novel and salient context.

Direct and Indirect Effects of Conspiracy Theory Support

The benefits (or costs) of QAnon support could be direct or indirect. The direct benefits are straightforward: just as candidates can garner support for positions on gun control or environmental policy, candidates could benefit from supporting QAnon. However, taking a position on a conspiracy theory differs from standard ideological position taking. Candidates might not have opportunities to explicitly, formally debate conspiracy theories, as they would other policy positions. Further, the support might activate a non-

left-right dimension of political identity grounded in anti-establishment beliefs (Uscinski et al. 2021).Therefore, investigating direct benefits merits investigation.

When we conducted our research in 2020 and 2021, most Americans were not familiar with QAnon. Those who were viewed it negatively (Pew Research Center 2020), which made a direct benefits story seem less plausible. We therefore considered whether QAnon support indirectly affects candidate evaluations via other mechanisms, such as cueing anti-establishment or conservative values, attracting media attention, or provoking the left. We first focused our attention on media coverage, given that this is a key pathway through which people come to learn about candidates, and the media play a central role in shaping how these candidates are portrayed. In particular, media coverage often frames candidates who have signaled affinity for QAnon or its related conspiracy theories as "supporting" QAnon. For example, when Marjorie Taylor Greene won her first primary election in August of 2020, the *New York Times* published an article describing her as "a QAnon Supporter" (Rosenberg, Herndon and Corasaniti 2020).

How does this indirect pathway work? Voters pay little attention to politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997; Zaller 1992) and rely on heuristics like partisanship, incumbency, or name recognition to make electoral decisions (Downs 1957; Kam and Zechmeister 2013; Popkin 1991; Schaffner and Streb 2002). Candidates, especially challengers running in low salience races, may struggle to break through—unless they find a way to become the subject of a "good story" (Hamilton 2011). From the media's perspective, that means a story with conflict, competition, and negative information (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Groeling 2010; Helfer and Aelst 2016). Politicians can take advantage of market incentives and make themselves more newsworthy by exhibiting less agreeable personality traits (Amsalem et al. 2020) or taking ideologically extreme positions (Wagner and Gruszczynski 2018). We argue that publicly supporting QAnon would similarly increase candidate news coverage. Given QAnon's unpopularity and ties to extremism and violence, we hypothesize that coverage of those candidates would be more negative.

Most candidates might prefer to avoid negative news coverage. However, we argue that negative coverage may not uniformly decrease candidate evaluations. Coverage, regardless of tone, can increase name recognition (Burden 2002; Kam and Zechmeister 2013) and in a more partisan and polarized media environment (see Prior 2013, for a review), media consumers may view coverage through a partisan lens (Baum and Gussin 2008; Smith and Searles 2014). Those with low trust in media may view negative mainstream coverage as a cue of candidate quality through the hostile media effect (Arceneaux, Johnson and Murphy 2012; Arceneaux and Johnson 2015; Coe et al. 2008; Vallone, Ross and Lepper 1985) or backfire effect (Christenson, Kreps and Kriner 2020; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Thorson 2016; but see Wood and Porter 2019). Indeed, some Republican operatives have recently suggested that provoking mainstream media outlets is a good strategy for Republican candidates to gain credibility with primary voters (Asawi and Brodey 2022; Cramer 2021; Swan and Markay 2022).

This theory suggests that individuals with low trust in media will be more likely to favor candidates who garner negative coverage than those with high trust in media (**Hypothesis 1a**). Similarly, we suspect that those with low trust in media will be more likely to believe in conspiracy theories (Miller, Saunders and Farhart 2016; Oliver and Wood 2014) and will feel warmer toward a candidate who is portrayed as supporting QAnon and receives negative media coverage, compared to one covered neutrally (**Hypothesis 1b**) or one covered negatively but is not portrayed as supporting QAnon (**Hypothesis 1c**). Given QAnon's partisan valence, we have analogous expectations for Republicans as compared to Democrats (**Hypothesis 2a-c**), which we discuss in the appendix. We also suspect that negative coverage and conspiracy theory support will increase candidate name recognition (**Hypothesis 3**). Finally, given our expectations about ideological cues, we hypothesize that negative coverage and QAnon support will increase perceptions of ideological conservatism (**Hypothesis 4**).

Indirect Effects of Conspiracy Theory Support

Before investigating how Americans evaluate candidates who are portrayed as supporting QAnon, we establish whether QAnon-supporting candidates earn more media coverage and whether that media coverage is more negative on average. If QAnon-supporting candidates received less coverage than non-supporting candidates, or their coverage was not negative, our experiment would lack external validity (see Appendix A for more details on the observational analysis).

Observational Evidence: Quantity and Tone of Candidate Coverage

We scraped data on 3,632 House and Senate candidates from `Ballotpedia.com` who ran in 2020 congressional primaries. We supplemented this data with an indicator for whether the candidate had ever supported QAnon as identified by Media Matters (Kaplan 2020). However, supporting and non-supporting candidates differ in important ways. To address this concern and achieve balance across groups, we constructed a matched set of QAnon-supporters and otherwise similar candidates who did not support QAnon based on the covariates we collected. Following Darr, Hitt and Dunaway (2018), we created the matched set through the use of Genetic Matching (Diamond and Sekhon 2013), which yielded a sample with 264 unique (unweighted) candidates.

We manually collected all newspaper coverage of each candidate in our sample between January 1 and November 2, 2020 from Nexis Uni. To determine whether supporting candidates received more coverage, we regressed the total number of articles on an indicator for QAnon support using a negative binomial model. Results are shown in Appendix Table A3. When we estimate the predicted effect of supporting QAnon, we find an equal amount of coverage of supporting and non-supporting candidates.

Although the volume of coverage was the same, the tone could differ. A research assistant read a random sample of 300 articles and coded each news story as either neg-

ative or non-negative. We trained an ensemble classifier to code the remaining articles. In Appendix Table A3, we find that supporting QAnon is associated with a statistically significant increase in overall negative news coverage—3.67 additional negative articles on average.

Experimental Evidence: Favorability, Name Recognition, and Ideological Perceptions

We have provided some evidence that when congressional candidates support QAnon, they receive more negative news coverage in mainstream newspapers. Here, we investigate whether this coverage provokes differential evaluations of candidates among those with high and low trust in mainstream media.

Experimental Design

Our pre-registered experiments were fielded on the November 2020 and March 2021 waves of the American Social Survey (TASS), which draws a nationally representative cross sectional sample of respondents from NORC at the University of Chicago. A total of 1,962 individuals participated in our experiment, 978 in the first wave and 984 in the second.[3] Respondents answered questions measuring their political attitudes and preferences. We obtained pre-treatment measures of trust in media as well as their impression of the QAnon conspiracy theory. In both waves, many respondents were unfamiliar with QAnon—55% in the first wave and 52% in the second. Among those who provided an evaluation, just 11% expressed positive sentiments (see also Enders et al. 2022). In addition, we obtained pre-treatment demographic information including perceived importance of following the news, party identification, ideology, age, education, income, gender, and race.[4]

[3]We pool both waves but analyze each separately in Appendix B.1-B.2.

[4]All covariates are balanced except Latino and Asian identifying respondents (Appendix Table B1). Appendix B.1-B.2 shows substantively similar results when we control for all covariates.

In addition to indicators for each condition, we conducted our analysis with a pre-treatment moderator: trust in the mainstream media.[5] We asked respondents: "In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media—such as newspapers, TV, and radio—when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly?" We found that 145 respondents (8%) had a great deal of trust in the mainstream media, 829 (42%) had a fair amount, 746 (38%) had not very much, and 238 (13%) had none at all. Trust in media was lower among Republicans, with 74 percent saying "not very much" or "none at all" versus 35 percent of Democrats and Independents.

After answering unrelated questions, respondents read a short news article about a hypothetical congressional candidate. We noted that the article could have appeared in a mainstream newspaper. For ethical and design considerations, we kept the description of the candidate and newspaper hypothetical. Using a real candidate or news outlet would have introduced deception, which we did not think was necessary for us to answer our research question. Consistent with recent work that aims to isolate treatment effects by stripping information down as much as possible, eliminating specific source cues (Coppock 2023), we chose to avoid using a *specific* news outlet. We did, however, want to highlight that the article could have appeared in a *mainstream* media outlet because our interest is in potential backfire effects of negative coverage from mainstream media. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three conditions with equal probability. Across all three conditions, respondents read about a fictional state representative who lost a House election in November 2020.[6] In the control condition, which we call *Neutral*, we described John Smith as having run a well-organized but unsuccessful campaign. The full text of each treatment is in Table 1.[7]

To analyze the effects of negative coverage both unrelated to, and as a consequence of,

[5]We preregistered a second moderator variable, party identification. Results are in Appendix B.2.

[6]In Wave 1 (2), the candidate's name was John Smith (Cunningham). Pilot tests on Mechanical Turk did not reveal variation in evaluations based on name.

[7]To ensure our articles were perceived as neutral and negative, we conducted a pilot study on Mechanical Turk on September 24, 2020.

QAnon support, we created two treatment conditions. In the *Negative* condition, respondents read the same headline and a similar paragraph about John Smith, but we described his campaign as poorly organized and wildly unsuccessful; we replaced a positive constituent quote with a negative one. The *QAnon* condition was identical to the *Negative* condition except we noted in the headline and body that John Smith was a QAnon supporter.[8] We avoided providing a direct quote from candidates indicating their support to focus on how the *media* portrays candidates.

To determine how the treatments influenced respondents' attitudes toward the candidate, we asked respondents to tell us how they felt about John Smith on a 101-point feeling thermometer.[9] In Wave 2, we also asked for respondents' perceptions of the candidate's ideology on a 7-point scale ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative.

Later in the survey, after respondents answered unrelated questions, we presented a text box and asked if they could remember the candidate's name. To measure whether respondents accurately recalled the candidate's name, we subtracted 1 from the Jaro-Winkler string distance between their response and the candidate's name. This dependent variable ranges from 0 (no match) to 1 (perfect match).[10]

Results: Trust in Media Moderates the Effect of Media Coverage on Candidate Favorability, But No One Likes QAnon Supporters

We expect respondents with low trust in media to feel warmer toward the candidate

[8] Although there may be more support for the conspiracy theories associated with QAnon than there is support for QAnon overall (Uscinski et al. 2022), mainstream media describes candidates as QAnon supporters, which is where we focus our attention here.

[9] "How warm or cold do you feel toward the candidate in the article? Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the candidate. Ratings between 0 and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the candidate and that you don't care too much for him. You would rate him at the 50 degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the candidate."

[10] For robustness, we created an alternative measure where respondents who included either the candidate's first or last name were coded as 1, and 0 otherwise.

Table 1: News Article Treatments

Treatment	Text
Neutral	**Statehouse Representative Loses Congressional Bid** John Smith, a two-term state representative, recently ran for an open seat in the House of Representatives. Mr. Smith won his last election to the statehouse, but his latest bid for Congress has proven to be unsuccessful. He lost the congressional election by a wide margin, but his campaign was well organized. Constituents had mixed feelings about the election outcome. One constituent tweeted "Smith's bid for Congress was a joke, So glad the people have spoken: Smith is a loser." Yet, another commented "Smith ran a strong campaign and advanced a lot of great ideas for our district. I hope he gets the chance to run again." He pledged to bring fresh ideas to Washington and ensure his constituents had their voices heard, but he will have to wait to try again in 2022.
Negative	**Statehouse Representative Loses Congressional Bid** John Smith, a two-term state representative, recently ran for an open seat in the House of Representatives. Mr. Smith barely won his last election to the statehouse, and his latest bid for Congress has proven to be wildly unsuccessful. He lost the congressional election in a landslide, and his campaign was poorly organized. Constituents had good feelings about the election outcome. One constituent tweeted "Smith's bid for Congress was a joke. So glad the people have spoken: Smith is a loser." Another commented "Smith ran a weak campaign and advanced a lot of terrible ideas for our district. I hope he never gets the chance to run again." He pledged to bring fresh ideas to Washington and ensure his constituents had their voices heard, but he will have to wait to try again in 2022.
QAnon	**Statehouse Representative, QAnon Supporter, Loses Congressional Bid** John Smith, a two-term state representative, recently ran for an open seat in the House of Representatives. Mr. Smith is a vocal supporter of the convoluted QAnon conspiracy theory. Mr. Smith barely won his last election to the statehouse, and his latest bid for Congress has proven to be wildly unsuccessful. He lost the congressional election in a landslide, and his campaign was poorly organized. Constituents had good feelings about the election outcome. One constituent tweeted "Smith's bid for Congress was a joke. So glad the people have spoken: Smith is a loser." Another commented "Smith ran a weak campaign and advanced a lot of terrible ideas for our district. I hope he never gets the chance to run again." He pledged to bring fresh ideas to Washington and ensure his constituents had their voices heard, but he will have to wait to try again in 2022.

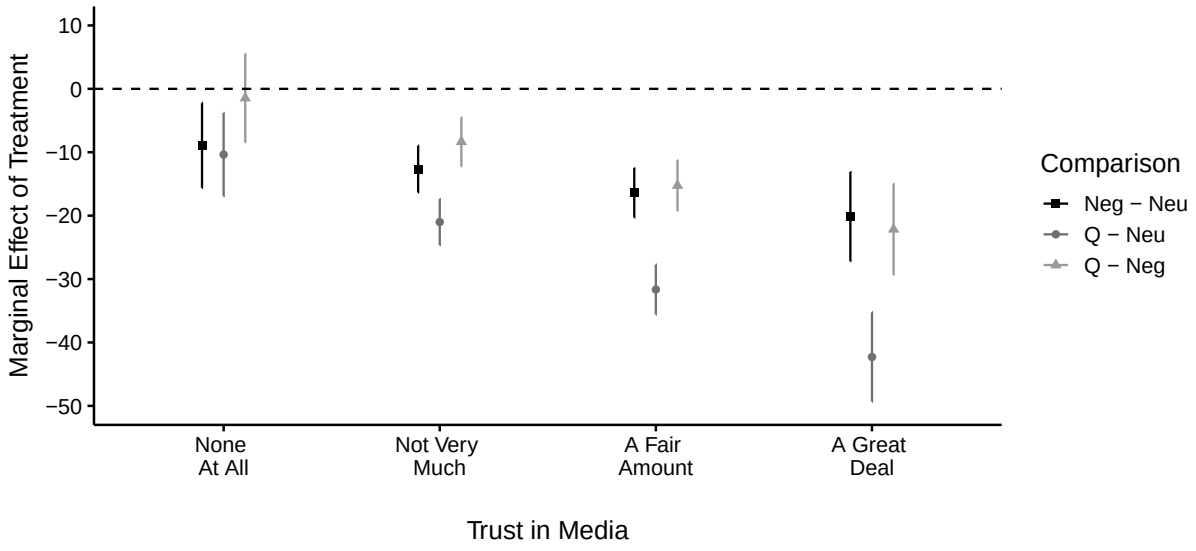

Figure 1: Average marginal effects of treatment comparisons for levels of trust in media. Consistent with expectations, those with higher trust in media feel cooler toward the *Negative* candidate and cooler toward the *QAnon* candidate. In contrast to expectations, those with low trust in media feel cooler toward the candidate in both treatments as compared to the *Neutral* candidate. However, low trust respondents feel significantly warmer toward either treated candidate than those with high trust.

in the *Negative* condition as compared to the *Neutral* condition. We also expect low trust respondents to feel warmer toward the candidate in the *QAnon* condition relative to the other two conditions. We expect the opposite results for those with high trust in media. We pool both survey waves and estimate all effects at the individual level using ordinary least squares. In Figure 1, we present the average marginal effects of treatment comparisons for each level of trust in media. We include the regression table and additional analyses in Appendix B.1-B.2.

In Figure 1, black squares represent the difference in candidate evaluations for respondents assigned to the *Negative* condition as compared to the *Neutral* condition.[11] The general trend as one becomes more trusting in media is negative, as expected. We find that the difference between those with the highest and lowest amount of trust are statis-

[11] All error bars are estimated at the Bonferroni-corrected level for 12 tests ($\alpha = 0.004$).

tically distinguishable at the 0.95 level.[12] The marginal effect of the treatment for those with higher levels of trust is negative as expected, however, it is also negative and statistically significant for those with lower levels of trust in media, counter to our expectations. We fail to support Hypothesis 1a.

The results are similar across the remaining comparisons. Dark gray circles represent the difference in evaluations between the *QAnon* and *Neutral* conditions. Consistent with our expectations, the highest trust respondents feel a full 42 points cooler toward a candidate portrayed as supporting QAnon. In contrast to our expectations in Hypothesis 1b, we find that those with low trust feel more negatively toward a QAnon-supporting candidate. However, the difference between those with the lowest and highest levels of trust in media are, again, statistically distinguishable.

Light gray triangles examine differences in candidate evaluations between those in the *Negative* condition as compared to the *QAnon* condition. Here, we find evidence that those with high trust in media feel roughly 22 points cooler toward the QAnon supporting candidate. In contrast to our expectations in Hypothesis 1c, those with low trust in media are no more approving of a candidate who is said to support QAnon versus one who only garners negative coverage.

Next, we investigate whether candidates who received negative coverage were more easily recalled by respondents. In Appendix B.3, we do not find any evidence of treatment on name recall. Finally, in Table 2, we use Wave 2 data to investigate the effects of the treatments on perceptions that the candidate is ideologically conservative. In the first column, we use ordinary least squares to regress seven-point ideology on treatment among all respondents. We find that the *Negative* treatment does not have a detectable effect. However, we find that a candidate who supports QAnon is seen as more ideologically conservative. This effect could be driven primarily by Democrats, who were more likely to know about QAnon (Pew Research Center 2020). Therefore, we estimate

[12] To determine within-treatment differences, we conduct 1000 bootstraps of the differences and calculate the 95% quantile.

Table 2: Media coverage describing candidates as supporting QAnon causes respondents to believe they are more ideologically conservative

	All Respondents	Republicans	Low Trust in Media
Negative	0.10	-0.31	0.14
	(0.10)	(0.16)	(0.14)
QAnon	1.04^{***}	0.34^{*}	0.79^{***}
	(0.10)	(0.16)	(0.13)
Constant	4.06^{***}	4.17^{***}	4.02^{***}
	(0.08)	(0.11)	(0.09)
R^2	0.11	0.04	0.07
Adj. R^2	0.11	0.04	0.07
Num. obs.	977	398	506

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

the same model among Republican identifiers in Column 2, and those with low trust in media (responded either "none at all" or "not very much" trust in media) in Column 3. Although effect sizes are attenuated, the candidate is perceived as more conservative among these sub-populations when described as supporting QAnon.

To summarize: those with high trust in media feel cooler toward a candidate receiving negative coverage and even cooler toward a candidate who is described as supporting QAnon. We do not find evidence that those with lower trust in media feel *warmer* toward negatively covered candidates or negatively covered QAnon-supporters, relative to neutrally covered candidates.[13] Further, we find no evidence that either negative coverage or coverage of QAnon support increases name recall. However, we find that coverage of QAnon support causes respondents to believe the candidate is more ideologically conservative. We observe consistent results when considering alternative vignettes (e.g., describing the candidate as winning the election) in Appendix B.4.

[13]In Appendix B.1-B.2, we present results of these regressions controlling for seven-point party identification and seven-point ideology (and other covariates). These effects are not driven by the correlation between trust in media, ideology, and party identification.

Direct Effects of QAnon Support

Our results do not suggest that candidates indirectly benefit from supporting QAnon. Although trust in media moderates the effect of media coverage of QAnon support on favorability as expected, respondents with low media trust never *increased* their evaluations of the candidate. These results seemed more consistent with a theory in which there are no electoral benefits to supporting QAnon and people vote for candidates *despite* this feature. For many, it is possible that a QAnon support label has either no effect on vote choice, or as suggested by our experimental results, a negative effect. We pre-registered three additional hypotheses: first, that a candidate's support for QAnon will not cause respondents to increase their likelihood of voting for that candidate **(Hypothesis 5)**. Relatedly, we expect that a candidate's support for QAnon will not cause respondents to increase their favorability toward the candidate **(Hypothesis 6)**. We expect these hypotheses to hold among relevant subgroups such as Republicans, those with low trust in media, and those with anti-establishment beliefs (Uscinski et al. 2021). However, given the literature on position-taking and cueing (Popkin 1991; Zaller 1992), we suspect that QAnon support leads voters to see the candidate as more conservative—even if they view the support itself negatively **(Hypothesis 7)**.

Data and Methods

We conducted a pre-registered conjoint experiment (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014) in November 2021. A conjoint experiment is uniquely suited to our purposes because it allows us to simultaneously test the independent, causal effect of QAnon support on vote choice compared to other candidate characteristics, such as policy positions and political experience.

We recruited 350 Republicans and 350 Democrats who live in the United States from Prolific (Palan and Schitter 2018). We balanced our sample on gender, but our sample is

not nationally representative. Participants chose to take surveys on Prolific and opted in to our specific survey, conditional on our screening criteria (US residents, Republicans, Democrats, balance on gender). We present available sample demographics in Appendix Table C1. We included a pre-treatment attention check and removed failing participants.[14]

We presented participants with two side-by-side profiles of hypothetical congressional candidates who vary independently across eight attributes. Participants were asked to report which candidate they would vote for to represent them in Congress, repeating the task ten times Then, half of the respondents were randomly assigned to rate each candidate on a 7-point favorability scale while the other half rated each candidate's ideology on a 7-point scale.

Table 3 summarizes the profiles shown to participants and the attribute levels. All levels within each attribute were randomized independently and uniformly. We randomized the order of the four policy attributes (i.e. impeachment, immigration, economics, infrastructure), and the four non-policy attributes (i.e., gender, party, QAnon, prior political experience), then randomized which block (i.e., policy, non-policy) respondents saw first. The order was then fixed across the ten choice tasks per respondent.

We present eight attributes in an effort to obfuscate the key covariate of interest: QAnon support. To be more consistent with our vignette experiments, we focus broadly on QAnon support instead of the conspiracy theories associated with QAnon, such as belief in the Deep State.

Our primary dependent variable (i.e. Hypothesis 5) is binary vote choice. We analyze our data at the candidate-profile level. For each candidate profile, the dependent variable takes the value of 1 if the respondent selects that candidate and 0 otherwise. For Hypothesis 6, we measure 7-point favorability, where 1 indicates a respondent "definitely would NOT want this type of candidate to represent [me] in the U.S. Congress" and 7 is "definitely would..." For Hypothesis 7, the dependent variable ranges from 1 (extremely

[14]We discovered four independents had taken our survey; we exclude them from the analysis.

Table 3: Attributes and levels in the conjoint experiment.

Attribute	Level
Party	Republican Democrat
Gender	Male Female
QAnon	Publicly Supported QAnon Has Not Publicly Supported QAnon
Prior Political Experience	State Representative U.S. Senator No prior political experience
Position on Trump's Second Impeachment	Supported Impeachment Opposed Impeachment
Position on U.S.-Mexico Immigration Policy	Supports Building a Border Wall Opposes Building a Border Wall
Position on Economic Policy	Lower taxes, but fewer government services Higher taxes, but more government services
Position on Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill	Supports Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill Opposes Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill

liberal) to 7 (extremely conservative). We compute the Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) by regressing each dependent variable on all attributes using ordinary least squares with standard errors clustered on respondents (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014).[15]

Results: Once Again, Nobody Likes QAnon Supporters

In Figure 2, we plot the AMCEs of each attribute on candidate choice for the full sample in black triangles. Supporting QAnon, holding party and other relevant attributes fixed, causes a 20 percentage point decline in the probability of choosing that candidate profile in a hypothetical election. Republicans and supporters of the bipartisan infrastruc-

[15]Comparisons between subgroup AMCEs are sensitive to the reference category (Leeper, Hobolt and Tilley 2020), however, with the exception of prior experience, our attributes are dichotomous. The AMCEs should not be susceptible to baseline effects (Carey et al. 2022). We present the same plots using marginal means in Appendix C.

ture bill are more likely to be selected, whereas those who support the construction of a border wall are less likely to be selected. However, the magnitudes of these effects pale in comparison to the negative penalty for QAnon support.

The analysis could mask heterogeneous treatment effects by party, so we plot the AMCEs for partisan sub-groups separately—Democrats in light gray circles and Republicans in dark gray squares. Democrats impose a large, negative penalty on supporters, reducing their probability of voting for those candidates by 28 percentage points. Republicans also exact a smaller, but statistically significant, penalty on these candidates.

A second potential concern could be that by randomizing candidate attributes uniformly, we have introduced bias by generating unrealistic profiles in which Democrats supported QAnon (de la Cuesta, Egami and Imai 2021). In Appendix Figure C2, we present an AMCE plot in which we restrict our attention to the 864 comparisons in which two Republican candidates were paired and a Republican respondent made a vote choice, simulating a Republican primary environment. If Republicans are voting for the most extreme candidate in the race, this is precisely where we would expect to find positive effects of QAnon-support (e.g., Hall 2015). Yet we find that supporting QAnon is associated with a statistically significant 14 percentage-point decline in vote choice probability. In Appendix C, we also present results among those with low trust in media, anti-establishment beliefs (Uscinski et al. 2021), and belief in the QAnon conspiracy theory (Figure C3). Even for those with the lowest trust in media or strongest anti-establishment attitudes, the AMCE of QAnon-support is negative. Those who report believing in QAnon are more likely to select a supporting candidate, but these AMCEs are not statistically significant given the small sample size of true believers. Even if this group is more likely to vote for the supporting candidate, targeting true believers while alienating larger subgroups is likely not electorally beneficial.

Appendix Figure C4 shows both AMCE and marginal mean estimates where the dependent variable is a 7-point favorability scale instead of vote choice. Among Democrats,

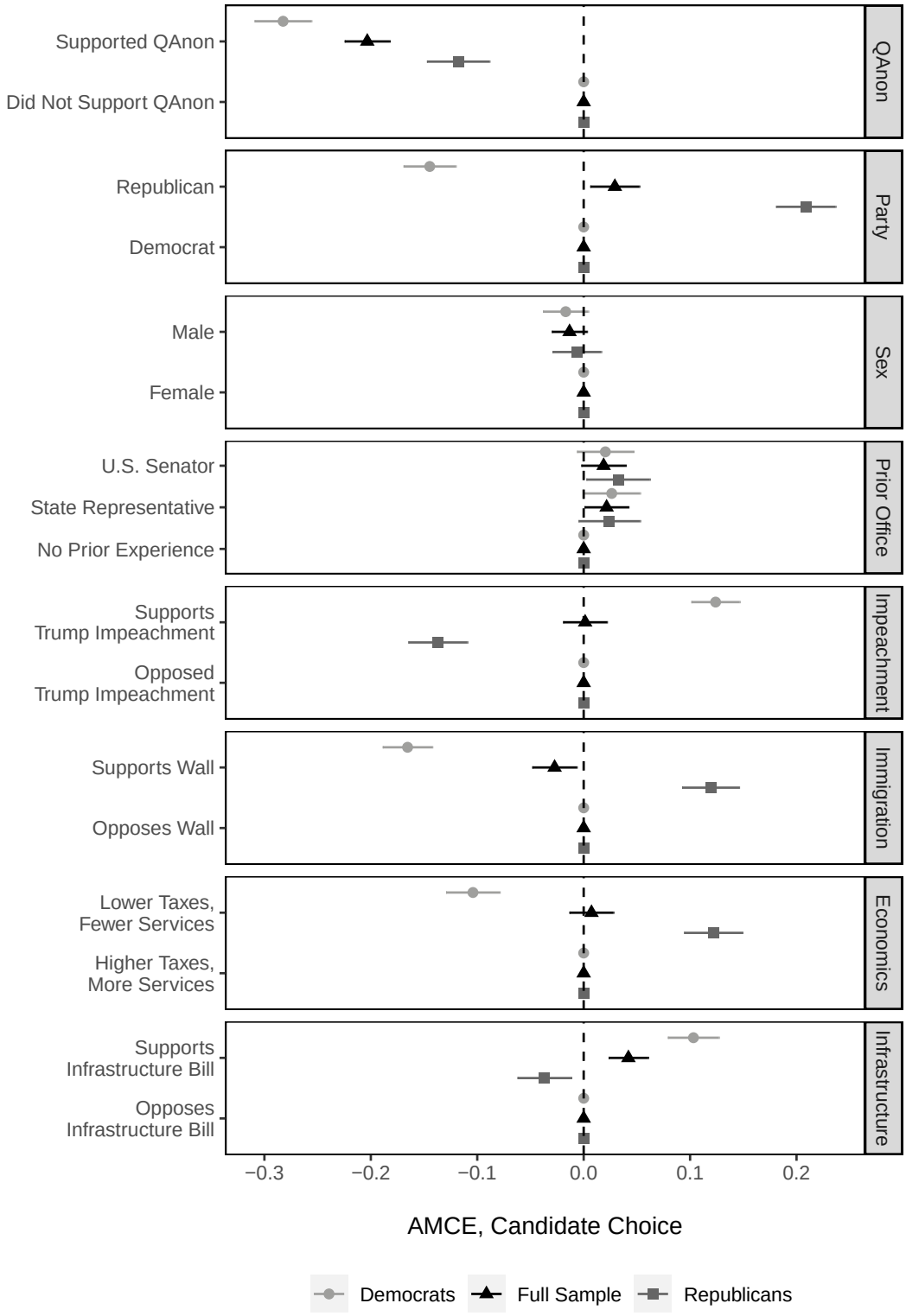

Figure 2: AMCE of each attribute on candidate choice. QAnon support produces a negative decline in the probability of vote choice among Democrats and Republicans.

QAnon support decreases favorability by 1.14 points, whereas among Republicans, support for QAnon causes favorability to decrease by 0.49 points—roughly the same magnitude of the decrease in favorability from supporting President Trump's second impeachment. These results are both statistically significant.

Finally, we present evidence consistent with Hypothesis 9, that QAnon support increases perceptions that the candidate is conservative, in Figure 3. Among Democrats, QAnon-supporting candidates are perceived to be 0.64 points more conservative—similar to identifying as a Republican or supporting a border wall. Among Republicans, the effect is positive and statistically significant, but smaller: 0.14 points. This large gap between partisan perceptions could be related to findings that Democrats are more aware of QAnon (Pew Research Center 2020).

Ultimately, these results provide support for Hypotheses 5-7. QAnon support causes respondents of both parties to reduce their likelihood of voting for, and their favorability toward, a candidate. Although QAnon support consistently increases perceptions of conservatism, this effect is small among Republican identifiers—the group most QAnon-supporting candidates are allegedly targeting.

Discussion

How do voters evaluate candidates who are portrayed as supporting QAnon? In short, not favorably. We test two mechanisms through which QAnon support could translate into candidate favorability: indirectly through media coverage and directly through position-taking. We analyzed news coverage about QAnon-supporting candidates and a matched sample of non-supporters. We find that supporters earn the same volume of coverage, but that coverage is more negative on average. Our vignette experiments revealed that even those with low trust in media disapprove of candidates who supported QAnon and received negative coverage. However, those with low trust in media punish

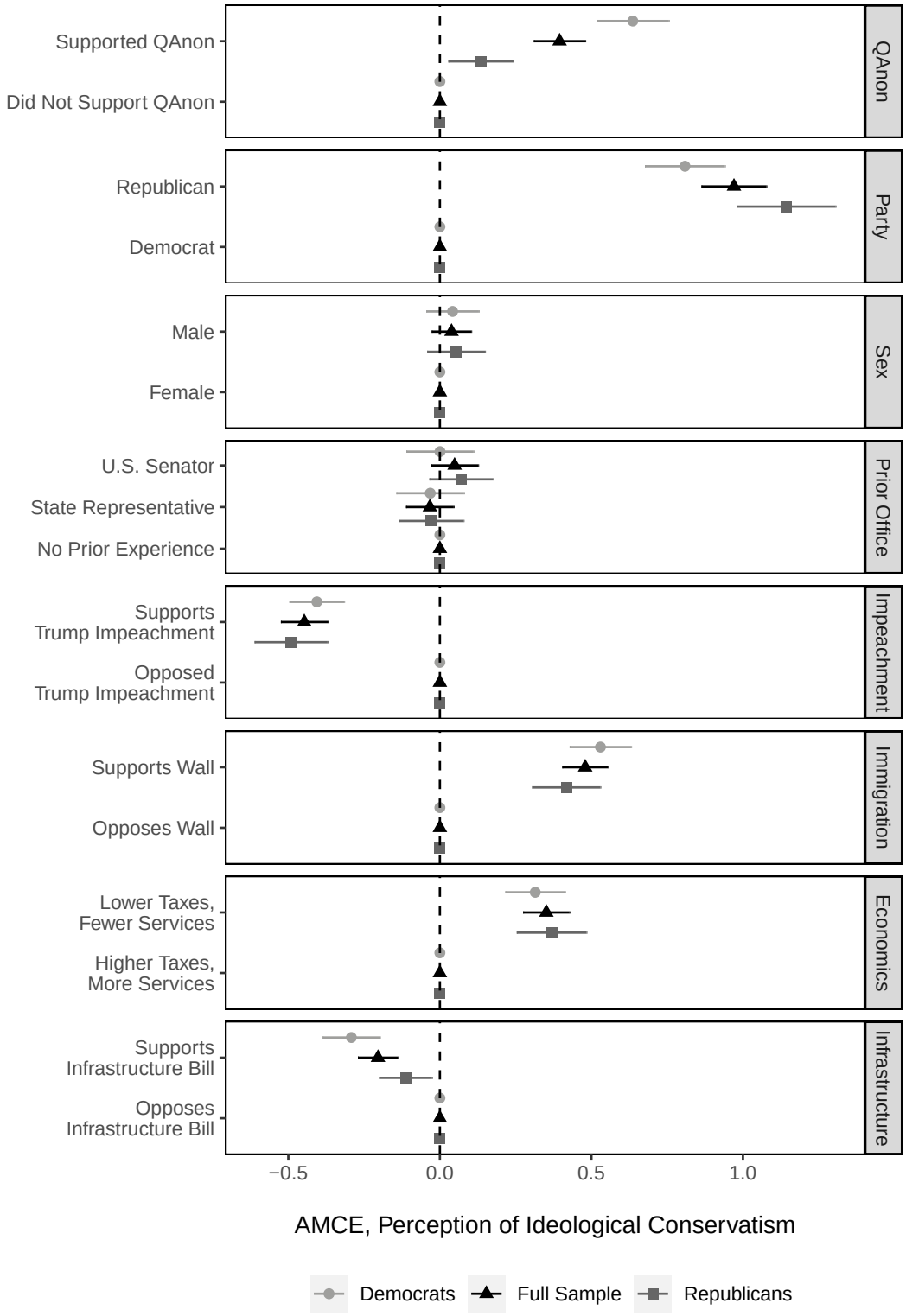

Figure 3: AMCE of each attribute on perceptions candidate is a conservative. QAnon support causes respondents to think the candidate is more conservative, however, this effect is larger among Democrats than Republicans.

a candidate described as supporting QAnon less than respondents with high trust in media, and they perceive that candidate to be more conservative. These findings contrasted with our expectations and popular narratives surrounding QAnon. In our second experiment, we hypothesized that QAnon-support could harm supporting candidates. We find that supporting QAnon causes a decline in vote choice probability for those candidates, even while increasing perceptions of ideological conservatism.

Our results present a corrective to conventional wisdom that conspiracy theory support is electorally beneficial. Previous research suggests—but does not test—that politicians support conspiracy theories for electoral gain, and journalists and campaign strategists make similar claims. We cannot say there are *no* benefits to supporting QAnon, but our evidence suggests individuals do not evaluate candidates who support QAnon more favorably than those who do not. Yet, our studies come with limitations.

First, while QAnon is an increasingly salient and important conspiracy theory, it is not the only one. It is unclear whether our results generalize to other conspiracy theories. QAnon may be unique in its obscurity, and support for more mainstream conspiracy theories could be rewarded (see e.g., Arceneaux and Truex 2022).

Second, our indirect effects analysis is limited to a hypothetical scenario, which may limit generalizability. For ethical reasons, we created vignettes about a hypothetical congressional candidate, and we informed respondents of this fact. Perhaps real-world news coverage of real candidates, about whom individuals might have other information, could contribute to evaluations in ways that we were not able to capture here (see e.g., Wu et al. 2022). Moreover, we used a forced exposure design, but this is a context in which media choice could be crucial. Future work could extend our findings to examine whether positive coverage of QAnon-supporting candidates on fringe media sources changes how respondents evaluate them, in addition to more directly incorporating choice into the design.

Third, our conjoint experiment presented participants with a limited subset of charac-

teristics. Although our choices were theoretically grounded, we could have chosen many possible attributes to manipulate and our results need to be interpreted within the context of the attributes we chose. We suspect that subtracting, not adding, information could shed light on other underlying mechanisms. In a low-information contest, it is unclear how much (if any) of this information voters would learn and what sorts of inferences they would draw from QAnon support.

Finally, we reiterate that our study cannot rule out indirect effects that we did not (or could not) test. For example, it is possible that candidates support QAnon to obtain positive media coverage from right-wing news outlets, grab attention on fringe platforms, or raise campaign funds. These positive effects could theoretically offset the penalties associated with negative mainstream media coverage. It is also possible that elected office is not their ultimate goal.

Conclusion

This article is among the first to investigate how Americans evaluate candidates who support conspiracy theories. We make three key contributions. First, we contribute to the political conspiracy theory literature by moving beyond questions of "who believes" to questions about evaluations of political figures who propagate conspiracy theories, answering recent calls to do so (e.g., Douglas et al. 2019). Our work is an important step that complicates some existing narratives. For example, Uscinski et al. (2021) suggest that the anti-establishment dimension to American political attitudes is correlated with support for conspiratorial candidates, yet our evidence suggests that even people with strong anti-establishment preferences are not likely to choose candidates who support QAnon. Our work is more consistent with Enders et al. (2022) and Wu et al. (2022), which finds limited public support for QAnon.

Second, this research suggests that supporting conspiracy theories may serve as a cue

about a politician's other preferences. Most Americans do not prefer candidates who support QAnon, even though they view them as more ideologically conservative. Future research on elite support of conspiracy theories—or position-taking broadly—could consider whether it is the position itself, or what it signals, that leads voters to choose a candidate. Additionally, our study suggests that the media should be careful in foregrounding candidates' support for QAnon or other conspiracy theory movements. Although relevant to voters' decisions, the language is often imprecise, obfuscating candidates' actual views.

Third, our results provide another example of the value of pre-registration. Following Ryan and Krupnikov (2021), we fully present our results and illustrate how our initial hypotheses, which were only partially supported, helped move our scholarship forward. The pre-registration for all of our studies allows researchers to track our theoretical development.

Although some of our results contrast with our initial argument, the conclusion is, in part, normatively good: most Americans oppose candidates who support QAnon. Even if conspiracy theory position-taking is in vogue, our results suggest that on average, Americans react negatively to candidates who do so. At the same time, political conspiracy theories and the politicians who promote them are not going away. As more politicians express support for conspiracy theories, we need to bring our understanding of "who believes" to questions of when and why those beliefs translate into electoral support, anti-democratic actions, or political violence.

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