

Cult of Personality or Lack of Competition? Determining Trump’s Sway Over Republican Partisans on a Critical Case

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Abstract

It is well-established that partisans follow their leaders. While this potentially has important implications for political accountability, studies of opinion leadership rarely examine accountability directly. We test whether partisans are able to hold a dominant leader accountable under favorable conditions using a critical case: Trump’s position on the Epstein files. Two preregistered experiments, fielded before the release of the Epstein files, show that partisans follow Trump and do not hold him accountable when he is unopposed or contested by the Democrats. However, when Trump faces opposition from within his own bloc—especially counter-messaging from right-coded media elites—both issue-specific and overall approval decline substantially, and following is halved. Our results have two important implications. First, opinion leadership does not imply the absence of political accountability. Second, meaningful political competition in polarized societies may need to originate from within ideological blocs. While Trump is powerful, credible opposition can make him accountable.

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Introduction

One of the most well-established findings in public opinion research is that partisans tend to follow their leaders (Bullock, 2020; Lenz, 2012) and no group illustrates partisan loyalty more clearly than Donald Trump's supporters (Barber and Pope, 2019). Both in the media and scholarship, Trump's following has been likened to a personality cult in which his most loyal supporters "adopt the leader's direction and positions unreservedly and unquestioningly" (Goldsmith and Moen 2025, 5; Sundahl 2023).¹ While partisan loyalty is often thought to undermine "the central tenets of democratic accountability" (Arceneaux and Vander Wielen, 2017, 4), studies of opinion leadership rarely examine accountability directly (but see, e.g., Broockman and Butler 2017 and Lenz 2012). To understand the severity of this threat, we need to examine if partisans are unable to hold their leaders to account in the very situations where accountability should be strongest.

Determining the upper bound of partisan loyalty, however, is difficult (see Fowler 2020). First, partisanship and ideology in the U.S. are closely intertwined, and leaders often take positions that their supporters would endorse regardless (Barber and Pope, 2019). Second, if partisans perceive the issue to be peripheral and the stakes to be low, there may simply be no strong reason *not* to follow (Barber and Pope, 2024). Third, party leaders often face little open resistance from within their own elite circles, which limits opportunities for dissenting cues or cross-pressures (Aldrich and Rohde, 2010; Galvin, 2020). Together, these factors leave open whether partisans can hold their leaders accountable when it matters most.

¹See, for example, Editorial Board. (2018, June 7). *The Cult of Trump*. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/07/opinion/trump-republican-party.html> and Evans, G. (2022, August 17).

We address these challenges by examining a critical case that allows us to observe the influence of a dominant politician—Donald Trump—under unusually unfavorable conditions for partisan loyalty: the so-called Epstein files. Arguably one of the most salient issues in U.S. politics in 2025, this highly politicized controversy concerns documents related to Jeffrey Epstein’s sex-trafficking network, including court records, flight logs, and lists of associates and visitors to his properties. Trump initially expressed sympathy for releasing the files during the 2024 campaign, but later denounced the demand as a “hoax started by the Democrats.”² In late November 2025, Trump finally reversed his position again and agreed to release them.

Three features make the Epstein case a particularly demanding test of partisan loyalty. First, Republican public opinion strongly favors disclosure: as of early October 2025, about two-thirds of Republicans supported releasing the files.³ The call to release the files draws on a core populist theme of MAGA politics—elite corruption—and echoes Trump’s original pledge to “drain the swamp,” even as his reversal on the issue and ties to Epstein appear to implicate him. Second, the Epstein controversy has become a central issue in U.S. politics, with both liberal and conservative outlets devoting substantial coverage to it, often criticizing Trump in strikingly similar terms (Zilinsky, 2025). Third, Trump has faced visible dissent from within the conservative camp itself, as prominent Republican figures and influential media personalities—Joe Rogan and Tucker Carlson—have publicly urged

²Hutzler, A. (2025, August 17). *What Trump Has Said About Epstein Over the Years, Including on the 2024 Campaign Trail*. ABC7 News. Retrieved from <https://abc7news.com/post/what-trump-has-said-epstein-years-including-2024-campaign-trail/17153215/>

³Treisman, R. (2025, October 2). *Most Americans Want the Epstein Files Released, Poll Finds*. PBS NewsHour. Retrieved from <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/most-americans-want-the-epstein-files-released-poll-finds>. We also conducted a prestudy on Prolific (see Supporting Information (SI) C), where 85% of Republicans agree that the files should be released and 58% were “very” or “completely” certain of their views. Only 5% of respondents said that they were uncertain.

disclosure. Consequently, this case provides a critical test of the upper bound of Trump's influence: whether he can escape accountability even when he defies his supporters' preferences, adopts a position at odds with his earlier anti-corruption message, and faces opposition from right-wing elites.

We assess Trump's influence in two preregistered experiments fielded in September-October 2025—before Trump signed the release—using the survey platform Cint. In the first ($N=2,500$), we test whether Republicans follow Trump when he argues for or against disclosure unopposed. Strikingly, even in this least-likely case for partisan loyalty, Republican respondents move toward Trump's position regardless of which side he takes (Barber and Pope, 2019; Lenz, 2012). In the second ($N=5,500$), we couple Trump's statements with counterarguments from both Democratic and right-wing elites. We show that when Trump is unopposed or contested by congressional Democrats, partisans follow to the same extent and do not express any issue-specific or general disapproval. Yet, under the right conditions, Republican partisans are both willing and able to hold Trump accountable. When Trump is counterargued by right-coded media elites, the magnitude of his opinion leadership is halved and, crucially, both issue-specific and overall Trump approval declines. The effects of congressional Republican opposition fall between these extremes.

Our results have two important implications. First, opinion leadership does not imply the absence of political accountability. Second, meaningful competition in polarized societies may need to emerge from within ideological blocs: while Trump is powerful, he can be made accountable when facing the right opposition. The development of the Epstein issue closely mirrors this conclusion in the real world.

Study 1: Do Republicans Follow Trump on Epstein?

We first examine whether Republican identifiers are willing to follow Trump under the unfavorable circumstances of the Epstein issue. To do this, we conduct a survey experiment with 2,500 Republican identifiers recruited through Cint. In all three studies, Cint invited users who had selected “Republican” in response to the platform-profile question, “In general, what is your political affiliation?” Within each survey, before treatment assignment, we asked the same question again, with the response options “Democrat,” “Republican,” “Independent,” “Other,” “None,” and “Prefer not to say.” Only respondents who again selected “Republican” were retained.

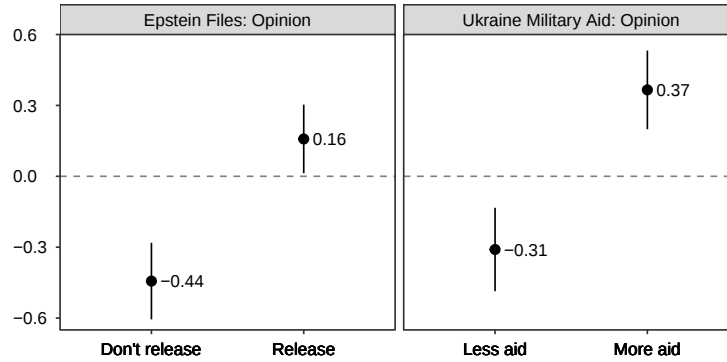
Before treatment assignment, we also asked, “Would you consider yourself a MAGA Republican or part of the MAGA movement?” with the response options “Yes,” “No,” and “Not sure.” We classify respondents answering “Yes” as MAGA identifiers and respondents answering “No” or “Not sure” as non-MAGA identifiers. The profile-based recruitment criterion and the in-survey questions, response options, timing, and coding rules were identical across all three studies.

Based on real statements by Trump, we construct two treatments arguing either against the release by describing the issue as a Democratic “hoax” or in favor of the release by citing Trump’s earlier pro-disclosure statements.⁴ Respondents are randomly assigned to one of the two treatments or a pure control. We measure the respondents’ support for releasing the Epstein files post-treatment on a seven-point Likert scale.

The left panel of Figure 1 shows the treatment effects on policy support compared

⁴See SI B for the exact treatments and an overview of statements from Trump both arguing in favor of and against disclosing information on the Epstein investigation.

Figure 1: Republican partisans follow Trump on both Epstein and Ukraine



to the control.⁵ Despite the salience of the Epstein issue and strong Republican support for disclosure, Trump’s statements still exert a clear influence on Republican opinion. When Trump argues against releasing the files, support significantly drops by .44 on the seven-point scale, and when he argues in favor, it instead significantly increases by .16. These effects are comparable to typical party-cue effects (Clifford, Leeper and Rainey, 2024; Skytte, 2025; Slothuus and Bisgaard, 2021). As we show in Table F3 in the Supporting Information (SI), Trump’s statements do not only affect the intensity of the opinion: the share opposing release increases from about 10% when Trump supports disclosure to 22% when Trump opposes it.

While the effects we estimate are substantial, it is nevertheless possible that Trump supporters follow him less on the Epstein issue than they would on another issue. To benchmark the effects, we ran a simultaneous experiment using Trump’s statements on providing military aid to Ukraine, a foreign policy issue where we would expect people to be more persuadable. These results, in the right panel of Figure 1, show effects that are very similar to the Epstein experiment. When Trump argues in favor of more aid,

⁵No weighting was applied in any of the analyses reported in the paper.

support for the proposal increases by .37, and when he argues against it, it decreases by approximately the same amount. Partisan loyalty thus appears equally strong under the difficult Epstein case as the easy case of aid to Ukraine. Even on an issue at the center of the political debate, the experimental treatments produce meaningful shifts toward Trump’s position, raising concerns about whether partisans can hold their leader accountable when it matters ([Barber and Pope, 2019](#); [Lenz, 2012](#)).

Study 2: Can Elite Competition Make Trump Accountable?

Similar to a canonical party cue design (see [Bullock, 2020](#)), our first experiment (1) presents respondents with an *unopposed* statement from Trump and (2) measures its effect on the Epstein files *policy opinion*. This design has two limitations. First, it omits a key feature of the Epstein case, in which Trump faces unusually visible dissent also from the conservative camp. Second, it does not include a direct measure of *accountability*, such as issue-specific or overall Trump approval. The Epstein issue provides an ideal case for testing whether between-bloc and within-bloc elite competition can help partisans hold Trump to account, as the literature on competitive political messaging and two-sided information flows suggests ([Chong and Druckman, 2007](#); [Druckman and Lupia, 2016](#); [Zaller, 1992](#)). However, the first experiment, like the typical party cue design, leaves open whether this is the case.

In the second experiment, we therefore test whether elite competition can help Trump supporters not only stop following their leader, but actually hold him accountable. To do this, we recruit 5,500 Republican partisans using Cint. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of several conditions in which Trump’s statement opposing the release

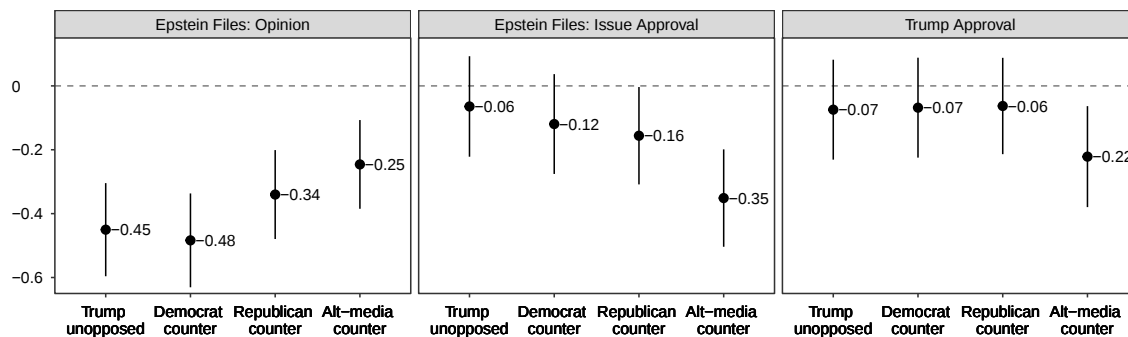
was shown either on its own or paired with a pro-disclosure counterargument from congressional Democrats Hakeem Jeffries and Ro Khanna, congressional Republicans Thomas Massie and James Comer, or prominent right-coded media figures Joe Rogan and Tucker Carlson. The Democratic and Republican congressional counterarguments use the same text apart from the named actors and party labels. The Carlson/Rogan counterargument, by contrast, is designed as a realistic alt-media message: it includes direct quotes and sharper language because this better matches how these actors publicly communicate about the issue. We therefore interpret this condition as a bundled but credible countermessage, not as an isolated test of source identity. The preregistration concerns the Republican and Carlson/Rogan counterarguments, while the Democratic counterargument is an exploratory out-party comparison.

The counterarguments do not include any attacks on Trump but forcefully emphasize that it is a matter of public interest what is in the records and that releasing the files is crucial for restoring public trust. We also include a pure control group that receives no statements. The preregistered outcome for this study is support for releasing the files. Because our broader question concerns accountability, we also explore two approval-based indicators of accountability: approval of Trump's handling of the issue and overall Trump approval.

Figure 2 shows the effect of the uncontested Trump statement compared to the control, and its subsequent effects when paired with the counterarguments. The effect of the uncontested statement on policy opinion is identical to that in the first study. In line with Broockman and Butler (2017), we do not see any indication that opinion leadership comes at the cost of political accountability: advocating this unpopular position does

not lead to any decrease in issue approval or overall Trump approval. The figure further makes clear that between-bloc elite competition does nothing to make Trump accountable. Even though the Democrats take a position aligned with Republican public opinion while Trump is clearly out of step, this does not mitigate Trump’s opinion leadership, nor does it have any effect on the approval measures. When unopposed or faced with opposition from the out-party, Trump appears virtually unconstrained.

Figure 2: The Carlson/Rogan counterargument reduces opinion following and approval, while Democratic and Republican counters have little to no effect



This is perhaps no surprise. In a highly polarized society it is unlikely that out-party competition will help partisans hold their own party accountable because partisans distrust opposing-party elites (Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus, 2013; Merkley and Stecula, 2021; Nicholson, 2012). We therefore theorize that meaningful competition must originate from within the party or ideological camp. We test this with the Republican and right-coded media counters.

The results show that within-bloc opposition appears to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for accountability. The Republican counter moves opinion toward releasing the files and lowers issue-specific approval, but the effects are not significantly different

from the unopposed Trump statement. Republican dissent does significantly reduce issue-specific approval by .16 relative to the pure control. However, this reflects the combined signal that Trump opposes release while congressional Republicans support it, and the reaction remains muted. Taken together, these patterns suggest that congressional dissent provides a modest basis for checking Trump's influence.

The potential of within-bloc opposition becomes clearer in the Carlson/Rogan condition. When Trump is paired with a realistic alt-media countermessage from Joe Rogan and Tucker Carlson, both of whom have endorsed him but publicly support releasing the files, his influence over Republican public opinion is reduced roughly by half and support for releasing the files increases by .2 ($p = .0080$) compared to the unopposed Trump statement (see SI Table F5). Furthermore, approval of Trump's handling of the issue sharply drops by .29 ($p = .00033$), and, strikingly, even overall Trump approval drops by .15 ($p = .067$).

The pattern is even more pronounced when we compare with the control group. Issue-specific approval now drops by .35 ($p = .0000065$) and overall Trump approval by .22 ($p = .0060$). As we show in SI Table F6, these effects are substantial: the share who approves of Trump's handling of the Epstein issue decreases by 9 percentage points, and the share approving of Trump overall decreases by 8 percentage points. In other words, when Trump is out of step with Republican opinion and faces credible within-bloc opposition, his supporters are willing to hold him accountable by expressing both disapproval of his handling of the issue and of Trump himself. Yet, Republican public opinion still moves towards Trump, making clear that opinion leadership does not exclude accountability.

One potential concern is that the findings are driven by Republicans who do not identify with the MAGA movement. We therefore test whether the results hold among

self-identified MAGA Republicans. MAGA identification is substantively meaningful: 72% of MAGA identifiers, compared with 42% of other Republicans, say that the 2020 election was stolen, while 55%, compared with 29%, say that Trump should run again. Yet the two groups are similarly supportive of releasing the Epstein files (82% and 85%), making MAGA identifiers a particularly demanding subgroup in which to test Trump's influence. Although an even more ardent subset exists within the broader MAGA category, MAGA identifiers are clearly more aligned with Trump on average. Remarkably, as we show in SI E, the results are if anything more pronounced among MAGA Republicans. While this does not rule out the existence of a smaller group of unwavering Trump supporters (Goldsmith and Moen, 2025), even MAGA Republicans are capable of holding Trump accountable.

Why do some forms of competition curb partisan loyalty while others do not? One explanation is that counterarguments are more effective when they come from actors whom recipients perceive as sharing their concerns. In the account developed by Lupia and McCubbins (1998), persuasion depends in part on whether recipients perceive that a speaker shares their interests. An exploratory Study 3 assesses the plausibility of this interpretation by measuring perceived shared concerns on the Epstein issue, an indicator of perceived common interests on the issue at stake, and familiarity with the actors used in Study 2. The results, described in SI D, show that Republicans perceive Rogan and Carlson as sharing their concerns more than Democratic actors and somewhat more than the named Republican legislators; they are also much more familiar with Rogan and Carlson than with the named Republican legislators.

A separate analysis examines a complementary outcome: how respondents make

sense of Trump’s handling of the Epstein issue in light of our experimental treatments. We include an open-ended question asking respondents why they think that Trump has acted the way he has. Using a large language model, we classify over 5,300 open-ended responses as *dismissal* if they describe Trump’s position on the Epstein files as unimportant or a distraction (see SI G for full prompts and details). The results, presented in Table G2, show that respondents become significantly more likely to dismiss the issue as unimportant when Trump argues against releasing the files unopposed. The Democratic counter again appears completely ineffective in helping Republican partisans take the issue seriously. However, when Trump is countered by right-coded media, the willingness to dismiss the issue is strongly attenuated to a level that is not statistically different from the control condition. Together, these findings show that the Carlson/Rogan countermessage changed how respondents interpreted Trump’s position by making them less likely to adopt his dismissal frame. This result complements Study 3 by showing how the message affected respondents’ interpretations, while Study 3 describes respondents’ perceptions of the messengers.

Conclusions

Using two preregistered survey experiments, we test the upper bound of partisan loyalty on a critical case: whether Republicans follow Trump on the issue of the Epstein files. We find that while Trump is powerful, his influence is not unlimited. When exposed to a credible Carlson/Rogan countermessage, Republican partisans express disapproval of both Trump’s handling of the issue and of Trump himself. Our results are thus a source of both optimism and concern: partisans can hold even a charismatic and dominant leader

like Donald Trump accountable—but we show this for an issue where the conditions for accountability are unusually strong.

The findings from our experiments, fielded before the Epstein files were ultimately released to the public, provide important insights into how the issue unfolded in the real world. Although Trump initially denounced calls for disclosure and sought to reframe the issue as a partisan attack, he ultimately did *not* veto the release of the files. Trump evidently perceived the political costs of vetoing the release as being too high. This closely aligns with our experimental results, showing that political dissent from his own camp imposes meaningful political costs, even among self-identified MAGA Republicans. In contrast, the development of the Epstein issue sits uneasily with the conventional view in both media commentary and scholarship that there are essentially “minimal downsides to staking out policy positions constituents claim to oppose” (Broockman and Butler, 2017, 6).⁶ At least when politicians face credible opposition.

Our findings raise questions about policy support as an indirect measure of accountability. When partisans express disapproval of Trump, they nevertheless follow him in supporting the policy (Lenz, 2012). Although scholars of partisanship rarely conceptualize policy support as an explicit indicator of accountability, the political implications of opinion leadership are often framed in those terms (e.g., Barber and Pope, 2019, 39). Yet our results show that, under credible within-bloc contestation, partisans may follow their leader while still disapproving of the direction.

Our results show how within-bloc competition is crucial for preventing dominant

⁶Similarly, on Trump’s relationship to the MAGA movement, Ezra Klein states that “there is nowhere he can go that they won’t follow.” *Ezra Klein: Abundance Politics — Doomscroll* (2025, March 18). *YouTube*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NzODYazKIC8&t=139s>.

politicians from cultivating a cult-like influence over their supporters. In highly polarized societies, the right kind of elite competition still has the potential to make leaders accountable. Understanding what makes a meaningful opposition is of great democratic importance and a crucial endeavor for future research.

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Online Supporting Information for

Cult of Personality or Lack of Competition? Determining
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A Surveys and sampling

A.1 Sampling

We relied on the market research firm Cint (www.cint.com) to sample respondents for Studies 1, 2, and 3. We provided Cint with target numbers of completes for each study: 2,500 for Study 1, 5,500 for Study 2, and 500 for Study 3.

Cint recruited participants whose existing platform profiles identified their political affiliation as Republican. The profile question was, “In general, what is your political affiliation?” with the response options “Democrat,” “Republican,” “Independent,” “Other,” “None,” and “Prefer not to say.” In each survey, before treatment assignment, we reconfirmed respondents’ affiliation using the identical question and response options. Only participants who had selected “Republican” in their Cint profile and again selected “Republican” within the survey were retained. Respondents selecting another response within the survey were screened out.

Before treatment assignment in all three studies, respondents were also asked, “Would you consider yourself a MAGA Republican or part of the MAGA movement?” with the response options “Yes,” “No,” and “Not sure.” Respondents answering “Yes” were classified as MAGA identifiers, while respondents answering “No” or “Not sure” were classified as non-MAGA identifiers. The profile-based recruitment criterion and the in-survey question wording, response options, timing, and coding rules were identical across all three studies.

Respondents also had to consent to participate and pass a preregistered attention check in which they were instructed to select two specified response options. Respondents who did not consent, did not reconfirm their Republican affiliation, or failed the attention check

were screened out and did not count toward the target number of completes.

We did not use additional post-treatment quality exclusions beyond the preregistered screener. This choice was deliberate: the screener establishes a baseline level of attention while avoiding more aggressive exclusions that could disproportionately remove respondents with lower education or lower survey-taking familiarity. Cint describes its platform-level quality-control procedures as combining proprietary and third-party fraud-detection tools, including a Trust Score that assesses the risk of potentially fraudulent survey activity when participants enter the Cint Exchange survey workflow.⁷ To the extent that some low-quality responses remain, this should primarily add noise to the outcome measures and therefore make it harder to detect systematic treatment effects.

All surveys were programmed in Qualtrics and respondents answered online via a link provided by Cint. Data for Study 1 were collected 2025-10-24 - 2025-10-30; data for Study 2 were collected 2025-09-25 - 2025-09-29, and data for Study 3 were collected 2025-10-14 - 2025-10-15. We present Study 1 before Study 2 for conceptual clarity: Study 1 isolates Trump’s unopposed cue, while Study 2 introduces competing elite counterarguments. Chronologically, Study 1 was fielded after Study 2 because it was designed as a preregistered replication of an earlier pilot, ensuring that both main studies reported in the paper were preregistered.

A.2 Respondent characteristics

Table A1 shows the demographic characteristics of the three unweighted study samples. As a descriptive benchmark, the table also shows the corresponding unweighted charac-

⁷See Cint, “Quality and Standards,” <https://www.cint.com/data-quality-approach/>; and Cint, “Trust Score,” <https://www.cint.com/lp/trust-score-real-people/>.

teristics from the 2024 American National Election Studies for respondents reporting that they think of themselves as a Republican (question V241221).⁸ We use the unweighted ANES Republican subsample because the purpose of the comparison is descriptive: to assess whether the unweighted Cint samples are visibly skewed relative to a probability-based benchmark, not to estimate population quantities. The Cint samples match the ANES sample well in general. Respondents in the ANES are slightly older, somewhat less likely to live in a suburb near a big city, slightly more likely to have low education (less than high school), and slightly more likely to select “some college” as their highest level of education instead of “high school”, which is more common in the Cint samples. In general, however, we do not consider these differences very substantial.

⁸<https://electionstudies.org/data-center/2024-time-series-study/>

Table A1: Respondent characteristics

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3	ANES
Mean age	48.6	48.4	50.3	54.9
Gender (%)				
Female	48.1	46.8	47.9	49.4
Male	51.9	53.2	52.1	50.6
Geography (%)				
Big city	17.2	20.9	22.0	19.7
Suburb near big city	36.2	34.9	35.9	28.8
Small city or town	25.3	23.3	21.4	29.1
Rural area	21.3	20.8	20.7	22.5
Education (%)				
Less than high school	3.2	2.4	1.9	5.4
High school	31.9	28.0	30.7	20.8
Some college	27.6	28.4	24.9	35.6
College degree	37.3	41.3	42.6	38.3
Observations	2567	5488	537	1652

B Experimental treatments and outcomes

B.1 The Epstein files

On the issue of the Epstein files, we developed three types of experimental treatments: an argument in favor of releasing the files, where Trump stands unopposed; an argument against releasing the files, where Trump is unopposed; and a third category of treatments with *competing arguments* (Chong and Druckman, 2007). In the third category, the argument against releasing the files is supported by Trump, but it is also countered by an argument in favor of releasing the files, which is supported by a competing elite. Because the Epstein issue was highly salient at the time of the study, the treatment effects

should be interpreted as the marginal effect of presenting elite positions in a pretreated, high-information environment rather than as persuasion in a blank-slate setting.

In constructing the treatments, we focused on three main factors: avoiding deception, developing an argument that could be attributed to several different elites, and achieving a balance between the competing arguments. Because Carlson and Rogan communicated about the Epstein issue in a more direct and personalized style than the congressional actors, the Carlson/Rogan alt-media treatment preserves this rhetorical form rather than translating their statements into the more institutional style used for members of Congress. This source-message matching was intended to improve treatment credibility, but it also means that the condition should be interpreted as a bundled countermessage.

We first present the full treatment texts. Next, we present sources and additional information relevant to the different treatments.

B.1.1 Full treatments

In Study 1, respondents were randomly assigned with equal probability to either the Trump argument against releasing the files, the Trump argument in favor of releasing the files, or a control group receiving no argument. In Study 2 respondents were randomly assigned to either a control group receiving no argument, a group receiving a Trump argument against releasing the files, or a group receiving a Trump argument against releasing the files *plus* one of four possible counterarguments (Republican, Democrat, Carlson/Rogan, Unlabeled). There were hence six possible groups in Study 2. The treatment texts below reproduce the text shown to respondents.

Trump unopposed against releasing the files (Study 1)

Donald Trump has on several occasions stated that the Epstein files should not be released to the public. He calls the push to release them “a hoax” promoted by his political opponents and warns it is meant to damage him and other Republicans. He argues that the controversy distracts from more important issues, and says releasing the records would only fuel unnecessary speculation. **Trump** describes the demand for release as politically motivated rather than in the public interest, and **insists the issue is not worth pursuing.**

Trump unopposed in favor of releasing the files (Study 1)

Donald Trump has on several occasions stated that the Epstein files should be made public. Following Epstein’s death in 2019, Trump called for a “full investigation” into the case. In a Fox & Friends interview in June 2024, when asked if he would declassify the Epstein files, he responded, “Yeah, yeah, I would.” **Trump** reiterated that position in a later interview, telling Lex Fridman, “I’d be inclined to do the Epstein. I’d have no problem with it.” Together, these statements frame **releasing the files as a way to put out the facts and end speculation.**

Trump argument against releasing the files (Study 2)

Donald Trump says the Epstein files **should not be released to the public.** He calls the push to release them “a hoax” promoted by his political opponents and warns it is meant to damage him and other Republicans. He argues that the controversy distracts from more important issues, and says releasing the records would only fuel unnecessary speculation. **Donald Trump** describes the demand for release as politically motivated rather than in the public interest, and **insists the issue is not worth pursuing.**

Republican counterargument (Study 2)

At the same time, **Republican members of Congress such as Rep. James Comer and Rep. Thomas Massie** say the Epstein files **should be released to the public.** They argue that transparency serves the public interest and that Americans “have a right to know” what’s in the records. They note that keeping the files secret only fuels speculation, while releasing them would help ensure accountability and restore public trust. They call the push to release the files a straightforward step to get the facts out and show that no one is above the law, and **insist the issue is worth pursuing.**

Democrat counterargument (Study 2)

At the same time, **Democratic members of Congress such as Rep. Hakeem Jeffries and Rep. Ro Khanna** say the Epstein files **should be released to the public.** They argue that transparency serves the public interest and that Americans “have a right to

know” what’s in the records. They note that keeping the files secret only fuels speculation, while releasing them would help ensure accountability and restore public trust. They call the push to release the files a straightforward step to get the facts out and show that no one is above the law, and **insist the issue is worth pursuing**.

Carlson/Rogan counterargument (Study 2)

At the same time, **Tucker Carlson and Joe Rogan** say the Epstein files **should be released to the public**. They argue that transparency serves the public interest and that Americans “have a right to know” what’s in the records. Carlson says dismissing questions about Epstein is like telling the public to “shut up.” Rogan accuses the government of “trying to gaslight” people by claiming there is no client list. They call the push to release the files a straightforward step to get the facts out, and **insist the issue is worth pursuing**.

Unlabeled counterargument (Study 2)

At the same time, **many people** say the Epstein files **should be released to the public**. They argue that transparency serves the public interest and that Americans “have a right to know” what’s in the records. Keeping the files secret only fuels speculation, while releasing them would help ensure accountability and restore public trust. Proponents call the push to release the files a straightforward step to get the facts out and show that no one is above the law, and **insist the issue is worth pursuing**.

B.1.2 Trump treatments, sources

Constructing the Trump arguments against releasing the files was straightforward: here, we drew on recent statements in which Trump referred to the controversy as a “hoax” promoted by his political opponents, and suggested that the issue is distracting and not worth pursuing. In a post on Truth Social on July 16 2025 Trump wrote: “[The Democrats’] new SCAM is what we will forever call the Jeffrey Epstein Hoax, and my PAST supporters have bought into this ”bull****,” hook, line, and sinker. (...) all these people want to talk about, with strong prodding by the Fake News and the success starved Dems, is the Jeffrey Epstein Hoax.” In the same post, he also suggests that the issue distracts people from

“talking of our incredible and unprecedented success”.⁹ Trump has repeatedly suggested the issue is unimportant and that people should drop it. For instance, when a reporter asked about the Epstein records during a cabinet meeting Q&A on July 8 2025, Trump rebuked the question and downplayed the topic: “Are you still talking about Jeffrey Epstein? (...) Are people still talking about this guy? This creep? That is unbelievable.”¹⁰ When asked about the issue by reporters on July 15 2025, Trump said “I don’t understand what the interest or what the fascination is. I really don’t and the credible information has been given” and “I don’t understand why the Jeffrey Epstein case would be of interest to anybody (...) I don’t understand why it keeps going.”¹¹

For the argument in favor of releasing the files, we drew on the fact that Trump on several occasions also has expressed support for *releasing* the files when asked in interviews. The argument refers to an interview on Fox & Friends where Trump was asked by host Rachel Campos-Duffy whether he would “declassify the Epstein files”, to which Trump responded “Yeah, yeah, I would. I guess I would.” In the following sentence Trump hedged about potentially harming people if “phony stuff” was in there. However, the quote used in the argument is accurate.¹²

The argument also refers to an interview Trump gave on the Lex Fridman podcast. Asked about the Epstein documents, Trump said: “I’d be inclined to do the Epstein. I’d have no problem with it.”¹³

⁹<https://trumpstruth.org/statuses/32018> (accessed 2025-10-18)

¹⁰<https://www.politifact.com/article/2025/jul/08/timeline-trump-admin-epstein-files-release/> (accessed 2025-10-18)

¹¹<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-bondi-release-thinks-credible-epstein/story?id=123774989> (accessed 2025-10-18)

¹²<https://www.forbes.com/sites/saradorn/2025/07/14/trump-sounded-hesitant-about-releasing-epstein-files-in-newly-resurfaced-interview/> (accessed 2025-10-20)

¹³https://lexfridman.com/donald-trump-transcript#chapter16-jeffrey_epstein (accessed 2025-10-20)

B.1.3 Counter treatments, sources

We constructed four different counterarguments for Study 2. The Republican, Democratic, and unlabeled counterarguments were based on closely parallel wording. The Carlson/Rogan alt-media counterargument shared the same broad pro-disclosure position but preserved the more direct and personalized rhetorical style of these actors' public statements. The unlabeled argument is equivalent to the Republican and Democrat arguments described below, but without the party label. The Republican argument mentions Rep. James Comer and Rep. Thomas Massie who have repeatedly argued in public that the Epstein files should be released.¹⁴¹⁵ Both have stated that releasing the files would restore trust and ensure accountability. For instance, Massie said on ABC news that those who might be in the Jeffrey Epstein files need to be held accountable regardless of their social status and that “we can’t avoid justice just to avoid embarrassment for some very powerful men”.¹⁶ In a House Oversight press release Comer talks about the need for a thorough investigation of the Epstein case “to bring transparency and accountability for survivors (...) and the American people.”¹⁷

The Democrat argument mentions Rep. Ro Khanna and Rep. Hakeem Jeffries. Both have repeatedly called for the release of the Epstein files, citing concerns about trans-

¹⁴<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/house-oversight-committee-issues-subpoenas-epstein-files/story?id=124378317>

¹⁵<https://www.c-span.org/program/news-conference/rep-khanna-and-massie-news-conference-on-the-release-of-epstein-investigation-files/665039> (accessed 2025-10-21)

¹⁶<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/massie-epstein-files-avoid-justice-avoid-embarrassment-powerful/story?id=125336706> (accessed 2025-10-21)

¹⁷<https://oversight.house.gov/release/oversight-committee-releases-records-provided-by-the-epstein-estate-chairman-comer-provides-statement/> (accessed 2025-10-21)

parency, accountability, and the need to restore trust.¹⁸¹⁹ For instance, on ABC’s *This Week* Khanna said, “Transparency demands the full release of the [Epstein] files”, discussing his bipartisan push to force a vote.²⁰ In a press briefing on the push to force a vote on the release of the Epstein files, Jeffries said: “The American people deserve to know the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth (...) what, if anything, is the Trump administration and the DOJ hiding?”.²¹

Finally, the alt-media counterargument mentions statements from Tucker Carlson and Joe Rogan arguing for the release of the files. Both have publicly called for releasing the files, citing concerns about transparency.²²²³ Carlson’s “shut up” line tracks his TPUSA speech, where he characterizes the government’s posture as “case closed, shut up conspiracy theorist.”²⁴ Rogan’s “gaslighting” charge comes from a 25 July (2025) episode of the *Joe Rogan Experience*, where Rogan, referring to the Trump administration’s handling of the Epstein case, said: “(...) you have this one hardcore line in the sand that everybody had been talking about forever, and then they’re trying to gaslight you on that.”²⁵

¹⁸<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/epstein-furor-undermines-public-trust-republican-election-hopes-two-us-lawmakers-2025-07-28/> (accessed 2025-10-21)

¹⁹<https://www.axios.com/2025/07/14/trump-epstein-files-jeffries-house-democrats> (accessed 2025-10-21)

²⁰<https://abcnews.go.com/ThisWeek/video/transparency-demands-full-release-epstein-files-rep-ro-124115103> (accessed 2025-10-21)

²¹<https://www.c-span.org/clip/news-conference/jeffries-blames-trump-for-fueling-epstein-files-conspiracy/5167974> (accessed 2025-10-21)

²²<https://tuckercarlson.com/february-27-morning-note> (accessed 2025-10-21)

²³<https://www.newsweek.com/joe-rogan-podcast-jeffrey-epstein-donald-trump-2105510> (accessed 2025-10-21)

²⁴<https://singjupost.com/transcript-tucker-carlsons-message-to-america-on-the-epstein-cover-up/> (accessed 2025-10-21)

²⁵<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/joe-rogan-donald-trump-epstein-files-b2798308.html> (accessed 2025-10-21)

B.1.4 Outcome questions

In Study 2, where more than one outcome question was asked, the attitude question was asked first, followed by the issue approval question, with the general approval question asked last.

Attitude on releasing the files (Studies 1 and 2)

Do you agree or disagree that the Epstein files should be released to the public?

Response options: Strongly disagree / Disagree / Somewhat disagree / Neither agree nor disagree / Somewhat agree / Agree / Strongly agree

Issue approval (Study 2)

Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling the issue of the Epstein files?

Response options: Strongly disapprove / Disapprove / Somewhat disapprove / Neither approve nor disapprove / Somewhat approve / Approve / Strongly approve

General approval (Study 2)

Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling his job as president?

Response options: Strongly disapprove / Disapprove / Somewhat disapprove / Neither approve nor disapprove / Somewhat approve / Approve / Strongly approve

B.2 Aid to Ukraine

In Study 1, the order of the two experiments was random.

On the issue of aid to Ukraine, respondents in the treatment group received either a statement in which Trump argues that aid should be increased or a statement arguing that the U.S. should clamp down on aid to Ukraine. Respondents were assigned to either the control group or one of the two treatments with $p = 1/3$.

As in the case of the Epstein files, the treatments were constructed to avoid deception. We present relevant sources for the Trump statements made in the treatments below.

B.2.1 Full treatments

Trump unopposed in favor of aid to Ukraine (Study 1)

Donald Trump has said that the U.S. should increase military support for Ukraine. He has pointed to additional air-defense deliveries and possibly even long-range weapons if Moscow refuses to move toward peace. “We’re going to be sending Patriots to NATO, and then NATO will distribute that” he said. Trump has also warned that if Vladimir Putin does not end the war, he may approve sending Tomahawk missiles to Ukraine. He has said he is “very disappointed” in Putin and that the conflict “should never have happened.” **Trump presents stepping up U.S. support as a way to strengthen Ukraine’s defenses and hasten a resolution consistent with American interests.**

Trump unopposed against aid to Ukraine (Study 1)

Donald Trump has said that the U.S. should clamp down on funding for Ukraine, pausing and reviewing its aid to ensure that it contributes to a lasting solution. He has argued that the U.S. should not send additional money unless Europe matches American support, declaring, “we should stop [providing aid] unless Europe starts equalizing.” Trump has also promoted a loans-not-grants approach, insisting that any future assistance be structured as repayable loans so the U.S. “gets its money back over time.” **Rather than sending ever-larger military packages that might prolong the conflict, Trump has repeatedly emphasized ending the war through negotiation.**

B.2.2 Trump treatments, sources

Trump has, on several occasions, argued that the U.S. should *increase military aid to Ukraine*, both in terms of additional air-defense systems and possibly long-range weapons like Tomahawk missiles.^{26,27} The treatment argument mentions a quote from CBS news where Trump said that the US would send “Patriots” that NATO will distribute.²⁸ The

²⁶<https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20250714-trump-says-us-will-send-patriot-air-defence-missiles-to-ukraine-usa-russia> (accessed 2025-11-07)

²⁷<https://apnews.com/article/trump-tomahawk-missiles-russia-ukraine-war-522fb8bb8fe8ce87107e1eb320abae0e> (accessed 2025-11-07)

²⁸<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/07/11/ukraine-to-receive-us-made-patriot-air-defence-systems-via-nato-trump-says> (accessed 2025-11-07)

argument also mentions Trump saying he is “very disappointed in Putin”²⁹ and that the conflict “should never have happened”³⁰. Finally, the argument mentions that Trump believes stepping up U.S. support would be consistent with American interests, which he has alluded to, for instance, in relation to the NATO-purchase/US-sale Patriot deal.³¹

For the argument *against more aid* we draw on the fact that Trump has also repeatedly argued against sending more aid to Ukraine, saying aid should be paused and reconsidered.³² The argument quotes Trump saying the U.S. should not send additional money unless “Europe starts equalizing”³³, and quotes Trump arguing for a loans-not-grants approach where the U.S. would get its money back over time.³⁴ Finally, the argument mentions Trump emphasizing ending the war through negotiation rather than sending more military aid.³⁵

B.2.3 Outcome question (Study 1)

Attitude on aid to Ukraine (Study 1)

Do you agree or disagree that the U.S. should provide more military aid to Ukraine?

Response options: Strongly disagree / Disagree / Somewhat disagree / Neither agree nor disagree / Somewhat agree / Agree / Strongly agree

²⁹<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-speaking-putin-thursday/> (accessed 2025-11-07)

³⁰<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/donald-trump-russia-ukraine-war-b2172182.html> (accessed 2025-11-07)

³¹<https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20250714-trump-says-us-will-send-patriot-air-defence-missiles-to-ukraine-usa-russia> (accessed 2025-11-07)

³²<https://abcnews.go.com/International/ukraine-europe-react-shocking-trump-aid-freeze/story?id=119416808> (accessed 2025-11-08)

³³<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/trump-halts-all-us-military-aid-ukraine-white-house-official-says-2025-03-04/> (accessed 2025-11-08)

³⁴<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/fact-checking-trumps-claims-amount-us-aid-ukraine/story?id=119167409> (accessed 2025-11-08)

³⁵<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-putin-russia-ukraine/> (accessed 2025-11-08)

C Pre-study data on Epstein opinion

Figure C1 shows data from a pilot study conducted on the platform Prolific ($n = 1278$) in August 2025. In the study, we measured the opinions of respondents identifying with the Republican Party regarding the issue of the Epstein files. Respondents were asked: “Do you agree or disagree that the Epstein files should be released to the public?” and “How certain are you of your feelings on the issue of the Epstein files?”, with responses given on 7-point Likert scales. As shown in the graph, a large majority of respondents support releasing the files: 85% of respondents agree with the statement to different degrees. Respondents also express that they are certain about their feelings on the issue: 58% say they are “very” or “completely” certain, while only 5% say they are “not at all certain”.

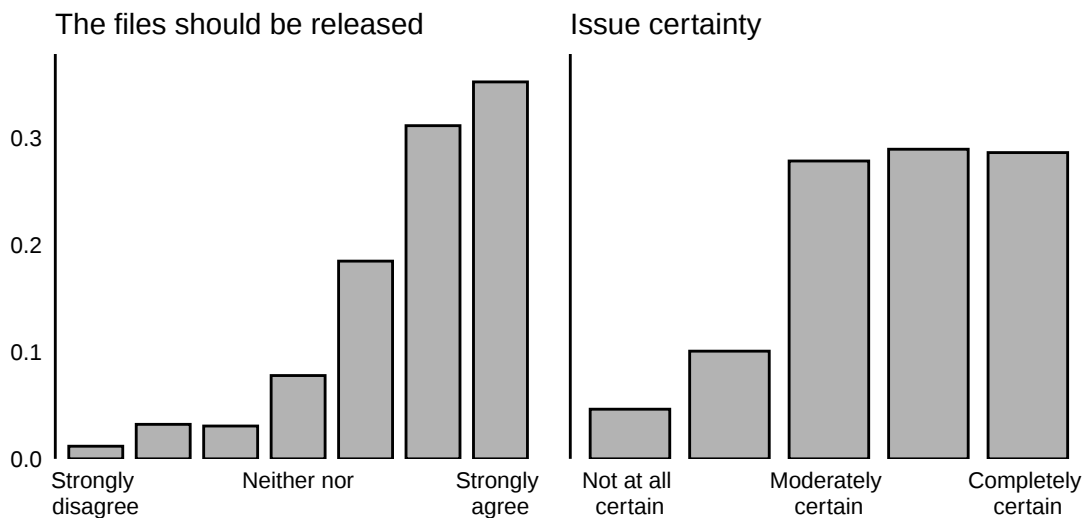


Figure C1: Republican respondents strongly support releasing the Epstein files

D Study 3: Perceived shared concerns on the Epstein issue and familiarity with specific actors

Study 3 is an exploratory study conducted with Cint ($n = 537$) to measure perceived shared concerns on the Epstein issue and familiarity with the actors mentioned in the Study 2 treatment texts (see Section A for details on sampling and respondent characteristics). The shared-concerns item captures whether respondents perceive an actor as aligned with the concerns of people like them on the issue at stake. We asked, “To what extent do you feel [ACTOR] in general share the concerns of people like you on the issue of the Epstein files?”³⁶ Responses were given on a fully labeled five-point Likert scale ranging from “not at all” to “a great deal.”

To measure familiarity, we asked respondents, “Please indicate how familiar you are with each of the following public figures,” with the names of the specific actors displayed in a grid format.³⁷ For each actor, respondents could indicate “never heard of,” “heard of, not familiar,” “somewhat familiar,” or “very familiar.”

We coded the perceived-shared-concerns indicator as 1 if respondents selected 3 (“a moderate amount”), 4 (“a lot”), or 5 (“a great deal”), and as 0 if they selected 1 or 2. We coded respondents as familiar with a specific actor if they selected “somewhat familiar” or “very familiar.” The party affiliation of the representatives was included in these questions. Questions about perceived shared concerns for the named members of Congress were added after the first wave of Study 3 responses had been collected. As a result, the sample

³⁶The actors are: Donald Trump, congressional Republicans, congressional Democrats, Joe Rogan, Tucker Carlson, Republican Congressman Thomas Massie, Republican Congressman James Comer, Democratic Congressman Ro Khanna, and Democratic Congressman Hakeem Jeffries.

³⁷We asked this for the specific individuals mentioned in the treatments, excluding Donald Trump.

size is lower ($n = 409$) for these actor-specific shared-concerns items than for the broader actor categories and the Rogan/Carlson items ($n = 537$).

Figure D1 shows the share of respondents coded as perceiving at least a moderate amount of shared concern and as familiar with each actor.

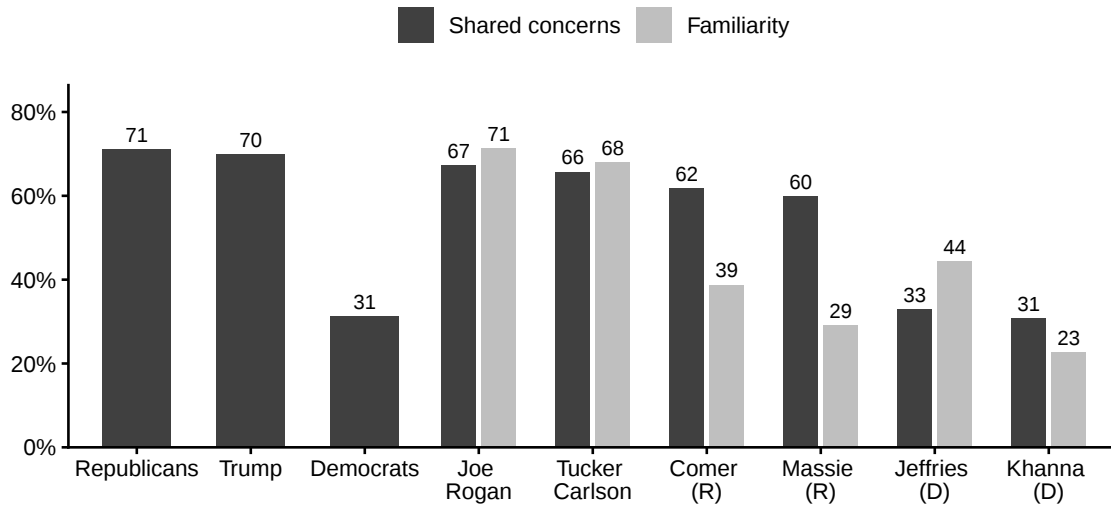


Figure D1: Perceived shared concerns on the issue of the Epstein files and familiarity with different actors

As seen in the figure, respondents are more likely to perceive Trump, congressional Republicans, Rogan, and Carlson as sharing their concerns on the Epstein issue. The corresponding shares are somewhat lower for the named Republican representatives and much lower for Democratic actors. The clearest distinction between Rogan/Carlson and the named Republican representatives is familiarity: around 70% report being familiar with Rogan and Carlson, while only 30–40% report being familiar with Comer or Massie despite the inclusion of their party affiliation. We therefore interpret Study 3 as descriptive evidence that Rogan and Carlson are widely perceived as sharing respondents’ concerns

on the issue and are highly familiar to Republican respondents. This provides context for why their countermessage may have been received differently in Study 2.

To further assess the descriptive pattern in Figure D1, Table D1 reports selected paired comparisons in perceived shared concerns and familiarity. Table D2 reports correlations between the perceived-shared-concerns indicator for Trump and the corresponding indicators for the other actors. These analyses use the same binary coding as Figure D1.

Table D1: Selected pairwise comparisons in Study 3

Comparison	Measure	Mean A	Mean B	Difference	SE	p-value	N
Rogan/Carlson vs. named Republican legislators	Perceived shared concerns	0.678	0.608	0.070	0.021	0.00078	408
Rogan/Carlson vs. congressional Republicans	Perceived shared concerns	0.665	0.711	-0.046	0.019	0.017	536
Rogan/Carlson vs. Trump	Perceived shared concerns	0.665	0.698	-0.033	0.020	0.10	536
Rogan/Carlson vs. congressional Democrats	Perceived shared concerns	0.665	0.312	0.354	0.023	0.000	536
Rogan/Carlson vs. named Democratic legislators	Perceived shared concerns	0.677	0.316	0.361	0.025	0.000	407
Rogan/Carlson vs. named Republican legislators	Familiarity	0.696	0.337	0.359	0.018	0.000	534
Rogan/Carlson vs. named Democratic legislators	Familiarity	0.696	0.335	0.362	0.017	0.000	535

Note: All measures are coded from 0 to 1. For perceived shared concerns, 1 indicates that the respondent selected 3, 4, or 5 on the five-point concern-sharing scale, and 0 indicates 1 or 2. For familiarity, 1 indicates being somewhat or very familiar. Rogan/Carlson, named Republican legislators, and named Democratic legislators are respondent-level averages of the two relevant actor indicators. Positive differences indicate higher values for Rogan/Carlson. Pairwise Ns vary because questions about perceived shared concerns for the named members of Congress were added after the first wave of Study 3 responses had been collected.

The pairwise comparisons reinforce two points. First, respondents are clearly more likely to perceive Rogan and Carlson as sharing their concerns than Democratic actors, and somewhat more likely to do so than for the named Republican legislators. However, the corresponding shares are not higher than for Trump or congressional Republicans as broader categories. Second, the clearest distinction between Rogan/Carlson and the named legislators is familiarity: respondents are about 36 percentage points more likely to be familiar with Rogan/Carlson than with either the named Republican or named Democratic legislators.

The correlations in Table D2 show that respondents who perceive Trump as sharing

Table D2: Correlations between perceptions that Trump and other actors share respondents' concerns in Study 3

Actor	Correlation with Trump indicator	p-value	<i>N</i>
Congressional Republicans	0.620	0.000	537
Congressional Democrats	0.050	0.25	537
Joe Rogan	0.373	0.000	536
Tucker Carlson	0.423	0.000	537
Thomas Massie	0.426	0.000	409
James Comer	0.353	0.000	409
Hakeem Jeffries	0.068	0.17	408
Ro Khanna	0.053	0.28	409

Note: The table reports Pearson correlations between binary indicators of perceived shared concerns. For each actor, the indicator is coded 1 if the respondent selected 3, 4, or 5 on the five-point concern-sharing scale, and 0 if the respondent selected 1 or 2. Pairwise *N*s vary because questions about perceived shared concerns for the named members of Congress were added after the first wave of Study 3 responses had been collected.

their concerns are also more likely to perceive Rogan, Carlson, Massie, and Comer as sharing their concerns. The corresponding associations for the Democratic actors are small and not statistically significant.

E MAGA identifiers

To examine whether our results also hold among the segment of our Republican sample that is more strongly aligned with Trump, we re-estimate the models among self-identified MAGA Republicans. We use MAGA identification as a substantively meaningful indicator of alignment with Trump, while recognizing that the category is broader than the narrower subset of uniformly ardent or unwavering Trump supporters.

Before treatment assignment in all three studies, we asked respondents, “Would you consider yourself a MAGA Republican or part of the MAGA movement?” with the response options “Yes,” “No,” and “Not sure.” We classify respondents answering “Yes” as MAGA identifiers and respondents answering “No” or “Not sure” as non-MAGA identifiers. The wording, response options, timing, and coding of the item were identical across all three studies. The subgroup analyses reported below use Studies 1 and 2, which are the two experimental studies.

About 50% of Republican respondents identify as MAGA in both studies, a number that is in line with recent polls. Table E1 reports the share of respondents who thought the election was stolen from Trump, who think that Trump should run for a third term, and who agree that the Epstein files should be released for MAGA and not-MAGA separately.

Table E1: Agreement with statements by MAGA support

Item	MAGA	Not MAGA
2020 election stolen	72%	42%
Trump should run again	55%	29%
Release the Epstein files	82%	85%
Observations	2729	2751

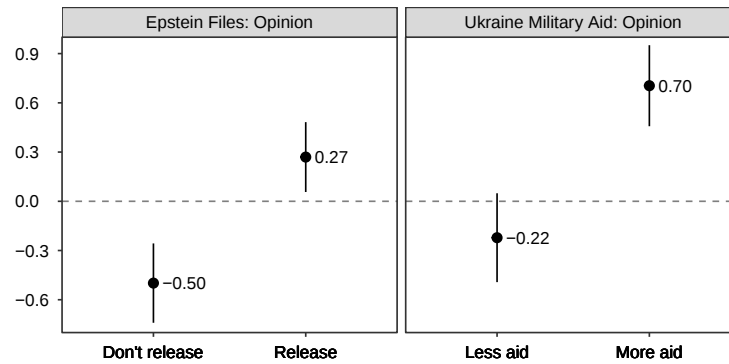
Table E1 confirms that MAGA self-identification captures a substantively distinct form of political alignment. Among MAGA identifiers, 72% say that the 2020 election was stolen, compared with 42% among Republicans who do not identify as MAGA. Similarly, 55% of MAGA identifiers say that Trump should run again, compared with 29% of other Republicans. These large differences indicate that respondents' identification with the MAGA movement is substantively meaningful rather than merely symbolic.

At the same time, the MAGA category contains some variation in attachment to Trump, and a still more ardent subset exists within it. We therefore do not treat every MAGA identifier as belonging to the narrower category of uniformly unwavering Trump supporters. Nor do we interpret Republicans who do not identify as MAGA as necessarily ideologically moderate. Importantly, both groups are similarly likely to support releasing the Epstein files (82% among MAGA identifiers and 85% among other Republicans). The MAGA subgroup therefore provides a particularly informative test: its members are substantially more aligned with Trump on prominent markers of Trump loyalty, but begin from essentially the same strong pro-release position as other Republicans.

We test whether our general findings from Studies 1 and 2 also apply among this more strongly Trump-aligned group by re-estimating the main models for MAGA identifiers separately. Overall, MAGA identifiers do not respond dramatically differently to the unopposed Trump statements: they too follow Trump, even when Trump takes the unpopular position and argues that the files should not be released. Figure E1 displays estimates that are similar to those in Figure 1, but slightly larger in each direction for the Epstein question. For the Ukraine question, the effect of the “more aid” statement shows a somewhat larger effect while the effect of the “less aid” statement is slightly smaller than

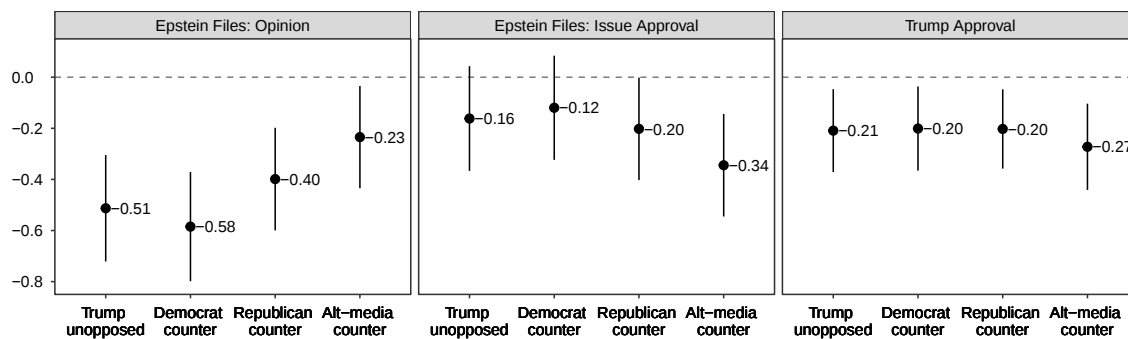
the main estimate shown in Figure 1.

Figure E1: Study 1 estimates for MAGA identifiers separately



Are self-identified MAGA Republicans willing to hold Trump accountable for taking an unpopular position when competing actors make the case for releasing the files? Figure E2 shows the results from Study 2 for MAGA identifiers. In line with the results in the main text, we see that Trump continues to have a strong sway over the opinion of MAGA identifiers when he is countered by Democrats. This sway decreases somewhat when congressional Republicans instead take the opposing side, but the big reduction, again, comes when Trump is counterargued by Joe Rogan and Tucker Carlson.

Figure E2: Study 2 estimates for MAGA identifiers separately



On the issue approval question, the patterns are similar to those in the main text, although the tendency is for MAGA identifiers to react more negatively to Trump taking the unpopular position, as seen in the somewhat larger (more negative) coefficients compared to Figure 2. Interestingly, this pattern also holds for the question on general approval. While the effect is most negative when Trump is counterargued by Rogan and Carlson, the estimate is negative and significant in all treatment conditions. In this sense, MAGA identifiers seem to behave slightly closer to the ideal of the *issue voter* on the Epstein issue than other Republicans: while Trump can influence the group's opinion, he cannot easily adopt an unpopular position without paying a price.

In sum, the patterns observed in the main text also hold among self-identified MAGA Republicans. This is a substantively important subgroup: MAGA identifiers are markedly more aligned with Trump than Republicans who do not adopt the MAGA label, even though an especially ardent subset exists within the broader category. Trump remains influential among MAGA identifiers, especially when unopposed, but there are clear limits to his influence even within this more strongly Trump-aligned group.

F Preregistration status, pre-analysis plans, and full estimates

Table F1: Preregistration status of studies, outcomes, and treatment arms

Study	Preregistered components	Exploratory or auxiliary components
Study 1	Epstein policy opinion; Trump pro-release and anti-release statements; H1 test.	Ukraine benchmark experiment.
Study 2	Epstein policy opinion; Trump unopposed, congressional Republican counter, and Carlson/Rogan counter; H1 and H2 tests.	Democratic counter; unlabeled information counter; issue approval; overall Trump approval; open-ended response analysis.
Study 3	None.	Exploratory of perceived shared concerns and familiarity with actors used in Study 2.

F.1 Study 1

For study 1, we pre-registered the following hypothesis:

H₁: When Trump argues for a policy position unopposed, Republican voters follow Trump regardless of what position he takes

In line with the pre-analysis plan, we evaluate support for the hypothesis by estimating the treatment effect of Trump arguing for or against releasing the Epstein files unopposed. These results are presented in Table F2, and are shown graphically in Figure 1 in the main text. The table also includes the corresponding estimates for the Ukraine issue, which we use to benchmark the Epstein estimates, but were not pre-registered. As shown in Table F2, the effects of the Trump treatment are statistically significant and in the expected

direction for the Epstein issue, which means that H_1 is fully supported. Note that all item-missing data is handled by listwise deletion in all analyses in the manuscript.

Table F2: Study 1 estimates

	Epstein	Ukraine
Trump for	0.158 (0.074)	0.366 (0.085)
Trump against	−0.443 (0.083)	−0.310 (0.090)
Constant	5.182 (0.053)	3.940 (0.061)
Observations	2522	2516

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. The outcome variables are recorded on 7-point Likert scales. The reference category is control.

Binary outcome To illustrate the magnitude of the effects, and in particular of Trump going against the popular position on Epstein, we recode the dependent variable to indicate whether respondents opposed the proposals (i.e., opposed releasing the files or opposed military aid to Ukraine). To do this, we code responses 1, 2, and 3 as 1 and 4, 5, 6, and 7 as 0, for the Epstein attitude question. For reference, we do the same for the Ukraine experiment.

Table F3 reports the results from a regression with the binary outcome variables on the Trump statements for or against the proposal. As expected, the baseline probability of opposing the release is very low: 0.12, as shown by the constant in the Epstein model. However, when Trump argues against releasing the files this probability increases by 0.1 to about 0.22—an increase of over 80%. The estimates in Table F3 also show that Trump arguing in favor of releasing the files has the expected sign, but is not statistically

Table F3: Study 1 alternative coding: Probability of being against the proposal

	Epstein (don't release)	Ukraine (no aid)
Trump: release/more aid	−0.024 (0.015)	−0.082 (0.023)
Trump: don't release/no aid	0.100 (0.018)	0.118 (0.024)
Constant	0.124 (0.011)	0.385 (0.017)
Observations	2522	2516

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. The outcome variables are equal to 1 for respondents who selected 1, 2, or 3 – i.e. being against the proposals to different degrees. The variables are coded as 0 otherwise. The reference category is control.

significant. For the Ukraine question, the Trump arguments move the probability of opposing the proposal in both directions. A likely explanation for this is the lack of floor or ceiling effects, as the baseline probability of being against more aid to Ukraine is much higher.

F.2 Study 2

For Study 2, we pre-registered the following hypothesis in addition to H_1 :

H₂: When Trump's position is opposed by competing conservative elites, Trump's sway over Republican voters diminishes

Table F4 shows the general effects of Trump arguing against releasing the files unopposed and the subsequent effects when Trump is counterargued by Democrats, Republicans and right-coded media (Carlson and Rogan). The table also includes an unlabeled “information counter” which is identical to the Democrat and Republican counters but without the partisan label (see SI B). This treatment arm was included for exploratory

purposes and was not pre-registered. The estimates for *Trump unopposed*, the *Democrat counter*, the *Republican counter*, and the *alt-media counter* are displayed graphically in Figure 2 in the main text.

Table F4: Study 2 estimates

	Attitude	Issue approval	Trump approval
Trump unopposed	−0.450 (0.074)	−0.064 (0.080)	−0.074 (0.080)
Democrat counter	−0.484 (0.075)	−0.119 (0.080)	−0.068 (0.080)
Information counter	−0.486 (0.075)	−0.206 (0.078)	−0.150 (0.081)
Republican counter	−0.340 (0.071)	−0.156 (0.078)	−0.063 (0.077)
Alt-media counter	−0.246 (0.071)	−0.351 (0.078)	−0.222 (0.081)
Constant	5.330 (0.048)	4.350 (0.055)	5.288 (0.057)
Observations	5478	5484	5482

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. All outcome variables are recorded on 7-point Likert scales. The reference category is control.

To formally test H_2 , we estimate the preregistered comparison model from the Study 2 pre-analysis plan. In this model, the main treatment variable is coded as 1 if a respondent received *any* Trump anti-release statement and 0 for the control group. The Republican and Carlson/Rogan counter variables are then coded as indicators for receiving that counterargument in addition to the Trump statement. The coefficients on these counter variables therefore estimate whether the effect of the Trump statement is attenuated when the counterargument is added. This is the model specified in the pre-analysis plan for the Epstein attitude outcome. For completeness, Table F5 also reports the same

parameterization for exploratory treatment arms and outcomes.

Table F5: Study 2 estimates, comparison model

	Attitude	Issue approval	Trump approval
Trump unopposed	−0.450 (0.074)	−0.064 (0.080)	−0.074 (0.080)
Democrat counter	−0.033 (0.081)	−0.055 (0.082)	0.006 (0.079)
Information counter	−0.036 (0.080)	−0.142 (0.080)	−0.076 (0.080)
Republican counter	0.110 (0.077)	−0.092 (0.080)	0.012 (0.076)
Alt-media counter	0.204 (0.077)	−0.287 (0.080)	−0.147 (0.080)
Constant	5.330 (0.048)	4.350 (0.055)	5.288 (0.057)
Observations	5478	5484	5482

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. All outcome variables are recorded on 7-point Likert scales. For the Epstein attitude outcome, the Trump unopposed, Republican counter, and Carlson/Rogan counter estimates correspond to the preregistered H_2 comparison model. The Democratic counter, information counter, issue approval, and overall Trump approval estimates are exploratory extensions. The treatment variable *Trump unopposed* is coded as 1 if a respondent received *any* treatment statement and 0 otherwise. The other treatment variables are coded as 1 (0 otherwise) if a respondent received the specific counter treatment. The model thus tests the overall effect of the unopposed Trump statement and how the effect is modified with each specific counterargument. The reference category is control.

Table F5 shows that H_2 is formally supported for the *alt-media* counter, which makes the impact of the Trump statement less negative ($p = .0080$), but not for the *Republican* counterargument. The alt-media counter also significantly lowers Trump’s issue approval compared to when Trump is unopposed ($p = .00033$), and lowers Trump’s general approval. The latter estimate, however, falls just short of conventional levels of statistical significance ($p = 0.067$). None of the other counterarguments show significant effects when compared

to the statement where Trump is unopposed.

Binary outcome To again illustrate the magnitude of the effects, we dichotomized the outcome variables (similar to the analysis in Table F3), indicating whether a respondent *opposes releasing the files* (coded 1 for responses 1 to 3, 0 otherwise), *approves of Trump's handling of the issue* (coded 1 for responses 5 to 7, 0 otherwise), and *approves of Trump in general* (coded 1 for responses 5 to 7, 0 otherwise). We then regressed the binary outcome variables on the treatment indicators to estimate how the probability of each outcome changes when Trump is unopposed versus when he is countered. That is, we use the same specification as in Table F4, but with dichotomized outcome variables.

Table F6 reports the results. Respondents are much more likely to oppose releasing the Epstein files when Trump is unopposed. The estimated effect of 0.104 closely mirrors the estimate for Study 1. However, when Trump is countered by Rogan/Carlson, the effect is roughly halved. Furthermore, the probability of approving of Trump's handling of the issue drops by 0.086 when the same counter is paired with the Trump statement. The probability of approving of Trump's handling of his job as president is also significantly reduced by 0.074 compared to the control. The effects of the counter from congressional Republicans are directionally the same but weaker, while the Democrat counter shows little effect at all. Finally, we note that the results for the unlabeled information counter are somewhat inconsistent but almost as strong as the Rogan/Carlson counter when it comes to general approval. As explained above, this treatment was merely included as a point of reference and was not pre-registered. The varying results could reflect sampling variability, or, potentially, that some respondents make inferences about who the sender is (see [Orr, Fowler and Huber 2023](#)).

Table F6: Study 2 estimates, binary outcomes

	Against release	Issue approval	Trump approval
Trump unopposed	0.104 (0.016)	0.003 (0.023)	−0.049 (0.021)
Democrat counter	0.107 (0.016)	0.002 (0.023)	−0.021 (0.020)
Information counter	0.104 (0.016)	−0.054 (0.023)	−0.074 (0.021)
Republican counter	0.066 (0.015)	−0.039 (0.023)	−0.041 (0.021)
Alt-media counter	0.055 (0.015)	−0.086 (0.023)	−0.079 (0.021)
Constant	0.091 (0.010)	0.435 (0.016)	0.756 (0.014)
Observations	5478	5484	5482

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. The outcome variables are coded as 1 (0 otherwise) if a respondent indicated that they are *against releasing the files*, *approves of Trump's handling of the issue*, or *approves of Trump's handling of his job as president*. The reference category is control.

F.3 Cohen's d

To facilitate comparison across outcomes, Table F7 reports standardized effect sizes for the main treatment contrasts. We calculate Cohen's d by dividing each treatment estimate by the standard deviation of the relevant outcome in the control group.

Table F7: Standardized effect sizes for main treatment contrasts

Study	Contrast	Outcome	Cohen's d
Study 1	Trump anti-release vs. control	Epstein opinion	-0.26
Study 1	Trump pro-release vs. control	Epstein opinion	0.10
Study 1	Trump anti-aid vs. control	Ukraine opinion	-0.17
Study 1	Trump pro-aid vs. control	Ukraine opinion	0.21
Study 2	Trump unopposed vs. control	Epstein opinion	-0.28
Study 2	Democrat counter vs. Trump unopposed	Epstein opinion	-0.019
Study 2	Republican counter vs. Trump unopposed	Epstein opinion	0.067
Study 2	Carlson/Rogan counter vs. Trump unopposed	Epstein opinion	0.12
Study 2	Carlson/Rogan counter vs. Trump unopposed	Issue approval	-0.17
Study 2	Carlson/Rogan counter vs. Trump unopposed	Trump approval	-0.086

G Open Text Responses

To understand how respondents make sense of Trump’s handling of the Epstein issue in light of our experimental treatments, we include an open-ended question asking respondents why they think that Trump has acted the way he has.³⁸ Using gpt-4o, we coded whether the responses dismissed Trump’s position on the Epstein files as unimportant and a waste of time as *dismissal* and responses that did not do this as *not dismissal*. This directly taps whether respondents buy Trump’s argument that the push to release the files is merely a distraction and a politically motivated “hoax”. We use the following prompt:

You will receive an open-text response from an opinion survey about Donald Trump’s position on releasing the Epstein files. Question: “Thinking about Donald Trump’s position on the Epstein files, why do you think he has acted the way he has?” Classify the response as either “dismissal” or “not_dismissal”. A response is “dismissal” if it treats the Epstein issue as unimportant or a distraction (e.g., “bigger issues to worry about”, “old news”, “gossip”, “not important”, “who cares”, “move on”, “waste of time”, “just politics”). A response is “not_dismissal” if it does not minimize the issue, including references to self-protection, protecting allies or victims, preventing chaos, political strategy or media framing, or unclear/irrelevant answers. Edge cases: mixed responses are “dismissal” only if dismissal is primary; hedged dismissal (“maybe not important”) counts as dismissal; trust without dismissal -> not_dismissal. Return only: dismissal or not_dismissal.

Examples: “There are more important issues to focus on; this is just a distraction.” = dismissal; “He is probably on the list and does not want people to know.” = not_dismissal; “He thinks Americans have bigger problems than this.” = dismissal; “He is trying to prevent chaos and protect victims’ privacy.” = not_dismissal; “It is old news, people should move on.” = dismissal.

We classified all open-ended responses from Study 2 using the dismissal prompt. To validate the LLM-generated labels, we hand-coded a random sample of 293 responses.

³⁸The question was phrased as follows: “Thinking about Donald Trump’s position on the Epstein files, why do you think he has acted the way he has? List as many reasons as you can. You can write sentences or keywords—whatever is easiest. There are no right or wrong answers; we’re interested in your interpretation.”

Table G1 reports the resulting confusion matrix, showing high agreement between the hand-coded and LLM-coded classifications (overall accuracy = 0.98, sensitivity = 0.95, specificity = 0.99).

Table G1: Confusion matrix comparing human-coded labels to LLM predictions

Human code	LLM prediction	
	not_dismissal	dismissal
not_dismissal	211	3
dismissal	4	75

We estimate the effect of the experimental treatments on the dismissal outcome using the DSL method (Egami et al., 2025), which incorporates the human-coded subset to adjust for misclassification in the LLM predictions and yields unbiased estimates with correct standard errors. The results both using the naive and the biased-corrected approaches are reported in Table G2.

When Trump argues against releasing the Epstein files, respondents are almost twice as likely to dismiss the issue as unimportant. For the bias-corrected estimates, the probability increases by 8.4 percentage points compared to the control. However, when Trump is countered by Rogan/Carlson, the willingness to dismiss the issue is strongly attenuated: the treatment effect drops to 0.013, which is not significantly different from the control group, but is significantly different from the unopposed Trump statement ($p = 0.0095$). Consistent with the main results, the Rogan/Carlson counter clearly stands out in its ability to affect how the Trump statement is received. These results suggest that the Carlson/Rogan countermessage influences how Trump’s actions are interpreted and makes respondents less likely to adopt his dismissal frame. This analysis captures uptake

Table G2: Effect of counterarguments on dismissal

	Naive	Bias-corrected
Trump unopposed	0.106 (0.018)	0.084 (0.028)
/w Democrat counter	0.093 (0.018)	0.098 (0.044)
/w Information counter	0.095 (0.018)	0.054 (0.034)
/w Republican counter	0.082 (0.018)	0.040 (0.033)
/w Alt-media counter	0.056 (0.017)	0.013 (0.033)
Intercept	0.125 (0.011)	0.150 (0.024)
Observations	5365	5365
F-test: Alt-med = Unopposed	0.0095	0.0095

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. The outcome variables are coded as 1 (0 otherwise) for respondents stating in their open answer that Trump's position on the issue of the Epstein files is unimportant. The reference category is control.

of Trump's dismissal frame. It is distinct from, but complementary to, the Study 3 evidence on perceived shared concerns and familiarity reported in SI [D](#).

H Ethics

Approvals

The studies were initially approved by the [BLINDED] ([*BLINDED*]) as part of a grant application for the project (nr. [BLINDED]). The grant is the sole funder of the research. Since the decision of the [BLINDED] is based on ethical principles³⁹ that are in line with the content of the Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research, the approval as such suggests that the studies comply with these principles and guidance. Moreover, we received additional ethical approval for the empirical studies from the [BLINDED] (approval number [BLINDED]). We filed this additional ethical application since the information treatment materials used in the studies had changed since our initial application.

Voluntary and informed consent

We collected the data for this manuscript in the form of online surveys, where some of the surveys included randomized experiments. Detailed information about the data collection can be found in Section A in the SI. We collected the data in collaboration with Cint (<https://www.cint.com/>) that recruit participants on an opt-in basis. Participants were invited to the studies by being given the opportunity to click on a link to the specific study via Cint's survey platform. On the opening screen of each study, we informed the respondents about the condition for their participation and asked for their explicit consent: "By clicking on the "next" button, you give consent to participate in this study. Participation is entirely voluntary, and you may end the survey prematurely should you

³⁹[BLINDED]

wish to end your participation in the research project.”

Deception

None of the studies in the manuscript contain any deception or false statements. We discuss the sources for all included statements and information in Section B. No treatments contain any false information and the content of the treatments were approved by the [BLINDED] (approval number [BLINDED]).

Anonymity and confidentiality

In order to ensure the complete anonymity of respondents, we did not record respondents’ IP addresses or any other data that would allow identification of study participants, such as names or email addresses. Participants were informed about this.

Payment of participants

All survey respondents were recruited by Cint and received remuneration in accordance with standard practice of the company: <https://cint.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/categories/19933963079708-New-Panel-Portal>.

Harms and benefits

Given the above, we believe the risk that our studies would harm participants is essentially zero. In terms of benefits, at the very minimum, participants received some small monetary benefits, as described above. However, as we argue throughout the manuscript, we also

think our studies have the potential to positively influence debates around citizen's ability to hold political representatives accountable by scrutinizing prevailing assumptions in the literature. This, we believe, would be a clear net benefit of our paper.

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