



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

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

Erin Baggott Carter  and Brett L. Carter 

### ABSTRACT

Can propaganda produced by foreign adversaries shape public opinion in a target country? We develop a theoretical framework to understand outward-facing propaganda, which many autocrats employ to shape public opinion abroad. We argue that beliefs about foreign affairs are more susceptible to outward-facing propaganda than beliefs about domestic conditions. Empirically, we focus on RT (formerly Russia Today), a media platform the Russian government founded in 2005. After characterizing its content, we ask whether exposure to RT influences the beliefs of American consumers. Exposure to RT, we find, induces respondents to support America withdrawing from its role as a cooperative global leader by 10–20 percentage points. This effect is robust across measures, obtains across party lines, and persists even when we disclose that RT is financed by the Russian government. RT has no effect on Americans' views of domestic politics or the Russian government.

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

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<sup>1</sup>Paul Mozur, "Live from America's Capital, a TV Station Run by China's Communist Party," *New York Times*, 28 February 2019, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/28/business/cctv-china-usa-propaganda.html>.

<sup>2</sup>Daisuke Wakabayashi and Nicholas Confessore, "Russia's Favored Outlet Is an Online News Giant. YouTube Helped," *New York Times*, 23 October 2017, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/23/technology/youtube-russia-rt.html>.

North Korean government maintains the *Pyongyang Times*. Venezuela's Hugo Chavez launched Telesur in 2015. "A Latin socialist answer to CNN," Telesur is also funded by the governments of Cuba, Nicaragua, Uruguay, and Bolivia. We refer to these as outward-facing propaganda apparatuses, and the financial commitments required to sustain them are nontrivial. The Russian government spends more than \$300 million on RT annually.<sup>3</sup>

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

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

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<sup>3</sup> Marcin Maczka, "The Propaganda Machine," *New Eastern Europe* 3, no. 4 (July 2012): 27–32. All dollar figures in this article are in USD.

<sup>4</sup> Jon A. Krosnick and Howard Schuman, "Attitude Intensity, Importance, and Certainty and Susceptibility to Response Effects," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54, no. 6 (June 1988): 940–52; Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, "Dynamic Public Opinion: Communication Effects over Time," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 4 (November 2010): 663–80; James N. Druckman and Thomas J. Leeper, "Is Public Opinion Stable? Resolving the Micro/Macro Disconnect in Studies of Public Opinion," *Daedalus* 141, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 51–68.

<sup>5</sup> Joshua W. Busby and Jonathan Montan, "Republican Elites and Foreign Policy Attitudes," *Political Science Quarterly* 127, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 105–42.

<sup>6</sup> Alexandra Guisinger and Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Mapping the Boundaries of Elite Cues: How Elites Shape Mass Opinion across International Issues," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (June 2017): 425–41.

To probe the effects of outward-facing propaganda by issue area, we focus on one uniquely important outward-facing propaganda apparatus: RT, which the Russian government founded in 2005 and, as of 2017, enjoyed a weekly viewership of eleven million Americans and a total potential audience of 85 million Americans.<sup>7</sup> We show that three topics constitute 60% of all articles disseminated by RT's Twitter account: coverage of America's democratic allies, US foreign policy, and US domestic conditions. These articles are overwhelmingly critical. Only 5% of RT content focuses on Russia.

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

The Russian government has acknowledged its objective to build a "post-West world order," as Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov put it. This order is multipolar, with the emergence of "other powerhouses" putting an end to "five or so centuries of domination of the collective West."<sup>8</sup> Our results are strikingly consistent with the possibility that the Russian government deliberately uses RT to make Americans more comfortable with this. In 2010, RT hired a Western advertising agency to craft its marketing strategy in Western capitals.<sup>9</sup> It should be unsurprising that RT calibrates its content to achieve geopolitical ends.

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

<sup>7</sup>RT, "RT Weekly TV Audience Grows by More than a Third Over 2 Years; Now 100mn – Ipsos," *RT*, 3 April 2018, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.rt.com/about-us/press-releases/ipsos-market-research-rt/>.

<sup>8</sup>Joel Gehrke, "Russia: 'We Are in the Post-West World Order,'" *Washington Examiner*, 29 June 2018, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/russia-we-are-in-the-post-west-world-order>.

<sup>9</sup>Jim Rutenberg, "RT, Sputnik and Russia's New Theory of War," *New York Times*, 13 September 2017, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/13/magazine/rt-sputnik-and-russias-new-theory-of-war.html>.

Researchers recognize the relevance of an individual's values,<sup>10</sup> political ideology,<sup>11</sup> economic interests,<sup>12</sup> peers,<sup>13</sup> and cognitive misunderstandings.<sup>14</sup> Individuals also look to the leaders of trusted allies<sup>15</sup> and international institutions.<sup>16</sup> This paper is the first to show that propaganda produced by foreign adversaries can shape citizens' foreign policy views, and in strategically meaningful ways.

Second, this paper illuminates the Russian government's ongoing informational campaign against the United States. Driven by the 2016 election, scholars have sought to understand the Russian government's covert activities undertaken to influence American politics. Researchers have attempted to identify Russian bots,<sup>17</sup> understand their objectives,<sup>18</sup> and measure their

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<sup>10</sup>Joshua D. Kertzer, Kathleen E. Powers, Brian C. Rathbun, and Ravi Iyer, "Moral Support: How Moral Values Shape Foreign Policy Attitudes," *Journal of Politics* 76, no. 3 (July 2014): 825–40; Andy Baker, "Race, Paternalism, and Foreign Aid: Evidence from U.S. Public Opinion," *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 1 (February 2015): 93–109; Brian C. Rathbun, Joshua D. Kertzer, Jason Reifler, Paul Goren, and Thomas J. Scotto, "Taking Foreign Policy Personally: Personal Values and Foreign Policy Attitudes," *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (March 2016): 124–37.

<sup>11</sup>Jack Snyder, Robert Y. Shapiro, and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, "Free Hand Abroad, Divide and Rule at Home," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (January 2009): 155–87; Stephen Chaudoin, David Thomas Smith, and Johannes Urpelainen, "American Evangelicals and Domestic versus International Climate Policy," *Review of International Organizations* 9, no. 4 (December 2014): 441–69.

<sup>12</sup>Richard K. Herrmann, Philip E. Tetlock, and Matthew N. DiMarco, "How Americans Think about Trade: Reconciling Conflicts among Money, Power, and Principles," *International Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (June 2001): 191–218; David H. Bearce and Kim-Lee Tuxhorn, "When Are Monetary Policy Preferences Egocentric? Evidence from American Surveys and an Experiment," *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 1 (January 2017): 178–93.

<sup>13</sup>Joshua D. Kertzer and Thomas Zeitzoff, "A Bottom-Up Theory of Public Opinion about Foreign Policy," *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 3 (July 2017): 543–58.

<sup>14</sup>Sungmin Rho and Michael Tomz, "Why Don't Trade Preferences Reflect Economic Self-Interest?" *International Organization* 71, no. S1 (April 2017): S85–108.

<sup>15</sup>Benjamin E. Goldsmith and Yusaku Horiuchi, "Spinning the Globe? U.S. Public Diplomacy and Foreign Public Opinion," *Journal of Politics* 71, no. 3 (July 2009): 863–75; Edward Schatz and Renan Levine, "Framing, Public Diplomacy, and Anti-Americanism in Central Asia," *International Studies Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (September 2010): 855–69; Nicolas Isak Dragojlovic, "Priming and the Obama Effect on Public Evaluations of the United States," *Political Psychology* 32, no. 6 (2011): 989–1006; Nicolas Isak Dragojlovic, "Leaders without Borders: Familiarity as a Moderator of Transnational Source Cue Effects," *Political Communication* 30, no. 2 (May 2013): 297–316; Nick Dragojlovic, "Listening to Outsiders: The Impact of Messenger Nationality on Transnational Persuasion in the United States," *International Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (March 2015): 73–85; Danny Hayes and Matt Guardino, *Influence from Abroad: Foreign Voices, the Media, and U.S. Public Opinion* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Benjamin E. Goldsmith, Yusaku Horiuchi, and Terence Wood, "Doing Well by Doing Good: The Impact of Foreign Aid on Foreign Public Opinion," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 9, no. 1 (March 2014): 87–114.

<sup>16</sup>Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, *Paying the Human Costs of War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Joseph M. Grieco et al., "Let's Get a Second Opinion: International Institutions and American Public Support for War," *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (June 2011): 563–83; Dustin Tingley and Michael Tomz, "Conditional Cooperation and Climate Change," *Comparative Political Studies* 47, no. 3 (March 2014): 344–68; Matt Guardino and Danny Hayes, "Foreign Voices, Party Cues, and U.S. Public Opinion about Military Action," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 30, no. 3 (Autumn 2018): 504–16.

<sup>17</sup>Sergey Sanovich, "Computational Propaganda in Russia: The Origins of Digital Misinformation" (working paper 2017.3, Computational Propaganda Research Project, Oxford, UK: University of Oxford, 2017), accessed February 13, 2021, <http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/06/Comprop-Russia.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup>Emilio Ferrara, "Disinformation and Social Bot Operations in the Run Up to the 2017 French Presidential Election," *First Monday* 22, no. 8 (August 2017), accessed February 13, 2021, <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/8005/6516>; Yevgeniy Golovchenko, Cody Buntain, Gregory Eady, Megan A. Brown, and Joshua A. Tucker, "Cross-Platform State Propaganda: Russian Trolls on Twitter and YouTube during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 25, no. 3 (July 2020): 357–89.

effects.<sup>19</sup> We show that one component of this campaign—both overt and longstanding—may be equally critical. Exposure to RT compels Americans to favor the United States retreating from its position of global leadership, and to privilege the national interest over the interests of America’s democratic allies. Contrary to much speculation, we find no evidence that RT undermines trust in democratic institutions or changes domestic political opinions.

Finally, this paper advances our understanding of autocratic politics. Scholars regard propaganda as central to autocratic survival. They have sought to measure its effects,<sup>20</sup> understand the mechanisms through which it operates,<sup>21</sup> and explain cross-country variation in propaganda strategies.<sup>22</sup> This literature focuses on inward-facing propaganda, designed to manipulate the beliefs of an autocrat’s citizens. Yet despite its ubiquity, outward-facing propaganda remains poorly understood. It is unclear which autocrats employ it, why they do so, who they target, or to what effect. Our theoretical framework addresses these questions. Our empirical results suggest these efforts are fundamental to autocratic politics.

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

## Understanding Outward-Facing Propaganda

### *The Objectives*

Scholars have suggested two reasons autocrats employ outward-facing propaganda. First, autocrats may aim to shape the beliefs of foreign citizens about themselves: their government, their community, and even their country’s appropriate role in the world. This is how many observers understand the Russian government’s social media campaigns against Western

<sup>19</sup>Joshua A. Tucker et al., *Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature* (Menlo Park, CA: Hewlett Foundation, March 2018).

<sup>20</sup>Ruben Enikolopov, Maria Petrova, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya, “Media and Political Persuasion: Evidence from Russia,” *American Economic Review* 101, no. 7 (December 2011): 3253–85; Maja Adena, Ruben Enikolopov, Maria Petrova, Veronica Santarosa, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya, “Radio and the Rise of the Nazis in Prewar Germany,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 130, no. 4 (November 2015): 1885–1939; Erin Baggott Carter and Brett L. Carter, “Propaganda and Protest in Autocracies,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (forthcoming); Erin Baggott Carter and Brett L. Carter, “When Autocrats Threaten Citizens with Violence: Evidence from China,” *British Journal of Political Science* (forthcoming).

<sup>21</sup>Andrew T. Little, “Propaganda and Credulity,” *Games and Economic Behavior* 102 (March 2017): 224–32.

<sup>22</sup>Erin Baggott Carter and Brett L. Carter, *Propaganda in Autocracies*. R&R, Cambridge University Press.

democracies. These campaigns have sought to shape citizens' voting preferences and ultimately elect candidates or support movements or parties who espouse pro-Russia policies or otherwise advance the Russian government's perceived interests: Donald Trump in the United States,<sup>23</sup> Marine Le Pen in France,<sup>24</sup> Brexit in the United Kingdom,<sup>25</sup> and Alternative for Germany (AfD).<sup>26</sup> Other scholars have suggested that the Russian government aims to undermine Americans' confidence in democratic institutions,<sup>27</sup> a view echoed by Special Counsel Robert Mueller's 2017 indictment against the Russian government's Internet Research Agency (IRA).<sup>28</sup> This may yield a range of benefits to autocratic governments. If citizens in Western democracies can be persuaded that democracy is less worthy of promotion, autocrats abroad may confront less pressure to reform from Western governments. Alternatively, if leading democracies appear dysfunctional,

<sup>23</sup>Alessandro Bessi and Emilio Ferrara, "Social Bots Distort the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election Online Discussion," *First Monday* 21, no. 11 (November 2016), accessed February 13, 2021, <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/7090/5653>; Bence Kollanyi, Philip N. Howard, and Samuel C. Woolley, "Bots and Automation over Twitter during the U.S. Election" (Data Memo 2016.4, Project on Computational Propaganda, Oxford, UK: University of Oxford, November 2016), accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/blog/bots-and-automation-over-twitter-during-the-u-s-election/>; Jonathon Morgan and Kris Shaffer, "Sockpuppets, Secessionists, and Breitbart: How Russia May Have Orchestrated a Massive Social Media Influence Campaign," *Data for Democracy*, 31 March 2017, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://medium.com/data-for-democracy/sockpuppets-secessionists-and-breitbart-7171b1134cd5>; Philip N. Howard, "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012–2018" (Computational Propaganda Research Project, Oxford, UK: University of Oxford, 2018), accessed February 13, 2021, <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2018/12/The-IRA-Social-Media-and-Political-Polarization.pdf>; Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018); Samuel C. Woolley and Douglas Guilbeault, "United States: Manufacturing Consensus Online," in *Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media*, ed. Samuel C. Woolley and Philip N. Howard (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 185–211; Adam Badawy, Emilio Ferrara, and Kristina Lerman, "Analyzing the Digital Traces of Political Manipulation: The 2016 Russian Interference Twitter Campaign," in *ASONAM '18: Proceedings of the International Conference on Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining*, ed. Ulrik Brandes, Chandan Reddy, and Andrea Tagarelli (Hoboken, NJ: IEEE Press, 2018), 258–65; Darren L. Linvill et al., "'THE RUSSIANS ARE HACKING MY BRAIN!'" Investigating Russia's Internet Research Agency Twitter Tactics during the 2016 United States Presidential Campaign," *Computers in Human Behavior* 99 (October 2019): 292–300; Marco Bastos and Johan Farkas, "'Donald Trump Is My President!': The Internet Research Agency Propaganda Machine," *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 3 (April 2019): 1–13; Leo G. Stewart, Ahmer Arif, and Kate Starbird, "Examining Trolls and Polarization with a Retweet Network" (paper presented at MIS2 Misinformation and Misbehavior Mining on the Web workshop, 11th ACM International Conference on Web Search and Data Mining, Los Angeles CA, February 9, 2018); Golovchenko, Buntain, Eady, Brown, and Tucker, "Cross-Platform State Propaganda."

<sup>24</sup>Ferrara, "Disinformation and Social Bot Operations."

<sup>25</sup>Philip N. Howard and Bence Kollanyi, "Bots, #StrongerIn, and #Brexit: Computational Propaganda during the UK-EU Referendum" (COMPROP research note 2016.1, Project on Computational Propaganda, Oxford, UK: University of Oxford, 2016), accessed February 13, 2021, <http://arxiv.org/abs/1606.06356>.

<sup>26</sup>Samuel C. Woolley and Philip N. Howard, "Conclusion: Political Parties, Politicians, and Computational Propaganda" in *Computational Propaganda*, ed. Samuel Woolley and Philip N. Howard (Oxford, UK: University of Oxford), 241–48.

<sup>27</sup>Peter Pomerantsev, "Authoritarianism Goes Global (II): The Kremlin's Information War," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 4 (October 2015): 40–50; Christopher Walker, "The New Containment: Undermining Democracy," *World Affairs* 178, no. 1 (May/June 2015): 42–51; Charles E. Ziegler, "International Dimensions of Electoral Processes: Russia, the USA, and the 2016 Elections," *International Politics* 55, no. 5 (September 2018): 557–74; W. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston, "The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions," *European Journal of Communication* 33, no. 2 (April 2018): 122–39; Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, *Network Propaganda*; Woolley and Howard, "Conclusion."

<sup>28</sup>United States of America v. Internet Research Agency LLC, filed 16 February 2018, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.justice.gov/file/1035477/download>.

autocrats may confront less pressure to reform from their own citizens, who may view democracy more skeptically.<sup>29</sup>

Second, autocrats may employ outward-facing propaganda to shape foreign citizens' beliefs about the sponsoring government. We refer to this as "image laundering," and it too has been widely documented. The Chinese government employs image laundering for both geopolitical and economic ends: to assuage Western concerns about its military rise and to build foreign constituencies for its investment.<sup>30</sup> For several of Africa's longest-tenured autocrats, image laundering is an investment in avoiding Western governments' sanctions in response to domestic human rights abuses.<sup>31</sup> Ilya Yablokov suggests RT is an investment in image laundering for the Russian government and serves a geopolitical objective.<sup>32</sup> After the Cold War, when the Russian government could no longer compete with the United States for global dominance, it embraced containment: "The division of the world into the 'majority' of nations led by Russia against the nations of the so-called 'New World Order' led by the US." By casting "Russia as a 'speaker' on behalf of the third-world nations excluded from the US-led 'New World Order,'" RT may enable the Russian government to exert geopolitical influence beyond its military capacity.

### **The Mechanisms**

Few accounts of outward-facing propaganda explicitly address how changes in public opinion culminate in policy change. Drawing on Michael Tomz, Jessica L. P. Weeks, and Karen Yarhi-Milo,<sup>33</sup> we suggest two mechanisms. First, voters may select candidates whose foreign policy positions are most consistent with their own. Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo refer to this as a selection mechanism, and it suggests outward-facing propaganda aims to shape electoral outcomes by compelling voters to back a preferred candidate, or at least to not penalize that preferred candidate for otherwise unpopular foreign policy positions. In the context of the 2016 American

<sup>29</sup>Larry Diamond, "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (January 2015): 141–55.

<sup>30</sup>Anne-Marie Brady, "Authoritarianism Goes Global (II): China's Foreign Propaganda Machine," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 4 (October 2015): 51–9; Gary D. Rawnsley, "To Know Us Is to Love Us: Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting in Contemporary Russia and China," *Politics* 35, no. 3–4 (November 2015): 273–86.

<sup>31</sup>Brett L. Carter, "The Rise of Kleptocracy: Autocrats versus Activists in Africa," *Journal of Democracy* 29 no. 1 (January 2018): 54–68. Paul Biya and Teodoro Obiang, who have ruled Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea, respectively, for a cumulative seventy-five years, jointly own Africa 24. Denis Sassou Nguesso, who has ruled the Republic of Congo for all but five years since 1979, lured Euronews's Africa subsidiary, Africanews, to Brazzaville with a skyscraper along the Congo River. Sassou Nguesso also financed *Forbes Afrique*, which circulates widely among Africa's financial elite.

<sup>32</sup>Ilya Yablokov, "Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of Russia Today (RT)," *Politics* 35, no. 3–4 (November 2015): 301–15.

<sup>33</sup>Michael Tomz, Jessica L. P. Weeks, and Karen Yarhi-Milo, "Public Opinion and Decisions about Military Force in Democracies," *International Organization* 74, no. 1 (Winter 2020): 119–43.

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

### **The Effects**

Although many autocrats employ outward-facing propaganda, virtually no evidence exists about whether it shapes public opinion. In turn, it remains unclear whether Western democracies should care that the world's autocrats are attempting to manipulate their citizens' beliefs. Many observers are skeptical. In 2014, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof dismissed it: "RT is a Russian propaganda arm, and I don't think it's going to matter."<sup>34</sup> In 2017, the *Washington Post* announced: "If Russia Today is Moscow's propaganda arm, it's not very good at its job."<sup>35</sup> Ellen Mickiewicz's skepticism rests on the size of RT's audience, which is uncertain, and its credibility, which is dubious.<sup>36</sup>

Not everyone agrees. The *New Yorker's* David Remnick called RT "nastily brilliant, so much more sophisticated than Soviet propaganda."<sup>37</sup> Stefan Meister, who studies Russia for the German Council on Foreign Relations, cautioned that "open societies are very vulnerable, and it's cheaper than buying a new rocket."<sup>38</sup> Officials in Eastern Europe, threatened by Russia's recent military aggression, are also concerned. In 2014, Lithuania's foreign affairs minister said that "Russia Today's propaganda machine is no less destructive than military marching in Crimea."<sup>39</sup>

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

<sup>34</sup>Nicholas Kristof, quoted in Piers Morgan, "New Cold War?" *Piers Morgan Live*, CNN, 5 March 2014, accessed February 13, 2021, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1403/05/pmt.01.html>.

<sup>35</sup>Amanda Erickson, "If Russia Today is Moscow's Propaganda Arm, It's Not Very Good at Its Job," *Washington Post*, 12 January 2017, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/01/12/if-russia-today-is-moscows-propaganda-arm-its-not-very-good-at-its-job/>.

<sup>36</sup>Ellen Mickiewicz, "RT: Influence, Persuasion, and Effects," NYU Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia, 9 March 2017, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://jordanrussiacenter.org/news/rt-influence-persuasion-effects/>.

<sup>37</sup>Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, *The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture, and Money* (New York, NY: Institute of Modern Russia, 2014).

<sup>38</sup>Quoted in Steven Erlanger, "Russia's RT Network: Is It More BBC or K.G.B.?" *New York Times*, 3 March 2017, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/08/world/europe/russias-rt-network-is-it-more-bbc-or-kgb.html>.

<sup>39</sup>Pomerantsev and Weiss, *The Menace of Unreality*.

parliamentary election, access to independent television decreased voting for Vladimir Putin's United Russia party.<sup>40</sup> Pro-regime coverage in propaganda newspapers across the world's autocracies appears to reduce popular protests.<sup>41</sup> Evidence also shows that partisan media in democracies can shape public opinion. Where broadcast, Fox News yielded an additional 0.6 percentage points for George W. Bush in the 2000 election.<sup>42</sup> In the 2004 and 2008 elections, Fox News generated an additional 3.59 and 6.34 percentage points, respectively, for the Republican candidate.<sup>43</sup> Most recently, a series of papers have documented how Fox News consumption shaped individual health decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>44</sup> Scholars have documented the effects of partisan media in other democracies, including, most notably, Brazil<sup>45</sup> and Italy.<sup>46</sup>

Second, outward-facing propagandists have adopted the tactics that render inward-facing propaganda and partisan media in democracies persuasive. All propagandists confront a singular challenge: rational citizens should discount information as long as its author is its chief beneficiary. We refer to this as the "propagandist's dilemma," and propagandists generally employ two tactics to confront it. "Honest propaganda" occurs when propaganda apparatuses acquire credibility by mixing fact with fiction, which gives them some capacity to manipulate citizens' beliefs.<sup>47</sup> The *China Daily*, for instance, acknowledges China's legitimate social problems, but also occasionally claims the 1989 Tiananmen massacre is "a myth."<sup>48</sup> "Black propaganda" occurs when authorship is concealed, the better to prevent consumers from discounting it.<sup>49</sup> This is why Russia's IRA and

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<sup>40</sup>Enikolopov, Petrova, and Zhuravskaya, "Media and Political Persuasion."

<sup>41</sup>Carter and Carter, "Propaganda and Protest in Autocracies."

<sup>42</sup>Stefano DellaVigna and Ethan Kaplan, "The Fox News Effect: Media Bias and Voting," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 122, no. 3 (August 2007): 1187–234.

<sup>43</sup>Gregory J. Martin and Ali Yurukoglu, "Bias in Cable News: Persuasion and Polarization," *American Economic Review* 107, no. 9 (September 2017): 2565–99.

<sup>44</sup>Leonardo Bursztyn, Aakaash Rao, Christopher Roth, and David Yanagizawa-Deott, "Misinformation during a Pandemic" (working paper 27417, Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research [NBER], June 2020), 1–112; Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Dolores Albarracín, "The Relation between Media Consumption and Misinformation at the Outset of the SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic in the US," *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 1 (April 2020): 1–22; Andrey Simonov et al., "The Persuasive Effect of Fox News: Non-Compliance with Social Distancing during the Covid-19 Pandemic" (working paper 27237, Cambridge, MA: NBER, May 2020), 1–69.

<sup>45</sup>Taylor C. Boas and F. Daniel Hidalgo, "Controlling the Airwaves: Incumbency Advantage and Community Radio in Brazil," *American Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 4 (October 2011): 869–85; Bernardo S. Da Silveira and João M. P. De Mello, "Campaign Advertising and Election Outcomes: Quasi-Natural Experiment Evidence from Gubernatorial Elections in Brazil," *Review of Economic Studies* 78, no. 2 (April 2011): 590–612.

<sup>46</sup>Ruben Durante, Paolo Pinotti, and Andrea Tesei, "The Political Legacy of Entertainment TV: Evidence from the Rise of Berlusconi," *American Economic Review* 109, no. 7 (2019): 2497–530.

<sup>47</sup>Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro, "Media Bias and Reputation," *Journal of Political Economy* 114, no. 2 (April 2006): 280–316; Tinghua Yu, "Propaganda to Persuade," *Political Science Research and Methods*, 1–7.

<sup>48</sup>Elizabeth Flock, "Chinese Newspaper Cites WikiLeaks: Tiananmen Massacre a Myth," *Washington Post*, 14 July 2011, accessed February 13, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/chinese-newspaper-cites-wikileaks-tiananmen-massacre-a-myth/2011/07/14/gIQAHF1MEI\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/chinese-newspaper-cites-wikileaks-tiananmen-massacre-a-myth/2011/07/14/gIQAHF1MEI_blog.html).

<sup>49</sup>Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (London, UK: Sage, 2012).

China's Communist Party employ bots and trolls on social media,<sup>50</sup> which attempt to pass as members of the target population. This makes sense: Individuals are more likely to update their beliefs based on peer effects from their in-group.<sup>51</sup>

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

Second, America's foreign policy has historically been far less polarized than its domestic politics. Since World War II, the American government has pursued a relatively liberal internationalist foreign policy, which has enjoyed bipartisan support.<sup>58</sup> G. John Ikenberry characterized the agenda: "Open markets, international institutions, cooperative security, democratic

<sup>50</sup>Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument," *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 3 (August 2017): 484–501; Golovchenko, Buntain, Eady, Brown, and Tucker, "Cross-Platform State Propaganda."

<sup>51</sup>Robert M. Bond, "A 61-Million-Person Experiment in Social Influence and Political Mobilization," *Nature* 489, no. 7415 (September 2012): 295–98; Kertzer and Zeitoff, "A Bottom-Up Theory."

<sup>52</sup>Ole R. Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

<sup>53</sup>Pew Research Center, "From Brexit to Zika: What Do Americans Know?" 25 July 2017, accessed February 13, 2021, <http://www.people-press.org/2017/07/25/from-brexit-to-zika-what-do-americans-know/>.

<sup>54</sup>George Friedman, "The American Public's Indifference to Foreign Affairs," *Forbes*, 19 February 2014, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stratfor/2014/02/19/the-american-publics-indifference-to-foreign-affairs/#3a105a8c3495>.

<sup>55</sup>A. Trevor Thrall, "America's Foreign Policy Attention Deficit," *Cato at Liberty* (blog), 19 January 2018, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.cato.org/blog/americas-foreign-policy-attention-deficit>.

<sup>56</sup>Busby and Monten, "Republican Elites and Foreign Policy."

<sup>57</sup>Krosnick and Schuman, "Attitude Intensity, Importance, and Certainty.,"; Chong and Druckman, "Dynamic Public Opinion.,"; Druckman and Leeper, "Is Public Opinion Stable?"

<sup>58</sup>Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*; Stephen Chaudoin, Helen V. Milner, and Dustin H. Tingley, "The Center Still Holds: Liberal Internationalism Survives," *International Security* 35, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 75–94.

community ... and the rule of law.”<sup>59</sup> This bipartisan consensus was challenged in the early 2000s when President George W. Bush initiated costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>60</sup> Still, Stephen Chaudoin, Helen V. Milner, and Dustin H. Tingley marshal a range of evidence that suggests the bipartisan consensus remains intact.<sup>61</sup> Again, this has important implications for the fluidity of foreign policy beliefs. Alexandra Guisinger and Elizabeth N. Saunders find that “the degree to which public attitudes are malleable ... depends on ... the degree to which the issue already exhibits partisan polarization.”<sup>62</sup> Where polarization is limited, Guisinger and Saunders show, the content of political messaging itself determines its persuasiveness, and many opinion leaders can be persuasive. This creates space for well-crafted outward-facing propaganda.<sup>63</sup>

This yields our first hypothesis:

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

Though outside the empirical scope of this paper, H1 has an important corollary: Image-laundering campaigns should be more effective when they focus on countries about which the target population knows relatively little. This may be why Rwandan president Paul Kagame has persuaded many international observers of his commitment to “good governance,” despite his poor human rights record.<sup>64</sup> Conversely, when the target population has stronger views about the sponsoring government, image-laundering campaigns should be less effective.

By contrast, our theoretical framework suggests beliefs about domestic politics should be more robust to outward-facing propaganda. Relative to foreign affairs, Americans are better informed about domestic politics, their beliefs tend to be more deeply held, and the issue space is highly polarized.<sup>65</sup> Accordingly, Stephen Ansolabehere, Jonathan Rodden, and James

<sup>59</sup>G. John Ikenberry, “Liberal Internationalism 3.0: America and the Dilemma of Liberal World Order,” *Perspectives on Politics* 7, no. 1 (March 2009): 71.

<sup>60</sup>Philip A. Klinkner, “Mr. Bush’s War: Foreign Policy in the 2004 Election,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (June 2006): 281–96; Charles A. Kupchan and Peter L. Trubowitz, “Dead Center: The Demise of Liberal Internationalism in the United States,” *International Security* 32, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 7–44; Robert Y. Shapiro and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, “Ideological Partisanship and American Public Opinion toward Foreign Policy,” in *Power and Superpower: Global Leadership and Exceptionalism in the 21st Century*, ed. Morton H. Halperin et al. (Washington, DC: Century Foundation, 2007), 49–68; Morris P. Fiorina and Samuel J. Abrams, “Political Polarization in the American Public,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008): 563–88. Klinkner concludes that polarization about President Bush himself drove polarization about foreign policy, rather than divergent beliefs about foreign policy.

<sup>61</sup>Chaudoin, Milner, and Tingley, “The Center Still Holds.”

<sup>62</sup>Guisinger and Saunders, “Mapping the Boundaries of Elite Cues,” 426.

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

<sup>64</sup>Susan Thomson, *Rwanda: From Genocide to Precarious Peace* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>65</sup>Shanto Iyengar et al., “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 22 (2019): 129–46; Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M. Shapiro, “Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization” (working paper 26669, NBER, Cambridge, MA, January 2020), 1–43.

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

This constitutes our second hypothesis:

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

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

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

### ***The Possibility (and Implications) of Decay***

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

<sup>66</sup>Stephen Ansolabehere, Jonathan Rodden, and James M. Snyder Jr., "The Strength of Issues: Using Multiple Measures to Gauge Preference Stability, Ideological Constraint, and Issue Voting," *American Political Science Review* 102, no. 2 (May 2008): 215–32.

<sup>67</sup>Thomas D. Cook and Brian R. Flay, "The Persistence of Experimentally Induced Attitude Change," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 11 (1978): 1–57.

<sup>68</sup>Seth J. Hill et al., "How Quickly We Forget: The Duration of Persuasion Effects from Mass Communication," *Political Communication* 30, no. 4 (2013): 521–47; Alan S. Gerber et al., "How Large and Long-Lasting are the Persuasive Effects of Televised Campaign Ads? Results from a Randomized Field Experiment," *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 1 (February 2011): 135–50.

<sup>69</sup>Scott L. Althaus, Brittany H. Bramlett, and James G. Gimpel, "When War Hits Home: The Geography of Military Losses and Support for War in Time and Space," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 3 (June 2012): 382–412; John Sides and Lynn Vavreck, *The Gamble: Choice and Chance in the 2012 Election* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

<sup>70</sup>Carter and Carter, "Propaganda and Protest in Autocracies."

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

This, we believe, is why outward-facing propaganda appears to intensify around the target country's elections. Russian bot activity spikes during American and European elections,<sup>71</sup> just as the Chinese government launches massive online campaigns to undermine pro-independence candidates around Taiwanese elections.<sup>72</sup> Outward-facing propaganda around other moments of political import is less well documented, though it appears to spike in such cases as well. Russian outward-facing propaganda in Turkey spiked during the Crimea invasion in 2014 after the Turkish military downed a Russian fighter jet that violated Turkish airspace in 2015, and after the 2016 coup against Erdoğan.<sup>73</sup> In Brazil, Russian propaganda spiked during the 2014 presidential election and Dilma Rousseff's 2016 impeachment.<sup>74</sup> Russian outward-facing propaganda has spiked during other political crises across Europe as well.<sup>75</sup>

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

## A Brief Overview of RT

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

<sup>71</sup>Kollanyi, Howard, and Woolley, "Bots and Automation."; Howard and Kollanyi, "Bots, #StrongerIn, and #Brexit"; Badawy, Ferrara, and Lerman, "Analyzing the Digital Traces."; Mariia Zhdanova and Dariya Orlova, "Ukraine: External Threats and Internal Challenges," in *Computational Propaganda*, ed. Samuel Woolley and Philip N. Howard (Oxford, UK: University of Oxford), 41–63; Ferrara, "Disinformation and Social Bot."

<sup>72</sup>Ketty W. Chen, "China's Mid-Election Information Campaign in Taiwan," *Disinfo Portal*, 18 November 2019, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.stopfake.org/en/china-s-mid-election-information-campaign-in-taiwan/>; Nicholas J. Monaco, "Taiwan: Digital Democracy Meets Automated Autocracy," in *Computational Propaganda*, ed. Samuel Woolley and Philip N. Howard (Oxford, UK: University of Oxford), 104–27.

<sup>73</sup>Balkan Devlen, "Stoking the Flames: Russian Information Operations in Turkey," *Ukraine Analytica* 1, no. 11 (April 2018): 43–49.

<sup>74</sup>Dan Arnaudo, "Brazil: Political Bot Intervention during Pivotal Events," in *Computational Propaganda*, ed. Samuel Woolley and Philip N. Howard (Oxford, UK: University of Oxford), 128–52.

<sup>75</sup>Maksym Kyiak, "The Kremlin's Information Wars in the 21st Century: Estonia, Georgia, Ukraine," *Ukraine Analytica* 1, no. 11 (April 2018): 27–35; Ferrara, "Disinformation and Social Bot Operations."

government and \$15 million from “private” banks. RT was conceived by Mikhail Lesin, Putin’s former media minister, and Aleksei Gromov, his former spokesman. RT markets itself as like the BBC: government-funded but editorially independent. Putin has been more candid. In 2013, he observed that, given its funding source, RT “cannot help but reflect the Russian government’s official position.”<sup>76</sup> Founded as Russia Today, RT rechristened itself in 2009 to emphasize its global coverage and expand its reach. Shortly thereafter, RT launched its satellite channel, RT America, which broadcasts from Washington and New York. Between 2005 and 2017, RT’s budget increased tenfold, to roughly \$323 million.<sup>77</sup> For reference, the 2014 budget of the BBC World Service—the world’s largest broadcast news operation—amounted to \$376 million. When RT’s operating budget reached \$380 million in 2011, the Duma, Russia’s lower legislative house, reduced funding to \$300 million for the following year. Putin promptly prohibited any future reductions.<sup>78</sup> In 2008, the Russian government designated RT as an organization of strategic national importance.

In 2010, RT paired its bid for global reach with a new advertising campaign, crafted by agency McCann Erickson. Entitled “Question More,” the campaign gave RT its current slogan. The campaign also yielded an advertisement that featured President Barack Obama morphing into Iranian leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, asking: “Who poses the greatest nuclear threat?” RT executives emphasize this effort to compel viewers to “question more.” In one 2017 interview with the *New York Times*, Anna Belkina, RT’s head of communications in Moscow, said: “This is why we exist. It’s important to watch RT to hear alternative voices. You might not agree with them, but it’s important to try to understand where they’re coming from.”<sup>79</sup>

RT claims to reach over 600 million people in 100 countries and five continents. In 2017, it boasted a weekly US viewership of 11 million people and a total potential audience of 85 million Americans.<sup>80</sup> Its YouTube channel is the most-viewed news channel in the world, which it displays on its banner.<sup>81</sup> With over 2.5 million subscribers to its flagship channel and 5 billion total views, YouTube has been one of RT’s most successful mediums.

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<sup>76</sup>Max Fisher, “In Case You Weren’t Clear on Russia Today’s Relationship to Moscow, Putin Clears it Up,” *Washington Post*, 13 June 2013, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/06/13/in-case-you-werent-clear-on-russia-todays-relationship-to-moscow-putin-clears-it-up/>.

<sup>77</sup>Steven Erlanger, “What Is RT?” *New York Times*, 8 March 2017, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/08/world/europe/what-is-rt.html>.

<sup>78</sup>Darya Fazletdinova, “Анатомия несопротивления [Anatomy of Non-Resistance],” *Lenizdat*, 2 July 2012, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://lenizdat.ru/articles/1105568/>.

<sup>79</sup>Erlanger, “Russia’s RT Network.”

<sup>80</sup>RT, “RT Weekly TV Audience Grows by More Than a Third Over 2 Years,” reports viewership statistics from a 2017 Ipsos poll.

<sup>81</sup>Simon Shuster, “Inside Putin’s On-Air Machine,” *Time Magazine*, 5 March 2015.

Its bid for influence has frustrated policymakers. In 2014, Secretary of State John Kerry called it a “propaganda bullhorn” for Moscow.<sup>82</sup> In 2017, French President Macron called it “lying propaganda.”<sup>83</sup> British regulators called it “materially misleading.”<sup>84</sup> These criticisms culminated in November 2017, when the US Justice Department required RT America to register as a Russian government agent. Other outward-facing propaganda outlets condemned the ruling. The *China Daily*, also registered as a foreign agent, proclaimed that “foreign media outlets in [the] US merit bouquets, not brickbats.” RT, the *China Daily* contended, was “far better” than CNN.<sup>85</sup>

## Survey Experiment

### Identifying Treatment Conditions

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

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

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

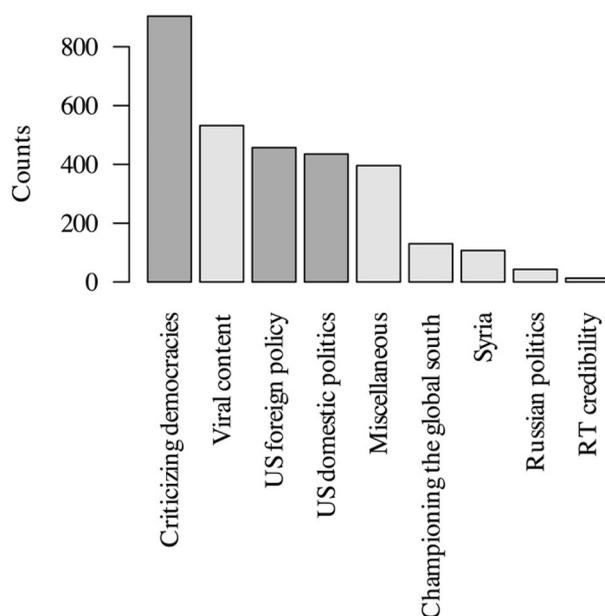
<sup>82</sup>Brett LoGiurato, “RT Is Very Upset with John Kerry for Blasting Them as Putin’s ‘Propaganda Bullhorn,’” *Business Insider*, 25 April 2014, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/john-kerry-rt-propaganda-bullhorn-russia-today-2014-4>.

<sup>83</sup>Sarah Wildman, “French President Emmanuel Macron Just Went after Russia—to Putin’s Face,” *Vox*, 30 May 2017, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/5/30/15712296/macron-putin-standing-up-to-russia-rt-propaganda>.

<sup>84</sup>John Plunkett, “Russia Today Threatened with Ofcom Sanctions Due to Bias,” *Guardian*, 10 November 2014, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/nov/10/russia-today-ofcom-sanctions-impartiality-ukraine-coverage>.

<sup>85</sup>Chen Weihua, “Foreign Media Outlets in US Merit Bouquets, Not Brickbats,” *China Daily*, 24 November 2017, accessed February 13, 2021, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2017-11/24/content\\_34923759.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2017-11/24/content_34923759.htm).

<sup>86</sup>Howard and Kollanyi, “Bots, #StrongerIn, and #Brexit”; Kollanyi, Howard, and Woolley, “Bots and Automation over Twitter.”; Badawy, Ferrara, and Lerman, “Analyzing the Digital Traces.”; Alexander Spangher, Gireeja Ranade, Besmira Nushi, Adam Fournery, and Eric Horvitz, “Analysis of Strategy and Spread of Russia-Sponsored Content in the US in 2017,” arXiv preprint (23 October 2018), accessed February 13, 2021, <https://arxiv.org/abs/1810.10033>.



**Figure 1.** RT content from April 2018. We draw treatment articles from the three most common topic areas, shaded in dark gray.

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

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

RT devotes substantial coverage to viral content. These tweets are “clickbait:” about animals, crime, or bizarre events such as comets or accidents. This content may drive traffic to RT’s political content.

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

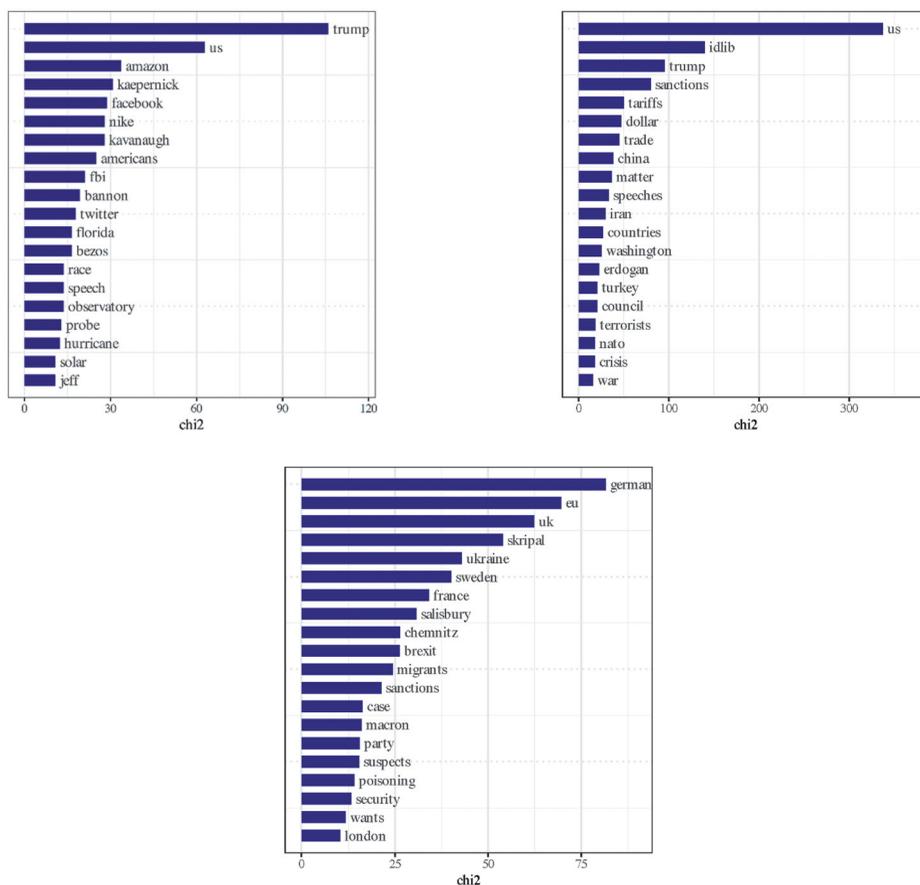
### **Visualizing Russian Propaganda Narratives**

RT focuses primarily on America’s domestic conditions, foreign policy, and democratic allies. To explore this content in more detail, we analyze our corpus of 3,249 RT tweets by adopting a tool from computational linguistics.<sup>87</sup> The basic idea is that, across two corpora of documents, words common to both are generally uninformative. These common words are pronouns, conjugations of the verb “to be,” question words like “who” and “where,” and generic words associated with a given topic (such as “sports” for sports). Words uncommon to both corpora are also uninformative. These are peculiar, low-frequency words. By contrast, words common in one corpus but uncommon in another are distinctive. They convey something meaningful about content in one corpus relative to another.

To measure semantic distinctiveness, we use Kenneth Benoit et al.’s keyness statistic.<sup>88</sup> We define as corpus  $A$  all tweets not about US domestic policy, US foreign policy, and America’s traditional Western allies. Then, we define tweets from these three topic areas, respectively, as corpus  $B^1$ ,  $B^2$ , and  $B^3$ . For each word in corpus  $B^1$ ,  $B^2$ , and  $B^3$ , we compute its keyness statistic relative to the baseline corpus  $A$ . The results appear in [Figure 2](#). The top left panel presents words that are distinctive to coverage of US domestic politics (corpus  $B^1$ ) relative to RT’s other content (corpus  $A$ ). The top right panel presents words that are distinctive to coverage of US foreign policy (corpus  $B^2$ ) relative to RT’s other content (corpus  $A$ ). The bottom panel presents words that are distinctive to coverage of America’s

<sup>87</sup>We employed standard preprocessing methods: lowercasing words and removing numbers, symbols, emoticons, links, and stop words. We did not stem words, since doing so obscured important details in RT’s content.

<sup>88</sup>Kenneth Benoit, Kohei Watanabe, Haiyan Wang, Paul Nulty, Adam Obeng, Stefan Müller, and Akitaka Matsuo, “Quanteda: An R Package for the Quantitative Analysis of Textual Data,” *Journal of Open Source Software* 3, no. 30 (2018): 774. In the online appendix, we use an alternative statistic by Jason S. Kessler, “Scattertext: A Browser-Based Tool for Visualizing How Corpora Differ,” arXiv preprint (20 April 2017), accessed February 13, 2021, <https://arxiv.org/abs/1703.00565>. The results are substantively unchanged.



**Figure 2.** RT propaganda narratives. Top left: US domestic politics. Top right: US foreign policy. Bottom: US Western allies.

democratic allies (corpus  $B^3$ ) relative to RT's other content (corpus  $A$ ). The  $x$ -axes record the  $\chi^2$  statistic for each word along the  $y$ -axes. This  $\chi^2$  statistic measures how much more often the  $x$ -axis words were used in corpus  $B$  than would have been expected based on corpus  $A$ . This constitutes our measure of distinctiveness.

From the top left panel, coverage of US domestic politics during the sample period underscored America's moral decay. Colin Kaepernick, whose national anthem protests left him excluded from the NFL, was routinely cited as evidence of American racism. "Nike" is among the most distinctive terms; RT cited Kaepernick's Nike endorsement as evidence of his widespread popularity among African Americans, reiterating America's racial divide. RT covered Brett Kavanaugh's Senate confirmation battle, and especially the sexual assault allegations against him: "Kavanaugh nomination vote set for Monday, unless accuser testifies on sex abuse claims." Amazon's Jeff Bezos figured prominently as well, evidence of America's massive inequality.

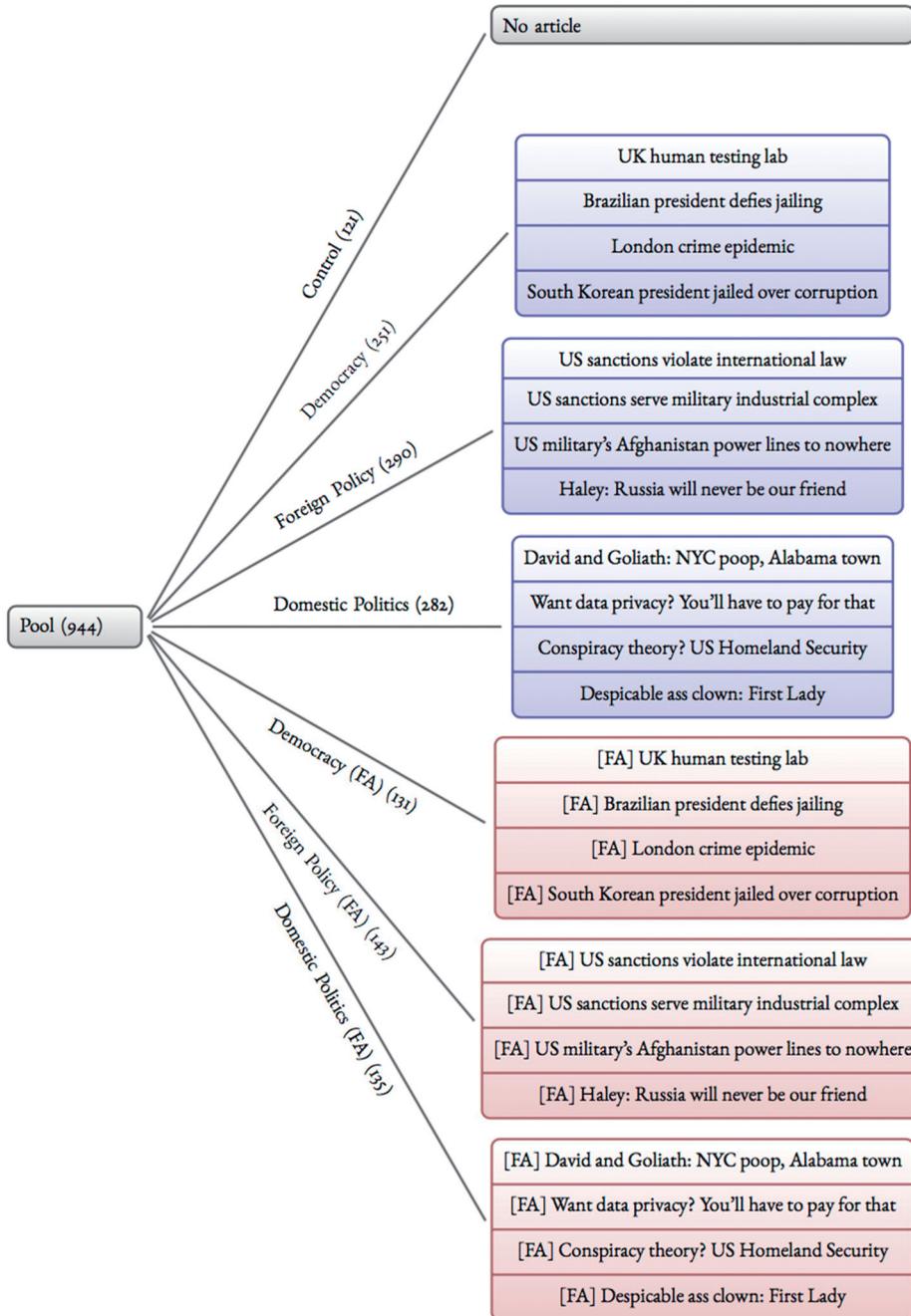
From the top right panel, coverage of US foreign policy was dominated by crises that underscored America's foreign policy failures. The military campaign in Syria was, by far, the most common topic; "Idlib," the most distinctive term behind "US," is a Syrian city that was devastated by the war. One representative tweet linked to an article with this headline: "The Iranian president repeatedly stressed that foreign influence was a major factor in escalating the war in Syria, and called on the US to withdraw the troops that it has illegally deployed." Other foreign policy coverage focused on US sanctions on Iran and Russia, as well as the tariffs Washington levied as the opening salvo in a trade war.

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

### **Survey Design**

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

We assigned each survey respondent a single treatment condition. The article to which the respondent was ultimately exposed was selected randomly from the set of four articles for each treatment condition. Our survey design thus incorporates three sources of randomness. Respondents were randomly assigned to a treatment condition (or the control group); the set of four articles for each treatment condition were randomly selected



**Figure 3.** Experimental design. FA: foreign agent.

from all articles published on one day, 6 April 2018; and the specific article to which treated respondents were exposed was randomly selected from among the set of four for each treatment condition.

After exposure to a treatment article, respondents were asked a series of questions. These questions, many of which were drawn from Pew Research

Center surveys on foreign policy,<sup>89</sup> solicit respondents' opinions about a range of topics: whether they favor US global engagement, view its democratic allies as worthy of support, view Russia as an adversary, approve of the president's job performance, and trust the national government and news media, among others. These questions are deliberately broad. We seek to identify the range of political views that RT shapes and those it does not.

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

### **Foreign Agent Disclosure**

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

### **Survey Population**

We fielded the survey experiment on 7 April 2018, via Amazon Mechanical Turk, a popular platform for social science research. Validation studies have shown that surveys fielded on this platform have generated the same findings as surveys fielded on nationally representative samples.<sup>90</sup> We received 1,007 responses. After omitting respondents who completed the survey in an unrealistically short amount of time, the sample size was 944.<sup>91</sup> Our sample's demographic characteristics appear in the online appendix. The sample is reasonably well balanced: 54% female, 82% white, and an average age of 41-years-old. The youngest participant is 19; the oldest 82. The sample is well educated, with over 50% reporting a bachelor's degree or higher. Politically, the sample skews left, with 51% identifying as

<sup>89</sup>See: Pew Research Center, "Public Uncertain, Divided Over America's Place in the World," 5 May 2016, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/05/05/public-uncertain-divided-over-americas-place-in-the-world/>; Pew Research Center, "The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider," 5 October 2017, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2017/10/05/3-foreign-policy/>.

<sup>90</sup>Adam J. Berinsky, Gregory A. Huber, and Gabriel S. Lenz, "Evaluating Online Labor Markets for Experimental Research: Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk," *Political Analysis* 20, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 351–68.

<sup>91</sup>Because respondents in the treatment group were administered an article to read and respondents in the control group were not, we adopted differential thresholds of 4 minutes for treatment group respondents and 3 minutes for control group respondents. Our results are robust to different thresholds, as discussed below.

Democrat, 25% as Republican, and 22% as an independent. The online appendix reports covariate balance across partisan subgroups.

Russian Twitter bots appear to target partisan echo chambers.<sup>92</sup> Therefore, we asked respondents to select the news sources they regularly consume from a list of several dozen. We then constructed a variable, *Low Quality News Share*, which measures the fraction of a respondent's news consumption that comes from extremely partisan, conspiratorial news websites. These include *Breitbart*, *Drudge Report*, *Infowars*, the *Intercept*, *Alternet*, *Red State*, *World Truth*, and *Patriotics*. Roughly 9% of respondents consult at least one of these websites; 2% of respondents get more than a quarter of their news from these websites.

## Do Americans “Question More?”

### *Estimating Equations*

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

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta T_i + \gamma X_i + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

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

### *Results: What Opinions are Unchanged*

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

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

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<sup>92</sup>Spangher, Ranade, Nushi, Fourney, and Horvitz, “Analysis of Strategy.”; Badawy, Ferrara, and Lerman, “Analyzing the Digital Traces.”

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

Dependent variable	Presidential approval Ordered logistic (1)	Economic Trajectory logistic (2)	News discernment Ordered logistic (3)	Trust in government Ordered logistic (4)	Russia favorability Ordered logistic (5)	Russia adversary Ordered logistic (6)
Nondisclosure	-0.178 (0.273)	0.068 (0.270)	-0.002 (0.189)	-0.135 (0.190)	-0.016 (0.199)	-0.096 (0.218)
Disclosure	-0.189 (0.274)	-0.135 (0.269)	-0.190 (0.190)	-0.038 (0.190)	0.073 (0.200)	-0.166 (0.218)
Age	0.010 (0.007)	0.013* (0.007)	0.010* (0.005)	0.001 (0.005)	-0.014*** (0.005)	0.011** (0.005)
Education	-0.063 (0.069)	-0.089 (0.069)	0.018 (0.048)	0.012 (0.047)	0.013 (0.048)	0.036 (0.052)
Income	-0.032 (0.054)	0.241*** (0.054)	0.031 (0.037)	0.061* (0.036)	-0.081** (0.038)	0.009 (0.041)
Gender (male)	0.166 (0.177)	0.549*** (0.173)	-0.182 (0.123)	-0.008 (0.120)	-0.158 (0.126)	0.183 (0.135)
Partisanship	-1.185 (0.073)	-0.640*** (0.057)	0.178*** (0.036)	-0.375*** (0.037)	-0.293*** (0.038)	0.255*** (0.039)
Low quality news share	4.923*** (1.532)	2.128 (1.539)	2.932*** (0.900)	-1.573** (0.774)	2.768*** (0.776)	-3.112*** (0.981)
Constant		1.816*** (0.504)				
Observations	693	743	890	901	894	859

Note. \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

**Table 2.** Effect of RT on foreign policy views.

Dependent Variable	Active Ordered logistic (1)	Solve world problems Ordered logistic (2)	Interests > allies Logistic (3)	Engagement Index OLS (4)
Nondisclosure	−0.331* (0.190)	−0.477** (0.213)	0.215 (0.251)	−0.047** (0.023)
Disclosure	−0.548*** (0.192)	−0.571*** (0.213)	0.561** (0.248)	−0.064*** (0.023)
Age	0.020*** (0.005)	0.004 (0.005)	−0.019*** (0.006)	0.002*** (0.001)
Education	0.117** (0.047)	0.023 (0.052)	−0.111* (0.060)	0.006 (0.006)
Income	0.040 (0.036)	−0.046 (0.040)	0.046 (0.046)	0.006 (0.004)
Gender (Male)	0.060 (0.121)	−0.200 (0.136)	0.242 (0.152)	−0.001 (0.015)
Partisanship	0.120*** (0.035)	0.322*** (0.040)	−0.443*** (0.047)	0.014*** (0.004)
Low quality news share	−2.125*** (0.818)	−0.409 (0.838)	2.141* (1.094)	−0.164* (0.093)
Constant			1.911*** (0.461)	0.504*** (0.042)
Observations	899	799	902	798

Note. \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

difficult to change domestic political opinions at this point in American history.

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

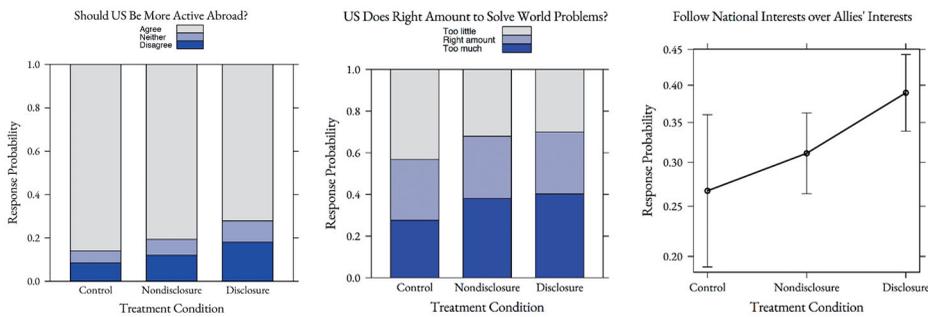
### **Results: What Americans Question**

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

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

**Table 3.** Core foreign policy survey questions.<sup>96</sup>

Label	Question	Possible answers
Active	It's best for the future of our country to be active in world affairs.	Strongly agree. Agree. Somewhat agree. Neither agree nor disagree. Somewhat disagree. Disagree. Strongly disagree.
Solve World Problems	In terms of helping solve world problems, does the United States do too much, too little, or the right amount in helping solve world problems?	Does too much Does too little. Does right amount.
Interests > Allies	In world affairs, the United States should follow its own national interests, OR the United States should take into account the interests of its allies.	In world affairs, the United States should follow its own national interests. In world affairs, the United States should take into account the interests of its allies.



**Figure 4.** The effect of RT on global engagement. For simplicity, we collapse “Strongly agree,” “Agree,” and “Slightly agree” into a single “Agree” category. We do the same for the “Disagree” responses. We reproduce these figures in the online appendix disaggregated by response categories.

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

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

Exposure to RT decreases this probability to between 61% and 69%. The third panel of [Figure 4](#) presents these predicted probabilities.

Why might disclosing RT's financial relationship with the Russian government have no effect? First, Americans may already know that RT is financed by the Russian government, and so the baseline (nondisclosure) results reflect this. Alternatively, respondents in the disclosure treatments may not care. They may simply trust their ability to update their beliefs based on the media content before them. Although our survey design cannot distinguish between these possibilities, we regard this as an important direction for future research. This is strikingly consistent with growing evidence that disclosures about fake news often have no effect, including in Facebook warnings,<sup>93</sup> product advertising,<sup>94</sup> and news retractions.<sup>95</sup>

### ***Measuring a Coherent Belief Shift: Principal Components Analysis***

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

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

To identify and measure this underlying coherence, we use principal components analysis. Intuitively, for a set of variables, the first principal component represents the single line that accounts for the largest possible variance among them. This technique has been used to construct underlying indices in a variety of settings. Andy Baker, for instance, uses it to construct an underlying index of racism from a set of survey questions.<sup>97</sup> In our case, the first principal component yields an index that measures the extent to which Americans support a foreign policy of global leadership, based on their responses to our survey experiment.

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

<sup>93</sup>Gordon Pennycook, Tyrone D. Cannon, and David G. Rand, "Prior Exposure Increases Perceived Accuracy of Fake News," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 147, no. 12 (December 2018): 1865–80.

<sup>94</sup>Ian Skurnik, Carolyn Yoon, Denise C. Park, and Norbert Schwarz, "How Warnings about False Claims Become Recommendations," *Journal of Consumer Research* 31, no. 4 (March 2005): 713–24.

<sup>95</sup>Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions," *Political Behavior* 32, no. 2 (June 2010): 303–30; Adam J. Berinsky, "Rumors and Health Care Reform: Experiments in Political Misinformation," *British Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 2 (April 2017): 241–46.

<sup>96</sup>See: Pew Research Center, "Public Uncertain, Divided"; and Pew Research Center, "The Partisan Divide."

<sup>97</sup>Baker, "Race, Paternalism, and Foreign Aid."

are correlated. The correlation matrix appears in the online appendix. Each correlation coefficient is 0.38 or above. We then compute several additional diagnostic statistics to confirm the correlation: Cronbach's  $\alpha$ , Bartlett's test of sphericity, and the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy. Again, we find evidence of moderate correlation, which indeed suggests an underlying dimension to these stated beliefs.<sup>98</sup> To measure this underlying dimension, we extract the first principal component of the three outcome variables, which yields an index of the underlying belief that gave rise to the correlation among them. To facilitate interpretation, we rescale this measure along the [0, 1] interval, where 1 indicates favoring a more globally engaged foreign policy and 0 indicates favoring a less active, less cooperative foreign policy. Finally, we re-estimate Equation (1), with the outcome variable given by this new index. Since it is continuous on the [0, 1] interval, we use ordinary least squares.

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

### **Robustness Checks**

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

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

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<sup>98</sup>The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  value is 0.62. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy is 0.64. The Bartlett's test of sphericity yields a  $\chi^2$  value of 325.7, indicating that the sample intercorrelation matrix did not come from a population in which the intercorrelation matrix is an identity matrix.

By casting America's democratic allies as corrupt and America's foreign policy as destructive, it is straightforward to imagine why RT's coverage of America's foreign policy and democratic allies compels Americans to favor a withdrawal from global leadership. Yet even RT's coverage of US domestic politics compels respondents to favor a less internationalist foreign policy. Readers may wonder whether RT's coverage of domestic politics causes Americans to look inward: to be more concerned about domestic politics, and thus prefer their government focus on domestic policy rather than foreign affairs. Although the null results in [Table 1](#) suggest this domestic pathway is probably not salient, we employ causal mediation analysis to probe it further.<sup>99</sup> The basic idea is that treatment effects can be decomposed into two components: a direct effect, which runs directly from the treatment, and a causal mediation effect, in which the treatment causes the outcome through some mediating pathway. Here, the causal mediator is Americans' views about domestic politics. Again, we find no evidence that the effect of RT's domestic coverage on Americans' foreign policy views goes through the domestic anxiety channel. This suggests RT's domestic coverage affects Americans' views on foreign policy through some other channel. Clarifying this channel is an important direction for future research.

### The Way Forward

RT may be "Russian propaganda," as Kristof put it, but we are less confident it will have no geopolitical consequences. The Russian government has acknowledged its efforts to foster a "post-West world order." Exposure to RT, we find, makes Americans more comfortable with that.

Nearly 60% of all RT coverage focuses on three topics: criticism of America's traditional allies, American foreign policy, and America's domestic conditions. Exposure to RT makes US citizens roughly 15 percentage points less likely to support an active foreign policy, 20 percentage points more likely to believe the United States is doing too much to solve world problems, and 10 percentage points more likely to value national interests over the interests of allies. These effects obtain across parties and persist even when we disclose that the Russian government finances RT. This constitutes the first evidence that propaganda produced by a foreign adversary can shape public opinion in a target country. Contrary to much speculation, we find no evidence that RT shapes Americans' views on domestic policy or undermines trust in democratic institutions.

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

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<sup>99</sup>Kosuke Imai, Luke Keele, and Dustin Tingley, "A General Approach to Causal Mediation Analysis," *Psychological Methods* 15, no. 4 (December 2010): 309–34.

opinion in the world's democracies. Of course, our survey experiment has limitations. Like many experiments, its external validity is uncertain; Americans do not consume RT in a lab. Our experimental approach does not measure how quickly consumers revert to their prior beliefs after exposure or whether endorsement by people within a respondent's social network conditions RT's persuasiveness. We are unable to identify the precise mechanism through which exposure to RT compels Americans to prefer their country's withdrawing from a position of global leadership. We are also unable to probe the effects of repeated exposure to RT, which is potentially critical. During the 2016 US presidential election, Gordon Pennycook, Tyrone D. Cannon, and David G. Rand found fake news headlines on Facebook became more persuasive to readers with repeated exposure, "even when the stories are labeled as contested by fact checkers."<sup>100</sup>

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

Another avenue of research concerns citizens who consume far-right conspiratorial news, an area of growing scholarly interest.<sup>101</sup> Though few in number, these respondents hold markedly different views in our sample. They report higher presidential approval ratings, view Russia more favorably and are more confident in their ability to discern truth in news. They report lower trust in government, are less likely to view Russia as an adversary and favor a less engaged foreign policy. Russian bots appear to be particularly active in online echo chambers,<sup>102</sup> and partisan discourse disproportionately shapes broader political discourse.<sup>103</sup> If foreign

<sup>100</sup>Pennycook, Cannon, and Rand, "Prior Exposure Increases Perceived Accuracy of Fake News," 1865; see also Emily Thorson, "Belief Echoes: The Persistent Effects of Corrected Misinformation," *Political Communication* 33, no. 3 (2016): 460–80.

<sup>101</sup>Joseph E. Uscinski, Casey Klofstad, and Matthew D. Atkinson, "What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs? The Role of Informational Cues and Predispositions," *Political Research Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (March 2016): 57–71.

<sup>102</sup>Spangher et al., "Analysis of Strategy and Spread of Russia-Sponsored Content in the US in 2017."

<sup>103</sup>James N. Druckman, Matthew S. Levendusky, and Audrey McLain, "No Need to Watch: How the Effects of Partisan Media Can Spread via Interpersonal Discussions," *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 1 (January 2018): 99–112.

propaganda can shape the views of conspiratorial news consumers, who in turn shape the broader discourse, the scope for foreign propaganda to shape politics in democracies is more profound.

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## Data availability statement

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