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Who Believed Misinformation during the 2019 Indonesian Election?

ABSTRACT

We present findings from eight nationally representative surveys conducted during the 2019 Indonesian presidential campaign, in which we measured voters' reported belief in prominent pieces of misinformation. Younger, better-educated, and wealthier voters were more likely to believe the misinformation. These results are true for stories about both the incumbent (Joko Widodo) and the challenger (Prabowo Subianto). These findings represent a significant departure from results in Western Europe and North America, where a surge in misinformation has disproportionately targeted older and less educated voters.

KEYWORDS: Indonesia, public opinion, misinformation, fake news

INTRODUCTION

The spread of political misinformation—fake news, false news, or rumors—has surged in recent years (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Vargo, Guo, and Amazeen 2018). This is concerning, since democratic accountability is contingent on voters' access to credible information (Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin 1999). By disrupting this link, misinformation might sway votes and distort democratic outcomes. This is particularly troubling given that recent work has shown that fake news—a form of misinformation that mimics news content—is shared more widely than traditional news when individuals encounter it online (Lazer et al. 2018; Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018).

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Explanations for the rise in misinformation have centered around two related hypotheses. First, it might be that digital literacy—the ability to evaluate the credibility of information encountered online—has not kept pace with the number of people entering digital spaces. This gap could enable the spread of misinformation as unsuspecting consumers read and share stories they erroneously believe to be true. Second, it could be that rising political polarization has led individuals to selectively consume information that fits their worldview, irrespective of its veracity.

The empirical evidence documenting the rise in misinformation comes largely from Western Europe and North America. In these contexts, misinformation has found an especially receptive audience among older and less-educated voters, who tend to share fake news at higher rates than their younger and better-educated counterparts (Barbera 2018; Bovet and Makse 2019; Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019). It might be that “digital natives,” those who have not known a world without the Internet, are better at gauging the veracity of the information they encounter online.

Yet we know comparatively little about the extent to which these findings hold in democratic contexts outside Western Europe and North America. In this article we present systematic evidence about voters’ reported belief in misinformation in Indonesia, the world’s third-largest democracy. We are particularly interested in establishing the average levels of belief in misinformation across different demographic subgroups. We conducted eight nationally representative face-to-face surveys of Indonesian voters, asking whether they had heard, and whether they believed, pieces of widely circulated misinformation.

Our central findings diverge significantly from results in Western Europe and North America. First, younger voters were more likely to believe misinformation than their older counterparts. Second, better-educated voters (particularly those with college degrees), were more likely to believe misinformation than their less educated peers. Consistent with this, we find that richer and urban voters were also more likely to believe misinformation.

These results hold for stories about both the incumbent (Joko Widodo, widely known as Jokowi) and the challenger (Prabowo Subianto), although in general, belief was more common among supporters of Prabowo. Restricting the results to those who use social media, we find that younger respondents were no more likely than older respondents to believe the misinformation, indicating that, at least for the age effect, our results are

probably driven by the higher likelihood of young people to be active on social media. However, we also find that better-educated and richer respondents were still more likely to believe the misinformation, even controlling for social media use. Furthermore, conditional on a high degree of political polarization, educated, younger, and richer respondents were still more likely to believe misinformation targeting Jokowi—a finding that casts doubt on the hypothesis that our main results are purely a function of the tendency of certain subgroups to engage in motivated reasoning.

This paper makes at least two central contributions. First, for policymakers interested in crafting interventions to curb the spread of misinformation in Indonesia and elsewhere, we provide an empirical base of evidence. Second, for scholars of Indonesia, we build on a growing body of evidence examining the attitudinal pathologies of young, educated, and urban citizens. In particular, our results dovetail with the findings of Fossati and Mietzner (2019, 771), who demonstrate that populist attitudes among Indonesians are “particularly prominent in the middle and upper classes.” Further research should investigate the possibility that the illiberal turn among these constituencies is being driven, in part, by a surge in misinformation to which they are evidently and especially vulnerable.

DEFINING AND MEASURING MISINFORMATION

Defining and measuring misinformation is difficult for at least three reasons. First, misinformation encapsulates a wide range of content, including fake news, false news, and rumor. Much of the recent scholarly emphasis has focused on fake news. Lazer et al. (2018) define fake news as “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent.” Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) define it as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers.” These definitions exclude conspiracy theories and misleading stories that are not outright false.

We adopt a broader term, *misinformation*, which includes content such as rumors. Our emphasis on misinformation, rather than fake news specifically, enables us to measure general belief in a demonstrably false narrative, rather than levels of belief in a particular piece of demonstrably false content. To be sure, misinformation frequently originates from specific pieces of fake news. But we believe that the virulent nature of misinformation stems from its

tendency to also spread beyond the instance that occasioned it, including through online conversations. Our approach enables us to capture this overall level of belief.

Second, delimiting the relevant population in which to measure belief in misinformation is fraught. Many recent analyses have focused on the behavior and beliefs of individuals already active on various forms of social media, especially Twitter. Our broader approach calls for a broader sampling frame, in line with the approach of Allcott and Gentzkow (2017). This raises inferential difficulties for comparing our findings to previous work. The population that uses social media is different from the population that does not, and these underlying differences might be driving our findings. In response to this concern, we demonstrate in our online appendix that our findings are generally robust to subsetting respondents according to whether they use various social media platforms.¹

Third, measuring the extent of misinformation is also difficult, since reported levels of “belief” might not actually capture the sincere attitudes of survey respondents. For example, respondents who are already predisposed to dislike a candidate might disingenuously affirm their belief in a piece of damaging misinformation as an expressive gesture, rather than a sincere statement. With a series of survey experiments, Berinsky (2018) examines the prevalence of such “expressive” responses in the context of prominent rumors in American politics. Importantly for the validity of our research design, he discovers little evidence that respondents strategically game survey questions.

Despite the surge of interest among journalists and scholars in recent years, misinformation is not a new phenomenon. Misinformation in general, and fake news in particular, has plagued political debates at least since the arrival of print media (Gorbach 2018). Historically, Indonesia has dealt with the political consequences of rumors and misinformation since its independence from the Dutch. During the New Order especially, the Suharto regime deployed misinformation and rumors to quash opponents and justify acts of further oppression (Hefner 2011, 185–190). The accusation of communist sympathies—as Jokowi has recently faced—was a common tactic. The tables turned with the return of democracy in 1999, however. Local elites and individual citizens were empowered to spread misinformation of their own accord,

1. See Figure 1 in the online appendix. We subset according to respondents who use Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and none of these.

typically for personal or political gain. Bubandt (2008) has argued that pamphlets containing false information (*selebaran gelap*) were influential in spurring the rioting in Ambon in 1999, for instance. In one prominent example, a pamphlet falsely claimed that the governor of Ambon had fired 37 senior civil servants, leading to a violent riot the following day (van Klinken 2001).

POLITICS AND MISINFORMATION IN INDONESIA

The Indonesian presidential election of April 2019 was a contest between the challenger, Prabowo, and the incumbent, Jokowi. It was thus a rematch of the 2014 presidential election. And once again, Jokowi was declared victorious, this time with 55.5% of the vote. But this decisive victory obscures the contentious nature of the campaign. After the result was announced, for instance, Prabowo disputed its legitimacy and called for protests in Central Jakarta.

Both candidates harnessed populist rhetoric, but aimed at different constituencies. As in 2014, Prabowo's support derived mostly from urban and well-educated voters. A former general and the former son-in-law of longtime military strongman Suharto, Prabowo has been accused of human rights abuses and has cultivated a coalition of unsavory characters in the pursuit of his political ambitions (Mietzner 2015). Chief among these allies are hard-line Islamist groups, such as the Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam). Jokowi, who was championed as a reformer in 2014, has relied on support from rural and less-educated voters, perhaps because he himself is from a middle-class background.² But, although Jokowi was generally believed to be the more moderate candidate, in 2019 he chose as his running mate Ma'ruf Amin, a cleric with a history of illiberal statements. Clearly this was an attempt to shore up the pious vote. But some analysts have interpreted this decision, along with other choices over his first term, as evidence of a broader "authoritarian turn" in his politics (Power 2018).

The coalitions assembled by the two candidates thus partially reflected long-standing cleavages in Indonesian society—rural versus urban, *santri* versus *abangan*—which raised the perceived stakes of the election.³ Against this backdrop, supporters of each candidate engaged in subversive campaigns to tarnish the brand of the other, often by enabling the spread of

2. For a demographic analysis of vote preference in 2019, see Figure 3 in the online appendix.

3. *Santri* refers to Indonesians who practice an orthodox form of Islam; *abangan* indicates Indonesians who practice a syncretic form of Islam that incorporates traditional spiritual practices.

misinformation. The degree of misinformation varied considerably, from demonstrably false to merely misleading or intentionally negative. While there were dozens of false stories circulating in advance of the election, we limit our study to four narratives (two about each candidate) that were demonstrably false and widely shared.

Two main pieces of misinformation dogged Joko Widodo throughout the campaign. One was that Jokowi has been a member of the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia). This story was related to a photograph, widely shared on social media, of a young man resembling Jokowi at a Communist Party rally in 1955.⁴ But the fact is that Jokowi was born in 1961, six years after this rally. The other story was that Joko Widodo is a foreign agent controlled (*kaki tangan*) by the Chinese government. While there is of course no credible evidence for this, it likely gained traction on the general suggestion that his presidency has been too accommodating of Chinese investment and too cozy with the ethnic-Chinese minority in Indonesia. One piece of widely circulated fake news—labelled a “hoax” by the Ministry of Communication and Information—claimed that Jokowi had agreed to “import” ten million Chinese laborers to Indonesia; this fueled the broader narrative that he had been co-opted by the Chinese government.⁵

Misinformation targeting Prabowo was less virulent, but we consider two demonstrably false claims that followed his campaign. The first was that the military and police had officially endorsed him. The evidence was a widely circulated photograph in which top officials from the military and police were seen holding up their thumbs and index fingers; this supposedly indicated Prabowo’s position (second) on the ballot.⁶ The officials pictured in the photograph later released a clarification in which they denied that the gesture was an endorsement of Prabowo. The second story was that Ustad Abdul Somad, a prominent Islamic preacher known for anti-LGBT positions, had joined the Prabowo campaign team (*tim sukses*). The story initially stemmed from a doctored photograph, widely circulated on WhatsApp, in which

4. “Penjelasan soal Foto Kampanye PKI DN Aidit yang Terdapat Pria Mirip Jokowi” [Explanation of the photo of the Jokowi lookalike at the communist rally for Aidit], *Kompas*, November 23, 2018.

5. “Presiden Jokowi Akan Impor 10 Juta Warga China” [President Jokowi will import 10 million Chinese citizens], Kementerian Komunikasi Dan Informatika Republik Indonesia [Ministry of Communication and Information], August 8, 2018.

6. “TNI-Polri Pose Dua Jari Dukung Prabowo-Sandiaga,” [Indonesian army and police raise two fingers in support of Prabowo-Sandiaga], *Turn Back Hoax*, January 3, 2019.

Abdul Somad's name appeared on a list of members of the team.⁷ In addition to a statement from the Ministry of Communication and Information, Abdul Somad posted a statement on his widely followed social media account clarifying that he had not in fact joined the campaign.

As we have noted, all four of these stories are demonstrably false. But there are important differences between them. For one, the attacks on Joko Widodo were likely very damaging. The Communist Party remains a prominent bogeyman in Indonesian politics; in our April 2019 survey, 14.6% of respondents stated that "communists" were the group they disliked the most.⁸ Similarly, the Chinese in Indonesia, including the ethnic minority of Chinese-Indonesians, have historically been an object of resentment. On the other hand, the stories about Prabowo, while likely damaging, could be taken by some voters as positive, since they connected him with the security apparatus of the state and a religiously conservative preacher.

DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

We conducted eight national surveys between December 2017 and April 2019, with a total of 14,005 respondents. To ensure a representative sample, villages were selected according to a multistage random sampling procedure in which we stratified by province. Within the selected villages, ten respondents (five men and five women) were randomly selected for face-to-face interviews. The sample size for the eight surveys varied from 1,059 to 2,479.

Every survey included this question: "People have many views about President Joko Widodo. Do you believe or not believe the following statements about President Joko Widodo: (1) President Joko Widodo is a foreign agent controlled by the People's Republic of China; (2) President Joko Widodo is a member of the Indonesian Communist Party, or at least affiliated with it." The January 2019 survey ($N = 1,426$) also included this question: "Many opinions and news stories concerning the upcoming election have circulated recently. Here are some of those stories. Do you believe or not believe the following statements: (1) The army and police officially endorsed

7. "Usulan Daftar Nama Calon Timses Prabowo-Sandi" [Proposed names of the Prabowo-Sandi campaign team], Kementerian Komunikasi Dan Informatika Republik Indonesia, March 15, 2019.

8. This is the third-most disliked group, after ISIS (22.4%) and homosexuals (14.8%).

TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics

<i>Statistic</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>St. Dev.</i>	<i>N</i>
China (Anti-Jokowi)	0.088	0.284	14,005
Communist (Anti-Jokowi)	0.048	0.214	14,005
Any Anti-Jokowi	0.101	0.301	14,005
Army/Police Endorse (Anti-Prabowo)	0.125	0.331	1,426
Ustad Endorse (Anti-Prabowo)	0.155	0.362	1,426
Any Anti-Prabowo	0.220	0.415	1,426

Prabowo for president; (2) Ustad Abdul Somad joined the campaign team of Prabowo.” These questions were selected following focus group discussions with journalists, in which we probed for salient pieces of misinformation.

For ease of interpretation, our main outcome is an index. For each candidate, we generated a new variable taken as 1 if the respondent agrees with either of the two stories, and 0 otherwise.⁹ We also collected demographic information. Here, the analysis focuses on five demographic variables: gender, education, age, geography, and income. To probe possible explanations of the findings, we also asked whether the respondents used social media, and their level of interest in politics.

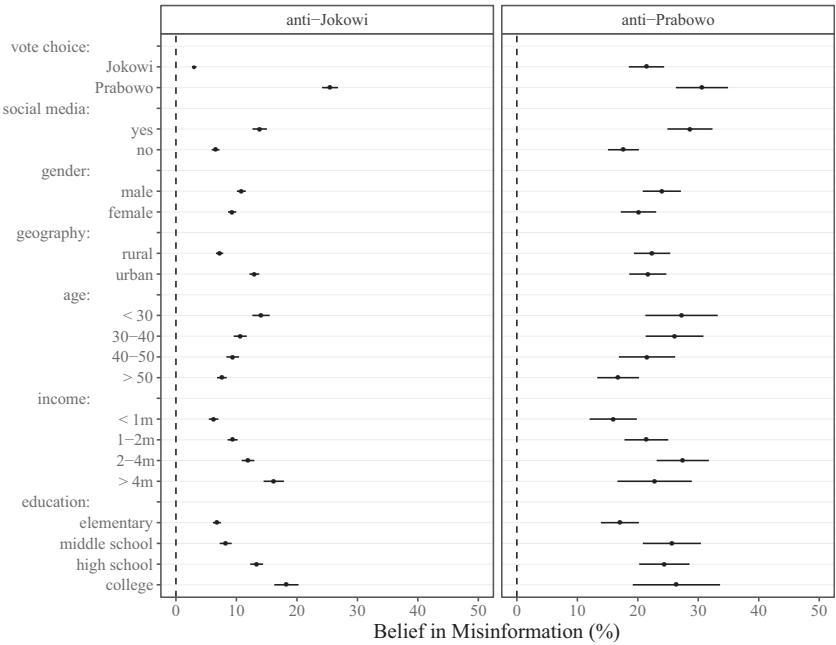
We present the topline results in Table 1. In general, respondents were more likely to believe misinformation targeting Prabowo than misinformation targeting Joko Widodo. Overall, 10.1% of respondents believed at least one false story about Jokowi, and 22% believed at least one false story about Prabowo.

MAIN RESULTS

We present the subgroup averages in Figure 1. The left panel shows the percentage of respondents who believed either of the two stories about Joko Widodo; the right panel shows the same results for Prabowo. Across both panels, younger voters were significantly more likely to state that they believed the misinformation. Regarding Joko Widodo, for instance, respondents under 30 were nearly twice as likely as those over 50 to report a belief

9. An alternative approach involves recoding respondents who responded “don’t know” as 0.5; this weakens the demographic trends observed in our main analysis (Figure 2 in the online appendix).

FIGURE 1. Who Believed the Misinformation?



NOTE: The left panel shows the percentage of respondents in each demographic subgroup reporting a belief in at least one piece of misinformation targeting Joko Widodo, while the right panel shows the same for Prabowo Subianto. We include 95% confidence intervals, which are larger for the Prabowo subgroup due to the smaller sample size (1,426 versus 14,005).

in at least one story (15.6% versus 8.4%, $p < 0.001$).¹⁰ Similar results obtain for Prabowo: 27.2% of respondents under 20, versus 16.7% of those over 50 ($p < 0.01$).

Turning to education, college-educated respondents were more likely than their less-educated peers to believe the misinformation. Respondents with a college degree were nearly three times more likely than those with an elementary-school education to believe at least one story about Joko Widodo (19.1% versus 7.8%, $p < 0.001$), and almost twice as likely to believe at least one story about Prabowo (26.3% versus 17.0%, $p < 0.05$). However, 25.6% of middle-school-educated respondents also believed at least one

10. All p -values are from difference-in-means analyses calculated using two-tailed t -tests.

story about Prabowo. Income also shows consistent results: the wealthiest respondents were generally more likely than the poorest respondents to believe the story.

Gender and geography produced mixed results. Regarding Joko Widodo, urban residents were more likely than rural residents to believe at least one story (14.1% versus 8.4%, $p < 0.001$), and male respondents were slightly more likely than female respondents (11.9% versus 10.4%, $p < 0.01$). But we detect no appreciable differences across gender and geography with respect to Prabowo.

Finally, respondents who indicated a vote preference for Prabowo were more likely to believe at least one story targeting *either* candidate. For instance, they were eight times more likely than supporters of Jokowi to believe at least one story targeting Joko Widodo (25.4% versus 3.0%, $p < 0.001$). Strikingly, they were also more likely than Jokowi supporters to believe at least one story about their preferred candidate (30.6% versus 21.4%, $p < 0.01$), which suggests that at least some of them interpreted the misinformation in a positive light.

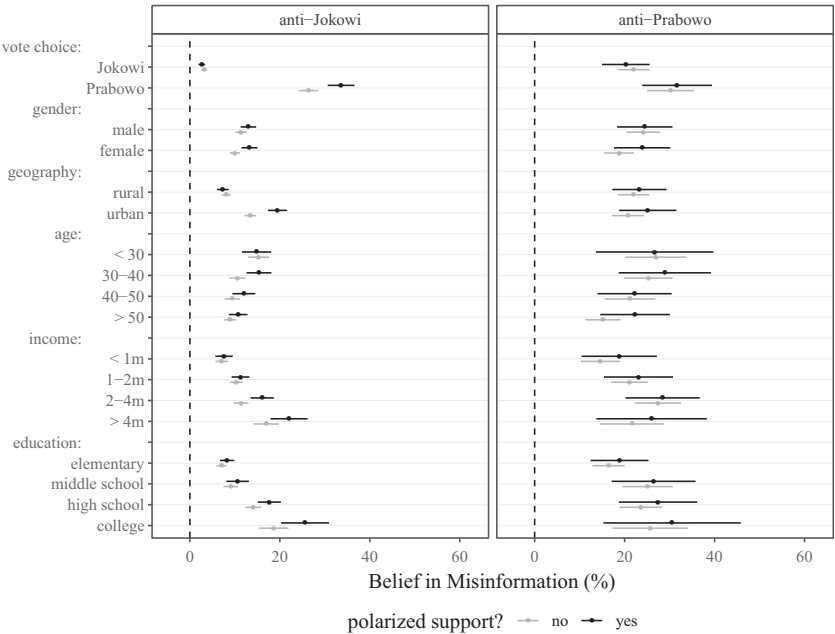
DISCUSSION

What explains these findings? One explanation is that the constituencies that were most likely to believe misinformation—younger, better-educated, richer, and urban—are also those most likely to be active on social media. If social media is the main vector through which misinformation spreads, it seems plausible that these subgroups' high levels of belief in misinformation could be a function of exposure. To examine this possibility, we split our sample into those respondents who report using social media and those who do not.

Figure 2 reveals two insights. First, in all subgroups, the percentage of belief in at least one piece of misinformation targeting Jokowi is higher among respondents who use social media. We obtain similar results regarding Prabowo, although the differences are not always statistically significant. Thus, exposure to social media appears to be associated with an increase in belief in misinformation, across all demographic subgroups.

Second, conditional on using social media, we find that more-educated and richer respondents were still more likely to believe the misinformation. The richest social media users were 48.3% more likely than the poorest social

FIGURE 2. Who Believed the Misinformation? Social Media Split Sample

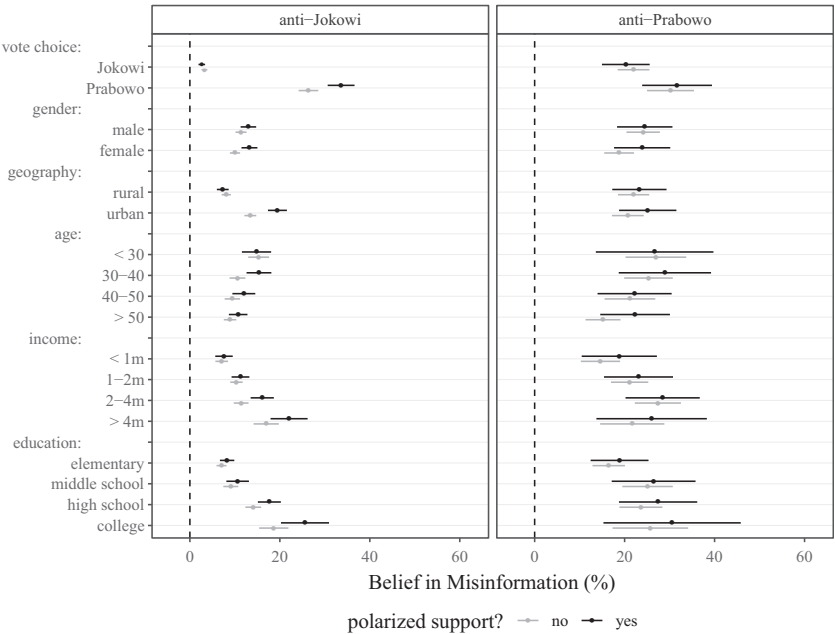


NOTE: Here we split the subgroups according to whether they use social media (gray) or not (black). We include 95% confidence intervals.

media users to believe at least one story about Joko Widodo (18.3% versus 12.4%, $p < 0.01$) and nearly twice as likely to believe at least one story about Prabowo, although this difference is not statistically significant at conventional levels (27.7% versus 18.0%, $p = 0.12$). And social media users with a college education were 63% more likely than social media users with an elementary school education to believe at least one story about Jokowi (17.3% versus 10.6%, $p < 0.01$).

This is a distressing result, since it casts doubt on the general expectation that education could be a powerful tool for combating the spread of misinformation (van Prooijen 2017). The purpose of this article is to establish a descriptive empirical foundation, but we believe that future work should investigate this result. Our preferred conjecture is that education in Indonesia has given individuals the false confidence to independently gauge the veracity of information they encounter on social media, but this education has not in

FIGURE 3. Who Believed the Misinformation? Polarization Split Sample



NOTE: Here we split the subgroups according to whether they report high levels of polarization (black) or not (gray). We include 95% confidence intervals.

fact adequately equipped citizens with the skills required to critically evaluate the veracity of misinformation in practice.

Another possible explanation concerns motivated reasoning. Perhaps the constituencies that were most likely to believe the misinformation—younger, better-educated, richer, and urban—are also the most polarized in their political views. They would then be the most susceptible to misinformation, as long as it fits their worldview. Partisanship is low in Indonesia, however: only 12.2% of respondents in our April 2019 survey reported feeling “close” to any particular party. To examine the possibility that motivated reasoning is driving our results, we split our sample according to the intensity of support respondents report for their chosen candidate. Specifically, in five out of our eight surveys, we asked respondents how likely they were (on a 10-point scale) to support either Jokowi or Prabowo. We subset those who reported a 10 for either candidate as a proxy for

partisan engagement (“polarized”); any other response was categorized as “not polarized.”

Across all subgroups, the proportion of respondents reporting a belief in at least one piece of misinformation is higher for “polarized” individuals (Figure 3). This is true for the stories about both Jokowi and Prabowo, although the differences for the latter are not statistically significant. We interpret this as evidence that latent interest in politics—a proxy for partisanship—is associated with susceptibility to misinformation. The demographic trends reported in the main analysis also hold for those who are interested in politics, at least for misinformation targeting Joko Widodo. Conditional on having a polarized preference, respondents under 30, were 4.1 percentage points more likely to believe at least one story about Joko Widodo, compared to those over 50 ($p < 0.05$); the most educated respondents are more than three times as likely as the least educated respondents (25.6% versus 8.2%, $p < 0.001$); and the richest three times as much as the poorest respondents (22.1% versus 7.6%, $p < 0.001$). Taken together, these results suggest that the tendency of certain subgroups to believe misinformation cannot be fully attributed to a higher likelihood of motivated reasoning.

CONCLUSION

Our aim in this article has been to establish an empirical foundation on which future work can build. In substantive terms, we have demonstrated that overall belief in misinformation was prevalent during the 2019 Indonesian presidential election. More worryingly, many of the subgroups that have been found elsewhere to be most discerning in consuming information online—young, educated, and urban—were the constituencies most likely to believe misinformation during this election.

Concerned activists and policymakers across the world have developed interventions to address the problem of misinformation; these have typically taken two forms. First, policymakers and social media platforms have rolled out fact-checking campaigns in which information being shared on social media is verified by neutral parties and removed if found to contain misinformation. The Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Information Technology has rolled out an “anti-hoax” initiative, while civil society groups such as Masyarakat Anti Fitnah Indonesia (Indonesian Anti-Slander Society, MAFINDO) have promoted efforts to “turn back

hoax” (*sic*). However, we do not yet have credible evaluations of the efficacy of these initiatives in the Indonesian context. Elsewhere, scholars have described mixed results, and in some cases a “backlash” effect from fact-checking (Badrinathan 2020; Fridkin, Kenney and Wintersieck 2015; Nyhan and Reifler 2010). Future work should focus on evaluating these interventions in the Indonesian context.

On the other hand, policymakers have also sought to promote digital literacy through educational and informational campaigns. Given the decentralized nature of misinformation in Indonesia, these campaigns perhaps hold more promise. Yet, this study shows that skepticism does not automatically follow from extended education; further work should investigate how digital literacy campaigns can effectively target individuals with already-high levels of education.

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