A Discussion of Adam Berinsky's *Political Rumors: Why We Accept Misinformation and How to Fight It.*

Political Rumors: Why We Accept Misinformation and How to Fight It. By Adam Berinsky. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023. 240p. $29.95 cloth.

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Mis- and disinformation research is deservedly the subject of tremendous scholarly attention, and Adam Berinsky's *Political Rumors* stands out for its breadth—11 studies across 10 years, with rumors on the left and on the right side of the ideological spectrum. Berinsky offers careful analysis and no easy answers. Rumors include spacecrafts crashing in Roswell, New Mexico, and lies that threaten to upend democracy. One of Berinsky's most useful observations comes early on—"it is not just that some people believe a lot of fanciful things. Rather, a lot of people believe some fanciful things" (p. 7). Misinformation is widespread but rumors vary in terms of the danger they pose to democracy, and while all rumors are interesting from a psychological perspective, it's the anti-democratic rumors that are of central concern to political science.

The book is centrally concerned with why people believe (or fail to reject) political rumors and whether it's possible to correct these beliefs. Rumor acceptance is related to a predisposition toward conspiratorial thinking and partisanship (interacted with the partisan nature of the rumor). Under some circumstances, rumors can be corrected, and this book deserves praise for the wealth of studies featuring different manipulations, and particularly the panel data that allow for both short-term and long(er)-term effects of corrections. Berinsky uses experiments to test the effect of time frames, different messengers, messages, and political contexts, to name some prominent factors considered in this book. The overall message across the studies is that we should approach corrections with modest expectations. A correction might hold (for some), but only if it comes from an unexpected messenger, and even then, only for a

short time. There is no simple solution to the vexing problem of misinformation.

While the work clarifying conditional effects of corrections is important, I see Berinsky's treatment of the "don't knows" as the most valuable insight of the book. Rather than portraying the mass public in two groups—those who believe a rumor versus those who don't—Berinsky separates people into four groups: the creators, the believers, the disbelievers, and the uncertain. Creators start rumors, metaphorically dropping pebbles (or rocks) in a pond. Rumors ripple outward to affect the believers and stop at the disbelievers, but uncertain people (who answer "don't know" or "not sure" to rumor questions) exist between these two groups and missing out on them causes us to underestimate the danger of rumors. With any given rumor, the uncertain can be a sizable segment of the electorate, and their unwillingness to reject a rumor increases its danger. They might be disengaged, generally skeptical, or truly unsure, and they certainly don't correct rumors when they're mentioned. The approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of our vulnerability to misinformation and our potential to overcome the associated challenges. Other areas of research in public opinion would benefit from a similar approach—rather than splitting the public into those who hold an attitude and those who don't, there's value in knowing who's willing to entertain particular attitudes, even if they stop short of endorsement. When it comes to the most dangerous anti-democratic attitudes, the "don't knows" might make hard turns in the right context.

Returning to the four main groups, future research might further disaggregate the disbelievers. Among people who don't believe a rumor, there are people who will stay quiet and those who will speak up. Even among those who speak up, there's variation to explore—*Political Rumors* shows that rumor corrections are most effective when they

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come from unlikely sources. But under what circumstances do we see disbelievers take public stances, particularly when doing so carries social and professional costs? Do we speak up when an issue is personally meaningful, or do the personal stakes inhibit behavior? In *Political Rumors*, the messengers (either nonpartisan, the expected partisan sources, or surprise partisan) are separate from the taxonomy of the mass public, which is a reasonable start. But dealing with the threat of rumors will require both ordinary people and political elites to speak up, and understanding motivations to correct is important for moving forward.

The messenger experiments are particularly intriguing because they show how partisanship can be used for good. For example, a Republican Senator who helped draft the Affordable Care Act (known colloquially as "Obamacare") was an effective messenger against the false "death panel" rumor—the supposed government-sponsored panels tasked with deciding which lives are worth saving. But as the chapter dealing with the Trump era (Chapter 5) suggests, in our current political climate the partisan dynamics are more challenging. To pause for a moment, it is worth reflecting on the fact that the less challenging context involved one party accusing the other party of requiring death panels for grandparents. Alas, here we are, where correcting some rumors changes the identity of a messenger, shifting them from a surprising source to a disloyal (and soon, unemployed) party member. Republicans in office and in the media who publicly opposed Trump's "stop the steal" efforts around the 2020 election have now been pushed out of the party.

The nefarious rumor that the 2020 election was stolen continues to infect our politics and raises a further area of research. When we consider what rumors are particularly dangerous in a democracy, they include often repeated "facts" such as *Obama was not born in the United States* or *thousands of unregistered people voted.* But other forms of misinformation are more nebulous—for example, *the election doesn't matter*, *the parties are the same*, *the economy is terrible*, and *it's the president's fault.* Misinformation scholars might say that these beliefs are not in their purview—in *Political Rumors*, Berinsky's focus is on claims "that are not, on balance, supported by the best publicly available evidence that has been confirmed by experts" (p. 28). Perhaps the examples I mentioned differ from the rumors in the book in terms of the range and variance of potential experts, or disputes over what constitutes evidence. There is a qualitative difference between a false statement that is refuted with a simple fact sheet and one that might take a semester to unpack, but they are a part of the misinformation challenge that confronts democracy.

But to end on more solid ground, *Political Rumors* is required reading for today's political psychology and public opinion researchers and should be of interest to anyone who cares about democratic backsliding. Berinsky calls for an "all hands on deck" approach to fighting misinformation, and this book is a massive contribution in that effort.