

No, We're Not Living in a Post-Fact World | POLITICO

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One of the most pessimistic claims about facts in American democracy is that when people see factual information, they respond by becoming *less* accurate. In one famous 2010 study, factual corrections about the absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq prompted conservatives to become *more* convinced that WMD were present. This behavior is known as the “backfire effect,” and it has been documented in a handful of studies. It would indeed be worrisome if, when presented with accurate information that conflicted with their political beliefs, Americans simply rejected it.

We decided to investigate the prevalence of the backfire effect during the 2016 election, conducting a set of experiments on Americans of all political stripes. We used a wide variety of platforms, including nationally representative online samples (one of which was administered by Morning Consult) and telephone-based studies, which helped recruit older, generally more conservative Americans. Across all of our studies, participants read misstatements by various politicians, including presidential candidates from both parties, on issues ranging from climate change to foreign policy to crime rates. To maximize the chance of inducing backfire, we tested many politically contentious issues, for which partisan positions tend to be more fixed. We then randomly assigned some participants to read factual corrections to the misstatements. Afterward, we asked all participants whether they still believed the initial misstatement.

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