

# Identifying and Correcting Policy Misperceptions

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April 23, 2015

## Abstract

This paper argues for the importance of distinguishing between misinformation (false information) and misperceptions (false beliefs). Factual misperceptions are not always the direct result of exposure to misinformation. I identify several substantive policy misperceptions in the American public using a combination of interview and survey data. Long-form interviews with a range of Americans probe the factual beliefs underlying their political opinions. These interviews yielded a number of common factual misperceptions, three of which are discussed in this paper. These misperceptions concern time limits on TANF, the U.S. debt to China, and Social Security. A representative survey confirms that each is present among both Democrats and Republicans. Finally, results from a two-wave panel suggest that even a single correction can substantially reduce these misperceptions.

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\*Emma Haberern provided invaluable research assistance for this project. Funding support was provided by the American Press Institute. Thanks to Jackie Stein, Kim Gross, Guarav Sood and members of the API Fact-Checking Project for helpful comments.

Citizen knowledge of factual information about politics and policies is critical for a functioning democracy (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Factual information is the “currency of democratic citizenship” – it provides common ground for political deliberation and allows citizens to evaluate public policy, which in turn shapes their political participation and behavior (Kuklinski et al. 2000). While survey research consistently finds that many Americans are uninformed about critical aspects of U.S. politics and policies (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), this deficiency can be overcome through the use of heuristics (Page and Shapiro 2010), interpersonal conversation, or a more effortful information search (Prior and Lupia 2008).

An uninformed citizen, however, behaves very differently from one who is misinformed (Kuklinski et al. 2000). Because an uninformed citizen recognizes when she lacks information about a particular policy, she can choose to seek out accurate information, rely on shortcuts like party identification, or refrain from letting that policy affect her political decision-making. In contrast, a misinformed citizen poses a much greater threat to democratic performance. A misinformed citizen may use incorrect factual beliefs to inform his opinions (Jerit and Barabas 2006; Weeks and Garrett 2014), spread these beliefs to others (Weeks and Southwell 2010), and resist any correction of these beliefs (Nyhan and Reifler 2010).

Given these normative concerns, it is not surprising that much recent scholarship has focused on tracking the spread and effects of political misinformation (Berinsky 2012; Weeks and Southwell 2010) as well as how to best correct the misperceptions it can cause (Garrett and Weeks 2013; Nyhan and Reifler 2010). Much of this research begins by identifying misinformation in the media (for example, rumors or false claims) then measuring the extent to which exposure to this misinformation leads the public to hold misperceptions, and finally assessing whether these misperceptions affect political attitudes. While intuitive, this approach to studying the effects of misinformation

limits the scope of misperceptions to those that are driven largely by exposure to misinformation. However, not all misperceptions are driven by misinformation in the media environment. For example, some may be driven by internal cognitive biases or misinterpretations of true information.

This paper takes a bottom-up approach to identifying misperceptions by first eliciting the factual beliefs that underlie individuals' political attitudes. In Study 1, forty interviews with American citizens from across the political spectrum probe the factual bases of their political opinions. This open-ended approach makes it possible to uncover the factual assertions that citizens spontaneously invoke in support of their policy preferences. The interviews show that many Americans hold substantial misperceptions about several critical aspects of public policy, three of which I describe in detail in this paper. In Study 2, a representative survey assesses the breadth of these three misperceptions, as well as the extent to which they can be minimized through corrections.

## **Misinformation vs. Misperceptions**

In this paper, I distinguish between *misinformation* and *misperceptions*. Misinformation refers to false information, while misperceptions refer to false beliefs. A campaign message claiming that the ACA contains death panels is a piece of misinformation. If a person views the message and accepts its claim, she will hold a misperception about the ACA. The distinction between misinformation and misperceptions is important for several reasons. First, misinformation does not inevitably lead to misperceptions. A person may hear a piece of misinformation and choose not to believe it. Second, misperceptions can arise even without exposure to misinformation. For example, many Americans misperceive the percent of the U.S. budget spent

on foreign aid (CBS News 2011). But this misperception likely does not result from explicit misinformation. Neither Politifact nor FactCheck.org has a record of a politician, pundit, or even chain email over-estimating the amount of the budget spent on foreign aid. It is more likely that the misperception emerged because factual beliefs are profoundly shaped by an array of cognitive biases. In the case of foreign aid, some of this belief might be driven by motivated reasoning (if a person opposes foreign aid they may over-estimate the amount the U.S. spend on it) while some may be driven by the availability heuristic: because foreign aid is frequently discussed and often reinforced with vivid imagery, people over-estimate the amount of money spent on it (Kahneman 2011). In both cases, the misperception can form even without an explicit external source of misinformation.

Finally, given the current state of polarized political discourse, misperceptions driven by elite misinformation are often highly partisan, which in turn can make them difficult to correct. For example, studies examining misperceptions around Barack Obama's religion have consistently demonstrated that ideology best predicts who will hold this misperception (Nyhan and Reifler 2010). A similar pattern holds true for rumors about death panels, 9/11 conspiracy theories, and Sarah Palin's banned books (Berinsky 2012). Because the misinformation emerges with and is spread by partisans, partisanship largely determines who holds the misperception. Partisan-driven motivated reasoning makes these types of misperceptions extremely difficult to correct. In contrast, misperceptions that arise from cognitive biases may be less subject to this effect, partly because they are not reified by partisan discourse. For example, over-estimations of foreign aid do not vary substantially by party (CBS News 2011).

Misperceptions that emerge from elite misinformation are straightforward to measure and track: after a politician or pundit makes a false claim, a survey can assess public belief in that claim. In contrast, misperceptions that emerge from other sources

are more difficult to identify, especially given the difference in political knowledge between those who conduct political surveys (typically academics and pollsters) and those who take them. Misperceptions driven by cognitive biases occur when a person incorrectly “fills in the blank” about a political issue about which they have little information. The types of people who write political knowledge questions are simply less likely to have those blanks.

## **Project Overview**

This project’s goal is to identify misperceptions that play a causal role in shaping political attitudes. To date, much research on misperceptions has found that they are the result of rather than the cause of attitudes (specifically, partisanship). But this may be partly because academics usually study misperceptions that come from external misinformation – misinformation often promulgated by partisans. Misperceptions that emerge from other sources (for example, cognitive biases) may play more of a causal role in attitudes. In addition, they may be easier to correct.

This project consists of two separate studies. The first is a series of open-ended interviews designed to elicit factual misperceptions. The second is a two-wave representative survey in which these misperceptions are (1) measured and (2) corrected. The goal of this survey is two-fold: first, to examine the breadth of the misperceptions elicited in the interview, including the extent to which they are correlated with partisanship; and second, to test whether these misperceptions can be successfully corrected.

## Study 1: Eliciting Factual Misperceptions

To date, most research on Americans' political knowledge structures is based on survey research. Recent years have seen a renewed focus on misperceptions, with accompanying surveys measuring a range of false beliefs. However, much of this research has focused on misperceptions that are based on explicit misinformation – false statements made by pundits, discussed on chain emails, or, in one case, published in a major medical journal. Examples include death panels, vaccines, climate change, GMOs and President Obama's religion. This focus makes sense given that the misinformation that generates these misperceptions is easy to observe (indeed, there are entire fact-checking operations dedicating to tracking it).

However, the mental processes that generate other types of misperceptions are more opaque, making such misperceptions more difficult to identify. As a first step, instead of employing a survey, I conduct open-ended interviews. The interviews are structured to elicit subjects' factual beliefs absent of preconceived assumptions about what facts are important to their attitudes. Soss (2006) describes the benefits of such interpretive approaches to explaining political phenomena, explaining that “prioritizing skepticism about shared meaning...and [placing] greater empirical pressure on my assumptions that particular words, actions, objects, people, and events had self-evident or widely shared meanings.” The national debt may mean something very different to an economist than it does to a university professor or a home health aide, and these different meanings have consequences not only for attitudes but also for factual beliefs.

### Methods

The data for this research were obtained through forty phone interviews conducted over the course of the summer of 2014. Participants for the phone interviews were

recruited from Craigslist, a website featuring classified advertisements. They were recruited with an advertisement in the volunteer section of 38 different areas (see Appendix) randomly selected from the 413 total under the United States section of Craigslist. The advertisement said that a university professor was looking for participants willing to participate in a 20-minute phone interview “as part of a study about jobs and today’s economy.” Those selected for the interview would be given a \$10 gift card to Target or Wal-Mart. To qualify, they were first asked to complete a brief online survey.

The survey consisted of a consent form, demographic questions, and an open-ended question asking what they perceived to be the most pressing issue facing the United States today. A total of 528 people took the the online survey. Of those, a subsection were selected for interviews. Selections were made so as to vary the sample in terms of age, sex, race, income, education, and political party. A full list of participant demographic characteristics is available in the Appendix. Selected participants received an email scheduling an interview time. Although not all of the selected participants responded to the email or answered the phone (resulting in several waves of data collection), 40 phone interviews were successfully completed, ranging in length from 10 to 25 minutes. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

The interview consisted of open-ended questions on a wide range of political issues. These issues included the deficit and debt, social welfare programs, size of government, unemployment, immigration, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, Social Security, corporations, and taxes. The interviewers asked about the participants’ general thoughts and experiences with the issues. In some cases, to encourage factual assertions, the participants were asked how they would explain a certain topic to a kindergartener or what factes they wished people more knew about an issue. While the topics included in the interviews remained consistent, the questions varied accord-

ing to the flow of the interview. The interviewers attempted to create a relaxed and informal environment for each participant. At the end of the interviews, interviewees were given the opportunity to bring up any issues important to them that had not previously been mentioned.

## **Results**

Each interview transcript was subsequently coded for any factual assertions made by the interviewee. In this study, I discuss three specific misperceptions that were cited frequently by respondents. They involve the national debt, social security, and time limits on welfare benefits.

### **National Debt**

The interviews included a series of questions about the causes and consequences of the national debt. The majority of respondents expressed concern about the issue. Although none volunteered an estimate of exactly how much the U.S. owed, most were confident that any level of debt was problematic. When asked to articulate their concerns more detail, a number focused on China's ownership of U.S. debt and the potential for China to exercise an outsize influence in U.S. affairs.

As Mary put it, "I told my daughter she needs to learn Chinese instead of Spanish." Or, as Arianne worded it, "we owe China our backside because they've lended to us." Their belief that China was America's biggest debtor directly informed their perceptions of the consequences of the national debt. Said Joseph, "It's all about leverage...when we're at the mercy of other countries, it lowers our leverage." Holly expressed another concern: "I wouldn't want them to come here and be like, 'we're taking over your country because you owe us so much money.'" Phong worried that "they could take our stuff, our natural resouces. They could demand that we give them



stuff like that.” Rodney described the situation similarly: “We are spending money that is not generated by our taxes or whatever, so everybody else around the world is owning pieces of America, and if they call in those debts or they decide to not spend any more money on our deficit, we are in trouble.” Even some respondents who were less concerned about the debt focused on the potential for other countries to collect. Kim mentioned that “It seems really unlikely that anyone is going to be calling in their debt at any time soon because they know that calling in the debts that they have that Americans hold to them kind of would drive a downturn of the global economy.”

One reason for this misperception may be that respondents understood the national debt to be similar to personal or household debt. For example, Amy criticized the government’s handling of the debt by drawing an analogy to her own family “I don’t spend money that I don’t have: we don’t spend above our means,” This metaphor is common in media coverage of the debt as well (Krugman 2012). When a household carries a debt, they usually owe it to an external creditor like a bank or a credit card company. But governments (unlike households) are comprised of multiple relatively independent actors. The plurality of U.S. debt (about 40%) is owed to federal government accounts (for example, Social Security and the Federal Reserve), but only one subject mentioned this. Instead, most focused on the amount of debt that was held by China (and in some cases, another foreign power). This factual misperception in turn affected attitudes by raising worries that lack of payment could lead to retribution.

## **TANF**

In discussing programs like welfare, food stamps, and even unemployment, a common theme emerged that cut across party lines: the assumption that most people who used these programs did so for years, if not a lifetime. Amy strongly supported these programs in general, saying that “we should have systems... if someone has an unex-

pected illness or loses their job, becomes unemployed, loses their health insurance, or becomes a single parent.” But she went on to succinctly summarize a common concern: “Those programs have gone from temporary solutions that maybe last six months, a year, two years, at the most five years and now they’ve just become a way of life for many families.”

It is worth noting that the majority of people interviewed – including conservatives – did not think that social welfare programs should be done away with entirely. Most simply thought that changes should be made to help people transition away from what many viewed as a lifetime benefit. Specifically, people proposed instituting time limits and job training. For example, Edwin mentioned that “there should be a program in place to help people develop new skills and get back in the workforce,” and Josh stated that “there should be a timeline in terms of how long they can receive benefits.” Maureen stated that “Your career can’t be welfare, there should be something to help people get a job...years ago, in Massachusetts anyway, if you went on welfare or unemployment that you got some training. At least that would help you with job searching.” Khensani agreed that “we have to get them more assistance in helping them out of the programs.”

Only one person, Maria, actually mentioned the existence of time limits on social welfare. She was also one of only three subjects who stated that they had themselves used the TANF program. Maria said “They have changed your basic welfare programs...women can no longer have a baby, go on it, have twelve more babies, and stay on it for the rest of their life. They limit how long you can stay on it, they make you go get a job.” In the interviews, respondents were not specifically asked whether they believed there was a time limit on welfare benefits. Instead, these statements were asserted spontaneously.

In the case of TANF, the lack of background information may be partially result of

how the media covers welfare. In 1996, President Bill Clinton's welfare reform imposed a highly-covered 60-month limit on how long a person could receive welfare benefits. Many states have even since imposed even stricter time limits (Schott and Pavetti 2011). However, post-welfare reform, media coverage of TANF and related programs has rarely mentioned specific aspects of the policy like time limits or job training, instead focusing on personal stories of welfare recipients or narratives of system abuse (Rose and Baumgartner 2013). Media coverage of policies is strongly related to political knowledge in that area (Barabas and Jerit 2009), and the lack of background information about welfare may open up room for misperceptions.

## **Social Security**

Interview subjects were also asked about their perceptions of Social Security, including how it worked and any concerns about its future. The majority of participants had a roughly accurate idea of how Social Security worked. For example, Kim said "You pay into it throughout your working years and then you are expected to receive some benefit for it when you are done or working or you are no longer able to work." Eric explained it as "the money we pay into social security goes toward running the government and...the taxes we pay this year, go to pay someone's social security who's receiving it now." Corey, although critical, also understood the system: "It does seem very Ponzi-schemish..everyone's paying in and then you're using that money to pay the older people who presumably paid in the past...there's a constant flow of money taken out of people's paychecks."

However, a vocal minority believed that Social Security was akin to a savings account in which people could deposit money as they worked, and then withdraw this money upon retirement. For example, Natalie said "As you work, money is set aside from your taxes...so that you can receive it when you retire." Khensani explained that

“This is money from earnings that you’ve accrued throughout your whole working span. You see it being taken away from your paycheck and you have kind of a sense of this is money being put away for the future, but who knows how that will play out in the future.” Justin described it similarly: “When you are not able to work or you retire...all the money you put away while you were working, get[s] paid back to you.”

There are several plausible explanations for this misperception. Presidential candidate Al Gore’s use of the word “lockbox” in the 2000 election may have contributed to an idea of a “savings account” where money is put aside and then withdrawn at a later date. The *New York Times* hypothesizes that the misperception may have emerged far earlier, with F.D.R.’s original description of the program to the American public (Calmes 2013).

## **Discussion**

It is important to note that because the focus of this paper is on the misperceptions held by our interview subjects, this paper ignores their many correct factual assertions. On many issues, ranging from the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act to Social Security, interviewees showed an impressive grasp of complex policies.

Along with identifying three misperceptions, I also offer hypotheses about some of the processes that may have given rise to them. These explanations are the likely not the only causes of the identified misperceptions. The reasons someone holds a particular factual belief are complex and vary from person to person. For example, while the over-estimation of foreign aid may be caused primarily by the availability heuristic, it may be heightened for a conservative who particularly dislikes foreign aid. These mechanisms are not mutually exclusive: no single mechanism will explain all the variance in who holds a given misperception. Still, identifying potential mechanisms is an important first step in correcting the misperceptions to which they give rise. Future

survey and experimental work will test these explanations with additional empirical data.

Finally, all three of the misperceptions outlined in this paper were held by both Democratic and Republican interviewees. This stands in contrast with many of the misperceptions that receive attention from the media and scholars, which are often highly partisan. When misperceptions are not reinforced by partisanship, resistance to corrections should decrease.

## Study 2: Measuring the Scope of Misperceptions

In Study 2, I use a representative survey to gauge the extent to which the misperceptions elicited in Study 1 are held by members of the general public. The survey was administered as a module of the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). This was a panel survey administered in two waves, one in early to mid October and one in early to mid November. The average time between the two surveys was about a month.

Each knowledge question was asked in two parts. In the first stage, the respondent is presented with eight pairs of statements, in random order, and asked to assess which one is true<sup>1</sup>. The three pairs of statements assessing the misperceptions described in Study 1 are listed below:

1. Which of the following statements is correct?
  - (a) Currently, there **is** a federal limit on how long a person can receive welfare (TANF) benefits.
  - (b) Currently, there **is not** a federal limit on how long a person can receive welfare (TANF) benefits.

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<sup>1</sup>The statements were introduced with the following text: You will be presented with several pairs of statements. In each pair, one statement is true and one statement is false. Please select the statement that you think is most correct. If you are not sure, take a moment to think and then make your best guess.

2. Which of the following statements is correct?
  - (a) China owns **more than half** of U.S. debt.
  - (b) China owns **less than half** of U.S. debt.
3. Which of the following statements is correct?
  - (a) Social Security benefits are paid for by taxes on people who are currently employed.
  - (b) Social Security benefits are paid for by money that retired people contributed to their Social Security savings account while they were working.

As soon as they selected one of the answers, a follow-up question popped up asking whether they were “very confident,” “somewhat confident,” or “not confident at all” in their answer.

This question format offers several advantages. First, it avoids the acquiescence bias inherent in true-false question formats by asking respondents to choose between two different plausible answers, which are presented in random order. Second, it adds a “confidence” measure that is especially important in assessing misperceptions. If a person is confident in their misperception, they may be more likely to use it to inform their policy preferences as well as share it with others. However, even knowing the distribution of “guesses” (i.e., “not at all confident” answers) is useful, because it may provide information about which statement people believe is more plausible.

In the first wave, three-fourths of the sample answered a series of eight factual questions that followed the above format. They were then shown the correct answers for each of the questions, prefaced by the statement “Next, you will be shown the correct answers to each of the factual questions.” The other third of the sample was instead asked a slightly different set of questions assessing not whether they knew the information, but whether they thought it was important for other citizens to know it. Specifically, they were asked “Lately, there has been a lot of discussion about what people do and don’t need to know about politics. How important you think it is

that citizens know the following information about politics and policies in the United States?” They were then shown a series of statements, for example, “Whether the federal government limits how long people can receive welfare (TANF) benefits.” For each statement, they ranked how important it was that citizens knew this information. In the second wave, all respondents answered the same series of factual questions.

## Results

In this section, I discuss three aspects of each misperception. Looking only at data from the first wave, I examine (1) how widespread the misperception is and (2) the extent to which it crosses party lines. While future research on this data set will examine aggregate measures based on the full data set, for the purposes of this project I focus only on the three misperceptions described above. Finally, I examine to what extent people learn (or resist learning) the correct answer.

### Breadth of misperceptions

Table 1 shows the overall percentage of people who were incorrect, as well as how these incorrect answers were distributed across levels of confidence.

Table 1: Percent of Sample Holding Misperception, with Confidence (N=674)

Overall % incorrect answers	Certainty of incorrect answer		
	Not at all	Somewhat	Very
TANF: 51.8% (349)	25.2% (88)	47.3% (165)	27.5% (96)
China debt: 68.4% (461)	12.7% (59)	44.9% (208)	42.3% (196)
Social Security: 40.1% (270)	8.1% (22)	33.6% (91)	58.3% (158)

Both the percentage incorrect and the distributions of confidence in the incorrect answer vary depending on the question. While a substantial majority of the sample

believes China holds more than half of U.S. debt, fewer than half misperceive how Social Security is paid for. Distributions of confidence also vary: the majority of those who are wrong about Social Security are confident in their misperceptions, while only about a quarter of incorrect people are confident in their TANF misperception.

The percentage of people who confidently hold a misperception is the most conservative estimate of its breadth. Overall, 14.1% of people hold a very confident misperception about TANF time limits, 29.0% about China’s ownership of U.S. debt, and 23.4% about Social Security.

To what extent do these misperceptions differ by party? Table 2 shows the percentage of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents who hold the misperception either very or somewhat confidently.

Table 2: Percent of Sample Holding Misperception, by Party Identification

	TANF	China debt	Social Security
Democrat	44.2%	65.0%	44.6%
Republican	65.0%	70.1%	38.2%
Independent	49.8%	70.2%	37.3%

Again, the pattern is not identical across the three misperceptions, which makes sense given the differences between the partisan valence of the misperceptions. For example, the difference between Republicans and Democrats’ misperceptions around TANF (65% versus 44%) may be attributable partly to motivated reasoning: because Republicans are more likely to oppose the policy, they are also more likely to hold beliefs that justify that opposition. In contrast, issues like China’s ownership of debt and Social Security are less obviously partisan, and so the differences between parties is minimal.

This pattern holds in a multivariate context as well. Party identification signifi-



cantly predicts an incorrect answer only for the TANF question. Education is a significant predictor of correct answers for all three misperceptions. The role of confidence is inconsistent: for TANF, more confidence is associated with correct answers; for China’s share of debt it is associated with incorrect answers, and for Social Security there is no relationship.

### Correctability of misperceptions

Can these misperceptions be corrected? The correction attempt in this experiment is relatively weak. It consisted of a single statement, with no justifying information, shown only briefly. More importantly, there was about a month. The two surveys were administered a month apart and the list of correct answers was shown only briefly. Table 3 shows the percentage of people who answered incorrectly in Wave 1 versus Wave 2. This includes incorrect answers at all levels of confidence.

Table 3: Incorrect Answers in First vs Second Wave

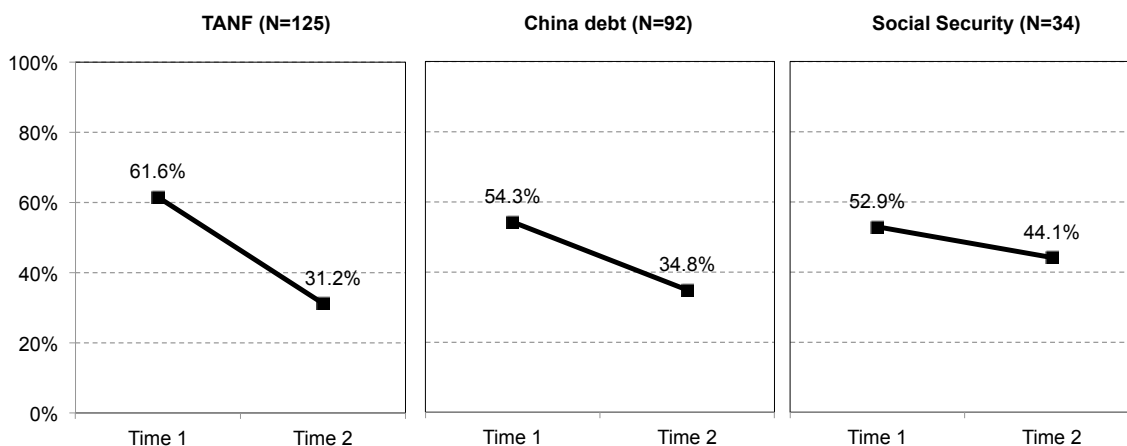
	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 2 (control)
TANF	53.5%	31.3%	51.5%
China debt	67.0%	45.4%	70.8%
Social security	39.3%	29.7%	43.5%

For all three misperceptions, there is a significant decrease in misperceptions ( $p < .001$ ) between Wave 1 and Wave 2. However, it is possible that these differences are attributable to external events, such as learning over the course of the campaign. This alternative explanation can be addressed by looking at the Wave 2 control group (those who assessed the issues’ importance at Time 2 but did not answer factual questions nor see the answers). The third column in Table 3 shows that in this group, levels of misperception at Time 2 are not significantly different from those at Wave 1.

Table 3 includes people who were very confident, somewhat confident, and not at all confident in their Wave 1 answer, the observed effect could be due to either a learning effect (people who guessed incorrectly subsequently learned the correct answer), a correction effect (people who were confident in their wrong answer accepted the correction and changed their belief accordingly), or a combination of both.

Figure 1 shows the decrease in incorrect answers among people who were “not at all confident” in their answer at Time 1. This figure shows the *learning* that took place: people who were unsure of the correct answer at Time 1 learned it and were able to recall it at Time 2.

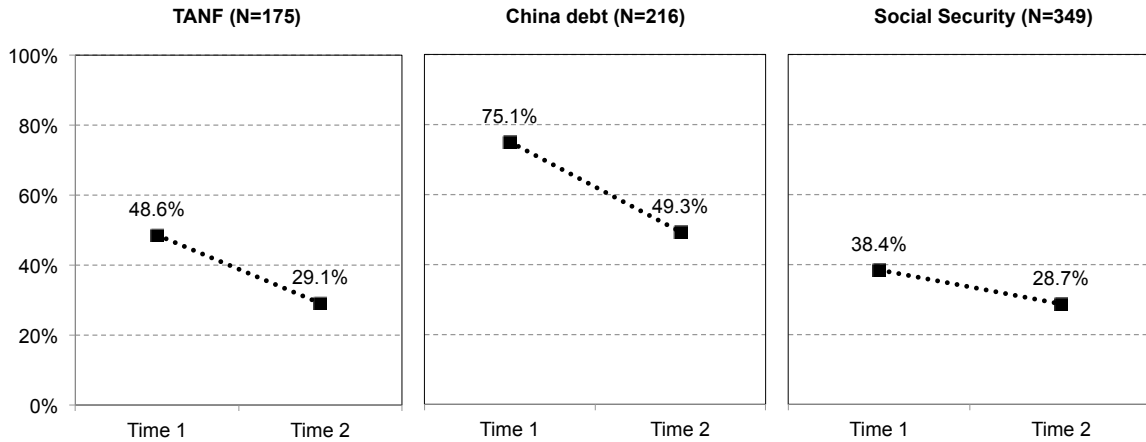
Figure 1: Decrease in incorrect answers among people who were “not at all confident” at Time 1



But what about people who were very confident in their wrong answer at Time 1? To what extent will they accept the correct answer? Figure 2 shows the percentage of “very confident” people who were incorrect at Time 1 versus Time 2. For each misperception, this number decreases. Even people who are very confident at Time 1 are willing to accept the correct answer and recall it at Time 2.

Table 4 shows that in every case, the overall change is driven both by learning

Figure 2: Decrease in incorrect answers among people who were “very confident” at Time 1



and correction.<sup>2</sup> There is no backlash effect for any of the questions. The effects are largely consistent across levels of confidence, with one exception: those who were not at all confident in their TANF belief were more likely to change their answer than those who were very confident. However, it is notable that this effect is not party-specific: confident Democrats and confident Republicans are equally likely to reject the correction.

## Discussion

Results of the survey demonstrate that the three misperceptions identified in the interviews are (1) relatively common (2) held by both Democrats and Republicans and (3) correctable (to some extent) via a single-shot intervention. The first finding suggests that interviews can be a useful strategy for identifying widely-held misperceptions. The second shows that not all political misperceptions are driven by motivated reasoning. And the third offers hope that these misperceptions – unlike many of those studied by

<sup>2</sup>These patterns are identical in a logistic regression including education, party identification, confidence in Wave 1, correct answer at Wave 1, and an interaction between confidence and correctness.

Table 4: Learning or Correcting? Changes in Misperceptions By Level of Confidence in Wave 1

	W1 Confidence in answer	% incorrect W1	% incorrect W2	Change
TANF	Not at all (N=125)	61.6%	31.2%	-30.4
	Somewhat (N=276)	52.9%	32.2%	-20.7
	Very (N=175)	48.6%	29.1%	-19.5
China debt	Not at all (N=92)	54.3%	34.8%	-19.5
	Somewhat (N=270)	64.8%	45.9%	-18.9
	Very (N=216)	75.1%	49.3%	-25.8
Social Security	Not at all (N=34)	52.9%	44.1%	-8.8
	Somewhat (N=197)	38.6%	28.9%	-9.7
	Very (N=349)	38.4%	28.7%	-10.1

political scientists – can be minimized.

The results also point to the danger of generalizing about misperceptions. Simply creating a single index of these three misperceptions (or the other five asked about in the survey) would miss several important differences between them, including the distributions of learning versus correction. Of course, an overall index can be useful for other purposes (for example, measuring the correlation between incorrect answers and confidence (Ortoleva and Snowberg 2013)), but risks obscuring meaningful differences between types of misperceptions.

## Conclusion

This research project has several limitations. First, the interview sample, although deliberately selected to be diverse, is not representative. People who read Craigslist and are willing to talk with a stranger for twenty minutes are unique in several ways. However, the fact that the misperceptions they mentioned were confirmed via the representative survey suggests that while the sample may not provide insight into the breadth or distribution of these misperceptions, it is a useful tactic for identifying their

existence. Second, due to space limitations, each misperceptions is measured in the survey with a single question. This increases the possibility of error and potentially decreases the validity of the estimates.

In general, the study of political knowledge has followed a standard procedure. First, a researcher determines (often drawing on normative democratic theory) what a person “should” know about politics in order to make informed choices. Then, surveys are designed and conducted to measure this knowledge, and factual answers are classified as correct or incorrect. In some studies, a distinction is drawn between incorrect answers and a lack of knowledge. In others, it is not. Finally, the results of these surveys are used to measure “political knowledge” and the lack thereof. This process is very useful for generating a list of whether people know facts that political scientists think that they should know. However, it is not very good at generating a list of the facts that people actually know – or their incorrect factual beliefs.

For example, knowledge questions about the national debt often ask people to estimate how much of the U.S. budget is spent on the interest on the national debt (Pew Research Center 2014). This question does an excellent job of measuring whether the public does or does not know the factual information that experts have deemed most relevant to the issue. However, it cannot measure the *actual* “facts” that people draw on to inform their attitudes. For example, in interview discussion of the national debt, only one participant brought up interest on the national debt as a reason for his concern. In contrast, over half the interviewees expressed worry over China’s ownership of the debt.

An important consequence of the current process of political knowledge measurement is that in many academic studies, the connection between facts and attitudes appears to be tenuous. Giving people new factual information does not always change their attitudes, even when it seems obvious (at least to researchers) that it should

(Lawrence and Sides 2014). One reason for this disconnect may be that the facts that researchers have decided that people *should* use to inform their opinions are not always the facts that people *actually* use. In other words, we are correcting the wrong misperceptions.

Identifying and correcting misperceptions is both practically and normatively important, but the current approach to the study of political knowledge makes it more difficult to do this effectively. I argue that using an open-ended process to elicit citizens' factual beliefs is an effective strategy for identifying misperceptions that actually matter for political attitudes. This method can then be paired with survey-based, quantitative research to measure the breadth of the misperceptions in the U.S. population.

Fundamentally, I hope that the methodological strategy outlined in this paper – open-ended interviews paired with representative survey questions – can serve as a model for future research into political misperceptions. The two methods together make it possible to discover misperceptions that may be central for political attitudes. It is important to point out that factual beliefs are only part of the explanation for any given attitudes. Partisanship of course plays an enormous role in shaping policy opinions, as do the policy positions of elected officials (Lenz 2013), racial attitudes (Gilens 2009), and other pre-existing opinions and preferences.

Identifying new misperceptions opens up a range of potential future research projects that fall into three major categories: understanding the processes that create them, assessing their effects on attitudes, and determining how best to correct them. I offer some hypotheses in this paper about why these misperceptions arose, and these could be tested along with other plausible explanations. A central argument of this paper is that the interview process elicits misperceptions that are central to political attitudes, but I offer no empirical evidence here to support that hypothesis. Future studies conducted

as a part of this project will take on that question directly. Finally, this paper suggests that even an inobtrusive correction can be successful in reducing misperceptions. However, more work remains to be done in determining how to make the corrections more effective, especially for those most confident in their misperceptions.

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## Appendix

### Demographics of Interview Subjects (N=40)

	<b>Percent</b>	<b>N</b>
18-24	10.0%	4
24-34	27.5%	11
35-44	17.5%	7
45-54	25.0%	10
55+	20.0%	8
High school	17.5%	7
Some college	37.5%	15
4 years of college	32.5%	13
Post-graduate	12.5%	5
Less than 30k	37.5%	15
30-50k	27.5%	11
50-70k	22.5%	9
70k+	7.5%	3
White	75.0%	30
Black	10.0%	4
Other	15.0%	6
Democrat	30.0%	12
Independent	27.5%	11
No preference	12.5%	5
Republican	32.5%	13

### Randomly selected Craigslist areas where advertisement was posted

Harrisburg	Green Bay	Corpus Christi
Memphis, TN	Duluth / Superior	Skagit / Island / SJI
Rockford	South Dakota	Charlottesville
Gadsden-Anniston	Florida Keys	Cedar Rapids
Mason City	Bemidji	Wichita Falls
Lansing	Hanford-Corcoran	Northern WI
Southeast Alaska	Dallas / Fort Worth	Nashville
Eastern Montana	Salem, OR	Zanesville / Cambridge
Houma	Flint	Ft Myers / SW Florida
Iowa City	New Haven	Del Rio / Eagle Pass
Pueblo	Hickory / Lenoir	Santa Fe / Taos
Plattsburgh-Adirondacks	Macon / Warner Robins	Lawton
Flagstaff / Sedona	Charleston, SC	