

Filling in the Gaps: False Memories and Partisan Bias

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While cognitive psychologists have learned a great deal about people's propensity for constructing and acting on false memories, the connection between false memories and politics remains understudied. If partisan bias guides the adoption of beliefs and colors one's interpretation of new events and information, so too might it prove powerful enough to fabricate memories of political circumstances. Across two studies, we first distinguish false memories from false beliefs and expressive responses; false political memories appear to be genuine and subject to partisan bias. We also examine the political and psychological correlates of false memories. Nearly a third of respondents reported remembering a fabricated or factually altered political event, with many going so far as to convey the circumstances under which they "heard about" the event. False-memory recall is correlated with the strength of partisan attachments, interest in politics, and participation, as well as narcissism, conspiratorial thinking, and cognitive ability.

KEY WORDS: memory, false memories, partisan bias, misinformation

As he reported on both December 4, 2001, and January 5, 2002, George W. Bush clearly remembers watching footage of the first plane strike the Twin Towers on 9/11. On December 20, 2001, though, he made no mention of watching this footage and instead remembered that adviser Karl Rove informed him that the first plane had struck the towers. History tells us that Bush's memory of watching footage of the first crash is inaccurate; only amateur footage of it exists, and it was not available on the morning of the attacks. While some suspect that Bush was lying, it is likelier that he simply possesses a false memory of the events of the morning of 9/11, memories that he genuinely believes to be true (Greenberg, 2004). He can hardly be blamed for this. False memory is a phenomenon that afflicts *all* people (Nichols & Loftus, 2019). While many consider memory to be an infallible snapshot of some event, humans are prone to false memories, where the brain "fills in the gaps" using bits of genuine perceptual information to construct a narrative (Steffens & Mecklenbräuker, 2007). The result is often a "memory" about which an individual is atypically certain (Talarico & Rubin, 2007) but that never, in fact, occurred.

As Walter Lippmann (1922) famously argued, the "pictures in our heads" shape our understanding of the political world, and these pictures are themselves shaped by outside forces (e.g., elite agenda-setting). What if the pictures in our heads are shaped by imperfect cognitive processes

like false memories of events? If so, false memories may be a factor in political attitude formation. Many political evaluations, like which candidate to vote for, are a function of remembering certain campaign events or candidate characteristics (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006), but such recollections may be inaccurate or incomplete (Lodge et al., 1995). Individuals do, it appears, generate false memories of political events that never occurred (Frenda et al., 2013) and report memories of misinformation or fake news (Murphy et al., 2019). What is more, both Frenda et al. (2013) and Murphy et al. (2019) report that false memories are more likely to occur when they align with existing predispositions and attitudes.

Although a great number of studies consider the genesis of and susceptibility to false memories (e.g., Frenda et al., 2013; Scoboria et al., 2017; Wade et al., 2002), we are interested here in the political underpinnings of false memories, as well as the individual attributes that relate to susceptibility to such memories. After all, memory distortions can be driven by social groups and situations (Brown & Kulik, 1977; Hirst et al., 2009; Newman & Lindsay, 2009) and are socially serving (Alea & Bluck, 2003). Political groups are an important component of one's broader social identity (Huddy et al., 2015). Moreover, memory recall—much like partisan bias—is guided less by accuracy motivations than directional ones in the social context (Cuc et al., 2007). While there are many potential causes for false memories—they may be completely random or a function of source-monitoring errors (e.g., Johnson et al., 1993)—the literature on the nature and causes of false memories suggests that politics is an area ripe for memory-recall distortions. We argue that such distortions are systematically politically biased.

In this article, we consider the role of partisan bias in fostering false memories. We ask whether, more than just a lapse in the brain's processing of past events, false memories are a way to (unconsciously) support existing predispositions and attachments. We suggest, more explicitly than past work (Murphy et al., 2019), that partisan bias can alter, generate, or distort memories in accordance with those attachments. Thus, we expect that individuals will report that they remember events that did not occur that are pleasing to their party, or displeasing to the out-party. We also examine the correlates of false memories, focusing on both political identities and orientations (e.g., the strength of partisan identities, interest in politics), as well as psychological factors (e.g., cognitive ability, conspiratorial thinking).

Memory, Partisan Bias, and Political Beliefs

People are typically confident that what they remember about certain events represents a time-stamped logbook of what occurred. Yet studies of human memory consistently demonstrate that recollection is prone to falsity (Drivdahl & Hyman Jr., 2014; Newman & Lindsay, 2009); we misremember even major details about all manner of phenomena. What is more, false memories can be created (Wade et al., 2002) and persist among even those said to possess “highly superior autobiographical” memories (Patihis et al., 2013). This phenomenon, to which those low in cognitive ability are most prone (Zhu et al., 2010), also afflicts political elites (Greenberg, 2004). Even when it comes to “flashbulb memories”—“memories for the circumstances in which one first learned of a very surprising and consequential (or emotionally arousing) event” (Brown & Kulik, 1977)—individuals vastly overestimate the accuracy of their memories (Schmolck et al., 2000).

As Newman and Lindsay (2009) eloquently ask of false memories, “What the hell are they for?” Extant theories about memory function and the purpose of false memories can explain why they arise in the context of politics. One of the primary functions of memory is to use the past for direction on present and future decisions. At its most basic, this helps us avoid dangerous situations (e.g., recalling which berry made us sick aids in survival). This is precisely the type of thinking in which individuals engage when evaluating political stimuli (e.g., Downs, 1957). They consider, for instance, past campaign events or whether the economy is robust when casting a vote (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006; Redlawsk, 2001). Even if

they do not have clear, specific recollection of events, memory of past events still influences subsequent political choices (Lodge et al., 1995, but see Redlawsk, 2001). Moreover, “illusory” memory—or the ability to use recollection of past events counterfactually—is what allows us to imagine new events, to convert retrospection into prospection (Schacter et al., 2007). It allows one to recall the economy under, say, President Obama and apply it to expectations about the economy under President Biden.

In using past events to guide the construction of political attitudes and evaluations, one must “recombine and reconstruct memory rather than recollect intact event replays” (Newman & Lindsay, 2009, p. 1114). Of course, memory is far from an intact replay of what genuinely occurred (Drivdahl & Hyman Jr., 2014). Thus, retrospective evaluations of all types are inherently prone to missteps in recollection. Was the economy actually performing well under the last Democratic president, or does one just remember it that way? Did the Republican president really end the war? It is well known that partisanship influences the perception of political situations (Campbell et al., 1960), candidates (Lodge et al., 1989), and the interpretation of information (Gaines et al., 2007; Kunda, 1990; Redlawsk, 2002), especially in the presence of elite cues on the matter (Zaller, 1992). We contend that, in addition to these phenomena, partisan bias also colors memory. However, we do not merely argue that individuals recall past events in a way that aligns with their political attachments. Rather, people remember events *that never even occurred* in a way that aligns with previously held beliefs. We know that individuals are biased processors of information (Taber & Lodge, 2006), but we argue this bias extends beyond simple processing to memory construction. If what is previously held is, itself, fabricated (or grossly inaccurate), partisan bias becomes a self-reinforcing, “monological” belief system impervious to outside forces.

Research on human memory finds that false memories are fairly prevalent; why, then, would they consistently conform to partisan motivations? After all, they could be random. Newman and Lindsay (2009) argue that distortions in memory are often socially driven and serve some specific adaptive purpose. In other words, they are both a function of, and operate to serve, social development (Alea & Bluck, 2003). We suggest that the systematic component to false political memories is a function of deeply held attachments to political groups. Not only will individuals recall things with varying certainty depending on social situations (Brown & Kulik, 1977), but social group biases contribute to memory distortion itself (Hirst et al., 2009). Moreover, in certain types of social situations, accuracy in memory recall is less of a motivating goal than is typical (Cuc et al., 2007). All of this accords with the predominance of goal-oriented (rather than accuracy-oriented) motivation in the context of political groups (Leeper & Slothuus, 2014), as well as partisanship as an important social-group identity (Huddy et al., 2015).

We are, by no means, the first to consider if, whether, and how false memories can be generated (see Scoboria et al., 2017, for summary). Nor are we the first to investigate the phenomenon with respect to politics specifically (e.g., Frenda et al., 2013; Murphy et al., 2019). Rather, we seek to extend these important studies in a number of ways. Frenda et al. (2013), for instance, are clear that they lack detailed information about respondents’ political and demographic backgrounds that may confound inferences about the role political covariates play in false-memory generation. Murphy et al. (2019) capitalize on a single focusing event—the 2018 abortion referendum in Ireland. First, we aim to provide more detailed information about which political predispositions and psychological traits may underlie false memory. Are those who report false memories likelier to be strong partisans and ideologues? We also utilize a number of political events to induce false memories instead of relying on only a single one. Finally, we demonstrate the role of partisan bias in false political memory construction.

Distinguishing Memories From Beliefs and Expressive Responding

Before turning to a description of our data and research design, we must articulate the difference between false beliefs and false memories and between expressive survey responses and false memories. A great deal of research on beliefs and memories indicates that there are three forms of memory judgment: (1) the belief that some event occurred, (2) an experiential recollection, and (3) confidence

in the memory (see Brewin & Andrews, 2017). Our analysis focuses mostly on element (2), but we must also consider elements (1) and (3) to fully distinguish false memories from the other memory judgments. Problematically, all three of these judgments can be easily conflated, particularly in interpreting answers to survey questions. The problem is exacerbated when considering *false* beliefs and memories.

A belief is merely the attitude that something is the case. A memory, on the other hand, is the recall of retained information. Consider individuals told they rode in a hot air balloon as a child, when in fact no such event occurred. To believe that such an event occurred is fairly trivial; a relative could remark that it happened (or researchers could fabricate a photo and show it to an experimental subject, à la Wade et al., 2002). One may assume they have simply forgotten the event, but there is no reason to doubt that it occurred. In the political realm, false beliefs are sensible. Individuals are not heavily tuned into politics, on average. It is reasonable for even those who keep a close eye on politics to miss various political events or to forget them but to then believe that they occurred if told or reminded.

To *recall* the hot air balloon ride, on the other hand, is an entirely different circumstance. Such a memory requires the belief that the event occurred *and* that one experienced it personally. As Wade et al. (2018) note, “People with false beliefs appear to accept that the false event occurred, or they imagine or speculate about it. People with false memories provide further evidence that they ‘genuinely’ remember the event. For instance, they might ... confidently state that they ‘remember the event occurring’” (p. 471). We expect false political beliefs (Munro et al., 2010). It makes sense that a Republican, for instance, would believe a Democratic candidate has a radical, socialist agenda. What is less clear is why one would possess false memories rather than false beliefs. If one is simply subconsciously motivated to paint the out-party negatively, false beliefs should “scratch that itch.” Of course, there are multiple reasons why one may possess false memories rather than a false belief. For instance, a robust literature finds that some false memories are simply errors in processing (i.e., source-monitoring errors), such as misremembering a hypothetical conversation as actually occurring (e.g., Johnson et al., 1993). However, source-monitoring errors can be caused by cognitive biases (Johnson, 1997; Marsh et al., 2006). Thus, we argue that *partisan* biases are capable of promoting false memories. Still, it is of utmost import to empirically distinguish false political beliefs from false political memories, as we do below.

Next, it is important to distinguish between false memories and expressive survey responding. It is possible that some individuals report that they remember events to express opposition to the party, politician, or policy we describe. We doubt that this is a prevalent issue. For starters, Berinsky (2018) finds that there is little reason to believe that many individuals are responding expressively on surveys about politics; survey responses generally tap genuine political beliefs. Bullock et al. (2015), on the other hand, find “partisan cheerleading” on responses to factual questions, such as whether inflation rose under the Reagan administration. The difference between beliefs about factual questions and reporting of memory proves important. Memory is often motivated by accuracy (Roebers et al., 2001), where beliefs about politics are motivated directionally. Furthermore, individuals seem surprised—even upset—when they are told they have recalled a false political memory (e.g., Frenda et al., 2013). As such, it is unlikely that individuals report false memories when they knowingly fail to recall the event. Still, we take steps below to differentiate false memories from expressive responses.

Finally, one may argue that producing a false memory, rather than merely a false belief, in the “laboratory” setting is a function of social desirability bias, satisficing the researcher, or some other type of biased survey responding. Perhaps respondents are embarrassed to admit they do not recall some event, or they think the researcher wants them to remember it. However, Patihis and Loftus (2016) demonstrate that those exhibiting susceptibility to social desirability concerns are

equally as likely to report a false memory as those exhibiting only weak susceptibility to social desirability.

Data and Research Design

We begin by describing our two surveys—corresponding with Study 1 and Study 2—before presenting the results of each separately. Study 1 utilizes an 819-respondent survey of U.S. adults fielded by Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in October 2019; Study 2 utilizes a 962-respondent survey of U.S. adults fielded by Lucid in September 2021.¹ While MTurk does not provide nationally representative samples, Lucid does. Regardless, we are not particularly interested in, for instance, how many Americans are susceptible to false memories. A great deal of work in cognitive psychology has asked such questions. Rather, we are interested in determining what underlies reported false memories. Additionally, one of our major goals is to differentiate false memories, false beliefs, and expressive responding.

Each respondent in our surveys first answered demographic questions, some questions about political orientations and psychological traits, and completed a cognitive-ability task.² Then, respondents were exposed to a series of fabricated events or policies, genuine events or policies to whom credit was misattributed, and (in the second survey) genuine events. Our vignettes are structurally similar to others used in the literature on false memories. Both fabricated events and altered events prove useful in imagining false events (see Frenda et al., 2013).

In all, there were a total of 18 unique vignettes across both studies, which are summarized in Table 1. Superscripts refer to the study in which the vignette appeared. The full text of each vignette appears in the Appendix S1 in the online supporting information. Some vignettes are expected to be recalled by Democrats, but not by Republicans, either because they portray Democrats positively or Republicans negatively. Others are expected to be recalled by Republicans, but not by Democrats (either because they are pro-Republican or anti-Democrat).³ In the first study, each respondent was randomly exposed to two of the vignettes expected to be recalled by Democrats and two expected to be recalled by Republicans. In the second study, each respondent saw all 14 vignettes in random order.

Table 2 displays the Trump veterans support vignette, and the items that followed each of the vignettes. Of course, the memory questions are asked after participants read each vignette. The questions are asked in the order they appear in Table 2, and all questions are asked in both studies. We also detail how we use these items in the remainder of this article, including how we distinguish false memories from false beliefs and expressive survey responding.

Before proceeding to Study 1, we must note an important limitation to our studies and, indeed, any study seeking to understand memories or beliefs in ideas for which truth value is disputed. Simply put, determining what counts as “true” and “false” is no easy task—this question has plagued philosophers for centuries. This fact is further complicated by people’s predisposition to determine truth and falsity using their own beliefs about the world and motivations (i.e., what comports with their beliefs and values must be true!). Because truth and falsity operate,

¹Demographic characteristics of each sample can be found in Appendix S1 in the online supporting information.

²Specifically, respondents completed the Wordsum task (Thorndike & Gallup, 1944), as high cognitive ability is associated with low proneness to false memories. We consider cognitive ability in the section below that examines the correlates of false memories.

³At first glance, the number of vignettes appears unbalanced in favor of Democratic recall. However, we are somewhat ambivalent on our expectations regarding the mask vignette. On the one hand, Democrats may be motivated to forget an action taken by Trump that they would normally support. Yet, fierce opposition to masks among Republicans suggests that they may be motivated to forget a Trump action that they do not support. Given that Republican opposition to masks appears stronger than Democratic support, we include this vignette in the “Democrats remember” category.

Table 1. Vignette Summaries

Expected Memory	Policy/Event	Source (Truth)
No difference	Afghanistan withdrawal ^b	Genuine
	Texas' abortion law ^b	Genuine
	Hurricane Ida ^b	Genuine
Democrats remember; Republicans do not	Obama criminal justice reform ^a	Misattributed (Trump)
	Obama bump stock ban ^a	Misattributed (Trump)
	Trump allows waste water ^c	Fabricated
	Trump minimizes Title IX enforcement ^c	Fabricated
	Infrastructure bill ^b	Fabricated
	Sick leave guarantees ^b	Fabricated
	No election fraud phone call ^b	Fabricated
	Trump pardons sex crimes ^b	Fabricated
	Trump mandates masks ^b	Fabricated
	Republicans remember; Democrats do not	Trump fed. Student loans; saves money ^c
Trump veterans support ^c		Misattributed (Obama)
Holder, MSNBC collude ^a		Misattributed (Barr, Fox News)
Obama Guantanamo support ^a		Fabricated
Biden hot mic ^b		Fabricated
Biden drone strikes ^b		Fabricated

^aFirst survey only.

^bSecond survey only.

^cBoth surveys.

Table 2. Example of Vignette and Subsequent Survey Items

Survey Item and Response Set	Use of Item
Trump Veterans Support Vignette: In early 2018, President Trump increased the Department of Veterans Affairs budget by 16% and increased the 2019 budget by 10%. He also signed a new GI bill, offering \$78 billion in tuition assistance over the next decade and provided multiple tax credits to encourage businesses to hire veterans	
1. Do you remember seeing this event?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I remember seeing/hearing this • I do not remember seeing/hearing this but I remember it happening • I do not have a specific memory of this but I believe it happened • I remember this differently • I do not remember this 	The third option (belief, but no memory) aids in distinguishing false memories from false beliefs
2. Where did you hear about this event?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I did not hear about this • I do not remember where I heard about this • Television • Newspaper • Radio • Online news website • Social media • From a friend/colleagues/family member • Other source 	Source reporting aids in distinguishing false memories from expressive responding

in practice, in shades of gray, many of our vignettes could vary in how tempting it may be for a motivated partisan to express memory or belief in something they are either certain that they do not remember or consciously know did not happen. In other words, some events described in

our vignettes may, to a partisan, be easier or more difficult to “recall” or believe. Although we employ many vignettes to provide robust test in the face of this possibility, it is a limitation of our investigation nevertheless.

STUDY 1

False Belief Versus False Memory

While, as we note above, false beliefs are theoretically distinct from false memories, it is fruitful to empirically distinguish them. In light of questions about whether false memories are, in fact, memories, or merely motivated beliefs (Brewin & Andrews, 2017; Wade et al., 2018), we adopt Murphy et al.’s (2019) strategy. Specifically, in response to the “Do you remember this event?” item, respondents could report no memory, a memory, or no specific memory but a belief that the event occurred. In Figure 1, we display the percentage of respondents who reported no memory, a false belief (i.e., no memory but a belief that the event occurred), and some false memory of the event. Specifically, a false belief is an affirmative response to “I don’t have a specific memory of this, but I believe it happened.” A false memory is an affirmative response to “I remember seeing/hearing this,” “I don’t remember seeing/hearing this, but I remember it happening,” or “I remember this differently.” Each is an endorsement of a memory, even though the exact contours of the memory are allowed to differ.⁴

In the upper-left panel of Figure 1, we display the average response across all eight policies/events. The modal response is no memory of the fabricated event. This is commensurate with other studies, which suggest false memories can be implanted in about 40% of respondents (Strange et al., 2008). On average, 30% of respondents report false memories. Only 16% report false beliefs. In some instances—e.g., Obama’s criminal justice reform and the bump stock ban—false memories well outpace no memory.

Turning next to the distinction between memory and belief, the percentage of respondents reporting each varies by action. For instance, very few suggest they possess memory of Barack Obama reallocating funds for upgrades at Guantanamo Bay, nor do they believe it occurred. However, many seem to remember Obama banning bump stock accessories for automatic rifles, rather than falsely believing that he did so. Despite this variability, in no instance do false beliefs exceed false memories in number. This is an important distinction and indicates that people are operating less so with false beliefs than false memories. The motivation for false beliefs is fairly clear; individuals *want* to believe the other side has enacted bad public policy or that their side has enacted good public policy. The motivation for false memories is less obvious; recalling an event extends beyond self-deception.

Partisan Bias in False Memories

Having demonstrated that individuals are likelier to report false memories than false beliefs, we move on to consider our primary question: Are memories a function of partisan bias? Susceptibility to false memories is partially a function of political predispositions. Frenda et al. (2013) find that ideology underlies receptivity to false memories, and Murphy et al. (2019) show the same using positions on salient policy issues. In each instance, individuals report remembering events that paint the outgroup in a negative light.

⁴We examine our data for inconsistent responses (e.g., responding “I do not remember seeing/hearing this” and then replying that they remember an event “well”) in Appendix S1 in the online supporting information. We also recode the false-memory variable to exclude “I remember this differently” and replicate all analyses.

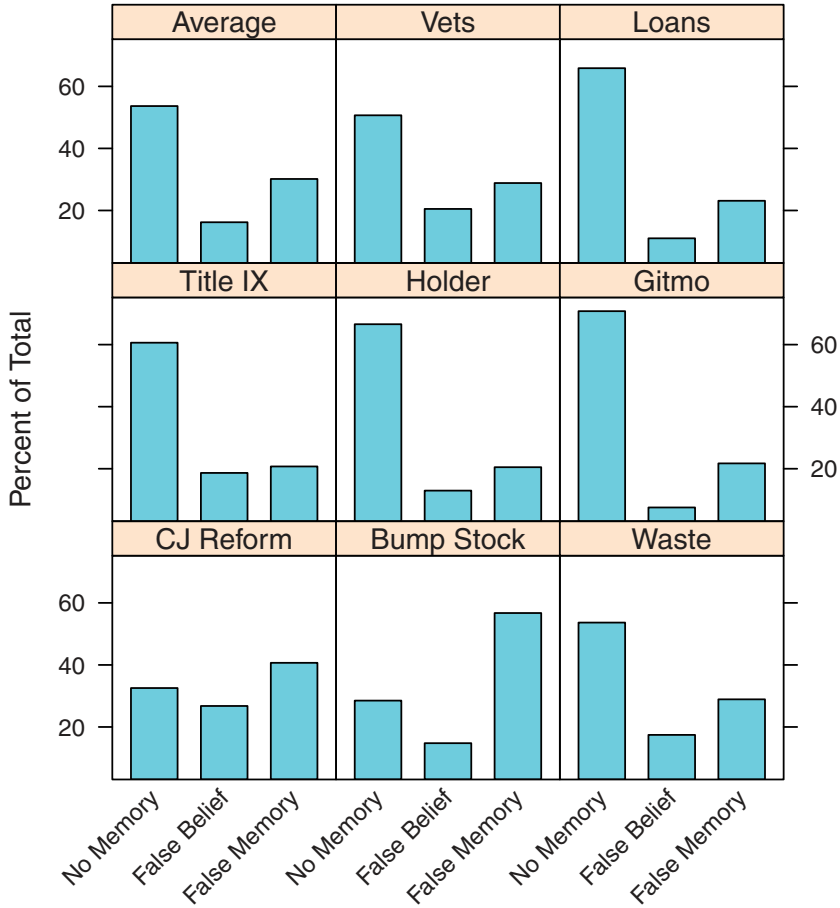


Figure 1. Percentage of respondents reporting no memory, false belief, or false memory.

Here, we focus on the most enduring political predisposition in American politics—partisanship—to test the proposition that false memories (or the lack thereof) are a method of partisan inference. An individual may have a fuzzy memory of some related event, and partisan bias helps them construct a narrative that they perceive to be a genuine, full-fledged memory.

Figure 2 displays the difference in the percentage of respondents reporting no memory of the event listed along the horizontal axis. Bars correspond to the difference in the percentage of Democrats who report no memory of an event and the percentage of Republicans who report no memory. Bars greater than 0 indicate that more Republican respondents reported no memory than Democrats; bars less than 0 indicate that more Democratic respondents reported no memory than Republicans. The color-coding corresponds to our theoretical expectations. Red (blue) bars indicate that we expect Democrats (Republicans) to report greater memory than Republicans (Democrats); conversely, red corresponds to the expectation that Republicans will report no memory, and vice versa for blue. Asterisks indicate that the difference across partisanship is statistically significant (at the $p < .05$ level for a one-tailed test corresponding to predictions).

We begin by noting that there are significant partisan differences in four of eight circumstances, and all differences—save the bump stock ban—are in the expected direction. Differences across

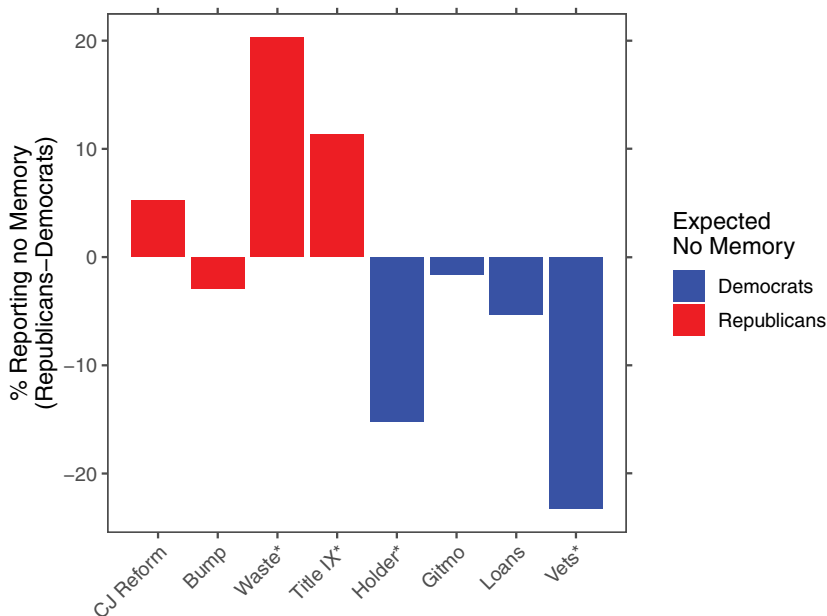


Figure 2. Difference in percentage of respondents reporting no memory (Republicans–Democrats). Asterisks denote $p < .05$, one-tailed test (according to color of bar).

political points of view for some, but not all, fabricated/misattributed stimuli are consistent with existing evidence (Frenda et al., 2013; Murphy et al., 2019).

We focus most intently on the four instances where significant differences appear. In two instances—Trump increases support for veterans and Holder meets with MSNBC to collude on positive Obama coverage—Democrats are significantly more likely to suggest they do not remember the event at all. Conversely, Republicans are more likely to report (false) memory of the event. This is sensible. For the veteran policy, Republicans are motivated to recall that Trump was the hero of veterans’ affairs. For the Holder event, Republicans are motivated to recall nefarious collusion. In both instances, Democrats are “correct”; Trump did not increase support for veterans and Holder did not meet with MSNBC executives. We see a similar, but converse, story emerge in two other instances—Trump allows waste water dumping into the Great Lakes and Trump reduces Title IX enforcement. Here, it is Republicans who are “correct” in failing to remember the event, and it is Democrats who report more recollection of the event. We also point out that two of the fabricated stories and two of the misattributed stories effectively induced false memories.

Where differences occur, we see evidence of partisan-motivated memory. However, we cannot state with any certainty why the recollection of certain events is not broken down along partisan lines. We do note that, directionally speaking, the recall of events does vary across partisanship in the expected ways (again, save for the bump stock vignette). But, perhaps some policies were insufficiently clear for partisans to understand if they were good or bad; the student loan vignette, for instance, is a fairly technical explanation of from whom students receive their loans (i.e., banks or the government). We return to this consideration in the discussion. Regardless, we do find evidence that memory—not belief that something occurred, but a genuine (false) memory—is a function of the motivation to view one’s preferred party positively and the other party negatively.

Finally, we note that the events that our respondents were, on average, the most or least certain about are the ones where we observe no differences across partisanship. We speculate—but cannot say with certainty without more data—that there are simply some events that, regardless

Table 3. Reported Sources of Memories

Source	CJ Reform	Bump Stock	Waste	Title IX	Holder	Gitmo	Loans	Vets
Do not remember	30	18	29	37	36	32	35	28
Television	38	51	29	31	28	26	27	34
Newspaper	14	14	17	13	17	23	20	15
Radio	8	15	12	8	15	15	12	9
Online news website	26	32	27	14	18	19	23	23
Social media	16	25	27	16	19	15	14	20
Friend/family/ colleague	7	8	11	4	1	5	6	9
Other source	2	1	5	7	<1	7	7	1

Note: Entries are percentages of respondents who reported having a memory. Columns do not sum to 100 because respondents could report multiple sources.

of partisanship, either seem so obvious that one would be unlikely to possess a unique memory or so jarring that they would certainly possess one. For example, “The president golfed this weekend” is so routine that one is unlikely to be surprised that they possess no memory of it. On the other hand, “a cabal of Democrats were arrested in association with a sex trafficking ring operated out of a Washington, DC pizzeria” is likely too far-fetched of a headline for one to have forgotten; the event would have surely generated a “flashbulb” memory, about which individuals are generally certain. We believe that false memories lie in a gray area, in between events that seem very likely and very unlikely.

In order to discount this possibility for the vignettes that we use, we fielded a brief survey of 825 adult Americans via MTurk in September 2021 that was designed to assess the believability of each vignette in this study and the next. We asked respondents whether each event was believable, on a scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*completely*). In the interest of space, we present the full results of this exercise in Appendix S1 in the online supporting information. However, we report here that each of the events used as vignettes (in both Study 1 and 2) are perceived to be more believable than unbelievable (i.e., mean response greater than 5; $p < .05$ in each case) by both Democrats and Republicans. Thus, it does not appear to be the believability of our vignettes, alone, that accounts for (the lack of) differences across partisanship in certain instances.

Expressive Responding

Because we find that partisan attachment underlies the reporting of false memories in several instances, it is possible that individuals are intentionally misreporting as memories that which they perceive as damaging to the out-party. That is, individuals may be expressively endorsing false memories, rather than genuinely remembering some event. It is important for us to distinguish between the two, as lying about false memories to researchers does not carry the same potential consequences as remembering something that did not occur. To that end, we asked respondents to tell us where they heard about the event. They were able to state that they learned of it from the television, newspaper, radio, online news, social media, a friend/colleague/family member, or some other source. Consistent with other studies of false political memories (Murphy et al., 2019), they were also able to select “I don’t remember where I heard about this.” Table 3 shows the distribution of source attribution for each fabricated event.

In instances where one reports some false memory of any of the eight events described above, 69% of respondents, on average, selected at least one source from which they learned about the event. The breakdown corresponds fairly closely with trends in media use: Most respondents selected television or some form of online news, with a smaller proportion choosing newspaper or radio. Only 31% of the sample who reported some false memory stated they did not recall the source, on average.

This is worth emphasizing: Reporting the source of a false memory is unnecessary for one to register an expressive response, yet the vast majority of respondents report recalling at least one medium through which they were “informed” about the event in question.

STUDY 2

In Study 2, we both partially replicate Study 1 (i.e., some of the vignettes are identical, some rewritten) and extend it vis-à-vis additional vignettes. In addition to seven new fabricated events, which aid in demonstrating the robustness of our previous findings across a wider array of events, we also include three genuine events that serve as a baseline for contextualizing the extent of the false-memory phenomenon.

False Belief Versus False Memory

Just as in Study 1, we highlight that the events we employ are more widely remembered than believed. As seen in [Figure 3](#), the genuine events (“Abortion,” “Afghanistan,” and “Ida”) are clearly remembered quite well, with no more than 10% believing but not remembering the event. Indeed, there is a statistically significant difference in reported memory between each genuine event and every fabricated one ($p < .05$ in each case). This provides additional credence to our assertion that individuals are genuinely reporting false memories by establishing a baseline level of memory of true events. We argue that partisanship is oftentimes used to “fill in the gaps” when one cannot quite construct a complete memory. Unsurprisingly, people remember true events at a high rate, as we would expect. Thus, we believe these genuine events and the lack of partisan bias provides additional leverage to understand the role partisan bias plays in false-memory reporting on other events. In other words, we observe bias in false memories but not true ones, further indicating that we are not merely tapping false beliefs or expressive responding on all survey items.

As for the remaining events, in no instance do false beliefs outpace false memories ($p < .05$ in each case), consistent with Study 1. To reiterate, this is an important first step: Individuals do not merely believe damaging information about the out-party and its figures (or fail to believe damaging information about ingroup stimuli), but instead they appear to genuinely recall the events in question.

Partisan Bias in False Memories

We follow the same procedures laid out in Study 1 to examine the role of partisan bias in false memories. [Figure 4](#) displays the difference in the percentage of respondents reporting no memory of the event listed along the horizontal axis. Red bars indicate that we expect Republicans to report less false memory than Democrats, and vice versa for blue bars.⁵ Black bars, which are associated with genuine events, indicate no expectation of partisan bias.

We begin by considering the neutral, or genuine, events. Republicans report that they do not recall these events to a greater degree than Democrats, but only by a substantively and statistically nonsignificant amount. Therefore, we can conclude that Democrats and Republicans (fail to) remember true events at the same rate. Next, we consider the red bars. Here, we corroborate evidence from Study 1 that demonstrates that Democrats are far more prone to remember these events, even though they did not occur; we argue this is because they are damaging to Trump. As for the events new to Study 2, we find similar results. For instance, Republicans are more

⁵As noted above, there is some uncertainty regarding the masks vignette. We include it with Republican-expected no memory here in accordance with [Table 1](#).

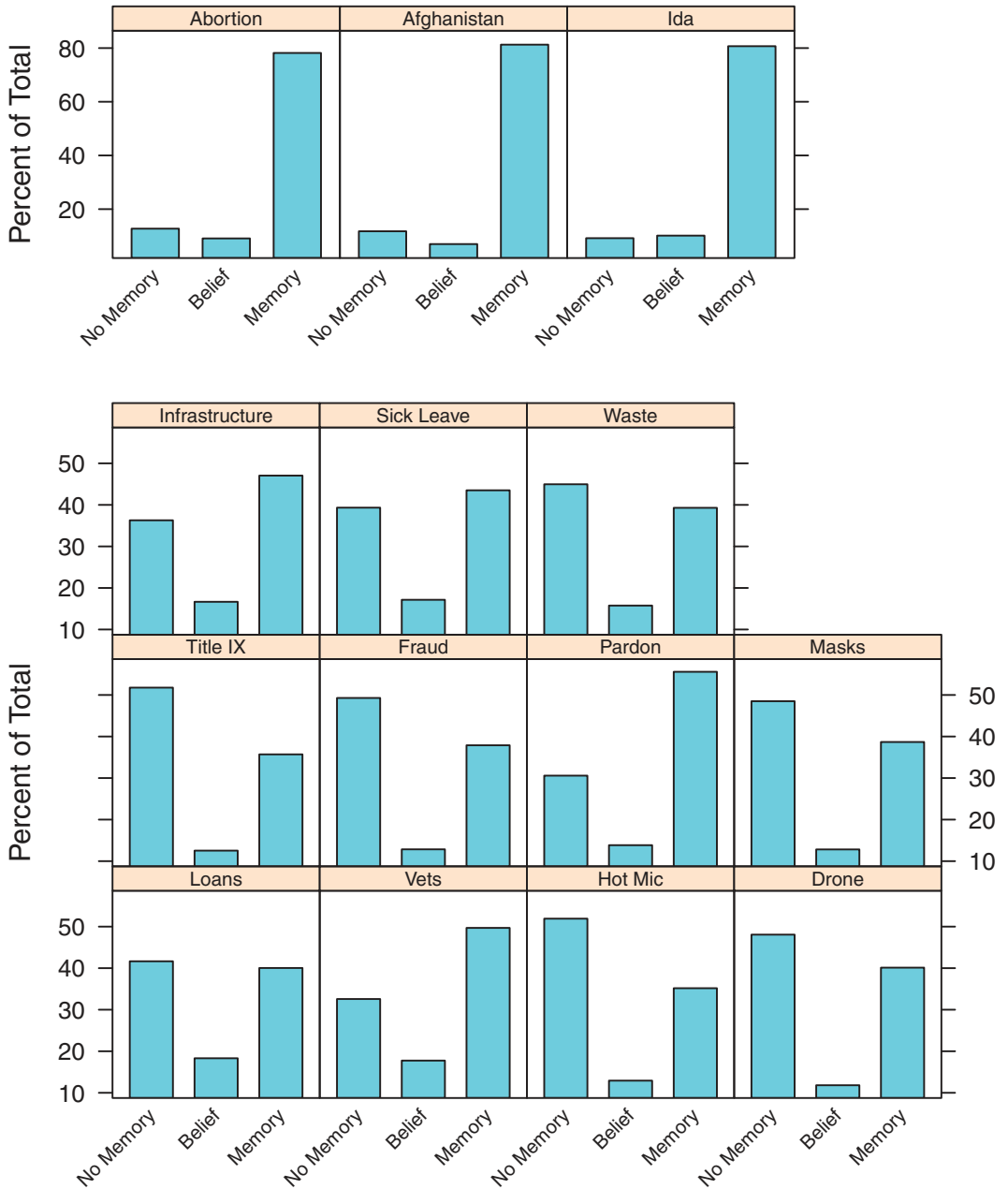


Figure 3. Percentage of respondents reporting no memory, false belief, or false memory.

than 30% more likely than Democrats to *correctly* report no memory of a fictional phone call with Mitch McConnell where Trump admitted there was no fraud in the 2020 election. Figure 4 demonstrates that Democrats are usually more likely to report memory of an event damaging to Trump.

Turning next to the blue bars, we see similar—but weaker—evidence for the events for which we expect less Democratic recall. First, we note that we are able to replicate the findings from Study 1

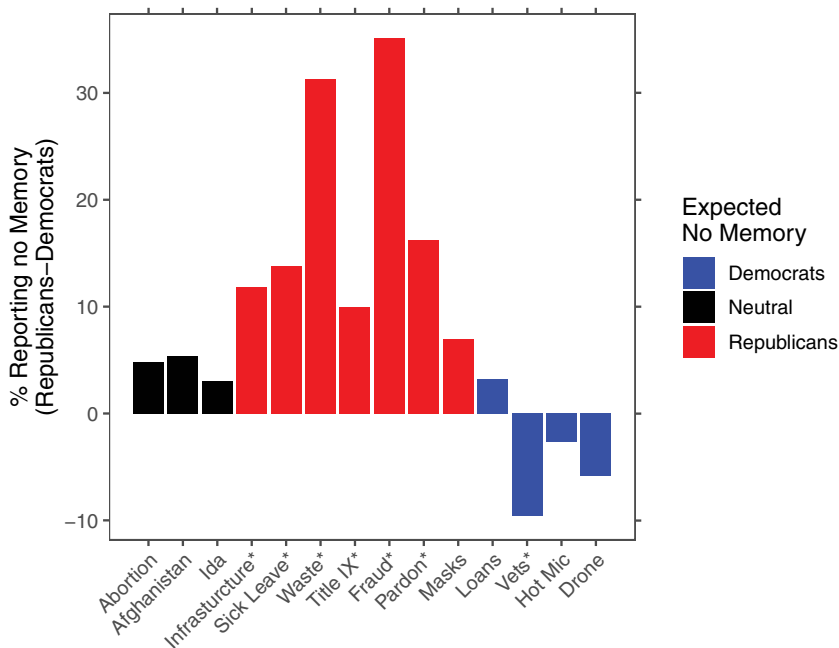


Figure 4. Difference in percentage of respondents reporting no memory (Republicans–Democrats). Asterisks denote $p < .05$, one-tailed test (according to color of bar).

regarding loans and veterans events. We see no substantive partisan difference in the loans event in either study, but we do see greater Democratic no-memory reporting regarding Trump’s veteran’s affairs record. As for Biden being caught on a hot microphone regarding a fallen soldier ceremony, Democrats do not remember the event, but Republicans tend to. However, the effect is quite small. Finally, there is a minor partisan effect for the drones event; Democrats state they fail to remember it, but Republicans do.

Across the board, we do see partisan bias in which events are recollected. While we do not observe partisan differences for each and every event, we do find them a majority of the time. Republicans falsely recall events that laud Trump and are damaging to Democrats, but Democrats do not. The converse is also true.⁶ Thus, we find support for our main assertion: False memories are frequently motivated by partisan bias. While existing work has found relationships between existing political predispositions and false memories (e.g., Frenda et al., 2013; Murphy et al., 2019), we find that the most enduring and influential political predisposition—partisanship—underlies the effect.

Correlates of False Memory

Finally, we investigate the correlates of false memories—who is most likely to exhibit false memories and what political, psychological, and social characteristics do they possess? Previous research on false memories finds that cognitive ability negatively correlates with the propensity to falsely recall past events that did not occur. To measure cognitive ability, we use Wordsum (Thorndike & Gallup, 1944), a 10-item test commonly employed on the General Social Survey where participants

⁶While there does appear to be some evidence of partisan asymmetry present in Figure 4, we would need a larger set of vignettes and political figures to make such a determination.

are shown a word (e.g., space) and asked to select the most similar word from a list of five options (e.g., school, noon, captain, room, board). The average number of correct items indicates cognitive ability. The use of Wordsum also serves as a test of validity for our summary measure of false memories. We also include a cognitive reflection task that asks questions like “If you’re running a race and you pass the person in second place what place are you in?”

We consider three additional psychological traits. First, those who traffic in conspiracy theories may falsely recall information, as they are prone to seeing nonexistent patterns and weaving unconnected, coincidental things together. It should be no stretch, then, for such individuals to talk themselves into remembering something that did not occur. Second, we consider narcissism. Those exhibiting narcissistic personalities are likely to be more confident in themselves and their importance. Third, we examine the relationship with pseudo-profound bullshit (Pennycook et al., 2015)—the propensity to believe “seemingly impressive assertions that are presented as true and meaningful but [that] are actually vacuous” (p. 549). We hypothesize that those who are most able to convince themselves of the profundity of hollow quips might also be likely to convince themselves that they possess memories of events that did occur. In all three cases, we expect positive correlations with false memories. Next, we consider political orientations. We measure engagement with politics three ways: knowledge about politics, interest in politics, and participation in political activities. While we suspect that those with high levels of knowledge about politics are less likely to possess false memories about political events, we hypothesize that the most interested and involved individuals—who also tend to hold the strongest partisan motivations according to Kamieniecki (1988)—should exhibit higher levels of false memories. Similarly, and central to our argument about the role of partisan bias, we should observe a positive relationship between the strength of partisan and ideological identities and false memories.

Finally, we examine the relationship between false memories and a host of sociodemographic characteristics: religiosity, educational attainment, age, gender, and race and ethnicity. Of these potential correlates we only have a theoretical expectation for religiosity. Because more religious people are more likely to see patterns between coincidental events and exhibit a relatively high need for certainty (Brandt & Reyna, 2010), we suspect that they will also be more likely to report false memories.

We utilize a summary measure of the propensity to possess false memories, rather than looking at false memories regarding each of the 11 fabricated events discussed above. To construct this measure, we simply counted the number of fabricated events for which respondents reported having a memory—not a belief—about the event. This produces a scale that ranges from 0 to 8 ($M = 2.06$, $SD = 1.91$); even though there are 11 fabricated events, no respondent reported false memories about more than eight events.

Bivariate correlations between false memories and the potential correlates described above appear in Figure 5 (with 95% confidence intervals).⁷ We observe supportive evidence for each of our hypotheses. The strongest correlate of false memories is cognitive ability—those exhibiting higher levels of cognitive ability are (much) less likely to recall false memories. This relationship supports the construct validity of our summary measure of false memory, as does the negative correlation with cognitive reflection. We also observe substantively nontrivial correlations ($>|0.20|$) between false memories and the strength of one’s partisan identity, narcissism, pseudo-profound bullshit receptivity, political participation, interest in politics, and religiosity.⁸

⁷Of course, bivariate correlations assume linear relationships between variables, which may be a dubious when a count variable is involved. We investigate this possibility in Appendix S1 in the online supporting information, finding that relationships are largely indistinguishable from linearity and never display particular nonlinear patterns.

⁸We also examined whether the correlates of false memory differed for Democrats compared to Republicans. A version of Figure 5 with correlations separated by partisanship appears in Appendix S1 in the online supporting information. We find that correlations are always in the same direction, although they do vary in magnitude in some instances.

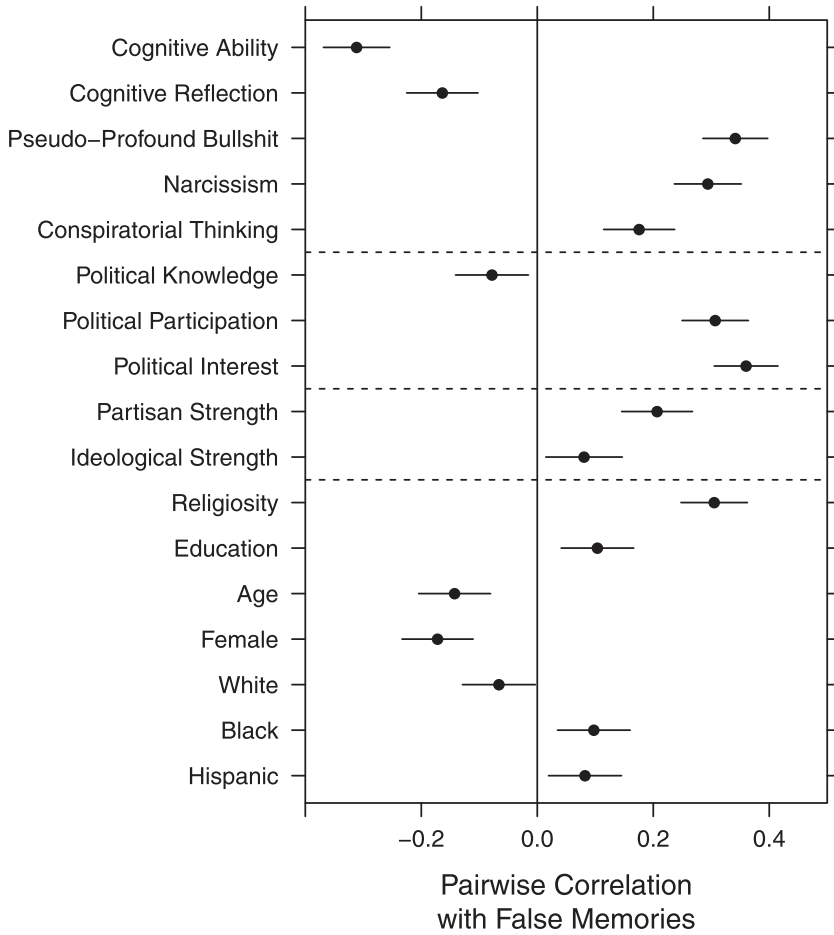


Figure 5. Correlates of false memories. Pearson correlations with 95% confidence bands.

The political orientations, in particular, provide additional support for our central argument. We see that those who are the most interested in and participate the most in politics are also prone to false memories. Additionally, the positive correlations with partisan and ideological strength suggest that these false memories serve the interest of protecting one’s ingroup or decrying the outgroup; these false memories are at least partially motivated by partisanship. In all, while false memories are more common among those with certain psychological orientations, the political motivations also play an important role.

Conclusion

While cognitive psychologists have learned a great deal about people’s propensity for constructing and acting on false memories, the role of false memories in political attitudes has received scant attention. In this study, we built on previous work by investigating the partisan foundations and political and psychological correlates of false memories. We found that nearly a third of respondents reported remembering a fabricated or factually altered political event. These false memories are not mere beliefs or expressive responses; indeed, most respondents conveyed where they “heard about” at least one event in question, with some providing vivid details of their circumstances. We also

found that false memory is associated with the strength of one's partisan attachments, conspiracism, and interest in politics, among other factors.

Altogether, false memories seem to behave like a form of partisan bias: The more in touch one is with politics, especially the political parties, the more susceptible they are to false-memory construction. While we cannot ascribe causality, uncovering this (likely) mechanism has several implications. First, the more polarized we become, the more likely individuals may be to construct false memories about in- and outgroups. In turn, the falser memories one constructs about the greatness of one's ingroup and the evil doings of the outgroup, the higher the temperature of polarization rises. Second, false-memory construction may be one mechanism by which misinformation takes hold psychologically. By exposing people to information they are motivated to believe, skilled traffickers of misinformation may be able to not only convince one to believe something but convince them that something which never transpired actually did so. The conviction that accompanies memory—people's natural tendency to believe their memories are trustworthy—makes false memories a particularly pernicious route by which to manipulate those subject to this bias. Indeed, this is precisely the concern presented by “deepfakes”—images and videos that have been expertly altered or fabricated for the purpose of exploiting targeted viewers. Finally, and relatedly, politicians may be able to induce false memories, strategically molding a past reality to suit their political will.

Our investigation is not without limitations. As one of only a few studies of the role of false memories in political attitudes, questions abound about the best measurement strategy for capturing false memories, the most efficacious strategy for inducing false memories in a “laboratory” setting, and the real-world impact of political communication, for example, on the construction of false memories. Future studies might try offering respondents payments for “true” attitudes in an effort to further differentiate between false memories and expressive responding, for example (see Bullock et al., 2015). It would also be useful to understand the extent to which politicians and other elites might be able to produce false memories through speeches and advertisements. Can politicians fabricate events out of whole cloth, promoting a sort of mass delusion among motivated supporters? We might look at politicians who have explicitly endorsed the QAnon movement, for example, and wonder whether such a seemingly preposterous proposition might find some support in a polarized environment. If politicians are capable of molding the “pictures in our heads,” as Lippmann put it, presumably such a capability extends to pictures of the past.

A particularly fruitful avenue for future research would seek to determine which qualities of a fabricated event are the most likely to produce false memories—under what conditions can a false memory be created? Clearly, we expect an influence of partisan bias in circumstances where individuals can recognize the partisan context and incorporate it into their worldview. Absent those conditions, we are less certain and encourage future investigation. As Kunda (1990) argues, the ability to engage in motivated reasoning is constrained by one's “ability to construct seemingly reasonable justifications for” (p. 480) their motivated conclusions. Thus, if an event under consideration is outlandish, one may fail to construct a reasonable justification for possessing (or not possessing) the memory. In other words, we suspect the construction of false memories is subject to similar constraints as motivated reasoning-based conclusions. Additionally, as Lodge and Taber (2005) show, individuals spend more time considering affectively incongruent information. In a similar vein, it may be the case that false events that do not neatly comport with one's existing partisan biases may be less subject to false-memory development; we cannot say with our current data. There are certainly limits to both the development of false memories and the instances where partisan bias underlies the construction of a false memory—future research should focus on the discovery of these outer limits.

Finally, we note limitations of our strategy for measuring false memories. The most interesting false memories are about those events which maybe seem plausible, but that did not occur. Constructing false, but perhaps plausible, stimuli for respondents to react to naturally complicates inferences. Is a

memory about a half-true event false, or only somewhat false? What about if a respondent notes that they remember an event which never occurred “differently” than it was described—“differently” could, for example, be taken to mean “that’s not how I remember it” or as simply a way to hedge one’s bets about what (did not) happened. Despite following past work on the measurement of false memories, it is clear that more work on measurement strategies—the ideal characteristics of true/false stimuli, response categories available to respondents, new methods for probing deeper into what respondents mean when they remember things differently or not at all—is needed. Hence, we urge caution in the interpretation of specific estimates of the prevalence of false memories reported above.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

Table S1. Demographic Characteristics of Samples

Figure S1. Average believability of each vignette from Study 1 and Study 2 (0–10 scale), by partisanship.

Table S2. Reported Sources of Memories. Study 2.

Figure S2. Scatterplots of false memories against hypothesized correlates with linear fit lines (red) and LOWESS curves (blue) with 95% confidence bands.

Figure S3. Correlates of false memories, by partisanship. Pearson correlations with 95% confidence bands.

Figure S4. Percentage of respondents reporting no memory, false belief, or false memory. Inconsistent respondents dropped.

Figure S5. Difference in percentage of respondents reporting no memory (Republicans–Democrats). Asterisks denote $p < .05$, one-tailed test (according to color of bar). Inconsistent respondents dropped.

Figure S6. Correlates of false memories. Pearson correlations with 95% confidence bands. Inconsistent respondents dropped.

Figure S7. Percentage of respondents reporting no memory, false belief, or false memory. Study 1. “I remember this differently” dropped.

Figure S8. Difference in percentage of respondents reporting no memory (Republicans–Democrats). Asterisks denote $p < .05$, one-tailed test (according to color of bar). Study 1. “I remember this differently” dropped.

Figure S9. Percentage of respondents reporting no memory, false belief, or false memory. Study 2. “I remember this differently” dropped.

Figure S10. Difference in percentage of respondents reporting no memory (Republicans–Democrats). Asterisks denote $p < .05$, one-tailed test (according to color of bar). Study 2. “I remember this differently” dropped.

Figure S11. Correlates of false memories. Pearson correlations with 95% confidence bands. Study 2. “I remember this differently” dropped.

Table S3. Random Effects Logit of false Memories on each Vignette