

RESEARCH ARTICLES

# Moral Foundations and Misinformation: Correcting Abortion Misinformation in U.S. Politics

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This research was conducted to investigate how moral foundations are the foundation of people's abortion opinions, and how abortion misinformation can be corrected by targeting those very morals. Jonathan Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory, which posits that people's views on policy and politics are rooted in five core moral values, served as the framework for analyzing the relationship between abortion misinformation and morals. Research was conducted by examining social media posts on X, from both Democrat and Republican politicians. These posts were searched for misinformation, and if found, that misinformation was mapped onto certain moral foundations. Prior to the research it was hypothesized that corrections tailored toward pro-life individuals will be more successful when rooted in purity and authority. Conversely, corrections tailored towards pro-choice individuals will be more successful when rooted in fairness and care. The major results of this study are that the majority of the pro-life Republican posts included some form of misinformation, while none of the pro-choice Democratic posts had any. Additionally, the misinformed abortion posts mapped onto the three moral foundations of authority, purity, and care, care emerging as the only unexpected foundation. The majority of abortion misinformation can be connected back to one or more moral foundations, and correction attempts rooted in moral foundations should be more effective than standard correction methods. Based on these findings, it is recommended that politicians, organizations, and others looking to correct misinformation should use moral foundations in corrections to obtain more effective results.

## Introduction

Abortion has enveloped U.S. politics in recent years. As a result, abortion misinformation is abundant, which can lead to women making misinformed choices. Specific stances on abortion have commonly been associated with particular political parties or religion. However, there is another intriguing perspective to examine abortion stances: moral foundations.

Initially proposed by Haidt (2004), moral foundation theory outlines five central moral foundations: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity. These foundations can be analyzed to better understand social, emotional, and political situations, including abortion. Moral foundations have helped explain people's abortion stances, pro-life or pro-choice, by highlighting

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which central moral values they prioritize, such as purity or care (Paruzel-Czachura et al., 2024). Although research exists on the connection between moral foundations and abortion opinions, we lack research on how moral foundations can be used to correct misinformation.

Therefore, this paper explores how politicians' misinformation (and efforts to correct misinformation) reflect moral foundations and concludes we may be able to improve misinformation correction attempts by utilizing moral foundations.

A collection of politicians' statements from the news, social media, and presidential debates were used to investigate how moral foundations can impact efforts to spread and combat misinformation. It is predicted that misinformation corrections will be more effective when correctly rooted in the appropriate moral foundations. This research could benefit politicians or groups attempting to combat misinformation surrounding abortion, as well as a multitude of other topics plagued by misinformation such as gun rights, immigration policies, or climate issues.

Abortion has been a controversial topic in U.S. politics, shown through the split public opinion in the last two decades of polling. In 1995, 60 percent of U.S. adults believed that abortion should be legal in all or most cases, while 38 percent believed it should be illegal in all or most cases, and in between 2005 and 2010 it was closer to half and half (*Public Opinion on Abortion*, 2024). Currently, 63 percent believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases (*Public Opinion on Abortion*, 2024). This division is closely tied to party identity. In recent years, a restrictive abortion stance has been affiliated with the Republican party, while a pro-choice stance has been affiliated with the Democrat party (Gallup, n.d.). This connection has been directly affected by the recent increase in affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019). Affective polarization is the extent to which one party "dislikes" or "distrusts" other parties (Iyengar et al., 2019). Abortion's emergence as a partisan issue is a direct result of this intensifying division (Carmines et al., 2010).

This polarization was enhanced by the Supreme Court decisions regarding *Roe v Wade*, a Supreme Court case in 1973 in which the court ruled that the United States Constitution's right to privacy protects the ability to choose (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.). However, *Roe* was recently overturned in the *Dobbs v Jackson* decision, in which the court ruled that the Constitution does not protect the right to attain an abortion (National Constitution Center, 2022). This ruling received tremendous backlash, increasing the number of Americans identifying as pro-choice (Gallup, 2024).

*Dobbs'* impact was demonstrated in the 2022 midterm elections. In Ohio, California, Kentucky, Michigan, Montana, Vermont, and Kansas, abortion rights prevailed (Terkel & Wu, 2023). Abortion became a top concern for voters in critical states like Michigan, a top issue heading into the 2022 midterms (Schneider & Otterbein, 2024).

Politicians on both sides emphasized abortion as a key topic in their platforms. For example, Democratic Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer reiterated her support for abortion rights, writing, “My administration is committed to ensuring that all Michigan residents have access to safe and affordable health care, including contraception. A woman’s health, not politics, should guide life-changing medical decisions” (*Governor Gretchen Whitmer*, n.d.). Conversely, Florida Republican governor Ron DeSantis signed the Reducing Fetal and Infant Mortality Act that prohibits all abortions after 15 weeks of gestation in 2022 (R. DeSantis, personal communication, 2024).

Although abortion is a topic that attracts a considerable amount of attention, there is an abundance of misinformation surrounding the subject. Misinformation is when someone holds incorrect information. People who are misinformed are often confident in their opinions which can lead to them taking action based on incorrect information. Since political knowledge can often be viewed as the basis for representative democracy, misinformation can pose a grave threat to democracy (Jerit & Zhao, 2020).

Correcting misinformation has been traditionally difficult, and failed correction attempts are sometimes more harmful. If corrections directly counter an individual’s prior attitudes or beliefs, they may be more likely to reject the corrections. For example, a recent meta-analysis found that corrections failed to correct misinformation, though corrections were more effective when the correction was aligned with the ideology of the individual or the issue was not politically polarized (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2023).

There are several methods of misinformation correction. With the myth-first approach, a fact checker presents a false statement followed by an explanation of its inaccuracy. A fact-first approach is when accurate information is presented before the misinformation. Lastly, the fact-only approach aims to emphasize the true information above all, avoiding false information (Thompson et al., 2021).

These methods have advantages and disadvantages. The fact-first method emphasizes the fact rather than the myth; however, it is also argued that the myth-first approach is preferable because it refutes the myth and then explains why it is false. The fact-only approach is sometimes viewed as less preferable because people are more likely to believe information when it is familiar to them, and that familiarity is eliminated due to the absence of the myth (Swire-Thompson et al., 2021).

Generally, misinformation correction is still difficult because people process corrections through the lens of their own preexisting beliefs. Therefore, misinformation corrections should be tailored to the specific person to be more effective (Wittenberg & Berinsky, n.d.). Researchers have found that when corrections oppose people’s ideology, people are more likely to reject the correction and reinforce their support for the misinformation.

For example, a person with a left-leaning ideology is more inclined to accept a correction of claims opposing climate change because that correction aligns with their ideals (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2023).

Understanding how to better combat misinformation about abortion is essential, because general knowledge about abortion is limited. In a study on women's knowledge of abortion policies, women correctly answered 18 percent of questions about abortion regulations in their state and more than a third of participants did not answer any correctly (Swartz et al., n.d.)<sup>1</sup>. Abortion misinformation is spread disproportionately among different demographics and is most prevalent for women of color and people of lower income (Sherman, 2022).

Abortion misinformation is a result of the anti-abortion movement which tampers with public opinion (Assifi et al., 2016). The overturning of Roe was a major catalyst for misinformation which pushes the message that abortion is unsafe. For example, in a study of 348 crisis pregnancy centers (organizations established by anti-abortion groups), at least 80 percent were found to have at least one piece of misleading information on their website (Rollison, 2022).

This misinformation epidemic is not limited to the websites. For example, Republican Ron Desantis falsely "claimed on CNN that 'some liberal states' allow 'post-birth abortions'" (CNN Staff, 2024). However, it is important to acknowledge that misinformation does exist within both political parties.

Misinformation is prevalent in both political parties, but Republicans share more unreliable news. From January to July 2022, 36 percent of news that Republican candidates shared came from unreliable sources on average each day compared to only two percent of news shared by Democrats (Macdonald & Brown, 2022). Social media, a major platform for spreading misinformation, has led to Democrats calling out CEOs such as Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk (*Oversight Democrats Call on Big Tech to Combat the Rampant Spread of Life-Threatening Abortion Misinformation and Disinformation*, 2023).

## Theory

The issue of misinformation surrounding abortion is problematic: it impacts choices people make about their health (Pagoto et al, 2023) and how people vote (Terkel & Wu, 2023). However, traditional efforts to correct misinformation are not effective, prompting a need for new solutions.

Utilizing moral foundations to combat the misinformation issue requires a different way of approaching abortion politics. The Moral Foundations Theory, initially proposed by Haidt (2004), outlines five central moral foundations (care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity) that shape moral reasoning. By grounding misinformation corrections in moral foundations, messages can target specific groups, making them more effective.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, participants were asked "In [your state], is there a law that requires a doctor to review a script or specific information with women prior to an abortion?" (Swartz et al., 2020).

Each moral foundation can shape values. Care is centered around kindness, gentleness, nurturance, and empathy. The foundation of fairness focuses on justice and rights. Loyalty is based on the virtues of patriotism and selflessness. Authority is based on hierarchical social interactions and respect for traditions, and emphasizes the virtues of leadership and followership. Lastly, the foundation of purity endorses the values of self-discipline, self-improvement, naturalness, and spirituality (*MoralFoundations.Org*, n.d.).

Moral foundations have been linked to opinions about same-sex marriage, immigration, and abortion (Tatalovich and Wendell, 2018) and offer a methodology for measuring morality across political issues.

Moral foundations can identify which morals different groups prioritize, and how that affects abortion stances. One study examined the difference in moral foundations between pro-choice and pro-life women (Paruzel-Czachura et al., 2024). Women who identified as pro-life more closely identified with purity and authority, while women who identified as pro-choice identified more with fairness and care. Most studies that involve moral foundations and abortion follow a similar pattern; however, bringing together moral foundations and misinformation is a new approach.

Using moral foundations to correct misinformation about abortion will target morals catering to specific individuals. People often resist being corrected because of their political affiliations: Democrat or Republican, in the American context. Moral foundations offer a new way to fight ideology-based resistance.

Incorporating moral foundations into corrections offers a more personalized approach: by targeting specific morals, corrections are likely to be more persuasive. Moral foundations may be a preferable method to standard corrections because the effectiveness of those standard methods is limited by how politically congenial the correction is to the recipient (Nyhan & Reifler, 2016).

## Methods

It can be hypothesized that corrections, attempts to correct misinformation, tailored toward pro-life individuals will be more successful when rooted in purity and authority. Conversely, corrections tailored towards pro-choice individuals will be more successful when rooted in fairness and care. In order to test these hypotheses, I collected existing data, social media posts and debate clips. I then analyzed the data to see how it maps onto different moral foundations.

I turned to *X*, a site of frequent activity for politicians, to analyze posts. More specifically, I selected posts from 10 Democrats and Republicans, ranging from far-left to far-right. These politicians were classified into categories based on their political activity, Voteview, and articles that categorize politicians (for example, a paper by ABC News called “The 8 Types Of Democrats And Republicans In The House”). I curated the selection of politicians to include a plethora of political perspectives. Any posts on that

politician's account pertaining to abortion, fit the criteria, as there were no date limits. If there was more than one post fitting the criteria, I picked the one that was a better example of abortion misinformation.

All politicians selected are currently in office except for Nikki Haley, who was included for the presidential campaign she ran in 2024. Each politician's posts were examined for abortion misinformation, whether that be spreading it or addressing it. Specific keyword searches such as "abortion", "misinformation", "false", "pro-life", "killing babies", "pro-choice" "Dobbs" and "Roe v Wade" were used to narrow the search.

Additionally, I analyzed the June 2024 presidential debate between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. These two candidates only participated in one debate together prior to Joe Biden stepping out of the presidential race. This debate is useful because politicians are able to respond to misinformation in a more conversational setting, providing examples of misinformation correction in real-time.

Once misinformation was identified through checking trusted sources such as the National Institute of Health, the misinformation and corrections were mapped onto topics. Understanding the themes that surround certain moral foundations and abortion stances was a first step. For example, purity is often connected back to religion, which plays into the pro-life stance. On the other hand, fairness connects to a right to choose, relating to the pro-choice stance (Paruzel-Czachura et al., 2024).

Taking this into consideration, I isolated certain keywords and phrases that connected to particular themes and foundations. Many pro-life propaganda and misinformation sources used keywords such as "unconstitutional" (Live Action). These words directly relate to moral foundations, as "unconstitutional" contradicts the foundation of authority, therefore that misinformation appeals to those who prioritize authority. Looking for these contradictions and connections in phrases identifies ways to improve misinformation corrections. It was helpful to study the debate clips to see the effectiveness of misinformation corrections, and if they related to moral foundations. This aids understanding of how and why moral foundations can be more effective.

## Results

There were common trends in the X data and the debate. Although I had not previously hypothesized that the foundation of care would appear in Republican posts, it was apparent in many instances. For both the X data and the debate, similar themes arose, such as *Roe v. Wade*.

The X accounts of 10 Democrats and 10 Republicans were searched for examples of abortion misinformation. For the Democrats, the accounts of Kamala Harris, Pete Buttiegeg, Gretchen Whitemer, Cory Booker, Annie Kuster, Maxine Waters, Hakeem Jeffries, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Jared Golden and Chuck Schumer. For the Republicans, JD Vance, Nikki Haley, Ron DeSantis, Marjorie Taylor Greene, Brian Fitzpatrick, Don Bacon, Marsha Blackburn, Lindsey Graham, Mike Johnson and Steve Scalise.

A search of the X accounts for all 20 politicians revealed abortion misinformation only from the accounts of the Republicans, represented in the table below. Out of the 10 Republicans, there were three accounts where there was no abortion misinformation: Ron DeSantis, Brian Fitzpatrick, and Steve Scalise. This does not imply they did not post at all about abortion, but there were no relevant examples.

On average, I sampled one post from each politician, with two posts from one politician's account that had more misinformation. I found that several female politicians posted about abortion more than male politicians. However, the topic was discussed evenly between Democrats and Republicans. The politician who posted the most misinformed posts was Rep. Majorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, so two posts were collected from her, to represent the larger volume of abortion misinformation on her account.

### Discussion

Some consistent themes Republicans emphasized in their X posts were murdering infants and post-birth abortions. There were three central moral foundations that came up the most frequently in the data: care, authority, and purity. For example, Rep. Don Bacon followed the theme of murdering infants, as he posted "Abortion kills a beating heart." This targets the foundation of care, described as "an ability to feel (and dislike) the pain of others" (Moral Foundations Theory, n.d). The post by Mike Johnson followed a religious theme, as he wrote, "The legalization of abortion openly defied the rules of our Creator...", which associates with the moral foundation of purity because the phrase "our Creator" is a religious phrase, and purity is commonly associated with religion (Moral Foundations Theory, n.d). Thirdly, the post recorded by Sen. Lindsey Graham connects to authority because of his word choice of "the law of the land."

Overall, each instance of misinformation could be traced back to one or more specific moral foundations.

Prior to collecting the data from X, I expected that Democrats would associate with a strong pro-choice stance, and the moral foundations of care and fairness. In contrast, I expected Republicans to associate with a pro-life stance, and the moral foundations of purity and authority (Paruzel-Czachura, Mariola, et al, 2023). However, it was surprising to find that there was a strong presence of care in the misinformed Republican posts, but it was used in a very specific way. Most often, posts used phrases such as "abortion kills a beating heart" or "murdering babies who survive abortion." These phrases target the moral foundation of care, which is described as "an ability to feel (and dislike) the pain of others" (Moral Foundations Theory, n.d). On the other hand, I found that the foundation of purity and authority were strongly present in Republican abortion misinformation, as predicted.

The data from the debate between Trump and Biden on June 27, 2024 is limited, as the two candidates spent only a short amount of time discussing abortion. Most of this discussion centered around the Dobbs decision. There was an instance of a back and forth between Trump and Biden involving

## Politicians' X Posts with Abortion Misinformation

Politician	Post	Moral Foundation
JD Vance (R - VP Candidate & Senator OH)	"AFL-CIO leaders used to support the family wage so workers could raise children comfortably. This one wants workers to <b>kill babies</b> so that they have fewer distractions at work." (in response to Liz Shuler who wrote "Access to reproductive healthcare services allows the ability for workers to stay in the workforce who may not have the option otherwise.")	Care
Nikki Haley (R- Former Governor SC and Former US Ambassador to UN)	"Six Presidential candidates voted in favor of murdering babies who survive abortion. I don't believe this to be a partisan issue. I believe every day Americans would see a baby surviving an abortion as a miracle and blessing. Our country needs a serious gut check on this issue."	Purity and care
Ron DeSantis (R- Governor FL)	N/A, posted about abortion but not misinformation on X.	
Majorie Taylor Greene (R - Congressional Representative GA)	"People are talking about how global birth rates are falling to dangerous levels for the future, but the biggest cause is abortion. Roe vs Wade was in 1973, and look at the decline in births around the world as America exported abortion and promoted it around the world. We should be promoting families and supporting motherhood."	Care
Majorie Taylor Greene (R - Congressional Representative GA)	"Democrats will take any opportunity to talk about how excited they are to murder babies. Abortion is NOT healthcare. Healthcare saves lives."	Care
Brian Fitzpatrick (R- Congressional Representative PA)	N/A, posted about abortion but not misinformation on X.	
Don Bacon (R - Congressional Representative NE)	"Abortion kills a beating heart. That is science."	Care
Marsha Blackburn (R - Senator TN)	"Democrats are out of touch with the average American when it comes to abortion. According to a Harvard/Harris poll, 75% of women "desire a policy that Roe deemed illegal."	AAuthority
Lindsey Graham (R - Senator SC)	"Liberals won't stop until abortion on demand, up until the moment of birth, is the law of the land. Join me in telling Congress to PASS my 15-week abortion bill."	Care and authority
Mike Johnson (Speaker of the US House of Representatives)	"49 yrs ago today, SCOTUS delivered its tragic & constitutionally unfounded opinion in Roe v. Wade. The legalization of abortion openly defied the rules of our Creator & the founding principles of our nation, & has led to the staggering loss of >63 million unborn children."	Care and purity
Steve Scalise (R- Congressional Representative LA, Majority Leader of House)	N/A, posted about abortion but not misinformation on X.	

a misinformed statement by Trump and an attempted correction by Biden. Biden stated that he intended to restore Roe V. Wade if reelected, which prompted Trump's misinformed statement.



## Trump responded

“So that means he can take the life of the baby in the ninth month and even after birth, because some states, Democrat-run, take it after birth. Again, the governor – former governor of Virginia: put the baby down, then we decide what to do with it. So he’s in – he’s willing to, as we say, rip the baby out of the womb in the ninth month and kill the baby.”

NBC fact checked this statement after the debate. NBC wrote, “According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, less than 1% of all abortions occur at this stage of pregnancy. More than 80% occur at or before nine weeks of pregnancy, and just 6% occur between 14 and 20 weeks of pregnancy, which is during the second trimester. Abortion does not involve ending the life of a born baby” (Sullivan, 2024).

The misinformation that Trump presented can be mapped most closely onto the moral foundation of care, aligning with a number of the X posts of misinformation put out by other Republicans. The Republicans pushing misinformation that relates to the foundation of care use the moral foundation in a specific type of messaging; care is being linked to the wellbeing of the baby. Republicans target that moral in people who may be persuaded by their misinformation.

This debate provides a strong example of correction attempts in a conversational setting, as Biden attempted to refute Trump’s statement. Biden responded with, “He’s lying. That is simply not true. That – Roe v. Wade does not provide for that. That’s not the circumstance. Only when the woman’s life is in danger, she’s going to die, that’s the only circumstance in which that can happen. But we are not for late-term abortion, period, period, period.” This response falls into the category of the fact-only correction method, in which Biden only states the correction and doesn’t repeat the misinformation. This was arguably not effective, as Trump did not accept this correction. Many viewers watching the debate were not impressed by Biden’s answers, therefore it is likely viewers did not find this correction attempt effective either (Edwards-Levy & Agiesta, 2024). A response grounded in moral foundations, perhaps care, would have been more effective, as that is the same foundation that connects to the initial misinformation.

## Conclusion

How can politicians’ efforts to correct misinformation be rooted in moral foundations (and do the moral foundations vary by party)? I posed this question because of abortion’s significance in contemporary politics and because moral foundations provide a new and potentially helpful lens to examine this issue. To tackle this question, I collected data from X and the debate between Biden and Trump. I found that seven out of ten Republicans and zero of ten Democrats posted inaccurate information about abortion, and that the misinformation mapped onto the three moral foundations of authority, purity, and care, care being the only unanticipated foundation.

The abortion misinformation in the debate between Biden and Trump also aligned with the foundation of care. Trump's misinformed claims, similar to many of the X posts, discussed post-birth abortions. Biden used the fact-only misinformation correction method in response to Trump.

I predict the majority of abortion misinformation can be connected back to one or more moral foundations, and that correction attempts rooted in moral foundations should be more effective than standard correction methods. Additionally, since standard misinformation corrections are not found to be very effective and misinformation is related to moral foundations, correction attempts rooted in moral foundations should be more successful. Given this, politicians and organizations looking to correct misinformation should implement moral foundations in corrections to obtain more effective results.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this paper. I limited my analysis to 20 X accounts and one presidential debate. It is possible that the data is not accurately representative due to the small scale. Mapping X posts and debate clips onto certain moral foundations is also technically subjective. While I relied on the criteria and descriptions found on the Moral Foundations website, the judgements were made by the researcher.

An expanded study of this paper could be beneficial in testing the true effectiveness of misinformation corrections rooted in moral foundations. For example, a study in which corrections rooted in moral foundations are tested on participants in comparison to standard correction methods could provide insight into how effective these improved corrections are. Additionally, it would be interesting to see how moral foundation corrections could help in political settings, such as debates.

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