

# Who Trusts State-Run Media? Polarized Perceptions of Credibility in Non-Democracies

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## Overview

Authoritarian regimes systematically spread disinformation and propaganda through state-run media, but often, their state media are popular and trusted. How do autocrats get away with it?

- I examine the perceptions of media trustworthiness in Russia, a prominent electoral autocracy.
- I show that trust in propagandistic state media is largely explained by government supporters' preference for like-minded information.

## Theory: Politicized News Perceptions

Citizens of autocracies trust biased media if the slant of these media is consistent with their beliefs:

- Government supporters are more likely than government critics to view state media as trustworthy and accurate.
- Supporters are less likely to trust critical, independent media.
- Supporters predominantly rely on state media to learn the news.

## Research Design

**Online experiment:** ~17,000 participants evaluate a series of short news stories, which I randomly attribute to state-run or critical news organizations; see Figure 1 for a flowchart.

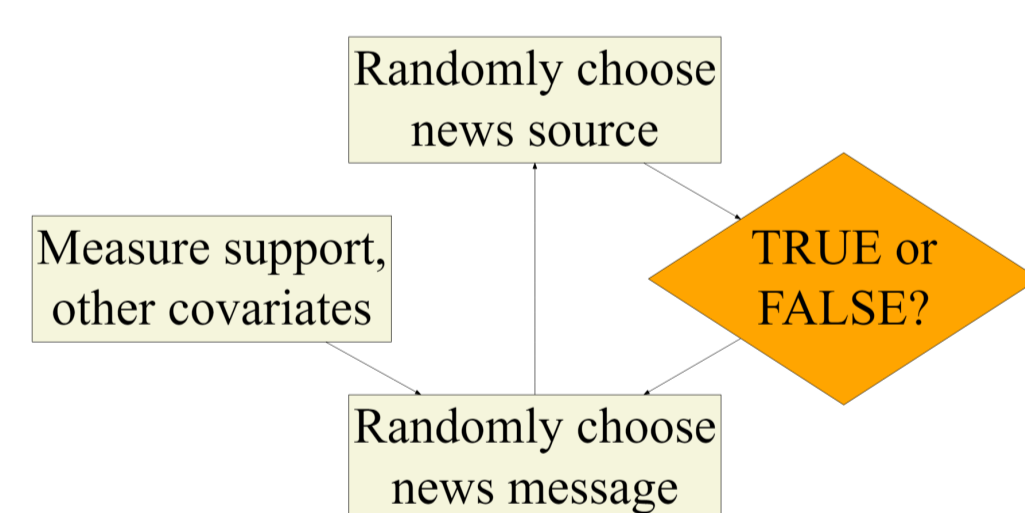


Figure 1: Survey flow and source assignment



Figure 2: Story vignette example (Russia-24 is a state-run outlet)

**Novelty:** The experiment is presented as a quiz: “How good are you at detecting fake news?” The quiz format provides internal motivation and places participants in a more realistic, everyday setting.

**2 additional studies:** 1) survey experiment on a nationally representative sample (n = 1600); 2) survey on perceptions of credibility of state and critical media (n = 2100; sample from an existing online panel).

## Experimental Results

**Estimation.** I regress news stories evaluations (true or false?) on news source assignment and covariates. The figures below demonstrate how changing the treatment to state-run media affects news evaluations for those who approve of the president Vladimir Putin (supporters) and for those who disapprove (critics).

**Key result:** The effect of switching news source from critical news outlets to state-run media outlets is positive for Putin supporters, but negative for Putin critics (Figure 3). Thus, supporters are more likely to believe messages attributed to state media (vs stories from critical media).

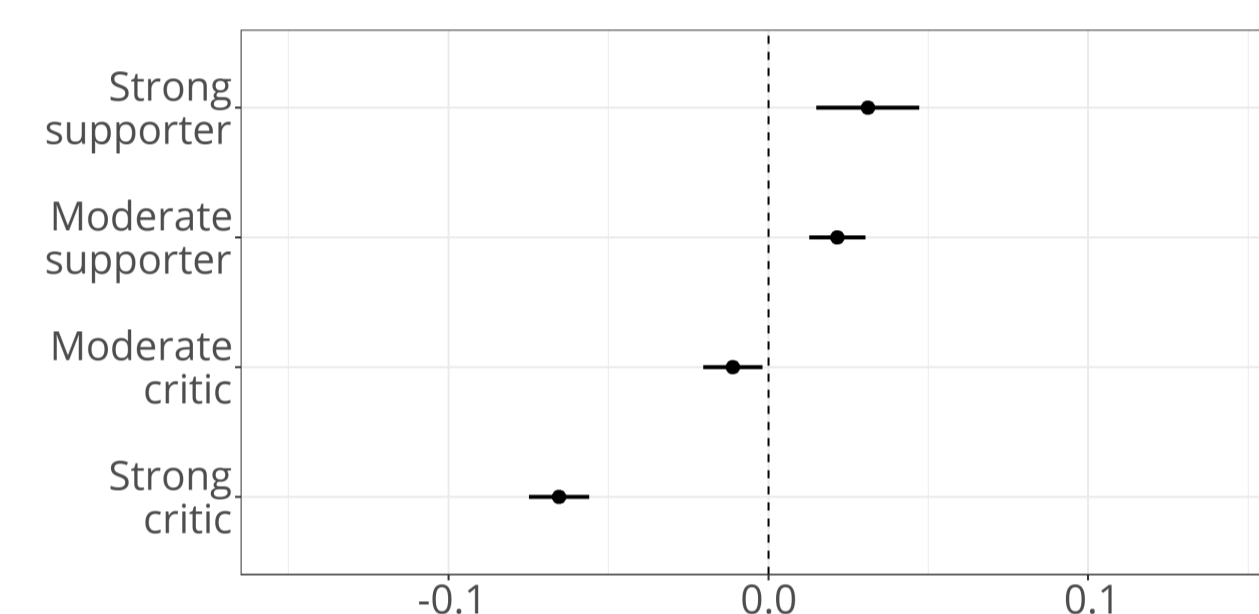


Figure 3: Predicted effect of changing the treatment from critical to state media outlet

These perceptions of news sources are consistent regardless of news content—like-minded or politically incongruent (Figure 4).

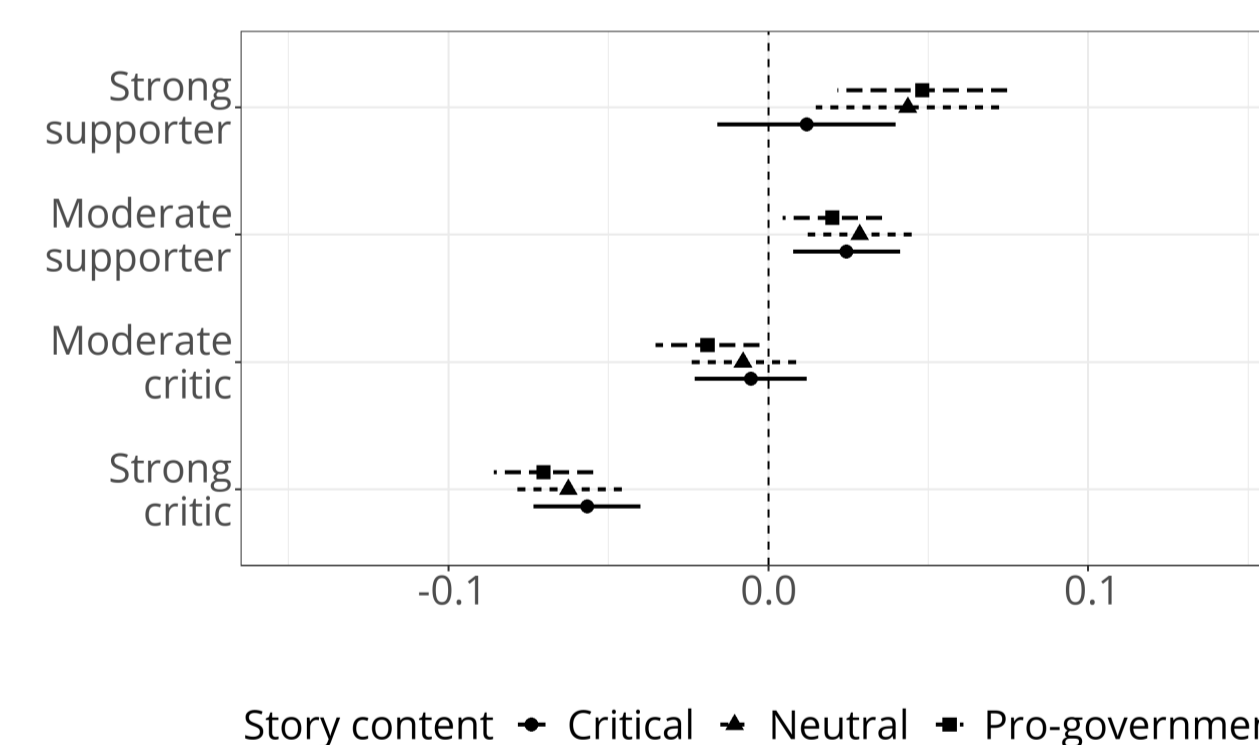


Figure 4: Predicted effect of changing the treatment from critical to state media outlet, by the type of news content

The effect also holds in a nationally representative sample with regard to Putin voters and those who did not vote for him (Figure 5).

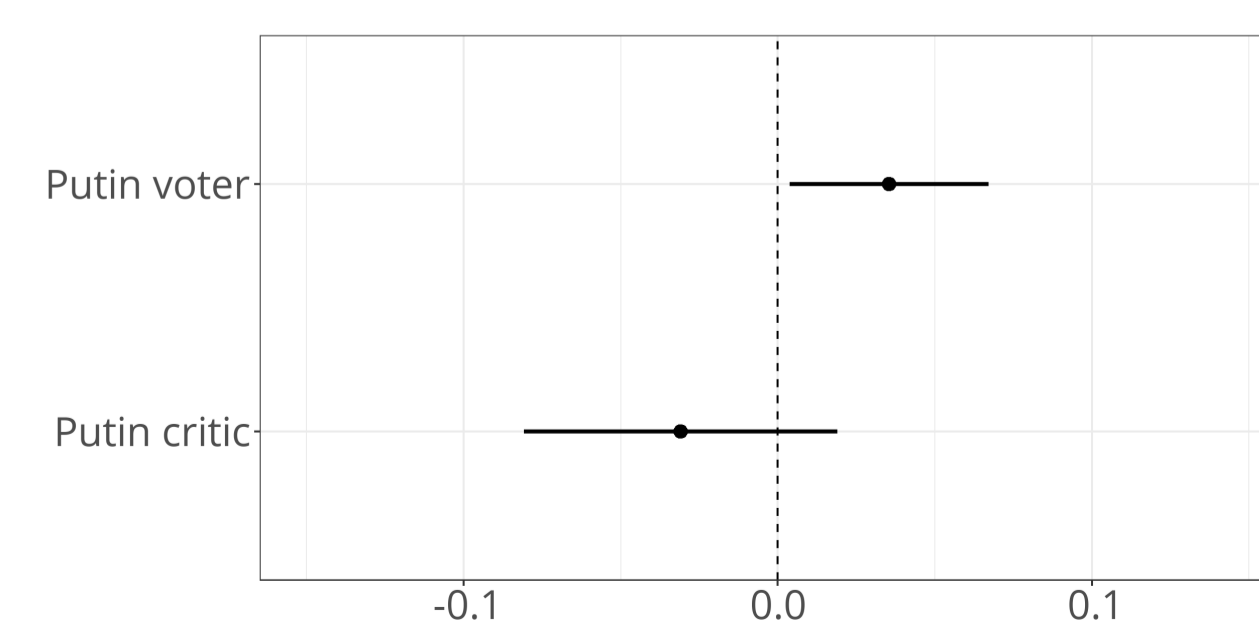


Figure 5: Predicted effect of changing the treatment from critical media (Echo of Moscow) to state media (Channel One), by vote choice in the 2018 presidential election

## Additional Evidence

- Putin supporters are much more likely than critics to list state media among news outlets they trust (Figure 6).
- Supporters are less likely to trust critical media.

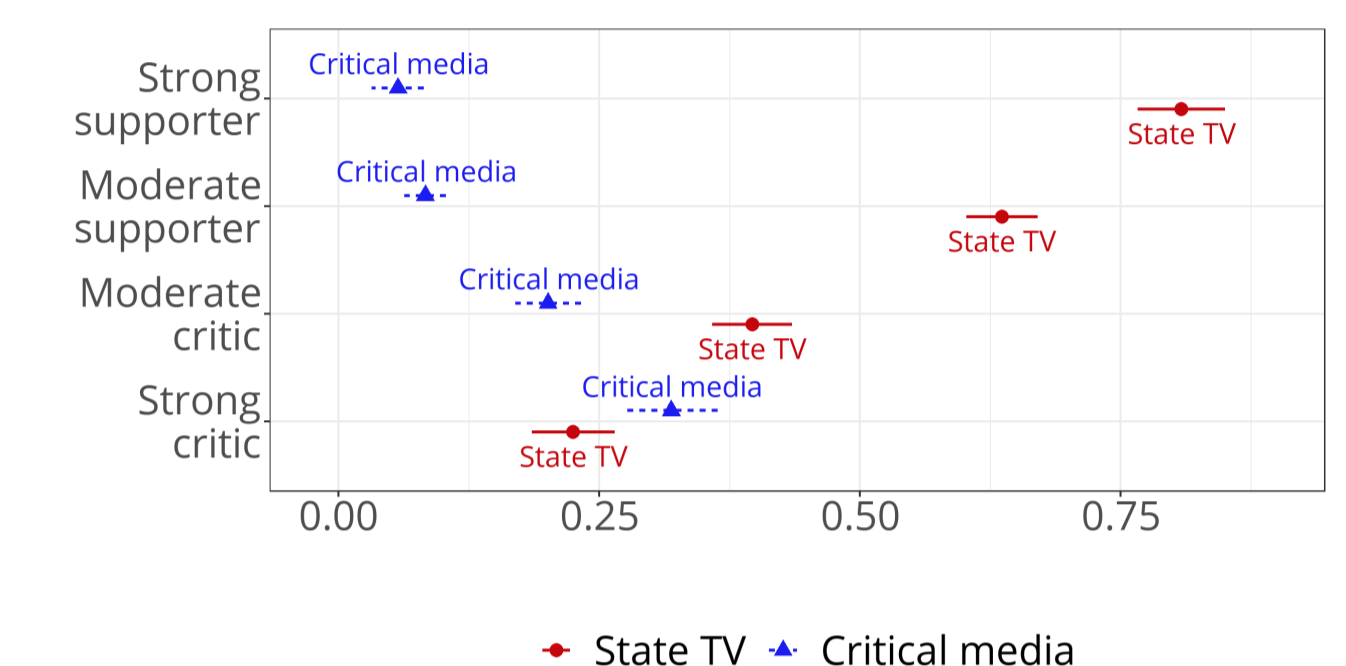


Figure 6: Predicted probability of trusting critical news outlets and state TV stations

- Putin supporters are much more likely to say that state-run outlets are accurate and uncensored (Figure 7).
- Supporters are very skeptical about critical media.
- Vice versa for Putin critics.

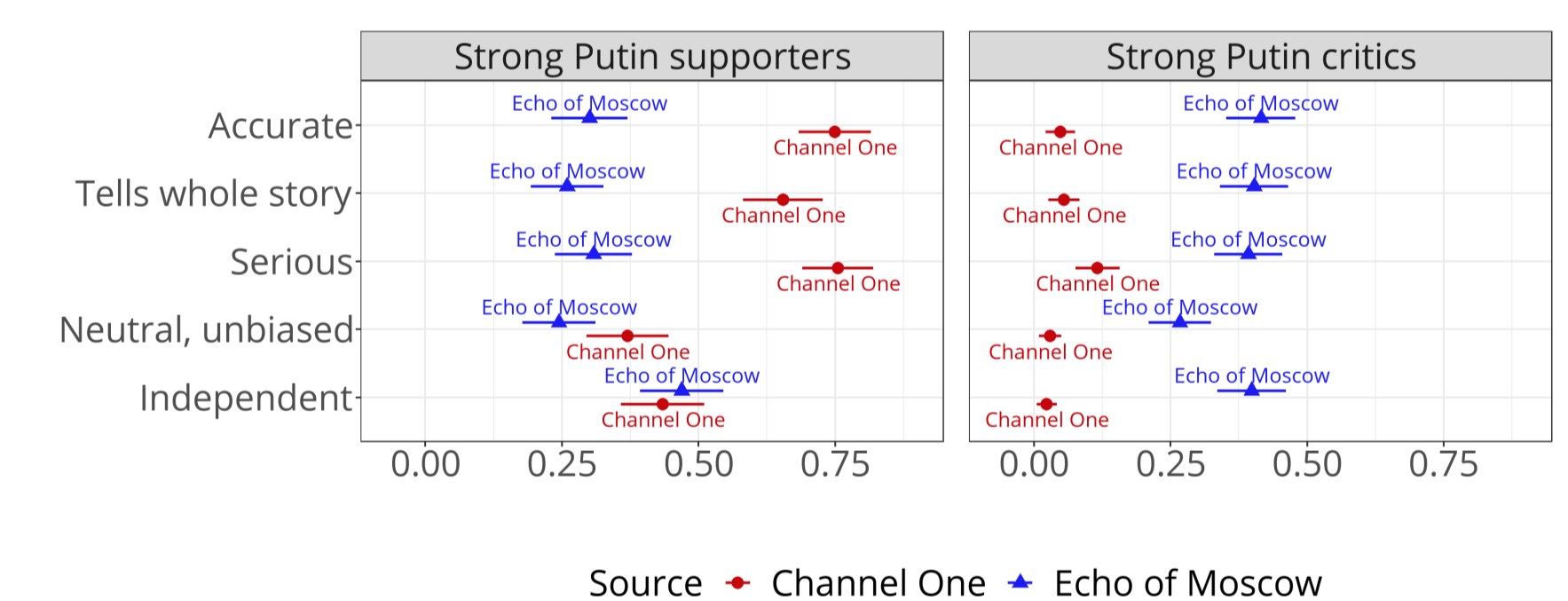


Figure 7: Predicted probability that one positively evaluates state media (Channel One) and critical media (Echo of Moscow) along various dimensions of news credibility

Moreover: in all my samples, Putin supporters overwhelmingly report learning their news from state media.

## Implications

- Perceptions of media in autocracies are politicized and polarized. Government supporters find information more credible when it's attributed to state media.
- If autocrats are popular, citizens can tolerate strong censorship and bias.
- Extending access to higher-quality news sources may not solve the problem of authoritarian disinformation: many citizens already avoid and distrust critical media.
- However, it is difficult for autocrats to reach out to the critics, as the latter are very skeptical about state media.

## Links and Contact Info

The full paper can be found [here](#). You can contact me at [shirikov@wisc.edu](mailto:shirikov@wisc.edu). Learn more about me: [shirikov.com](http://shirikov.com).