
The proliferation of research on misinformation in recent years is predicated on fears that people are not only uninformed, but *misinformed*—holding inaccurate beliefs with confidence that they are right (Kuklinski et al. 2000). However, the few studies that have measured the confidence with which inaccurate beliefs are held use methods that cannot meaningfully distinguish between the misinformed and uninformed. The result is that we know far less about how misinformed the public is, and who is misinformed, than is often claimed.

The dominant method of measuring belief certainty asks survey respondents to report how confident they are on an ordinal scale (e.g., ‘extremely sure’, ‘very sure,’ ‘somewhat sure’, ‘not at all sure’). Researchers then specify a threshold (e.g., ‘somewhat sure’) above which to classify beliefs as certain, and thus holders of inaccurate beliefs as misinformed. However, this approach is problematic in two ways. First, it requires researchers to specify a threshold above which to define beliefs as certain using a scale that has only relative meaning. For instance, ‘somewhat certain’ is more certain than ‘not at all certain’, but how certain is ‘somewhat certain’? And is someone who is ‘very certain’ about an inaccurate belief misinformed? Second, pilot data shows that different respondents use different scale points to express the same underlying level of certainty (i.e., Differential Item Functioning; King et al., 2003), and this differential use is likely not random. Adding to the confusion over how misinformed the public is, studies measuring certainty often use different response scale options and different thresholds at which to define people as misinformed (e.g., Kuklinski et al., 2000; Pasek et al., 2015; Graham, 2020).

This project addresses these concerns using anchoring vignettes (King et al., 2003; King and Wand, 2007; Wand, 2013), which add substantive meaning to ordinal response scales used to measure certainty in past work. This enables a more meaningful distinction between the uninformed and misinformed, as well as the ability to control for respondents’ differential use of the same response categories. The proposed project makes four primary contributions to the literature on misinformation: 1) examining how widespread the problem of being misinformed is in the U.S., 2) identifying the demographic and political characteristics associated with being misinformed, 3) adding meaningful context with which to interpret recent studies (e.g., the 2020 ANES) that use ordinal scales to measure certainty, and 4) validating a new measure of certainty using a large, high-quality national sample of U.S. adults. As discussed in the Sample Request & Justification section of this proposal, pilot data suggests that a large, high-quality national sample is critical to each of these aims.


