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The emotional mechanism of motivated reasoning: How arousal response to fake news shapes political attitudes

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Abstract

Using the framework of the motivated reasoning theory, this study examined the role of emotional responses to news in understanding the link between partisanship and political attitudes (e.g., Support for government policies). Specifically, it aimed to show whether the association of partisanship and support for government policies would be mediated by voters' perceived valence and arousal of fake and real news. A total of 200 Indonesians who voted either "Joko Widodo – Ma'aruf Amin" or "Prabowo Subianto – Sandiaga Uno" in the 2019 Presidential Election of the Republic of Indonesia were asked to read and rate the valence and arousal levels of fake and real news conveying anti-government framing. Then, they indicated how much they supported government policies led by Joko Widodo – Ma'aruf Amin. Results showed that voters of the election winner had a higher support for government policies. In comparison, voters of the election loser had lower support, indicating the presence of partisanship-based motivated reasoning. This association of partisanship and political support was mediated only by the arousal response to the anti-government fake news. Neither the mediation effect of the valence response to the fake news nor the valence and arousal responses to real news was significant. Hence, these findings suggest that arousal response activates motivated reasoning to defend or reinforce prior beliefs based on partisanship. The findings also imply that motivated reasoning is closely related to arousal responses to belief-consistent and belief-inconsistent fake news, providing a better understanding of how partisanship predicts political attitudes.

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Introduction

While democracy assumes that society can make decisions rationally, reality often diverges from this assumption. In political events, partisanship often influences how a person perceives conditions in the real world, including its impact on political attitude. Partisanship is linked to the tendency to make decisions based on one's alignment with the government, ideology, candidates, or party they support (Faragó et al., 2020; Halida, 2020; Lee, 2020; Neyazi & Muhtadi, 2021). Previous findings showed that individuals are more likely to perceive government policies as successful if the political figure they voted for in the election has successfully assumed office; conversely, they are more likely to deem government policies as failures if the political figure they voted for has failed to assume office (Bisgaard, 2015; Bolsen et al., 2014; Gerber & Huber, 2010; Ramirez & Erickson, 2014; Slothuus & De Vreese, 2010). This aligns with motivated reasoning theory, which suggests individuals make decisions based on prior beliefs (Kunda, 1990).

News consumption has been found to influence political attitudes (Balmas, 2014; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2022; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020). Previous research using physiological measurements found that the emotional elements of news, particularly the combination of high arousal and adverse effects, influenced political attitudes, such as support for anti-immigrant policies (Boyer, 2021). However, that research did not examine the emotional responses from reading different types of news, namely, fake and real news. Fake news has been shown to have serious consequences, including influencing political decisions (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Pennycook et al., 2021), endangering lives by fostering public doubt about the existence of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ioannidis, 2020), and inciting racial riots, as observed in the UK (Azzahra, 2024).

This distinction is essential, as Shelby and Ernst (2013) found that fake news, in comparison to real news, attracts readers more because it contains higher proportions of emotional language. Additionally, investigating emotional responses to fake news and real news is relevant since fake news is widely spread on social media (Lazer et al., 2018), considering the absence of editorial processes for news on social media (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Meanwhile, social media is currently used as the primary source for accessing information for 54 percent of residents in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2024). In Indonesia, data from Katadata Insight Centre and the Ministry of Communication and Informatics (Kementerian Komunikasi dan Informatika, 2022) showed that 72.6 percent of respondents in 2022 relied on social media as their primary source of information.

This study examined whether emotional responses, specifically valence and arousal responses to fake and real news, are linked to partisanship and predict political support. Given the strong association between motivated reasoning and emotion (Boyer, 2021), we tested whether these emotional responses mediate the effect of partisanship on political attitudes, specifically support for government policies. Previous studies have shown that the emotionality of news affects political attitudes, focusing mainly on negative and positive emotions (Lecheler et al., 2015; Soroka & McAdams, 2015; Valentino et al., 2011). However, they have not empirically examined how emotional responses to fake and real news might influence political attitudes. Additionally, previous studies have not distinguished the roles of valence and arousal responses in shaping political attitudes. To address these gaps, this study separately measured valence and arousal responses through self-inventory after participants read each real and fake news headline.

Literature Review

Motivated Reasoning: A Framework For Political Attitude

Decision-making based on partisanship is an example of motivated reasoning in processing information (Redlawsk, 2002). Motivated reasoning is the tendency for individuals to believe things that align with their pre-existing beliefs or attitudes - "believing what they want to believe because they want to believe it" (Kunda, 1990, p. 480). Pre-existing beliefs are influenced by various factors, including ideology, partisanship, and cultural worldviews (Kahan et al., 2017). Motivated reasoning helps protect one's identity and reduce cognitive dissonance (Kahan et al., 2017; Sloman & Rabb, 2019).

Partisanship and Political Attitude

Previous studies have shown that partisanship predicts political attitudes and behavior significantly (Bisgaard, 2015; Bolsen et al., 2014; Gerber & Huber, 2010; Ramirez & Erickson, 2014; Slothuus & De Vreese, 2010). For instance, people tend to evaluate the government as more successful if a candidate leads it from their in-group and less successful if the government is led by an out-group candidate (Bisgaard, 2015; Gerber & Huber, 2010). Furthermore, partisanship also

influences perceptions of government success, such as economic progress and unemployment reduction (Ramirez & Erickson, 2014).

Campbell et al. (1960, p. 133) defined partisanship as "a largely affective psychological attachment to a political party." This partisan identification influences how information is gathered, analyzed, and integrated into decision-making (Ramirez & Erickson, 2014). A specific characteristic of Indonesian voters is that their political identification with parties (Party ID) tends to be weak (Basrianto, 2018). Indonesian voters do not feel firmly attached to the party they believe in and vote for in the elections. Another characteristic of Indonesian politics, with its multi-party system, is the absence of apparent differences in ideology and political policies among parties. Party differences tend to be more clientelistic or patronage-based, driven by vested interests (Fossati et al., 2020), influencing the formation of party coalitions and candidate selection during presidential elections in Indonesia.

Tomsa and Ufen (2013) identified clientelism as a common political feature not only in Indonesia but also in Thailand and the Philippines. Despite differences in their political systems, all three countries are marked by weak public confidence in political parties. This form of clientelism contrasts with patterns in Western democracies, such as the United States, where partisanship closely aligns with ideology: liberals tend to support the Democratic Party, while conservatives favor the Republican Party (Bronstein et al., 2019; Kahan et al., 2012; Pennycook & Rand, 2019b). In clientelistic systems, however, voting is less about ideological platforms and more about emotional ties and personal interests, often centered on political figures. In Thailand, partisanship is measured by the divide between the Red Shirts, who support electoral democracy and Thaksin, and the Yellow Shirts, who are conservative, pro-monarchy, and aligned with the military (Jirasatthumb et al., 2022). Similarly, party identification in the Philippines is weak and is often measured by individuals' support for or opposition to a dominant political figure, such as Rodrigo Duterte (Arata et al., 2020).

In Indonesia, partisanship often aligns with support for political figures, such as presidential candidates. Previous research indicates that partisanship in Indonesia is defined by individual preferences or support for presidential candidates, with partisanship measured by voters' support for candidates such as Joko Widodo or Prabowo Subianto in the 2019 Presidential Election (Halida, 2020; Neyazi & Muhtadi, 2021). This study, conducted in 2022, measures political attitudes by the extent to which voters support government policies, based on the candidate they chose in the 2019 election. The research question and hypothesis proposed are:

RQ1: To what extent would partisanship predict support for government policy?

H1: Partisanship would significantly predict support for government policy.

News Emotionality As Mediators

Calvillo et al. (2020) found that political ideology's impact on attitudes and behavior is influenced by how politicians and media frame the news. During the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S., Republican supporters, following party leaders, downplayed the virus's severity and saw it as a political issue. This led them to struggle more to distinguish fake news from real news than Democratic supporters did. Calvillo et al. (2020) suggested that politicians use fake news to frame issues effectively. According to Lazer et al. (2018), fake news is "fabricated information that imitates the format of news media content but lacks the organizational process or intent." The effectiveness of fake news lies in its emotional impact. Vosoughi et al. (2018) found that fake news elicits more negative emotions, such as fear and disgust, whereas real news elicits more positive emotions, such as happiness and trust. This difference is due to the higher use of negative language in fake news (Shelby & Ernst, 2013), which also triggers readers' higher arousal responses than real news (Baumeister et al., 2001). As a result, fake news captures readers' attention more effectively, influencing their political cognition and behavior.

In this study, we define emotional responses to news based on Russell's (1980) circumplex model of emotions, which maps emotional experiences by their valence (positive-negative) and arousal (low-high). Martel et al. (2020) show that the arousal state impacts the ability to assess fake news, with higher arousal increasing belief in fake news. Boyer (2021) showed that news activates stronger motivated reasoning by inducing negative emotions and high arousal. However, Boyer (2021) did not differentiate between fake and real news and the partisanship of his participants, and measured only arousal responses to the news. Thus, whether the valence or arousal responses, types of news, partisanship, or all components make news content influential in shaping readers' attitudes remain unanswered.

This study explores how valence, arousal, and partisanship influence political attitudes and support for government policies. Motivated reasoning theory suggests that partisanship predicts political attitudes, which are more favorable when aligned with supported political figures. However, we hypothesized that partisanship also influences voters' emotional responses to political news. Specifically, news inconsistent with beliefs will be seen as more arousing, negative, or threatening, activating motivated reasoning to defend one's

partisanship (Boyer, 2021). In contrast, belief-consistent news will be perceived as less arousing and positive and yield the opposite effect, which is to reinforce one's partisanship. Both mechanisms will predict the level of political support for government policies based on one's partisanship (Kahan et al., 2017). Thus, emotional responses to fake and real news might mediate the effect of partisanship on political support. Given this reasoning, we proposed a second research question and more hypotheses:

RQ2: Do the arousal and valence responses to fake news and real news mediate the association of partisanship and support for government policies?

H2a: The arousal and valence responses to fake news would significantly mediate the association of partisanship and support for government policies.

H2b: The arousal and valence responses to real news would significantly mediate the association of partisanship and support for government policies.

Methodology

Participants and Data Collection

This research had two main stages: collecting news stimuli and distributing questionnaires. For fake news stimuli, we accessed the fake news databases of Indonesian fact-checking websites, including Cekfakta.com and the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (Kementerian Komunikasi dan Informatika [KOMINFO]). website from August 2021 to April 2022. These sites identified fake news through specific verification processes. We selected seven fake news headlines with anti-government framing. Using a within-subject design, the study compared the effects of fake and real news. Real news was sourced from mainstream mass media, replicating methods from previous research (Pennycook & Rand, 2019a, 2019b).

Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Psychology at Universitas Indonesia (044/FPsi.Komite Etik/PDP.04.00/2022). Data were collected between April and August 2022. Participants had a chance to win one of ten online vouchers worth Rp 50,000 each (about 3 USD) through a lottery. The study was conducted online, using convenience sampling based on participants' availability and willingness to respond. Data collection began by distributing an e-flyer through social media and colleagues. Written informed consent was obtained at the beginning of the survey, which took about 10-15 minutes to complete. Participant emails were recorded, and each email could only be used to submit once. There was no missing data in this study. Participants in this study had to be Indonesian citizens who voted in the 2019 Presidential Election. A total of 235 respondents were obtained, but 35 did not vote in the 2019 Indonesian Presidential Election, leaving 200 respondents for further analysis.

Measures and Data Analysis

Seven fake news headlines with an anti-government attitude were selected, such as "Over 70 percent of officials in Indonesia experienced an increase in wealth after the Covid pandemic due to the sale of coronavirus and vaccine bonuses." We also selected eight real news headlines with a similar anti-government tone to better understand the mechanisms of emotion and motivated reasoning in both fake and real news. Including real news helped prevent respondents from discerning the study's primary purpose. An example of a real news headline is "Chinese hacker group, allegedly state-funded, hacks several targets in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia."

Following the presentation of each news headline, participants were asked to assess their emotional response to each headline using a 5-point scale for valence (1=negative to 5 = positive) and arousal (1= very aroused to 5 = not at all aroused). Reverse scoring was performed to ease the computation of the arousal level. The validity and reliability of arousal and valence responses towards the fake news and real news were assessed using the Rasch Model (Winstep). The test reliability of valence and arousal measures for fake news was acceptable, with $\alpha = .67$ (fair) for valence and $\alpha = .75$ (good) for arousal. For real news, the reliability was $\alpha = .64$ (fair) for valence and $\alpha = .75$ (good) for arousal.

This study measured partisanship by asking respondents whom they voted for in the 2019 Indonesian Presidential Election, with options "Joko Widodo-Ma'ruf Amin" (coded as 1) and "Prabowo Subianto-Sandiaga Uno" (coded as 2). Political attitude was measured using a single-item question: "What is your view on the success of the current policies implemented by the government of the Republic of Indonesia?" Responses were recorded on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 4 (very satisfied). Consistent with previous studies (Ahmad et al., 2014; Allen et al., 2022; Wanous et al., 1997), single-item measures have been shown to be as valid and reliable as multi-item measures.

The data were analyzed using regression and mediation analysis in SPSS version 26.0. Specifically, a mediation analysis was conducted using Hayes' type 4 and bootstrap method with 5,000 samples, with a total research sample of

200. Age and gender were employed as covariates to test the hypotheses and were statistically controlled (Table 1). This decision was based on the unequal distribution of gender among participants, the wide age range in the sample, and prior findings indicating that age and gender can influence partisanship (Huang, 2013).

The mean age of respondents was 40.03 years (SD = 14.96, range 20–75 years). The study included 120 females (60%) and 80 males (40%). Most respondents were Muslim (145 individuals, 72.5%) and from the Javanese ethnic group (99 people, 49.5%). The majority held a bachelor's degree (72 participants, 36%), followed by those with a master's degree (68 individuals, 34%). Most were private employees (68 participants, 34%), followed by students (35 individuals, 17.5%).

Based on the arousal rating, the arousal response to fake news (M = 2.86, SD = .83) was higher than to real news (M = 2.64, SD = .72), t(199) = 4.95, p < .001. This indicates that fake news was generally perceived as more arousing or evoked a stronger emotional response than real news. Another analysis using the independent samples t-test based on partisanship found that Joko Widodo-Ma'aruf Amin voters (M = 2.98; SD = .75) showed a significantly higher (t (198) = 7.99, p < .001) support for government policies compared to Prabowo Subianto-Sandiaga Uno voters (M = 2.06; SD = .74).

Results from mediation analysis showed that partisanship significantly predicted support for government policies (b = -.811, p < .001) (Table 2 and Table 3). These results indicated that Hypothesis (H1) was supported.

Table 1 Partial correlations among main study variables (controlling for sex and age, N = 200)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Par	—					
2. SGP	-.48**	—				
3. ValFN	-.13	.20*	—			
4. AroFN	-.23*	.17*	-.17*	—		
5. ValRN	-.07	.13	.52**	-.06	—	
6. AroRN	-.22*	.06	-.15*	-.67**	-.12	—

Note: Par= Partisanship: 1:Joko Widodo-Ma'ruf Amin; 2:Prabowo Subianto-Sandiaga Uno, SGP= Support for Government Policies, ValFN= Valence of fake news, AroFN= Arousal of fake news, ValRN= Valence of real news, AroRN= Arousal of Real news.
*p < .05, two tailed. ** p < .01, two tailed.

Table 2 Analysis of the mediating effects of valence and arousal responses to fake news and real news in the association between partisanship and support for government policies

Effect	Estimate	*SE*	95% CI		*p*
			LL	*UL*	
Support for Government Policies					
Partisanship (Path C)	-.87	.11	-1.10	-.65	<.001 ***
Support for Government Policies					
Intercept	2.78	.47	1.85	3.71	<.001***
Partisanship (Path C')	-.81	.12	-1.04	-.58	<.001***
Valence Response to Fake News (Path B1)	.18	.09	.01	.36	.04*
Arousal Response to Fake News (Path B2)	.19	.09	.02	.36	.03*
Valence Response to Real News (Path B3)	.02	.10	-.17	.21	.85
Arousal Response to Real News (Path B4)	-.16	.10	-.36	.04	.11
Covariates					
Age	.01	.00	.00	.02	.03*
Sex	.15	.18	-.06	.36	.17
Valence Response to Fake News					
Intercept	2.66	.22	2.22	3.09	<.001***
Partisanship (Path A1)	-.19	.11	-.41	.02	.07
Covariates					
Age	-.00	.00	-.01	.00	.21
Sex	-.11	.10	-.31	.09	.26
Arousal Response to Fake News					
Intercept	3.68	.26	3.18	4.18	<.001***
Partisanship (Path A2)	-.41	.13	-.66	-.17	.001**

Table 2 (Continued)

Effect	Estimate	*SE*	95% CI		*p*
			LL	*UL*	
Covariates					
Age	-.00	.00	-.01	.01	.50
Sex	-.29	.12	-.52	-.06	.02*
Valence Response to Real News					
Intercept	2.63	.20	2.23	3.02	<.001***
Partisanship (Path A3)	-.10	.10	-.29	.09	.31
Covariates					
Age	.00	.00	-.00	.01	.35
Sex	-.12	.09	-.30	.06	.18
Arousal Response to Real News					
Intercept	3.61	.22	3.18	4.05	<.001***
Partisanship (Path A4)	-.34	.11	-.55	-.13	.002**
Covariates					
Age	-.01	.00	-.02	-.00	.001**
Sex	-.17	.10	-.37	.03	.09

Note: *p < .05, two tailed. **p < .01, two tailed. ***p < .001, two tailed.

Table 3 Direct, indirect, and total effects found in the mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 4)

Effect	Estimate	*SE*	95% CI		*p*
			LL	*UL*	
Support for Government Policies					
Partisanship (Path C)	-.87	.11	-1.10	-.65	<.001 ***
Partisanship (Path C')	-.81	.12	-1.04	-.58	<.001***

Indirect Effect (Mediation Indexes)

Effect	Estimate	*SE*	95% CI	
			LL	*UL*
Total	-.07	.06	-.20	.04
Ind1 (Valence Response to Fake News)	-.04	.03	-.12	.01
Ind2 (Arousal Response to Fake News)	-.09	.06	-.21*	-.00*
Ind3 (Valence Response to Real News)	-.00	.02	-.04	.03
Ind4 (Arousal Response to Real News)	.06	.05	-.01	.17

Note: *p < .05, two tailed. **p < .01, two tailed. ***p < .001, two tailed.

The overall model was significant, $F(7, 192) = 12.24$, $p < .001$, and accounted for approximately 30.9 percent of the variance in support for government policies ($R^2 = .309$). Regression analyses examined the effect of partisanship on emotional responses (valence and arousal) to fake news. The model predicting valence response was not significant, $F(3, 196) = 1.90$, $p = .13$, $R^2 = .03$. However, partisanship significantly predicted arousal response, $F(3, 196) = 5.95$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .08$. Concerning the mediating roles of arousal and valence responses to fake news in the relationship between partisanship and support for government policies, the results showed that the valence response to fake news did not serve as a significant mediator between partisanship and support for government policies (b = -.04, $p > .05$; CI [–.12, .01]). However, arousal response to fake news was found to significantly mediate the relationship between partisanship and support for government policies (b = -.09, $p < .01$; CI [-.21, -.00]), indicating that hypothesis 2a (H2a) was partially supported.

Regression analyses were conducted to examine the effect of partisanship on emotional responses (valence and arousal) to real news (Table 3). The model predicting valence response was not significant, $F(3, 196) = 1.39$, $p = .25$, $R^2 = .02$. However, partisanship significantly predicted arousal response, $F(3, 196) = 7.03$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .10$. The study also tested the mediation effects of valence and arousal responses to real news on partisanship and support for government policies (Figure 1). The results showed that the valence response to real news did not significantly mediate partisanship and support for government policies ($b = -.00$, $p > .05$; CI [-.04, .03]). Similarly, the arousal response to real news did not significantly mediate partisanship and support for government policies (b=.06, p >.05; CI [–.01, .17]). These results suggested that the indirect influence of partisanship on support for government policies was mediated only by the arousal response to fake news, not real news. Thus, hypothesis 2b was not supported.

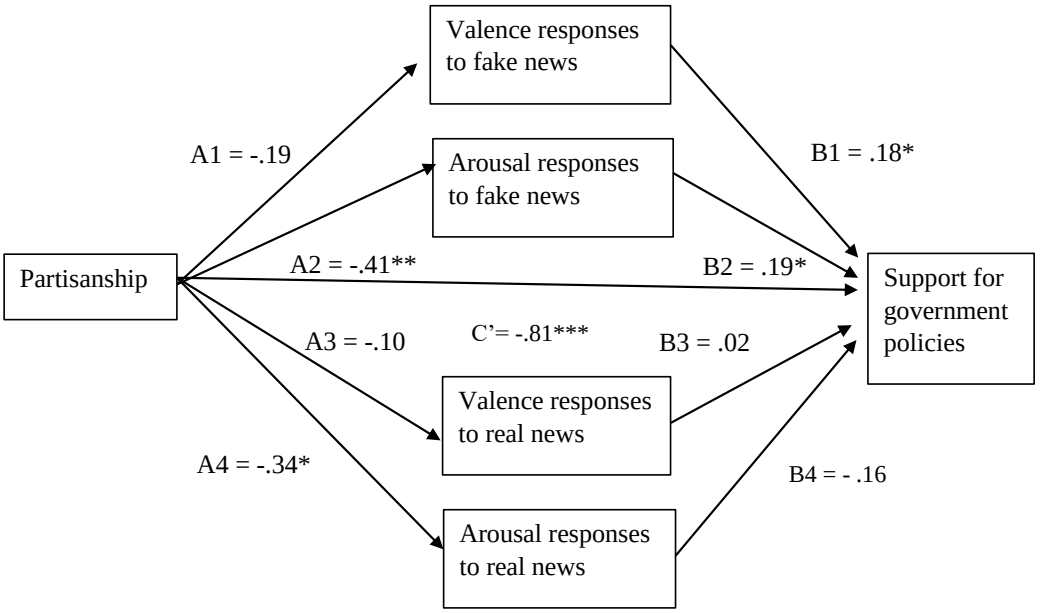


Figure 1 The mediation effects of arousal and valence responses to fake and real news in the association between partisanship and support for government policies
*p < .05, two-tailed. **p < .01, two tailed. ***p < .001, two tailed.

Discussion

General Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study align with previous research, showing that partisanship significantly predicts political attitudes, which in this study is measured by support for government policies. Voters of Joko Widodo-Ma'aruf Amin tended to view government policies more positively than voters of Prabowo Subianto–Sandiaga Uno. Our study found that partisanship influenced support for government policies through the arousal response to anti-government fake news. Prabowo Subianto-Sandiaga Uno voters showed lower arousal to such news, reinforcing their beliefs and resulting in weaker policy support. In contrast, Joko Widodo-Ma'aruf Amin voters, who supported government policies more strongly, had higher arousal due to the inconsistency between their partisanship and the anti-government content, leading to stronger support for government policies.

The results align with prior research (Bisgaard, 2015; Bolsen et al., 2014; Gerber & Huber, 2010; Ramirez & Erickson, 2014; Slothuus & De Vreese, 2010), showing that partisanship influences policy support, particularly when the information aligns with one's beliefs. The study found that arousal triggered by fake news mediates this effect, with higher arousal increasing support for government policies among Joko Widodo-Ma'aruf Amin voters. In contrast, Prabowo Subianto-Sandiaga Uno voters showed lower arousal and weaker policy support. These findings suggest that motivated reasoning might serve as a defense mechanism against belief-inconsistent information (Kahan et al., 2017; Kunda, 1990; Sloman & Rabb, 2019) or as a reinforcing mechanism towards belief-consistent information. The findings of Westen et al. (2006) regarding the brain's neural mechanisms during motivated reasoning are similar to the brain mechanisms involved in psychological defense, confirmatory biases, and cognitive dissonance, especially in the presence of cognitive–evaluative discrepancies. Motivated reasoning is viewed as an emotional regulation mechanism in which brain activation shows a tendency to maximize positive emotional states and minimize negative emotional conditions, especially when dealing with information perceived as threatening (Westen et al., 2006). Even though confirmation bias occurs as individuals reach conclusions that align with their prior beliefs (even if it is fake news), this state is often preferred because it provides a sense of relief, as they feel they have achieved balance (emotionally stable judgment).

The study also revealed that arousal played a stronger role in fake news than real news, highlighting how it is perceived as more credible and engages motivated reasoning more effectively due to its higher emotionally charged content. The role of emotions can be explained through the close relationship between emotions and memory. In general, emotions have been found to enhance attention and memory (Vuilleumier, 2005). Specifically, previous findings confirm that the effect of emotions on memory does not depend on the valence (positive-negative) of the stimulus (Kensinger & Corkin, 2003), but instead on the arousal aspect of the stimulus (whether it elicits excitement or calm) (Genc Aksaray & Ozcelik, 2023; Hamann, 2001).

The arousal element of emotions has indeed been found to capture attention (Tugade et al., 2021), allowing stimuli to be prioritized in the process and more memorable. In this study, the fake news used as stimuli is anti-government, critical, or derogatory toward the government, reflecting the most common type of fake news found on Indonesian social media, as most of it is intended to create unrest and erode public trust in the government (Paterson, 2019). Compared to the emotional reponse to real news, which was proven not to be a significant mediator, the emotional response to anti-government fake news was found to generate greater arousal, especially among Joko Widodo-Ma'ruf Amin voters, due to its inconsistency with their prior beliefs. The excitement aspect of arousal, which evokes surprise, shock, or sensation, has been found to have a greater influence on attention and shaping political attitudes (such as support for the success of government policies) compared to the valence (positive or negative nature of the news). Therefore, it is not surprising that Boyer (2021) found arousal to be a key aspect of news content that journalists effectively use to attract readers. Arousal enhances readers' attention and memory of the news, thereby increasing its power to shape their attitudes.

Implications

The main contribution of this study is to provide a better understanding of how partisanship predicts political attitudes. This study confirms the tendency toward motivated reasoning, in which individuals favor decisions consistent with their prior beliefs, particularly in the context of political news. Furthermore, this study highlights the emotional mechanism of motivated reasoning, emphasizing the role of arousal responses to fake news. The arousal response was found to activate motivated reasoning that defends or reinforces prior beliefs based on partisanship.

This research has practical implications for public policymaking and media practices. Motivated reasoning and the spread of fake news are linked to political polarization, which harms social cohesion (Stanley et al., 2020). Educators and media experts should consider these insights when designing interventions to reduce misinformation and political polarization. Journalists could present real political news in more emotionally engaging ways, similar to fake news, to counter its spread. Additionally, enhancing public digital literacy through techniques like inoculation (Morris et al., 2020; Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019) could help voters recognize how fake news influences emotions and reinforces motivated reasoning.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study confirms hypothesis 1 that partisanship predicts support for government policy. Regarding the role of emotions, hypothesis 2a is supported only in the case of arousal responses to fake news. The arousal responses to fake news mediate the relationship between partisanship and support for government policies, whereas valence responses to fake news do not. Hypothesis 2b is not supported, as both arousal and valence responses to real news do not mediate the relationship between partisanship and support for government policies. Thus, the arousal of fake news plays a crucial role in motivated reasoning, reinforcing or defending beliefs based on partisanship.

This study's limitations include its cross-sectional design, which prevents causal inference, and the reliance on anti-government fake news due to difficulties finding pro-government content. Future research could use a longitudinal design to establish causal relationships and explore pro-government fake news. Additionally, alternative physiological measures could improve the validity of emotional response assessments. Finally, while single-item measures may be as valid and reliable as multi-item measures, future research could benefit from using multi-item measures, as this approach may enhance the robustness of findings.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

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