Article

How Politics Shape Views Toward Fact-Checking: Evidence from Six European Countries

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Abstract
Fact-checking has spread internationally, in part to confront the rise of digital disinformation campaigns. American studies suggests ideological asymmetry in attitudes toward fact-checking, as well as greater acceptance of the practice among those more interested in and knowledgeable about politics. We examine attitudes toward fact-checking across six European counties to put these findings in a broader context ($N = 6,067$). We find greater familiarity with and acceptance of fact-checking in Northern Europe (Sweden and Germany) than elsewhere (Italy, Spain, France, and Poland). We further find two dimensions of political antipathy: a left–right dimension and an "anti-elite" dimension (including dissatisfaction with democracy and negative feelings toward the European Union), the latter of which more consistently predicts negative feelings toward fact-checkers in the countries examined. Our findings demonstrate that despite general acceptance of the movement, significant political divides remain. Those less likely to trust fact-checkers could be more vulnerable to disinformation targeting these divides, leading to a spiral of cynicism.

Keywords
public opinion, political perceptions, media bias, media audiences, party identity

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Introduction

Online disinformation is a growing concern among the public and policy makers, with high-profile cases including Russia's Internet Research Agency "troll factory" (Bastos and Farkas 2019) and Macedonian teenagers producing pro-Trump "fake news" (Silverman and Alexander 2016). Although the overall reach of these campaigns may be limited (Fletcher et al. 2018; Guess, Lyons, et al. 2018; Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2018), their individual posts often exceed the engagement metrics of high-circulation mainstream news outlets (Fletcher et al., 2018; Marchal et al., 2019).

Alongside the rise of online disinformation, the number of fact-checking websites continues to grow (Amazeen 2017, 2019; Graves and Cherubini 2016; Graves et al., 2016; Nie et al., 2010). Fact-checkers attempt to render judgments about the truth behind statements from public figures. Beginning in the United States in the early 2000s, this movement has now taken root in more than fifty counties, and well over 100 independent fact-checkers are now in operation (Graves and Cherubini 2016; Nie et al., 2010). More than fifty have launched in Europe alone in the last ten years, though around a third have ceased operation (Graves and Cherubini 2016). These operate in twenty countries across every region of the continent.

The global proliferation of the fact-checking movement is primarily driven by digital expansion, particularly outside the movement's original epicenter in the United States (Graves and Cherubini 2016). As the fact-checking movement has spread, many of its practitioners have geared their product explicitly toward online misinformation (Snopes 2019). Online fact-checking initiatives have expanded beyond basic text corrections in recent years, turning increasingly to innovations like automation to address misinformation and disinformation on a global scale (Oliveira 2018). Fact-checking is also now directly integrated into the global fight against online disinformation waged by the largest social platforms (i.e., Facebook) (Funke 2019). There have also been digitally native fact-checking innovations such as Spain's Maldito Bulo ("damn hoax"), a project specifically designed to debunk viral hoaxes and misleading images (Lyons 2018).

Importantly, though, public familiarity with fact-checking is not universal. Those who are already knowledgeable about and interested in politics are more likely to be acquainted with the format (Nyhan and Reifler 2016). Furthermore, fact-checking faces asymmetric resistance. In the United States, where the bulk of fact-checking research has been conducted (Nieminen and Rapeli 2019), conservative Republicans hold much less-favorable views toward fact-checkers (Nyhan and Reifler 2016). On the contrary, those more interested in and knowledgeable about politics are more favorable toward them. As this journalism format grows abroad, it is important to understand what conditions its embrace in a cross-national perspective.

Taken together, these trends may result in worrying gaps in factual beliefs (Veenstra et al. 2014). As foreign disinformation campaigns increasingly target

and attempt to inflame domestic social divisions (Kim et al., 2018; Linvill et al., 2019), such as the Internet Research Agency's use of pro-Trump conservative and Black Lives Matter activist spoofed accounts (Farkas and Bastos 2018), asymmetry in acceptance of fact-checks could leave some groups more vulnerable to manipulation and further stoke division. In Europe, belief gaps may emerge surrounding anti-elite worldviews if the similar trends observed in the United States hold internationally. Just like conservative elites in the United States, populist politicians in Europe frequently attack the press (Krämer 2017), influencing media attitudes among those holding sympathetic political preferences (Fawzi 2019; Schulz et al. 2020). Likewise, those who are dissatisfied with democracy and those who view the European Union (E.U.) negatively may hold similar negative views toward fact-checking.

Still, cross-national work is needed to determine if the United States is an outlier in terms of public familiarity with and asymmetric acceptance of fact-checking, whether due to differences across political systems, media systems (Dobek-Ostrowska and Głowacki 2010), or the role fact-checkers serve within them (Graves and Cherubini 2016). In this study, we posit that findings regarding involvement in politics (knowledge and interest) and attitudes toward fact-checking should replicate in Europe (Norris 2000). Furthermore, we argue that United States conservative resistance is not anomalous but fits within a broader systemic distrust of media across political divides (Krämer 2017). Specifically, we examine conservatism (Nyhan and Reifler 2016), negative attitudes toward the E.U. (Hobolt 2012), and dissatisfaction with democracy (Hagan 2019) as potential predictors of unfavorable attitudes toward fact-checkers.

We find that approval of fact-checking in Europe is generally high, with important political and geographic variation. Specifically, we find familiarity and support is higher in Northern Europe (Germany and Sweden) compared with elsewhere (Spain, Italy, Poland, and France). We further show that while conservatism is linked with negative attitudes in some Western European countries, dissatisfaction with democracy and/or disaffection toward the E.U. are associated with more negative attitudes toward fact-checking across all countries examined. Importantly, while familiarity predicts approval, the associations of political views with fact-checking approval do not vary across familiarity. Our findings suggest that while overall sentiment toward fact-checking is positive across each country we examine, those undertaking this work in Europe do so in the face of important political divides around their profession, just as do those in the United States.

Explanations of Asymmetric Disaffection

In this section, we outline two possible explanations for the role of political views in fact-checking attitudes—attitude generalization from pre-existing views toward the media more broadly, and responses to fact-check content

itself—and briefly discuss how these might play out in a European context. Importantly, these potential explanations are not mutually exclusive.

Attitude Generalization

In the United States, as fact-checking has gained prominence, it has also drawn criticism from political elites (like those in the United States, European fact-checkers have been targets for aggrieved politicians (Graves and Cherubini 2016)). American conservatives, in particular, have voiced disdain for the enterprise, as when Mitt Romney's chief pollster, Neil Newhouse, said in 2012 that "we're not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact-checkers" (Smith 2012).

This sentiment fits within the larger distrust of the news media within the conservative movement going back decades (Ladd 2011); American conservatives are more likely to perceive (liberal) media bias (Dimock et al. 2013). There has been an even steeper decline in media trust among Republicans in recent years, with about 80 percent distrusting traditional mass media (Gottfried et al., 2019; Hamilton and Hern 2017). Indeed, data from the 2014 U.S. campaign show that Republicans, particularly those who are more knowledgeable about politics, hold less-favorable views toward fact-checking (Nyhan and Reifler 2016). Republicans also appear to share fact-checks online less often, and express more hostility toward them when they do (Shin and Thorson 2017). Overall, conservatives' negative perceptions of fact-checking might be linked to fact-checking's origin within mainstream media outlets in the United States, resulting in attitude generalization to the new format.

A similar process may play out in Europe. Although European fact-checkers are less likely to be tethered to an established news organization than their American counterparts (Graves and Cherubini 2016), fact-checking is nonetheless becoming more institutionalized in Europe.[1] As research on Euroscepticism, populism, and attitudes toward the media outlined below suggest, institutionalization may not work in fact-checkers' favor among a subset of the public. That is, institutionalization of fact-checking would mean they come to be seen in the same negative light as other institutions by cynical "anti-elite" citizens. This could be exacerbated by moves by the E.U. to address false news content (European Commission 2019; Radio Free Europe 2019). Because European integration remains a contentious issue in many E.U. member states (De Vries 2018; De Vries and Edwards 2009), as pro-E.U. think tanks or the E.U. itself move to employ and elevate fact-checking in response to misinformation, they risk transferring the polarization over E.U. integration to readers' feelings about fact-checking more broadly.

Importantly, transfer of attitudes about the media to attitudes toward fact-checking may occur not at the outlet level but in a more generalized fashion (Schulz et al. 2020). Citizens may not make distinctions between fact-checkers operating independently and those integrated with legacy media outlets. Instead,

fact-checking on the whole may be seen as a part of "the media," which themselves can be interpreted as elites (Jagers and Walgrave 2007), or even more extremely, as a conspiring actor working on behalf of establishment politicians (Mazzoleni et al. 2003). This view of the media as party to a conspiracy of the elite has been referred to as "anti-media populism" (Krämer 2018). Populist politicians have called out mainstream media as an out-group operating in opposition to the masses—an out-group that encompasses all media, and not only certain outlets (Schulz et al. 2020). Working from a social identity perspective, Schulz et al. (2020) argue that those holding an anti-elite identity must distance themselves from the out-group—the media as institution—to maintain their identity. For this reason, we focus on the explanatory power of individual-level political views rather than national-level differences in fact-checkers' operations.

Response to Fact-Check Content

Whether fact-checkers more frequently target one party or another may also contribute to asymmetry in public attitudes.[2] In the United States, fact-checkers have fact-checked Republican politicians' statements more often, and more often labeled their statements as false (Card, Lin and Smith 2018; Ostermeier 2011). Whether this is due to more frequent false statements from Republicans, more sensational statements among Republicans, or selection bias among fact-checkers, this imbalance could also produce more negative attitudes toward fact-checkers among conservative elites and voters. Although to our knowledge there are no data on the frequency of fact-checks by party in European contexts, an asymmetric pattern likely plays out there as well (FactCheck Ukraine cites "combating populism" as a core mission (Graves and Cherubini 2016)). Populist leaders, in particular, are often decried for blatantly false statements suitable for fact-checking (Waisbord 2018). If these politicians are accordingly targeted by fact-checks more often, those supporting them, including voters more dissatisfied with democracy and those who exhibit anti-E.U. sentiment, may likewise be less favorable toward the fact-checking movement. Those dissatisfied with democracy and those who exhibit anti-E.U. sentiment may also come to view fact-checking more negatively by way of a more generalized spiral of cynicism in which negative views toward political and media institutions are mutually reinforcing.

Predictors of Fact-Check Attitudes

While we outlined potential theoretical explanations for differences in attitudes toward fact-checking in the previous section, we now move to outline specific relationships between variables of interest.

Political Knowledge and Interest

Prior work in the United States shows that those interested and knowledgeable about politics are not only more familiar with the fact-checking movement, but also more supportive (Nyhan and Reifler 2016). While attentiveness to politics and the news environment may engender familiarity with what is a relatively newer journalism format, mechanisms for the latter relationship ultimately remain unclear. These individuals may report greater support for fact-checking due to social desirability of doing so (Tsfati 2010). Alternatively, they may seek it out more given that they are more interested in political events, and the resulting familiarity may eventually drive approval for fact-checkers (Norris 2000; Strömbäck and Shehata 2010). This would be a corollary of the "virtuous circle" proposed by Norris (2000), in which news consumption produces more positive orientations toward and engagement with the political system through deeper political knowledge, driving yet more news consumption.

We examine political interest and political knowledge and additionally test analytical thinking (Pennycook and Rand 2018) as potential measures of political and cognitive "sophistication" (Luskin 1990).[3]

> **Hypothesis 1:** Those more interested in and knowledgeable about politics and more inclined to analytical thinking, will be (a) more familiar with and (b) hold more favorable views toward fact-checking.

Ideology and Party Affiliation

Conservatism is a key predictor of fact-checking acceptance in the United States (Nyhan and Reifler 2016) and may also be in Europe, especially Western European nations with similar left–right traditions. However, this may not be the case in newer democracies, for example, where there may be significant variation from the patterns of beliefs typically linked to the left and right in more established democracies (Piurko et al. 2011). Specifically, research has shown that Poland, a postcommunist multiparty democracy, would not conform to such expectations (Caprara et al., 2017; Piurko et al., 2011).

Party affiliation is also a strong predictor in the United States, with Republicans less favorable toward the enterprise. Right-leaning parties may likewise be less favorable in Europe, again especially in nations with established left–right party histories, though exactly how this maps to multi-party systems is unclear. For this reason, we examine the association of party-family affiliations with fact-checking attitudes in an exploratory way.

> **Hypothesis 2a:** Conservatives will hold less-favorable views toward fact-checking.

Research Question 1: Do right-wing party affiliates hold less-favorable views toward fact-checking?

Based on prior work, we make no prediction about the relationship between political views and *familiarity* with fact-checking.

Euroscepticism and Dissatisfaction with Democracy

We extend the set of possible political predictors to include Euroscepticism and dissatisfaction with democracy. More broadly, political cynicism and anti-elite sentiment are linked to cynicism about the media. Like populist worldviews (Fawzi 2019; Schulz et al. 2020), the anti-establishment attitudes we examine here may also be associated with greater distrust of the media, and fact-checking specifically. If so, there would be two distinct dimensions of politically driven antipathy toward fact-checking—a traditional left–right dimension as seen in the United States, manifesting in both ideology and partisanship, as well as an anti-elite dimension. In both Euroscepticism and satisfaction with democracy, we examine how views of those opposed to the status quo in government—membership in the E.U., and democracy itself—correlate with attitudes toward a media movement. Furthermore, both variables may reflect anti-elite sentiments (Carlin 2006; Fawzi 2019; Lewandowsky 2019; Schulz et al. 2020).

Satisfaction with the government, in general, is linked to media attitudes. A Pew Research Center survey of thirty-eight countries found those expressing less trust in the government to do what is right for the country were also less satisfied with the news media, and in twenty-one countries, support for the governing party was linked to media attitudes (Mitchell et al., 2018). Those opposed to the governing party, particularly in Europe, hold more negative views about the media (Hagan 2019; Mitchell et al., 2018). Furthermore, satisfaction with democracy itself is associated with greater media trust (Hagan 2019).

Likewise, Eurosceptics, who criticize or reject European integration, often come to hold such views based on broader political discontent (Hobolt 2012; Hooghe and Marks 2007).[4] Some have highlighted the role of populists in projecting national discontent into Euroscepticsism (Hooghe and Marks 2007). Such rhetoric may produce a spiral of discontent and can contaminate views toward institutions more broadly. Indeed, populist worldviews, which often become entwined with Euroscepticism (Franzosi et al. 2015; Hartleb 2012), prominently feature an anti-media component (Fawzi 2019; Krämer 2017; Schulz et al. 2020).

In general then, those exhibiting dissatisfaction with democracy and the E.U., which may reflect more general anti-elite sentiment or cynicism regarding institutions, may be less favorable toward fact-checkers in Europe if fact-checkers are viewed through the same lens of the media at large—an elitist enterprise opposed to the will of the masses (Schulz et al. 2020). If so, this broad attitude

generalization is likely to overpower any differences in fact-checking's structure or format at the outlet level.

> **Hypotheis 2b:** Those viewing the E.U. more negatively will hold less-favorable views toward fact-checking.
> **Hypothesis 2c:** Those less satisfied with democracy will hold less-favorable views toward fact-checking.

As above, based on prior work, we make no prediction about the relationship between these views and *familiarity* with fact-checking.

Geographic Variation

We are also interested in differences across the cultural and political contexts we examine. As mentioned above, newer post-Communist democracies might not foster the link between conservatism and fact-check attitudes (Caprara et al., 2017; Piurko et al., 2011). In northern Europe, which has more robust public media and higher institutional trust in general, we also might expect more positive attitudes toward fact-checking as well. In general, though, it is unclear what role country-level variation in political and media systems might play in fact-check attitudes. For this reason, we pose the following research question:

> **Research Question 2:** To what degree do the correlates of familiarity and favorability vary cross-nationally?

Methods

Sample

We examined views toward fact-checking in six European nations: France ($n = 1,011$), Germany ($n = 1,025$), Italy ($n = 1,006$), Poland ($n = 1,011$), Spain ($n = 1,007$), and Sweden ($n = 1,007$), in February, 2019 (total $N = 6,067$). Together, these nations give representation to Northern, Southern, Eastern, and Western Europe. Survey data were collected online with Dynata's (formerly known as Research Now SSI) opt-in Internet panel, with quotas for sex, age, education, and regional origin in each nation. For demographic profiles across national samples, see Appendix A.

Measures

Outcome measures. We collected several measures relating to views toward fact-checking. All question wording can be found in Appendix B. Familiarity ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.61$) was measured on a 6-point scale with the following

item: "how familiar are you with the fact-checking movement in journalism, from very unfamiliar to very familiar." Favorability ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.37$) was measured on a 6-point scale with the following item: "how favorably do you view the fact-checking movement in journalism, from very unfavorable to very favorably." We also asked respondents whether they want more fact-checking ($1 = less$, $2 = same$, $3 = more$), whether they believe that fact-checkers get facts straight ($0 = no$, $1 = yes$), and whether they believe that fact-checking is unbiased with political and social issues ($0 = no$, $1 = yes$). We treat familiarity as a separate construct than the other measures, which unlike familiarity include a valenced attitude—in favor or against fact-checking (Table 1). For the remaining items, we conducted principle factor component analysis, which shows all items load on a single factor. We therefore average these to create one favorability scale for these attitudinal items after transforming each to range from 0 to 1, $M = .55$, $SD = .31$, $\alpha = .62$. As a robustness check, we also examine predictors of each favorability item individually. Our two primary outcomes, familiarity and the favorability scale, correlate at $r = .22$.

Predictors. We also collected measures for a number of demographic, political, attitudinal, and cognitive variables along which fact-checking attitudes may vary. We include standard demographics of age, sex, college education.

We additionally measure cognitive reflection test scores (Frederick 2005) (an additive scale of three 1/0 items, $M = .62$, $SD = .70$), political interest (one 5-point Likert item, $M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.15$), and factual political knowledge (an additive scale of 10 items, $M = 5.93$, $SD = 2.46$). See supplementary materials for all question wording.

We also include measures of conservatism (a single 10-point item, $M = 5.18$, $SD = 2.80$) and party affiliation. We code party affiliation as belonging to the following party families based on CHES 2017 party codes[5]: conservative, socialist, Green, radical TAN (traditional/authoritarian/nationalist), liberal, radical left, Christian-democratic, regional, or agrarian party, a dummy for feeling closest to a party that is not classified in a family, and a dummy for "other party." Finally, Movimento Cinque Stelle, coded as "no family" in the CHES

Table 1. Correlations among Fact-Check Attitudes.

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Familiarity	1				
2. Favorability	.2202	1			
3. Want more	.0480	.3971	1		
4. Get facts straight	.1952	.3846	.2203	1	
5. Unbiased	.1929	.2419	.1244	.4633	1

Note. Pooled data. $N = 6,067$.

Table 2. Correlations among Predictors.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Conservatism	1					
2. Pro-E.U. attitude	−.0348	1				
3. Satisfaction with democracy	.1018	.5372	1			
4. CRT score act	−.0320	−.0046	.0204	1		
5. Political knowledge	−.0142	.0962	.0564	.0856	1	
6. Political interest	.0564	.1088	.0802	−.0429	.3497	1

*Note.* CRT = Cognitive Reflection Test. Pooled data. $N = 6,067$.

2017, is given a unique dummy, as the party currently is in government in Italy and has substantive importance for fact-checking-related attitudes.

We also examine pro-E.U. attitudes (a single 11-point item, $M = 6.11$, $SD = 2.63$) and satisfaction with democracy (the average of two items asking about satisfaction at the national and European levels, $M = 5.14$, $SD = 2.35$, $\alpha = .78$). Correlations among predictors are presented in Table 2. While most variables are only weakly correlated, E.U. attitude and satisfaction with democracy correlate at $r = .54$, while political interest and knowledge correlate at $r = .35$. Notably, E.U. attitude ($r = −.03$) and satisfaction with democracy ($r = .10$) are not closely associated with conservatism, allowing us to examine distinct dimensions of political antipathy toward fact-checking.

Results

Descriptive Results

We first present descriptive results that show cross-national differences in familiarity with and attitudes toward fact-checking in Figure 1. This figure shows average ratings across countries for familiarity, favorability, belief that fact-checkers are unbiased, belief that fact-checkers "get facts straight," and support for more fact-checking, with 95 percent confidence intervals. A few points stand out. First, overall familiarity with fact-checking is low across all countries surveyed. However, general favorability is relatively high, and respondents generally report wanting more fact-checking. On the contrary, belief that fact-checkers are unbiased and belief that they get facts straight are much lower. We also see significant differences in these latter two items: those in Germany and Sweden were more likely to ascribe to both beliefs than were respondents in Spain, France, Italy, or Poland. Respondents in Germany and Sweden were also more familiar with fact-checking overall.
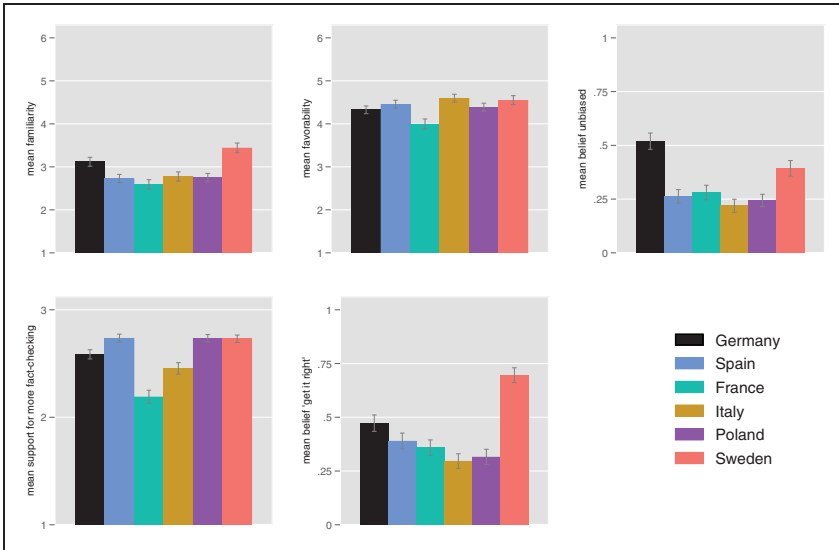
Figure 1. Attitudes toward fact-checking across Europe.

Note. Data come from France ($n = 1,011$), Germany ($n = 1,025$), Italy ($n = 1,006$), Poland ($n = 1,011$), Spain ($n = 1,007$), and Sweden ($n = 1,007$), February, 2019, collected from Dynata's opt-in internet panel, with quotas for sex, age, education, and regional origin in each nation. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

Hypothesis Tests

Next, we model familiarity and our composite measure of favorability. We rescale our outcome variables to range from 0 to 1 for interpretation. We report individual ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model results for each country, which show cross-national differences in correlates of fact-checking attitudes. Each model includes demographics of age, gender, and college education; political variables including conservatism, pro-E.U. attitudes, and satisfaction with democracy; and measures of political interest, political knowledge, and Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT) scores.

Familiarity results are reported in Table 3. As expected, political interest and knowledge predict familiarity. Across all countries, interest is associated with familiarity, β ranging from .05 ($SE = .01$) in Poland to .09 ($SE = .00$) in Germany, all $p < .005$. In Sweden, Germany, and Spain, knowledge was also associated with familiarity. However, CRT scores were not associated in any country.

In terms of political correlates, satisfaction with democracy was associated with familiarity in countries that were less favorable to fact-checking overall: France ($\beta = .02$, $SE = .01$, $p < .005$), Italy ($\beta = .03$, $SE = .01$, $p < .005$), and

Table 3. Predictors of Fact-Checking Familiarity across Europe.

	Sweden	Germany	Spain	France	Italy	Poland
Age	−0.042***	−0.036***	−0.034***	−0.057***	−0.056***	−0.025***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Female	−0.019	−0.064***	−0.025	−0.065**	−0.048*	−0.029
	(0.024)	(0.022)	(0.020)	(0.024)	(0.022)	(0.021)
College education	0.023	0.043	−0.008	0.021	0.015	0.005
	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.020)	(0.024)	(0.026)	(0.021)
Political interest	0.082***	0.092***	0.060***	0.065***	0.068***	0.051***
	(0.011)	(0.013)	(0.008)	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.011)
CRT score	−0.022	−0.022	−0.020	0.011	−0.023	−0.011
	(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)
Political knowledge	0.029***	0.013*	0.014***	0.008	0.007	−0.004
	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Conservatism	−0.002	0.009*	0.001	0.008	0.007	0.007
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Pro E.U. attitude	0.003	0.008	0.013**	0.007	0.011*	0.008
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Satisfaction with	0.011	0.011	0.000	0.022***	0.028***	0.025***
democracy	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Constant	0.145*	0.008	0.138***	0.080	0.054	0.066
	(0.064)	(0.067)	(0.046)	(0.064)	(0.066)	(0.066)
R^2	.17	.16	.12	.19	.18	.10
N	795	832	854	766	729	811

Note. CRT = Cognitive Reflection Test. Cell entries are ordinary least squares coefficients with SEs in parentheses.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .005$ (two-sided).

Poland ($\beta = .03$, $SE = .01$, $p < .005$). Pro-E.U. attitudes were associated in Spain ($\beta = .01$, $SE = .01$, $p < .01$) and Italy ($\beta = .01$, $SE = .01$, $p < .05$). Conservatism was associated with familiarity in Germany ($\beta = .01$, $SE = .00$, $p < .05$).

Favorability results are reported in Table 4. Interest was associated with favorable attitudes in Spain ($\beta = .03$, $SE = .01$, $p < .005$.) and France ($\beta = .03$, $SE = .01$, $p < .05$). Knowledge was associated in Spain ($\beta = .01$, $SE = .01$, $p < .05$) and Italy ($\beta = .02$, $SE = .01$, $p < .005$). CRT scores were associated in Sweden, Germany, and Italy, with β ranging from .03 to .04, all $p < .005$.

Meanwhile, satisfaction with democracy predicted favorable attitudes everywhere but Poland, with β ranging from .01 ($SE = .00$, $p < .05$) in Spain to .03 ($SE = .01$, $p < .005$) in Germany. Pro-E.U. attitudes predicted favorable views toward fact-checking everywhere but France, with β ranging from .01 ($SE = .01$, $p < .05$) in Spain to .02 ($SE = .00$, $p < .005$) in Poland. Finally,

Table 4. Predictors of Fact-Checking Favorability across Europe.

	Sweden	Germany	Spain	France	Italy	Poland
Age	0.019***	−0.009	0.002	−0.023***	−0.017*	−0.025***
	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.005)
Female	0.037*	0.009	0.031	−0.058*	−0.012	−0.005
	(0.019)	(0.021)	(0.019)	(0.025)	(0.022)	(0.017)
College education	0.018	0.032	−0.004	0.096***	0.027	0.042*
	(0.018)	(0.023)	(0.020)	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.018)
Political interest	0.007	0.004	0.025***	0.026*	0.021	0.014
	(0.009)	(0.012)	(0.008)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.009)
CRT score	0.026*	0.035*	0.028	0.010	0.038*	0.013
	(0.012)	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.018)	(0.017)	(0.013)
Political knowledge	−0.003	0.010	0.011*	0.004	0.016***	−0.005
	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.004)
Conservatism	−0.016***	−0.021***	−0.011***	−0.007	−0.003	0.002
	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.003)
Pro E.U. attitude	0.012***	0.014**	0.010*	0.007	0.012*	0.022***
	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.004)
Satisfaction with	0.025***	0.029***	0.011*	0.022***	0.014*	−0.001
democracy	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.004)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.005)
Constant	0.455***	0.396***	0.292***	0.281***	0.207***	0.417***
	(0.051)	(0.065)	(0.046)	(0.067)	(0.067)	(0.053)
R^2	.15	.16	.07	.11	.08	.08
N	829	840	837	746	758	836

Note. CRT = Cognitive Reflection Test. Cell entries are ordinary least squares coefficients with SEs in parentheses.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .005$ (two-sided).

conservatism negatively predicted favorability in Sweden, Germany, and Spain, with β ranging from −.01 to −.02, all $p < .005$.

We also conduct robustness checks modeling each individual item in the favorability scale. These results are reported in Appendix A. We use OLS regression for the single-item favorability model as well as our model of respondents' desire for more fact-checking. We use logistic regression for our models of respondents' belief that fact-checkers "get facts straight" and are unbiased. Pro E.U. attitudes and satisfaction with democracy remain key predictors of most fact-checking attitudes when examined individually, as does conservatism in Sweden, Germany, and Spain. As with the combined scale model, interest, knowledge, and CRT scores were inconsistently associated with attitudes across countries. It is also notable that political views do not tend to correlate with one item when examined in isolation: desire for more fact-checking.

Overall, findings support our broad hypotheses that those more interested and knowledgeable about politics would be more aware of (and, less consistently, voice greater support for) fact-checking, while anti-E.U attitudes and dissatisfaction with democracy would be associated with lesser support, though there is variation across individual predictors and across countries analyzed; political interest is the most consistent predictor of familiarity. One pattern that emerges is that in Northern European countries (Sweden and Germany), where awareness and support for fact-checking are greater, there is more consistent cleavage around political worldviews. Likewise, our models explain more variance in favorability in these countries.

As a further examination of potential divides, we replicate the prior models while adding variables for political party families. This allows to see if party affiliation is associated with fact-checking attitudes above and beyond the various political attitudes we examine, which could suggest party elites' cues influencing rank-and-file members. Specifically, we add dummies for whether the respondent felt closest to a conservative, socialist, Green, radical TAN (traditional/authoritarian/nationalist), liberal, radical left, Christian-democratic, regional, or agrarian party, as well as a dummy for feeling closest to a party that is not classified, and a dummy for "other party." We use "no party" or "not sure" as the reference group. Results are reported in Tables 5 and 6.

After accounting for E.U. attitudes, conservatism, and satisfaction with democracy, we find no association between party and familiarity or favorability in Sweden, Spain, or France. In Italy, we find that affiliating with a conservative party or M5S is associated with greater familiarity, while affiliating with a socialist party is associated with approval. In Poland, also, affiliating with a socialist party is associated with approval. Finally, in Germany, we find that affiliating with a radical left, socialist, liberal, Green, or conservative party is associated with greater familiarity. Only affiliation with the Green party is associated with favorability in Germany.[6] Overall, there is some evidence that socialist or Green party affiliation is associated with favorable views toward fact-checking cross-nationally.

Finally, we include results from multi-level models pooling across countries in Appendix A. We include multilevel models of familiarity, the favorability composite scale, the favorability single item measure, and the binary "get facts straight" measure. For each outcome, we include a model with and without the party family predictors. Results support the summary findings derived from country-level models.

Discussion

Fact-checking has become a global force over the past decade. While research assessing the public's response has not advanced in lockstep with fact-checking's globalization, we present cross-national evidence here. We find broad

Table 5. Predictors of Fact-Checking Familiarity across Europe with Party Affiliation.

	Sweden	Germany	Spain	France	Italy	Poland
Age	−0.042***	−0.035***	−0.031***	−0.056***	−0.053***	−0.025***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Female	−0.024	−0.058**	−0.023	−0.068***	−0.040	−0.028
	(0.024)	(0.022)	(0.020)	(0.024)	(0.022)	(0.022)
College education	0.025	0.042	−0.007	0.023	0.025	0.003
	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.020)	(0.024)	(0.026)	(0.022)
Political interest	0.083***	0.087***	0.058***	0.067***	0.060***	0.048***
	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.009)	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.011)
CRT score	−0.024	−0.021	−0.020	0.010	−0.024	−0.012
	(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)
Political knowledge	0.028***	0.012*	0.013**	0.008	0.011	−0.005
	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Conservatism	0.000	0.014**	0.006	0.011*	0.000	0.009*
	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.004)
Pro E.U. attitude	0.002	0.007	0.013**	0.007	0.015***	0.007
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Satisfaction with	0.011	0.008	0.000	0.022***	0.027***	0.026***
democracy	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Conservative party	0.016	0.088*	−0.033	−0.045	0.148***	
	(0.048)	(0.038)	(0.040)	(0.038)	(0.049)	
Socialist party	0.014	0.103**	0.033	−0.045	−0.050	0.095
	(0.044)	(0.039)	(0.032)	(0.043)	(0.037)	(0.049)
Green party	−0.017	0.094*		−0.023		
	(0.067)	(0.042)		(0.053)		
Radical TAN party	0.001	0.052	0.024	−0.078	0.062	0.030
	(0.047)	(0.045)	(0.047)	(0.047)	(0.036)	(0.032)
Liberal party	0.027	0.107*	0.001	−0.033		0.075
	(0.069)	(0.047)	(0.035)	(0.036)		(0.066)
Radical left party	0.054	0.132***	0.066	−0.015		
	(0.055)	(0.043)	(0.036)	(0.044)		
Christian-democrat party	0.008	0.003			0.038	0.032
	(0.057)	(0.063)			(0.110)	(0.035)
Regional party			0.015			
			(0.045)			
M5S					0.113***	
					(0.033)	
Agrarian party	0.117					0.005
	(0.072)					(0.065)
No family party	0.152					
	(0.122)					
Other party	0.075	0.103	0.087	−0.063	0.053	0.073
	(0.132)	(0.093)	(0.074)	(0.101)	(0.088)	(0.050)

(continued)

Table 5. Continued.

	Sweden	Germany	Spain	France	Italy	Poland
Constant	0.122	−0.057	0.093	0.086	0.015	0.034
	(0.072)	(0.070)	(0.050)	(0.067)	(0.069)	(0.067)
R^2	.18	.18	.13	.19	.21	.11
N	795	832	854	766	729	811

Note. Cell entries are ordinary least squares coefficients with SEs in parentheses. TAN = traditional/authoritarian/nationalist; CRT = Cognitive Reflection Test.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .005$ (two-sided).

acceptance across six European states. However, we find geographic and political heterogeneity in attitudes toward the movement. In northern Europe, which has more robust public media and higher institutional trust in general, acceptance is greater. Mirroring political asymmetry in the United States, fact-checking attitudes of respondents in all samples examined here vary along key political dimensions—conservatism, satisfaction with democracy, and feelings toward the E.U.

We also find that even after accounting for these political attitudes, those who affiliate with left parties (socialist and Green) have more favorable views toward fact-checking in several counties looked at here. Notably, we find more evidence for left-party affiliates favoring fact-checkers, rather than right-party affiliates distrusting them.

Broadly speaking, individuals who are more left-leaning, pro-E.U., and satisfied with democracy see fact-checking more favorably. Political knowledge or interest are less consistently associated with one's views. Perhaps most importantly, we find two distinct dimensions of political attitudes along which views toward fact-checking vary, then—a left–right dimension and what we refer to as an "anti-elite" dimension, the latter of which is more consistently predictive across political contexts.

Although familiarity with fact-checking is fairly low (which may suggest that responses on favorability represent views that are not deeply held) and familiarity is positively correlated with favorability, we find no variation in the relationships between our political variables and favorability across levels of familiarity. That is, conservatism, E.U. sentiment, and satisfaction with democracy are associated with fact-checking attitudes for those both more and less familiar with the format. This may suggest that citizens use more general attitudes toward the media (held in tandem with political views) to form attitudes about fact-checking, rather than forming them through experience.

Our findings on various favorability measures may also appear to show potential conflicting views—most approve in the abstract, but most *do not* believe the process is unbiased or that fact-checkers "get facts straight" (as

Table 6. Predictors of Fact-Checking Favorability across Europe with Party Affiliation.

	Sweden	Germany	Spain	France	Italy	Poland
Age	0.021***	−0.007	0.001	−0.020*	−0.018*	−0.025***
	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.005)
Female	0.033	0.008	0.031	−0.057*	−0.008	−0.005
	(0.019)	(0.022)	(0.020)	(0.026)	(0.022)	(0.018)
College education	0.011	0.032	−0.006	0.100***	0.021	0.039*
	(0.019)	(0.023)	(0.020)	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.018)
Political interest	0.010	0.002	0.026***	0.026*	0.023	0.012
	(0.009)	(0.012)	(0.008)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.009)
CRT score	0.023	0.035*	0.029*	0.011	0.033*	0.013
	(0.012)	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.018)	(0.017)	(0.013)
Political knowledge	−0.004	0.009	0.011*	0.004	0.016***	−0.005
	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.004)
Conservatism	−0.011*	−0.020***	−0.006	−0.002	0.003	0.004
	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.004)
Pro E.U. attitude	0.012**	0.012*	0.011*	0.006	0.008	0.023***
	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.004)
Satisfaction with	0.024***	0.028***	0.013**	0.022***	0.014*	−0.002
democracy	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.005)
Conservative party	−0.043	0.050	−0.061	−0.074	0.026	
	(0.038)	(0.037)	(0.040)	(0.040)	(0.049)	
Socialist party	−0.036	0.054	0.002	0.006	0.082*	0.092*
	(0.035)	(0.038)	(0.033)	(0.046)	(0.039)	(0.040)
Green party	0.100	0.108**		0.033		
	(0.054)	(0.041)		(0.056)		
Radical TAN party	−0.054	0.049	−0.028	0.002	−0.046	0.029
	(0.037)	(0.044)	(0.046)	(0.051)	(0.037)	(0.026)
Liberal party	−0.010	0.039	−0.035	−0.006		0.099
	(0.056)	(0.046)	(0.035)	(0.039)		(0.054)
Radical left party	0.033	0.025	−0.028	0.019		
	(0.045)	(0.042)	(0.037)	(0.046)		
Christian-democrat	−0.026	−0.024			0.071	0.014
party	(0.046)	(0.062)			(0.107)	(0.028)
Regional party			0.084		0.385	
			(0.045)		(0.297)	
M5S					−0.014	
					(0.034)	
Agrarian party	0.041					−0.017
	(0.059)					(0.052)
No family party	−0.091					
	(0.100)					
Other party	−0.161	0.036	0.045	−0.070	−0.039	0.045
	(0.108)	(0.092)	(0.072)	(0.107)	(0.092)	(0.041)

(continued)

Table 6. Continued.

	Sweden	Germany	Spain	France	Italy	Poland
Constant	0.451***	0.373***	0.268***	0.257***	0.203***	0.387***
	(0.057)	(0.068)	(0.050)	(0.071)	(0.070)	(0.054)
R^2	.17	.17	.09	.11	.09	.09
N	829	840	837	746	758	836

Note. Cell entries are ordinary least squares coefficients with SEs in parentheses. TAN = traditional/authoritarian/nationalist; CRT = Cognitive Reflection Test.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .005$ (two-sided).

shown in Figure 1). However, it is reasonable to assume that one may believe fact-checking should be undertaken even if it is an imperfect enterprise. Our use of binary measures for perceived bias may also account for this ostensible contradiction. However, more in-depth interviews are needed to illuminate what respondents think about when asked about "fact-checking." It would be useful to know, for instance, whether citizens tend to think of the more-prevalent nongovernmental organization (NGO) model, or the perhaps more-prominent ventures tied to legacy media outlets (Graves and Cherubini 2016).

Importantly, our study has several limitations. The findings presented in these cross-national comparisons are derived from correlational designs. We cannot assume, for instance, that pro-E.U. feelings drive fact-checking attitudes in a causal fashion. Another issue to note in our results is that the meaning of satisfaction with democracy, though broadly linked with media attitudes, varies contextually with the actual quality of a nation's democracy. For instance, dissatisfaction with democracy in Poland means a very different thing than dissatisfaction with democracy in Germany or Sweden. The quality of democracy objectively declined in Poland since the populist Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) party has been in government (Poland 2018). Hence, respondents with low satisfaction with democracy in Poland might base their response on the objective state of affairs, while those with high satisfaction might in fact be the populists. This could explain the null result for this variable in Poland.

The causes of other observed cross-national differences also remain an open question. For example, it is unclear why conservatism is associated with less-favorable views toward fact-checking in three Western contexts (Sweden, Germany, and Spain), but not Italy or France. Likewise, anti-E.U. sentiment is associated with negative views everywhere but France. More granular work is needed at the national level. Finally, our study only extends our knowledge of the public's fact-check attitudes from the United States to Europe. More work is needed around the world.

Overall, though, we present descriptive findings that enrich and broaden our understanding of public attitudes toward fact-checking beyond the United

States together, our findings suggest that despite general acceptance of the movement, obstacles, particularly significant political cleavages, remain. As those who are less favorable toward the E.U. and are dissatisfied with democracy are less likely to trust fact-checkers, they could be more vulnerable to disinformation targeting these cleavages, leading to a spiral of cynicism (Schulz et al. 2020). If the fact-checking movement is to be leaned on to help combat the acceleration of digital disinformation around the world (Funke and Flamini 2019), these issues must be addressed.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Many established media outlets or networks offer at least occasional fact-checking (e.g., Le Monde, Der Spiegel, and La Sexta) (Lyons 2018). Many independent ventures also have formal or informal ties to universities, and both Pagella Politica and Demagog have had direct influence on the political discourse in their respective countries (Graves and Cherubini 2016).
2. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.
3. Luskin (1990) argues political sophistication consists of exposure to information, motivation, and intelligence. We avoid using this term due to possible elitist connotations.
4. While we note that primary explanations for Euroscepticism are identity concerns and utilitarian considerations, our focus here is on the role of discontent with politics, as this may map to attitudes toward fact-checking as an institution.
5. We make two updates. We treat Vox and Lega as radical TAN parties. Vox had no code and Lega was coded as regionalist in the CHES 2017 coding.

6. In addition, we re-estimate these party affiliation models after removing political attitudes—conservatism, pro-E.U. attitude, and satisfaction with democracy. Results are reported in the Supplementary Materials. Results are largely similar in the familiarity models. However, liberal party affiliation in France is associated with familiarity, and in Poland, affiliating with a socialist party is no longer associated with familiarity; however, radical TAN party affiliation is. Party associations in the favorability models are more prevalent when removing political attitudes. In addition to the associations described in the full models, affiliating with a socialist, radical left, or conservative party in Germany was associated with favorable views. In Sweden, affiliating with a Green, radical left, or agrarian party was positively associated with favorability, while radical TAN party affiliation was negatively associated.

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