Facts, Alternative Facts, and Fact Checking in Times of Post-Truth Politics

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Motivation

- The efficiency of democratic political systems depends on the accuracy of voters' beliefs
    - Voters must understand the implications of alternative policies and must be able to judge performance of politicians in office
- Yet, far from all of the information relevant for political decisions of voters is accurate

"Alternative facts"

- "Alternative facts" is a term introduced by Kellyanne Conway to give an elegant name to blatant misrepresentation of reality
  - Alt-facts are often used by populist politicians in their political discourse
  - Mainstream media and NGOs invest in fact-checking, showing voters that alt-facts are false
- The question is how does this affect voters

How important are alternative facts in news consumption?

- Allcott and Gentzkow (2017):
    - Fake news favoring Trump were shared on Facebook about 30 million times and favoring Clinton – 8 million times
    - 42% of fake news reach people through social media
    - 13.8% of US population claim that social media are the main source of information (for TV – 23.5%)
    - 15% have seen fake news on the Internet and 8% recall believing it
- Mocanu, et al. (2015) document a rapid spread of fake news on social media during the 2012 elections in Italy

Narratives

- Most Alt-facts are used as part of a narrative to reach an intended conclusion, in contrast to fact checking

  - Brexit example:
    - Alt-fact: £350m/week ⇒
    - Policy conclusion: EU membership is too costly ⇒
    - Imperative: Vote leave!

    - Fact checking: £350m/week is not true

- Thus, alt-facts and fact checking potentially can influence: (1) voting intentions, (2) beliefs about policy, and (3) factual knowledge

Research question and design

- We conducted an online randomized survey-experiment in the midst of French 2017 presidential election campaign
- in which we expose subgroups of participants to
- quotes from Marin Le Pen (MLP) containing misleading or false claims about immigrants and refugees in France
- and/or to facts from official sources to examine whether:
  1. Alternative facts used in a political argument have an effect
  2. Fact checking corrects the effect of political lies
  3. And whether directly providing correct information about a sensitive issue affects voters

Preview of the main results

- Alternative facts are highly persuasive: they substantially affect voting intensions and policy conclusions of voters
- Fact checking does nothing to undo alt-facts' impact on voting intensions, but improves factual knowledge of voters
- Exposure to sensitive facts alone also helps MLP, although its effect is smaller than that of Alt-facts

Related literature

① Effect of media on political outcomes:
   - **Traditional media**: e.g., Gerber et al (2009), DellaVigna and Kaplan (2006), Enikopolov et al. (2011), Snyder & Stromberg (2010)
   - **New media**: e.g., Mocanu et al. (2015) and Allcott & Gentzkow (2017), Enikopolov et al. (2016)

② Emerging literature on the effects of lies on voting intentions and beliefs
   - Papers (in political science and psychology) on the effect of showing that Trump lied on his supporters: Nyhan et al. (2017), Swire et al. (2017)

③ Backfiring of information on facts
   - Nyhan (2015), Berinsky et al. (2017)
   - but this literature does not look at political outcomes

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Outline

1 Intro

2 Experiment design

3 The results

Sample

- In March 2017, one month before the first round of the presidential election, we used the Qualtrics online platform to survey 2480 voting-age French individuals

- The sample was drawn at random from the pool of Qualtrics participants
  - Individuals who participate in online surveys for pay

- The sample was stratified terms of gender, age, and the level of education by treatment

- Restricted to 5 out of 12 regions with the strongest support for the extreme right party (FN) in the previous (2015 regional) elections

Regions in the sample and extreme right vote in 2015 regional elections
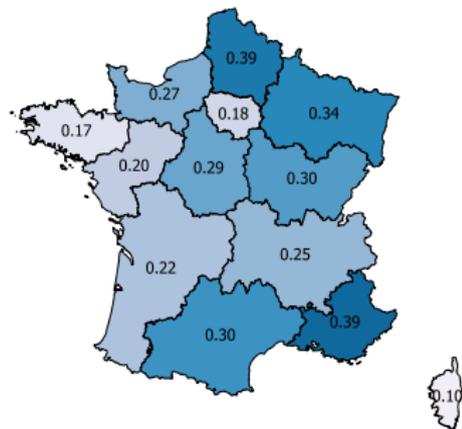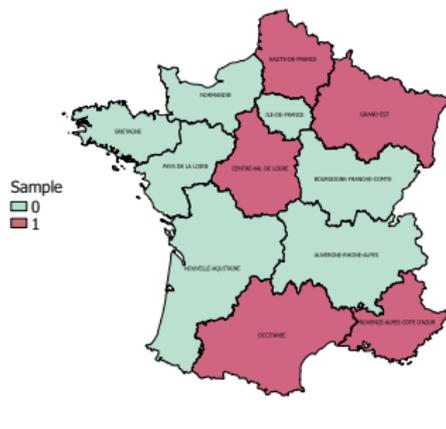
The survey-experiment consisted of 4 parts:

① A short introduction followed by:
  • Questions on socio-economic and demographic information
  • One question on prior beliefs: *"What was the unemployment rate among immigrants in 2015?"* (18.1%)

② **Treatment:** participants were presented with different texts to read

③ Questions to measure voting intentions using 3 different methods

④ Questions to measure the knowledge of facts presented in Part 2

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Treatments

Participants were randomly allocated to one of 4 groups, each group was presented with different text in Part 2 of the survey:

1. **Control:** no text

2. **Alt-Facts**: one-sentence intro + quotes from Marine Le Pen with fake numbers about refugees and immigrants

3. **Facts**: one-sentence intro + figures from official sources (UN, INSEE) on the same issues

4. **Fact Check**: Alt-Facts + Facts

All introductions were neutral to eliminate the Experimenter Demand Effects

The content of the Alt-Facts and Facts treatments

In quotes used, the goal of MLP was to convince voters that immigration should be restricted

- Each quote contained an implicit argument backed by a false fact or a misleading statement:

1 If refugees came for security reasons, they would not have left their families behind
  - Alt-Fact: 99% of refugees that are men; Fact: 58%

2 Migrants exploit generous French welfare system at the expense of the French
  - Alt-Fact: 95% of immigrants do not work; Fact: 55% (as compared to 45% for the French)

3 Refugees are cowards, as they flee instead of fighting for their countries
  - Alt-Fact: French stayed to fight the Nazis during WWII; Fact 25% of French population fled from the Nazi to the South

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Argument 1: Reasons for refugees to come

Marine Le Pen: *"A very small minority of them are really political refugees (...) I have seen the pictures of illegal immigrants coming down, who were brought to Germany, to Hungary, etc... Well, on these pictures there are **99**% of men (...) Men who leave their country leaving their families behind, it is not to flee persecution but of course for financial reasons. Let's stop telling stories. We are facing an economic migration, these migrants will settle."*

Official: *The UNHCR evaluates that among the migrants crossing the Mediterranean in 2015, 17% are women, 25% are children and **58**% are men.*

Argument 2: The effect of refugees on welfare system

Marine Le Pen: *"5% of the foreigners who come to France have a work contract. This means there is 95% who come to France who are taken care of by our nation (…) There is **95**% of people who settle in France who don't work, either because of their age, or because they can't as there is no work in France."*

Official: *According to the National Statistics Institute (INSEE) in 2015, 54, 8% of the immigrant population was active (worked or looking for a job) against 56, 3% for the rest of the French population. The rate of unemployment for the immigrant population is 18, 1% against 9, 1% for the rest of the population. There is therefore **44,9**% of the immigrant population that works against 55, 1% for the rest of the population.*

Argument 3: Refugees' cowardice

Marine Le Pen: *"Everyone of us has good reasons to flee war, but there are also some who fight. Imagine during the Second World War, there were surely many French, believe me, who had good reasons to flee the Germans and yet, they went to fight against the Germans."*

Official: *During the First and Second World Wars, the French fled war zones in much larger numbers than the current refugees. After the defeat of the French army in the North of France in the Spring 1940, 8 million civilians, that is one quarter (**25**%) of the population of the time, took the road to go to the South of the country that stayed freen according to Jean-Pierre Azema, a French historian.*

Outline

1 Intro

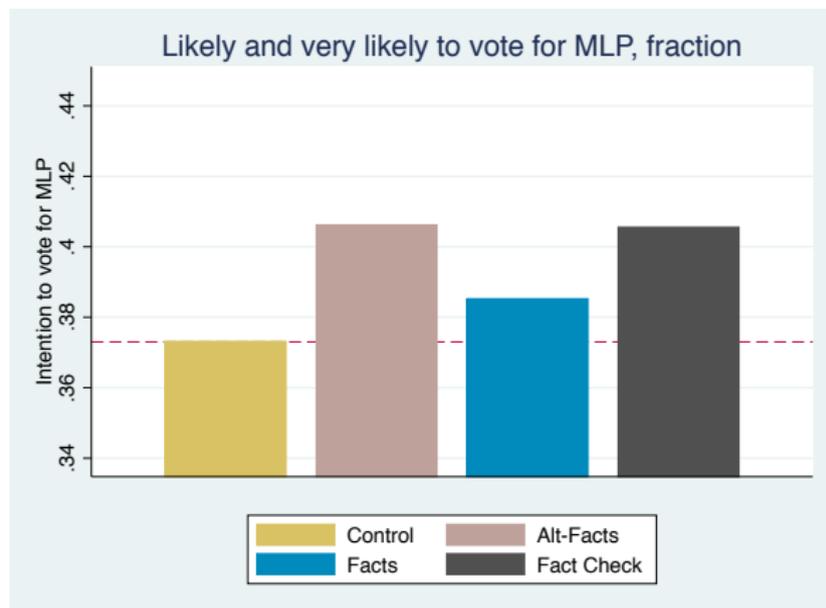**2** Experiment design

3 The results

Goal

Measure the impact of the treatments on:

- Voting intentions

- Knowledge of facts

- Perception of reasons for migration

- Agreement with MLP on immigration policy

Voting intentions

- Fact Check and Alt Facts have same-size positive effect on MLP vote
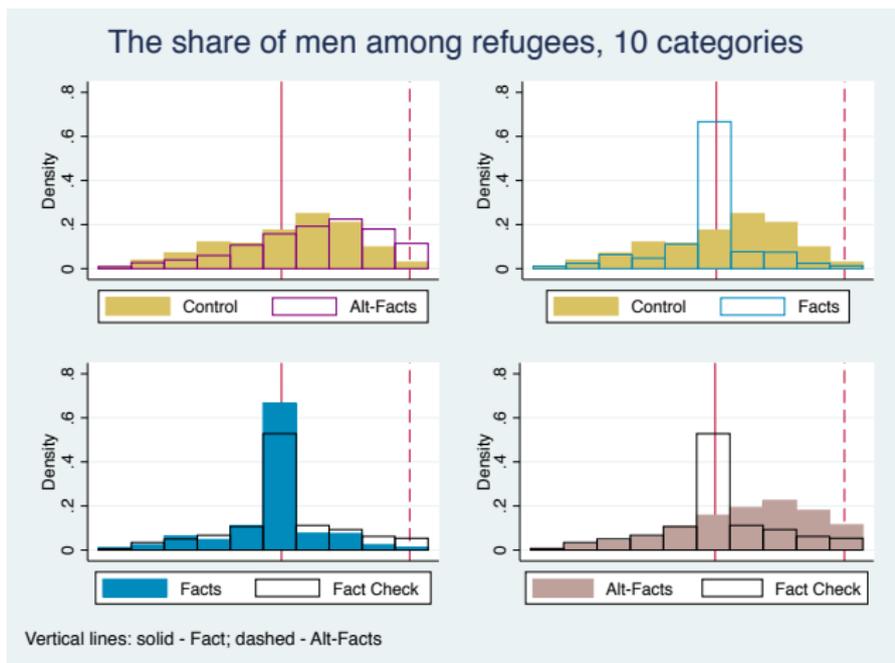- Facts alone also have a positive effect, but smaller in magnitude

Voting intentions: regression output and magnitudes

	Will vote for MLP	Persuasion rate
Alt-Facts	0.049^{**}	7.8%
	(0.023)	
Fact Check	0.048^{**}	7.7%
	(0.024)	
Facts	0.030	4.8%
	(0.023)	
Observations	2480	
Adjusted R^2	0.305	
Mean of DV in control group	0.373	
p-val: Alt-Facts=FactCheck	0.959	
p-val: Facts=FactCheck	0.432	
p-val: Alt-Facts=Facts	0.403	
p-val: Alt-Facts+Facts=FactCheck	0.351	

- These are fairly large magnitudes
- The main focus is not on the absolute magnitudes, but on the direction of the effect and *relative* magnitudes
  - Fact checking has the same effect as Alt-Facts
  - Facts alone help MLP

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Does this mean that people ignore information from official sources in Facts and Fact Check treatments?

Figure: Posterior beliefs (1):

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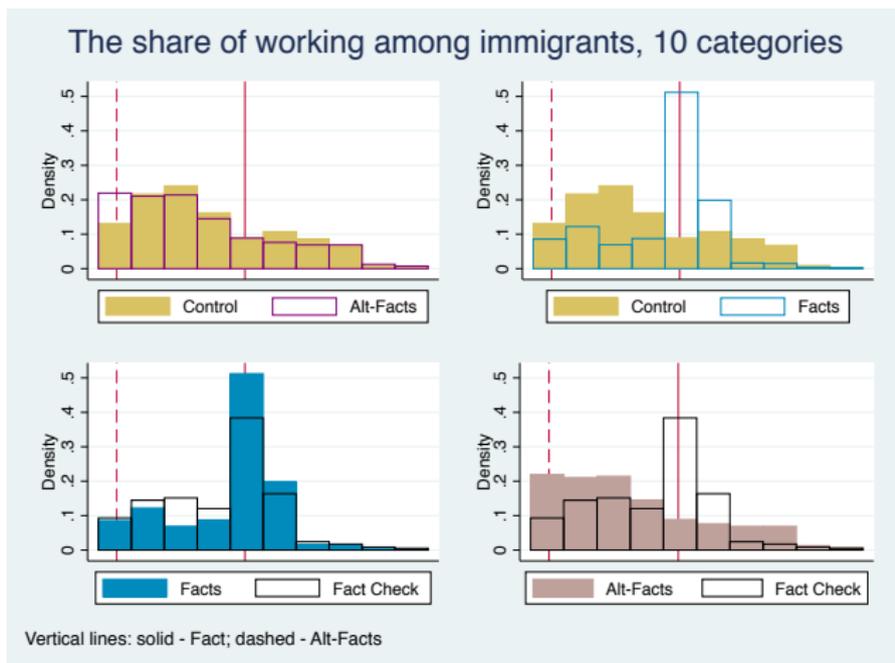# Does this mean that people ignore information from official sources in Facts and Fact Check treatments?

Figure: Posterior beliefs (2):

The share of working among immigrants, 10 categories

Vertical lines: solid - Fact; dashed - Alt-Facts

Official facts are learned: Fact check moves voting intensions and posteriors on facts in opposite directions

	Distance to truth on %:		Correct posterior on %:		Persuasion rates	
	men-refugees	migr. working	men-refugees	migr. working	men-refugees	migr. working
Alt-Facts	0.298***	0.253***	-0.023	-0.006	–	–
	(0.070)	(0.069)	(0.021)	(0.016)		
Fact Check	-0.505***	-0.685***	0.312***	0.255***	37.0%	23.6%
	(0.070)	(0.070)	(0.025)	(0.022)		
Facts	-0.845***	-0.984***	0.444***	0.376***	52.7%	34.8%
	(0.068)	(0.071)	(0.025)	(0.023)		
Observations	2480	2480	2480	2480		
Adjusted R^2	0.137	0.175	0.188	0.172		
Mean of DV in control group	1.651	2.115	0.157	0.080		
p: Alt-Facts=FactCheck	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000		
p: Facts=FactCheck	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000		
p: Alt-Facts=Facts	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000		
p: Alt-Facts+Facts=FactCheck	0.708	0.605	0.002	0.000		

- Information from official sources is retained in both Facts and Fact-Check treatments

- Posteriors are updated in the direction of treatment, with voters having much more confidence in official sources

- Alt-Facts only affect those did not know the truth to start with, as the probability to record correct answer is not affected

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Policy impressions: reasons for refugees to come and disagreement with MLP on immigration policy
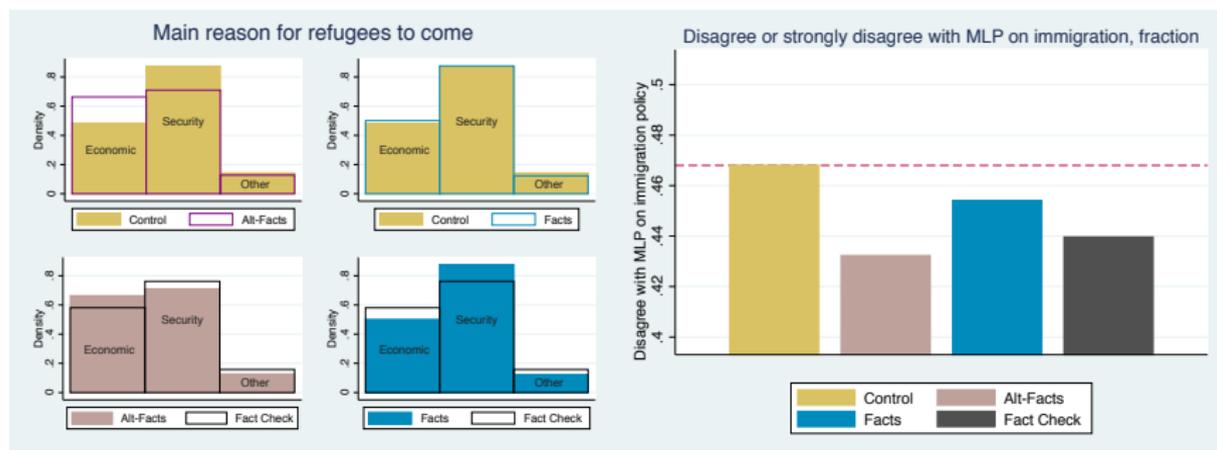
Treatments move policy impressions in the same direction as voting intentions

	Reason for refugees: Economic	Agree with MLP on migrants	Persuasion rates Econ. reason	Agree w/MLP
Alt-Facts	0.127***	0.050**	12.2%	3.7%
	(0.027)	(0.024)		
Fact Check	0.067**	0.036	6.5%	2.6%
	(0.027)	(0.024)		
Facts	0.017	0.022	1.6%	1.6%
	(0.027)	(0.025)		
Observations	2480	2480		
Adjusted R^2	0.068	0.280		
Mean of DV in control group	0.322	0.532		
p-val: Alt-Facts=FactCheck	0.026	0.570		
p-val: Facts=FactCheck	0.062	0.576		
p-val: Alt-Facts=Facts	0.000	0.272		
p-val: Alt-Facts+Facts=FactCheck	0.046	0.300		

- Fact checking undoes 40% of the Alt-Facts effect on the reasons of refugees to come
- And is completely ineffective for impressions about how tough the anti-immigrant policy should be