



Article

The Influence of Political Ideology on Fake News Belief: The Portuguese Case

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Abstract: The relationship between a subject's ideological persuasion with the belief and spread of fake news is the object of our study. Departing from a left- vs. right-wing framework, a questionnaire sought to position subjects on this political-ideological spectrum and demanded them to evaluate five pro-left and pro-right fake and real news, totaling 20 informational products. The results show the belief and dissemination of (fake) news are related to the political ideology of the participants, with right-wing subjects exhibiting a greater tendency to accept fake news, regardless of whether it is pro-left or pro-right fake news. These findings contradict the confirmation bias and may suggest that a greater influence of factors such as age, the level of digital news literacy and psychological aspects in the judgment of fake news are at play. Older and less educated respondents indicated they believed and would disseminate fake news at greater rates. Regardless of the ideology they favor, the Portuguese attributed higher credibility to the sample's real news, a fact that can be meaningful regarding the fight against disinformation in Portugal and elsewhere.

Keywords: political bias; fake news; disinformation; left–right dimension



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1. Introduction

The increasing spread of fake news has become a global threat. After the 2016 US presidential election, fake news became a risk for Western democracies [1,2]. Nowadays, fake stories easily reach high popularity rates, sometimes overlapping with real stories, deceiving and manipulating people [3,4]. Online disinformation has become part of the daily life of the reader/user of social media. Through social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, fake news is widely disseminated [5–8], obtaining, in some cases, greater engagement (that is, shares, reactions and/or comments) than true popular news [4,9–11]. In Portugal, the country where our study is centered, fake news is also a reality. Baptista and Gradim (2020a) analyzed the activity of fake news pages on Facebook during the 2019 national elections and found that fake news obtained, on average, more shares per publication than newspaper pages on Facebook [11]. Regarding the research problem, the literature shows that many studies have been carried out in the scope of detecting and mitigating fake news and identifying existing disinformation websites [12–14].

The spread of fake news, during the various elections, has also been studied on Twitter [15–17] and Facebook [11,18,19]. Studies on filter bubbles or echo chambers have contributed to understanding the phenomenon of fake news [20–22] or how malicious bots and algorithms have contributed to the “success” or proliferation of fake news [23–25].

Despite the abundance of research, we found that the focus of the literature is clearly on the United States scenario, specifically in the 2016 elections. However, there are some

studies that address the consumption and dissemination of fake news in the European context. The investigation has sought, above all, the influence of disinformation during the electoral campaigns of several countries, as in the debate related to Brexit [26], in the Italian general elections [27], in the French elections [28] or in the German elections [6] through the coordination of social bots on twitter. The impact that disinformation has on the European Union's unification policies has also been investigated [29], especially with regard to pro-Russian propaganda and the ultranationalist, xenophobic and anti-immigration populist rhetoric that discredits the European Union project [29–31]. As in the American scenario, some studies support the idea of very small audiences for fake news [27,32]. Our study adds to the current literature with a unique European perspective and could motivate future investigations in this area. In Portugal, the phenomenon of fake news still needs scientific research, especially in terms of political ideologies. This study focuses on a largely unexamined aspect regarding the Portuguese reality, having as a main objective to understand the relationship between the orientation of an individual's political ideology and the belief in fake news. In this study, we define 'fake news' as an article that falsifies a real news or report, in the online universe, imitating its format in order to appear legitimate and credible to the public. Fake news articles are a type of online disinformation that contains totally or partially false content, which can be verified, and have the malicious intention of deceiving or manipulating the reader/user [10,19,33–35].

2. Theoretical Background

The belief and dissemination of fake news seems to be related to psychological, economic and ideological aspects [19,36–41]. Baptista and Gradim (2020b) found that low levels of education or digital literacy, distrust in the media, low cognitive ability, close relationship with other users on social media and people's partisanship or ideological beliefs are the most common factors found in the existing literature [10]. Stories that meet our view of the world (in different aspects such as religious or political issues) are more easily accepted, even if they are wrong [39,42,43]. These ideological effects contribute to the creation of filter bubbles and echo chambers on social media [44–46].

However, recent studies suggest that the impact of filter bubbles, echo chambers, and recommendation algorithms on their creation, is not as great as previously thought, since the fake news audience is very specific, small and disloyal, with heavy users [15,18,47,48]. On the other hand, fake news continues to be disseminated, and false or biased information increases the likelihood of exposure. After being repeated many times, fake news becomes more familiar, quick to access and difficult to control and may induce belief in some users [36,49]. In ideological and partisan terms, several studies have shown that conservatives seem to be more likely to believe and share fake news than liberals [15,19,37,39,50,51].

Fake news content seems to indicate that those products are conceived for the conservative electorate, because they confirm their beliefs and also because their supply is much larger than neutral or non-political fake news [18,52].

In Portugal, fake news also seems to be aimed at the right wing, especially the far-right audience, with racist, anti-system and anti-corruption speeches that target the left wing [11,53]. However, other studies have shown that both conservatives and liberals have a tendency to accept false information as long as this confirms their views. Both can be equally vulnerable to believing false information or conspiracies [39,54]. Guess et al. (2019) also demonstrated that, although conservatives are more likely to share fake news, the age variable (older people) overlaps with education, ideology or partisanship. People over the age of 65 shared fake news many times more than young people.

2.1. The Left–Right Political Scale

The left and right political schema has played a fundamental role, since the French Revolution, in the political-ideological orientation of citizens [55]. Like the cardinal points for the geographic reading of a map, the scheme has served as a guiding mechanism in a complex political universe [56–58]. In the Anglo-Saxon universe, this dichotomy

has an older history and opposes terms like liberal and conservative [57,59]. Even so, several theses sought to question its validity for measuring the political ideology of citizens, organizations and parties, claiming the end of ideology [60,61], the end of history [62] and the third way [63]. However, the dichotomy continues to be used in the political language of most Western democracies [56,58,64].

The left wing and the right wing are not divided by absolute meanings of each political field [65]. The literature usually distinguishes these two terms by their views on the values of equality and freedom in the economic and social organization of society [57,66,67].

Bobbio (1995) made the distinction between left and right by the way they both see equality. The left, in addition to being more egalitarian than the right, also defends that inequalities can be eliminated [65]. The right presents itself as more libertarian and less egalitarian, defending the impossibility of eliminating all inequalities, which may even be beneficial to social development. Pinto (1996) highlights as essential themes of the distinction an anthropological pessimism (right wing) vs. anthropological optimism (left wing). Pinto (1996) also opposes the dichotomies: anti-utopianism (right) and utopianism (left); organicism and the right to difference (right) with egalitarianism and socialism (left); elitism (right) and democratism (left); property and anti-economicism (right) and economicism (left); nationalism (right) and internationalism (left) [68]. With the transition to a post-materialist society between the 1960s and 1980s, the left and the right acquired new values. The ‘new left’ became more egalitarian, defending new causes associated with the rights of women (also in the option of abortion), migrants and immigrants, the environment, homosexuals and LGBT movements and minorities in general [69–71].

Despite these differences, we can never consider that the left wing radically defends equality and that the right-wing rejects it completely [65]. The ‘new right’ seems to take a more “authoritarian” view [69], more conservative and traditionalist in favor of strong leaders, security and order, social authority and, compared to the left, greater intolerance toward minorities, sexual and social issues and abortion [64,70,72,73]. This political dyad is markedly distinguished by the way in which they interpret and defend state action in the economic life of society. While the left assumes a policy more in favor of state intervention both in regulating markets and in social services, the right defends greater economic liberalization, with a free, unregulated market, based on a more globalized economy [74]. In addition, opinions and attitudes related to religious beliefs can take on political relevance and be part of social cleavages in some countries [57,67].

2.2. Portuguese Case

In 2019, the Portuguese were the most trusting of journalistic news content (75%), and their concern about fake or illegitimate content on the internet increased compared to 2018, as did the use of social media to access news [75]. These results—namely, a greater confidence in journalistic institutions—may be related to the low political polarization of the Portuguese party system [76] and its media [77].

The Portuguese media managed, over the years, to separate themselves from an ideological and party culture, becoming more professional than several countries, namely in southern Europe [77–79]. da Silva et al. (2017) characterize the Portuguese media system as being hybrid and complex, composed of public and private media, with detachment from political control [79]. The Portuguese government has been led by moderate parties (center-left—Socialist Party (PS) and center-right—Social Democratic Party (PSD)) with the exception of some coalitions with the Social Democratic Center (CDS), a right-wing conservative party, without the representation of extremist ideals [80,81].

Until 2019, Portugal emerged as an exception by keeping away from the Portuguese parliament left and far-right populist ideals [82–85]. Left-wing parties (such as the Left Bloc and the Portuguese Communist Party) identified as a ‘radical left’, mostly manifesting popular discontent without acquiring populist narratives [82]. These parties seem to have channeled the protest vote [86]. Even with the 2011 economic recession, Portugal, unlike

Spain or Greece [87], opposed the emergence of left or right populist leaders, forming a parliamentary agreement known as ‘Geringonça’ [88].

That changed in the 2019 national elections, with the Portuguese extreme-right electing a national deputy for the first time [89–91]. Dissatisfaction with the right-wing opposition and parties in the center may have triggered the rise of Chega [89,91,92]. Marchi (2019) classifies Chega as a populist party of the new radical right [93]. Until 2019, da Silva (2018) argues that low levels of Euroscepticism, low immigration rates and the lack of political space for populist ideologies to develop kept Portugal as an exception in Europe [94].

3. Methods

Our investigation focused on understanding the relationship between an individual’s political ideology with the belief, interpretation and dissemination of fake news and assessing the electorate’s ability, whether ideologically left wing or right wing, to discern fake news. To achieve our goals, a questionnaire was delivered, for self-answer and convenience, to participants aged 18 or over. The exploratory sample used in our study was $n = 712$ participants. Data collection was conducted through the dissemination of an online questionnaire (via email, Facebook), with the support of several business, cultural and social associations in mainland Portugal. Additionally, the online questionnaire was available on Internet. Data collection took place between 3 March and 3 September 2020. The questionnaire was divided, to ensure data quality, into 3 sections: (1) demographic issues, (2) exposure to fake and real headlines to assess participants’ perceptions of fake news and news and (3) issues to identify the ideological dimension of the participants in the left–right political dimension. The questionnaire guaranteed participants with total anonymity and confidentiality of the data. In the introductory description of the questionnaire, they were informed that the study sought to understand how the Portuguese consumed information. The participants did not receive any encouragement and/or warning that they would be evaluating fake political headlines, to ensure that they would respond as they normally would on social media. We also did not specify that the questions related to their attitudes, opinions or values sought to identify their profile within the left and right political scale, so that this would not make their responses biased.

3.1. Procedure

3.1.1. Measuring the Ability to Distinguish Fake News

The main objective of this study is to measure the electorate’s ability to discern fake news, investigating its relationship with the political ideology of each individual. A single questionnaire was designed to ascertain the influence of these variables on the belief and dissemination of fake news. Based on the premise that the majority of the public is limited to reading only the headlines of the news articles [95,96], which can influence their beliefs [29], the participants were exposed to a set of fake news (FNL—pro-left; FNR—pro-right) and real news (RNL—pro-left; RNR—pro-right), presented in a Facebook post format, with photo, title, signature and source (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Example of fake news targeted to right (A) and left (B) audiences used in the study. Note: **A**—Catarina Martins defends a basic income of 750 euros “for gypsies, migrants and others” Figure A explores social prejudice toward the Roma community. The Roma community has been a victim of right-wing populist rhetoric, based on the stereotype that “people don’t work because they don’t want to” and that they are living on state benefits. The fake story indicates that a leader of the left party defends a higher state benefit, even higher than the Portuguese minimum wage. **B**—Brief | Statistics Portugal: More than half of the jobs created since 2015 have salaries above 1200 €. Figure B reports that half of the jobs that have been created since 2015 have salaries above 1200 euros. In 2015, Portugal came to be governed by a left-wing party (PS) that succeeded a right-wing government that was marked by the Troika’s economic rescue, low wages, unemployment and precariousness. Source: The fake headlines were edited by the authors and adapted from the Polígrafo: A (<https://bit.ly/3cP4PcB>, accessed on 25 May 2021) and B (<https://bit.ly/3aOjrE7>, accessed on 25 May 2021).

To measure the belief and willingness to share fake news and real news, we followed the procedure of several studies that sought to understand individual susceptibility to fake news [36,38,97]. Participants chose at random to complete the questionnaire and expressed their opinion regarding 10 fake news and 10 real news. In order to establish a relationship with the variables (left–right political ideology), the articles were categorized as follows: 10 fake news (5 pro-left and 5 pro-right) and 10 real news (5 pro-left and 5 pro-right) (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Example of real news pro-right (A) and pro-left (B) used in the study. Note: **A**—The past four years have had the biggest tax burden ever; **B**—There have never been so few unemployed enrolled for 28 years. Source: Image A was adapted from <https://bit.ly/3hSg3PS> (accessed on 25 May 2021). Image B was adapted from <https://bit.ly/3alsfhh> (accessed on 25 May 2021).

The fake headlines used were taken from Polígrafo, the first Portuguese fact-checking website. Polígrafo occults, in some cases, the author/source/website that created or disseminated the false headlines. Therefore, we decided to create, for the most part, the sources of the false headlines used (with the exception of *direitapolitica.com* and *geringonca.com*), according to sources similar to the Portuguese sources of disinformation and misinformation. The headlines were distributed at random. Respondents were asked

as follows: “According to your knowledge, how do you rate the following headline? on a 5-point scale (1—not credible; 2—somehow credible; 3—quite credible; 4—credible; 5—very credible).

The belief in fake news is based on calculating the average rating of responses, just as with belief in real news. In addition, we also asked participants about their willingness to share the fake (SFNL—willingness to share pro-left fake news; SFNR—willingness to share pro-right fake news) and real headlines (SRNL—willingness to share pro-left real news; SRNR—willingness to share pro-right real news) as follows: ‘What is your willingness to share the headline?’ (on a scale from 1—most unwilling to 4—totally willing). Responses were calculated in the same way as belief in fake news and real news. All fake news and real news that were used in the questionnaire can be consulted in the Supplementary Materials.

3.1.2. Identification of the Electorate in the Left–Right Political Dimension

Recognized by the majority of European citizens, the left and right political dimension mostly categorizes the attitude and opinion of voters about a diverse range of socioeconomic, moral and religious values [67,98].

Most studies [98–101] have focused on electorate self-positioning on this scale, when asked what political field they think they belong to. The voter’s self-placement on the left–right political scale is related to the proximity to a given political force [102]. In other words, the voters interpret the scheme and places themselves in it according to their party identity, that is, in the field in which they think their party fits best [74,98].

In order to characterize the political ideology (left–right) of the Portuguese electorate, the questionnaire we used was made up of questions based on a wide range of values and crucial indicators for the distinction between left and right. The questionnaire includes an ideological component, with a set of variables, which allow the evaluation of the participants’ social and political opinions and attitudes, framed in the left–right political scheme. The questions were elaborated from the European Values Study 2017 database (available online: <https://bit.ly/2Zx0dzN>, accessed on 25 May 2021) and the questions used by Baptista and Loureiro (2018) [74].

Questionnaire Application: Identification of Left and Right Political Ideology

To identify the ideological orientation of the participants, we used the left–right political scale of 10 points, 1 being extreme left and 10 being extreme right. We consider points 1 to 4 to be left, political center 5 and 6, and right from 7 to 10. All questions related to the participant’s ideological identification were designed based on this scale, which allowed the classification of the participant’s ideology by calculating the average of the responses. The model we use (adapted from [74]) shows the participant’s position in light of the main cleavages that distinguish the left and the right in western Europe. Participants were questioned about issues such as moral and religious values, attitudes toward social groups, positioning on the left–right scale, socioeconomic values and libertarian and authoritarian values, i.e., topics that respond to most theories on attitudes and opinions related to the left and right political dichotomy in western European democracies (see Table 1).

Table 1. Categorization of the application of the questionnaire to measure the left–right political scale.

Moral and religious values	God's Importance in Life	1—Nothing important 10—Very important
	Abortion	1—Always
	Euthanasia	10—Never
	Suicide	
	Prostitution	
	Smoking marijuana or hashish	
	Artificial insemination	
	Extramarital relations	
Socio-economic values	Intercourse with occasional partners	
	Equalization of income	1—Wages should be equal as possible 10—There should be incentives to reward individual effort
	State intervention (I)	1—The state should control companies 10—The state should give more freedom to companies
	State intervention (II)	1—The state should be primarily responsible for ensuring the survival of all 10—People should be primarily responsible for ensuring their survival
	State intervention (II)	1—The property of the state in business and industry should increase 10—Private property in industry and business should increase
Social values	Homosexuality	1—Always 10—Never
	Immigration (libertarian vs. authoritarian orientations) (I)	1—Immigrants do not take jobs from people in the countries where they go 10—Immigrants take jobs from people in the countries where they go
	Immigration (libertarian vs. authoritarian orientations) (II)	1—Immigrants do not impoverish the cultural life of the country they are going to 10—Immigrants impoverish the cultural life of the country they are going to
	Immigration (libertarian vs. authoritarian orientations) (III)	1—It is better for the good of society that immigrants maintain their customs and traditions 10—It is better, for the good of society, that immigrants do not maintain their customs and traditions, but that they adopt the customs of the country
	Death Penalty	1—Always 10—Never
	Unemployed	1—The unemployed should have the right to refuse the job they do not want 10—The unemployed should accept any job or lose the unemployment benefit
	Self-placement on the Left–Right political spectrum	1—Left wing 10—Right wing

Note: Data adapted by the authors from the European Values Study database and the study by Baptista and Loureiro (2018) [74].

3.2. Participants

A sample of 712 individuals (245 men and 467 women) participated randomly in Portugal. The sample was divided into the following age groups: 18–30 years (40.6%), 31–40 years (23.0%), 41–65 years (34.3%) and over 65 years (2.1%). According to their responses (on the left–right political scale), we classified a total of 339 (47.6%) individuals on the left, 211 (29.7%) in the center and 162 (22.7%) on the right. The political ideology of women is as follows: 46.9% are from the left, 29.1% from the center and 24.0% from the right. Regarding men, 49.0% are from the left, 30.6% from the center and 20.4% are from the right. With schooling up to the 12th year, 168 individuals (109 women, 59 men) participated, 267 (182 women, 85 men) with a degree, 184 (128 women, 56 men) with a master's degree and 93 (48 women, 45 men) with doctorate degree.

Considering the left-wing individuals ($N = 339$), 56 (16.5%) participants have schooling up to the 12th year, 134 (39.5%) have a degree, 99 (29.2%) have a master's degree and 50 (14.7%) have doctorates; 172 (50.7%) are 18–30 years old; 68 (20.0%) are 31–40 years old and 99 (27.7%) are over 41 years old.

Regarding people ideologically from the center ($N = 211$), 64 (30.3%) with education up to the 12th year, 76 (36.0%) with a degree, 52 (24.6%) with a master's degree and 19 (9.0%) have a doctorate; 77 (36.5%) were 18–30 years old; 54 (25.5%) 31–40 years old and 80 (37.9%) are over 41 years old. Of the right-wing individuals ($N = 162$), 48 (29.6%) have a level of education up to the 12th year, 57 (35.0%) have a degree, 33 (20.3%) have a master's degree and 24 (14.8%) have a doctorate; 40 (24.6%) 18–30 years old; 42 (25.9%) are 31–40 years old and 80 (49.4%) are over 41 years old.

3.3. Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics of data were presented as mean (M), standard deviation (SD), minimum and maximum and relative frequency (%), when appropriate. Skewness and kurtosis coefficients were computed for univariate normality analyses purposes, and all values were within ± 2 , except the FNR share variable. Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) followed by one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to investigate differences between ideology, schooling, gender and age. Associations between variables were calculated using the Pearson product-moment coefficient. In order to verify if there was a significant relationship between some of the observed variables, the chi-square test was used. All of these statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS 27.0 (IBM SPSS 27.0, Chicago, IL, USA). In all statistical analyses, significance values of $p < 0.05$ were considered.

4. Results

4.1. Relation between Belief in (Fake) News and Political Ideology

In order to identify possible real news belief differences by political ideology, two independent MANOVA's were conducted. The results revealed that political ideology has a significant effect on the multivariate composite (Wilk's $\lambda = 0.913$, $p < 0.001$). Follow-up univariate analyses (Table 2) indicated that only for real pro-left news are the differences not significant. Post hoc comparisons using Tukey's test demonstrated that the belief in real pro-right news presents significant differences ($p < 0.02$) for all political ideologies (left, center and right). Furthermore, right-wing individuals are those with higher values in relation to the belief in real pro-right news, with higher values than left-wing participants and center participants.

Table 2. Means (M), standard deviations (SD) and univariate effects of belief in real news (pro-left RNL and pro-right RNF) and fake news (pro-left FNL and pro-right FNR) by political ideology.

Item	Left Wing M \pm SD	Center M \pm SD	Right Wing M \pm SD	F	p
RNR	2.44 \pm 0.66	2.60 \pm 0.74	2.86 \pm 0.79	18.522	<0.001
RNL	2.50 \pm 0.71	2.45 \pm 0.67	2.45 \pm 0.65	0.639	0.528
FNR	1.50 \pm 0.59	1.79 \pm 0.72	2.01 \pm 0.71	36.021	<0.001
FNL	1.99 \pm 0.73	2.09 \pm 0.74	2.22 \pm 0.75	5.699	0.004

Regarding pro-right fake news, there are significant differences ($p < 0.001$) for all ideologies (left, center and right) (Table 2). The participants, ideologically from the right, are the ones with the highest values of belief in relation to fake news for the right, with the individuals from the left those with the lowest values, followed by the participants from the political center. As to the belief in pro-left fake news, the results revealed significant differences ($p = 0.002$) only for individuals from the left and right. Still, it is also the right-wing individuals who are most likely to believe pro-left fake news.

4.2. Relation between Willingness to Share (Fake) News and Political Ideology

As for the respondents' willingness to share real news, there are also significant differences (Wilk's $\lambda = 0.901$, $p < 0.001$). However, follow-up univariate test indicated that there are only no significant differences in the willingness to share pro-left real news (SRNL) ($F_{(2,711)} = 0.567$, $p = 0.567$). Regarding the respondents' willingness to share pro-right real news (SRNR), right-wing participants also have higher values on willingness to share than those on the center and on the left. Left-wing participants are the ones with lower values compared to other ideologies.

Regarding the willingness to share fake news, the multiple comparison tests showed significant differences ($p = 0.012$) in the willingness to share pro-left fake news (SFNL), either between left-wing or right-wing individuals, with people on the right presenting higher average values. As for the willingness to share pro-right fake news (SFNR), there are significant differences ($p < 0.001$) for all political ideologies, but there are higher values associated with right-wing individuals. Given the descriptive measures of the variables (Table 3), it is important to highlight that the belief in pro-left fake news presents, in general, an average ($M = 2.07 \pm 0.75$) higher than the belief in pro-right fake news ($M = 1.70 \pm 0.70$), with the minimums and maximums to present the same values.

Table 3. Descriptive measures and univariate normality.

Variables	Min.	Max.	M	SD	Sk	Ku
FNL	1.00	4.40	2.07	0.75	0.337	−0.44
FNR	1.00	4.40	1.70	0.70	1.075	0.74
RNL	1.00	5.00	2.60	0.74	0.585	0.39
RNR	1.00	4.80	2.48	0.69	0.660	0.24
SFNL	1.00	4.00	1.40	0.55	1.44	1.47
SFNR	1.00	4.00	1.30	0.48	2.01	4.22
SRNL	1.00	4.00	1.53	0.63	1.16	0.79
SRNR	1.00	4.00	1.52	0.63	1.32	1.52

Note: The acronyms sk and ku mean skewness and kurtosis respectively.

On the other hand, when analyzing Table 3, we found that individuals considered real news, in general, more credible than fake news, obtaining higher averages and maximums. Analyzing the averages of the variables, the willingness to share fake news and real news is reduced. Finally, it should be noted that the majority of participants (regardless of their ideology) did not consider the false stories pro-left (71.5%) and pro-right (86.3%) credible.

4.3. Demographic Factors and Belief in (Fake) News

Regarding the effect of the educational level of the participants in the belief in fake news, it was found that there is a significant effect (Wilk's $\lambda = 0.953$, $p < 0.001$). However, follow-up univariate analysis indicated significant differences only in the belief in pro-right fake news ($F_{(3,708)} = 11.501$, $p < 0.001$). The Tukey's multiple comparison test allowed us to verify that individuals with less education have higher values in relation to the belief in pro-right fake news. As for the belief in real news, there are only significant differences with the belief in pro-right real news ($F_{(3,708)} = 2.806$, $p = 0.039$). It is also found that the lowest education index has higher values of belief in pro-right real news.

The gender of the participants has no influence on the belief in fake news, since there are no significant differences (Wilk's $\lambda = 0.997$, $p = 0.410$).

The results obtained with MANOVA indicate significant differences regarding age (Wilk's $\lambda = 0.934$, $p < 0.001$). Follow-up univariate analysis of variance demonstrated significant differences between the pro-left real news ($F_{(2,709)} = 8.311$, $p < 0.001$) and the pro-right real news ($F_{(2,709)} = 10.241$, $p < 0.001$). There are significant differences between the older group and the younger group, with the older ones showing higher values.

As for the belief in fake news, MANOVA indicates that age has a statistically significant effect (Wilk's $\lambda = 8.053$, $p < 0.001$). Univariate analysis of variance indicates significant differences both for the belief in pro-right fake news ($F_{(2,709)} = 11.672$, $p < 0.001$) and for the pro-left fake news ($F_{(2,709)} = 13.531$, $p < 0.001$). Post hoc comparisons using Tukey's indicate that there are significant differences between younger and older people for both, with the older age group showing higher values.

To verify whether the combination (age and education factor) influences the belief in fake news, we performed two analyses of variance with two factors with interaction. Only regarding the belief in pro-left fake news, this combination showed significant differences ($F_{(6,700)} = 8.028$, $p = 0.02$). Therefore, first we compared the ideological groups by level of education in relation to the belief in pro-left fake news, and the post hoc Tukey test allowed us to verify that there are significant positive differences between the participants (from the center and from the right) of low-level education with the most-educated left and center participants.

Regarding the left-wing participants, with low education, we did not find these differences. We also found that right-wing participants have higher belief values at all levels of schooling (up to 12th grade ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 0.74$), undergraduate ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 0.78$), master's ($M = 2.15$, $SD = 0.77$), doctorate or more ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 0.72$)) compared to participants from left (up to 12th grade ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 0.80$), degree ($M = 1.95$, $SD = 0.65$), master's ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 0.79$), doctorate or more ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 0.73$)).

Second, we compared the groups by age group and ideology and, through the post hoc Tukey's test, we found that the age of the left-wing participants has no effect on the belief in pro-left fake news. On the other hand, age is relevant in the belief in pro-left fake news among participants ideologically of center and right wing.

We found significant positive differences between people of the highest age group, the center and the right wing, and the youngest people (18–30 years) of the left wing, the center and the right wing. The people on the right had higher average values than the center and the left, in the younger and older group. In other words, younger people on the right believe more in fake news than young people on the left and young people in the center, and the same is true among older people.

4.4. Association between Willingness to Share and Belief in (Fake) News

To study the association between willingness to share and belief, Pearson's linear correlation coefficient was used (Table 4).

Table 4. Association between willingness to share and belief in (fake) news.

Variables	RNR	RNL	FNL	FNR
SFNL	0.262 **	0.377 **	0.558 **	0.362 **
SFNR	0.390 **	0.295 **	0.366 **	0.628 **
SRNL	0.273 **	0.496 **	0.307 **	0.232 **
SRNR	0.489 **	0.284 **	0.212 **	0.361 **

Note: ** $p < 0.01$.

The results indicate strong and significant positive correlations between all variables, highlighting the correlations between the willingness to share pro-left fake news and the belief in pro-left fake news ($r = 0.558$, $p < 0.01$), the willingness to share pro-right fake news and belief in pro-right fake news ($r = 0.628$, $p < 0.01$), willingness to share real pro-left news and belief in real pro-left news ($r = 0.496$, $p < 0.01$), and the willingness to share real pro-right news and belief in real pro-right news ($r = 0.489$, $p < 0.01$).

5. Discussion

In general, the degree of legitimacy attributed by participants to FNL ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 0.75$) and FNR ($M = 1.70$, $SD = 0.70$) is lower than the credibility attributed to real news (RNL ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 0.74$) and RNR ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 0.69$)). In addition, the willingness to share fake news indicates that it is less than the willingness to share real news. Our results seem to be encouraging regarding the ability of the Portuguese electorate to distinguish fake news, at a time when online disinformation continues to be widespread in Portugal [11]. Our results also show that there is a relationship between the political ideology and the belief and spread of (fake) news, which has been pointed out by the literature as one of the main factors, along with partisanship [18,103–107].

We found evidence to suggest that right-wing people are more likely to accept fake news, compared to left-wing people and moderates. Unlike most investigations in this area, we classify the participants ideologically—depending on their responses—in the left–right political dimension. Even so, this evidence corresponds to most of the results found in the recent literature, which points to a greater propensity by conservative voters (right wing) to believe and share fake news [15,18,19,36,51,107,108].

The literature indicates several reasons to explain why conservatives and/or right-wing people are more likely to believe fake news than liberals or left-wing people. On the one hand, right-wing people seem more sensitive to threats and to believe negative information [107], are more associated with a closed-minded style, less receptive to changes and confrontation with new information [109] and can be more likely to agree with ideologically compatible content [110] and, in the case of more radical people and with higher levels of authoritarianism, the resistance to change their beliefs after being corrected is higher [111]. In addition, people on the right are also associated with being more dogmatic [112]. In the United States, Republicans are more likely to believe negative fake news about Democrats than liberals are to believe negative fake news about Republicans [113]. Conservatives are also, in general, more susceptible to conspiracy theories, which is a very close genre of fake news that has also been studied [114,115]. On the other hand, the fake news ‘online market’ is more targeted at the conservative public, and the pro-Trump fake news offer was broader during the 2016 elections [18,19], as conservatives seem to be more exposed to fake news [116]. It is known that repeated exposure can contribute to making the content more accessible, more difficult to control and, above all, more familiar to the user, which can induce false beliefs [36,49] which, later on, are very difficult to correct or disprove [117,118]. In Portugal, we can consider that right-wing people are more exposed to online disinformation. The production of fake news and the use of bots and fake profiles seems more related to the right and far-right, with the entire Portuguese left wing as its political target [11,119,120]. On the other hand, the right wing is more skeptical about the functioning of several democratic institutions, namely journalism, which has been the target of physical attacks and infamies in Portugal and in several countries [121,122]. Distrust

in the media has been identified as one of the main reasons for belief in fake news [121], and it is known that right-wing activists embrace alternative media and disinformation as a strategy, more than left-wing activists [123]. Other studies [36,37,51] have sought to understand this difference between liberals and conservatives based on their cognitive thinking, verifying that the most intuitive people, with little attention and little calculation, seem to be more prone to the consumption of bullshit and fake news. Intuitive thinking is also more associated with conservatives and right-wing people.

However, other studies have found that there is a tendency, not only for conservatives but also for liberals, to believe in fake news, as long as it confirms their beliefs or worldview, with an equal ideological influence for both ideologies [39,106,107,113,124]. Our results demonstrate that, regarding the Portuguese, people on the right are more likely to believe and disseminate fake news that favor the right-wing but also to believe and disseminate fake news that is pro-left, which contradicts the effect of confirmation bias. Thus, our findings pose a new discussion in the contemporary debate about the relevance of the factors that motivate the belief in fake news. The fact that right-wing people have higher levels of belief in fake news that favor the right wing and also the left wing, leads us to consider that there may be more influential indicators in a given political ideology. Regarding the belief in pro-left fake news, we find that the combination of the age and education factor presents significant differences. Our results indicate that the low level of education of right-wing people is related to a greater propensity to believe in pro-left fake news, whereas the left does not. In addition, in relation to age (the older the age group, the higher the belief values), we verify this relationship with the right-wing people and not with the people of the left. Our results therefore suggest that high age and low education may be related to the fact that right-wing individuals are more likely to accept pro-left fake news as well. Even so, the age factor seems to have more relevance, given the age distribution of the people on the right. Guess et al. (2019) also demonstrated that the age variable can be stronger than education, ideology or partisanship not only in relation to the belief in fake news but also regarding the willingness to share fake news. In Portugal, older generations have lower news literacy rates and are not avid users of social media compared to younger generations [125,126]. In addition, older people have a greater tendency to share and comment on news on online platforms [126].

When we analyze the age and education factor separately, our results demonstrate that older people, regardless of ideology, are more likely to believe in fake news. On the other hand, the low level of education indicated significant differences only with the belief in fake news pro-right and real news pro-right. Other studies [127,128] also reinforce the hypothesis that people with less education have a greater degree of acceptance and spread of fake news.

Our results indicate that gender has no influence on the belief in fake news. However, several studies have found that the consumption of false information may be related to gender differences [129,130], revealing that women are more likely to believe rumors or false information. It is important to note that our study did not explore the influence of other variables related to psychological motivations, such as, for example, the participants' personality characteristics [130,131] or their cognitive ability [36,37,132], which are aspects that may have an influence on the degree of acceptance of fake news.

Finally, our results suggest that the willingness to share content (false or true) is correlated with the belief in 'news' content. Still, the positive correlations are stronger between willingness to share and belief when it comes to the same group (SFNL-FNL, SFNR-FNR, SRNL-RNL, SRNR-RNR), which suggests that people have a greater tendency to disclose (dis) information they believe in. We believe that, in future studies, it is important to evaluate the perception of fake news according to the different political ideologies, taking into account the attitudes and habits of the participants in the media (digital media literacy), especially of the older generations in relation to the political content.

6. Conclusions

The belief and dissemination of (fake) news are related to the political ideology of the participants, classified within the scope of the left–right political-ideological dimension. Our results demonstrate that ideologically right-wing participants have a greater tendency to accept and disseminate fake news compared to individuals from the left or the political center, regardless of whether fake news favors the left or the right. The fact that right-wing participants believe in pro-left fake news more than left-wing individuals contradicts confirmation bias and may suggest that the level of education and the age of individuals may interfere with the degree of acceptance of fake news. In fact, our results showed that the low level of education and the older age group had an influence on right-wing people in believing pro-left fake news. In addition, the belief in fake news, in general, also seems to be related to lower levels of education and older people, albeit with a greater weight in right-wing people. However, the low-education factor does not appear to be stronger than the high-age factor. In general, left-wing participants are less likely to believe and disseminate fake news and real news than people in the political center and the right. Finally, it is important to mention that our study allowed us to verify that the Portuguese attribute greater credibility to real news (regardless of the ideology they favor) than to fake news, which may indicate a good omen in the fight against disinformation in Portugal.

Supplementary Materials: The following are available online at <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/publications9020023/s1>, Table S1: Fake news and real news headlines that were used in the questionnaire.

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