The Role of (Social) Media News in Shaping Romanian Voters' Support for Populist versus Mainstream Parties

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Abstract: This study builds on research exploring how media exposure and conspiracy beliefs shape support for populist movements, addressing a gap in analyses comparing populist and mainstream parties in Romania. Using an original dataset from an online panel survey conducted by Kantar/Lightspeed with 1,500 respondents, the paper examines predictors of vote intention for both the radical right *Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor* (AUR) and the mainstream *Partidul Social Democrat (*PSD). Results show that social media news consumption is associated not only with AUR support but also with left-wing PSD support. These findings suggest that, in Romania, PSD and AUR share similar voter profiles, highlighting the unique overlap between left – and right-wing populist appeal.

Keywords: vote intention; populist parties; news consumption; political knowledge; mainstream; Romania

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Europe has witnessed a rise in nationalist and populist movements, many of which promote euro-skepticism and advocate for closer ties with Russia. This rise in populist parties across Europe has raised new questions about the conditions under which citizens form political preferences. Scholars have increasingly highlighted the role of media, and particularly social media, in this process as a channel for mobilization, an alternative source of news, and a space

that facilitates polarization and in-group, out-group dynamics (Douglas et al., 2019; Hameleers, 2020; Müller & Schulz, 2021). Bypassing mainstream media and communicating directly with voters, populist actors can amplify messages that challenge elites and resonate with disaffected citizens (Bartlett et al., 2011).

Beyond media, two additional factors have been consistently linked to populist support: skeptical orientations often associated with conspiracy beliefs and political knowledge. Conspiracy narratives provide simplified explanations for complex crises (e.g., COVID-19), reinforcing distrust in institutions and mainstream elites. Prior studies have demonstrated that such beliefs strongly predict support for political parties (Cantarella et al., 2023; Christner, 2022; Loziak & Havrillová, 2024; Mancosu et al., 2017). This study, however, employed a measure that reflected a narrower form of skepticism (see Measurements section for details). Similarly, political knowledge conditions the association with populist support. While lower knowledge levels have been associated with higher populist attitudes, recent evidence has suggested that 'informed populists' are more inclined to vote for radical parties, whereas 'uninformed populists' are more likely to abstain (Marcos-Marne et al., 2023; Stanley & Cześnik, 2022; van Kessel et al., 2020).

While extensively studied in Western Europe, the dynamics of populist support remain less explored in Eastern Europe, where such movements have risen more recently. Romania exemplifies this through the ascent of *Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor* (Alliance for the Union of Romanians, AUR), which has consolidated its position in national politics, reflecting broader European trends (Soare & Collini, 2024). Following Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), in this paper populism is understood as a thin-centered ideology framing politics as a struggle between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite," often intertwined with nationalism or authoritarianism. Within this framework, AUR represents a populist party combining anti-elite appeals with ultranationalism, traditional family values, and anti-Western rhetoric (Burciu, 2024; Crăciun & Țăranu, 2023; Soare & Tufiş, 2023). Previous research on Romanian populism has been either general (Aparaschivei, 2010; Momoc, 2018; Pătruţ, 2017) or focused on individual parties (Crăciun & Țăranu, 2023; Gherghina & Miscoiu, 2014; Soare & Tufiş, 2023). Few studies have compared predictors of support for populist versus mainstream parties, particularly regarding news consumption. This gap is especially relevant as AUR, since its 2019 founding, has steadily expanded, entering Parliament in 2020 and further strengthening its base during Romania's "super electoral year" of 2024, positioning itself as the main challenger to mainstream parties. Thus, the present paper sought to address this gap, with three main objectives.

Firstly, to investigate the differences between traditional and populist parties' supporters in terms of news consumption habits, and how this reflects on voting intention. Several important studies have focused on analyzing the effects of news consumption on vote intention, in particular vote intentions for a populist party

(Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Schulz, 2019; Schumann et al., 2021). To our knowledge, scant research has discussed this relationship in an Eastern European country (Aparaschivei, 2010; Matiuta, 2023; Momoc, 2018; Pătruț, 2017), with only a few studies addressing the potential role of news consumption on voting for a populist party, compared to mainstream parties (Matiuta, 2023; Soare, 2023).

Secondly, the study examined the association between conspiracy narratives and vote intention during recent crises, such as COVID-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which amplified disinformation and skepticism toward official narratives. Building on previous research on conspiracy beliefs in Romanian society (Buturoiu et al., 2021; Corbu, Bârgăoanu, et al., 2023; Corbu, Buturoiu, et al., 2023; Corbu et al., 2020), it explored how conspiracy-like skepticism relates to voting intentions—an understudied topic in Romania. The analysis also considered political knowledge as a potential predictor of populist support, as studies show that lower knowledge aligns with higher populism, while "informed populists" tend to vote and "uninformed populists" often abstain (Marcos-Marne et al., 2023; Stanley & Cześnik, 2022; van Kessel et al., 2020).

Thirdly, previous studies that explored the rise of populist parties in Romania have focused solely on a specific party (Crăciun & Țăranu, 2023; Gherghina & Miscoiu, 2014; Soare & Tufiş, 2023), and less on a comparative analyses of populist parties versus mainstream parties. This paper bridged this gap in the literature by conducting an empirical analysis of the role of news consumption habits, orientation as proxy for conspiracy thinking and political knowledge in shaping Romanian voters' support for populist parties versus mainstream parties. To the best of our knowledge, this was the first study in Romania to conduct a comprehensive analysis of vote intention predictors in a country where the populist parties have relatively recently started to gain momentum.

Although focused on Romania, this study offers insights relevant to other young democracies in Eastern and Southern Europe, marked by fragile institutions, fragmented media, and the rise of populist movements (Crăciun & Țăranu, 2023). AUR's trajectory illustrates these dynamics, making Romania a useful case for understanding broader populist trends. By comparing vote intention predictors for AUR with those for PSD, PNL, USR, and UDMR, the study explores whether factors commonly linked to populist support are unique to AUR or reflect wider patterns within Romania's party system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE ROLE OF NEWS CONSUMPTION IN SHAPING POPULIST VOTING INTENTIONS

News consumption patterns have been widely studied, with research consistently showing that political preferences are closely tied to the channels through which individuals access information. Supporters of populist radical right parties tend to rely heavily on social media platforms, where direct communication, emotionally charged narratives, and alternative sources of information circulate more freely. This reliance reflects both the style of populist parties, which strategically use digital platforms to bypass traditional gatekeepers, and the preferences of their electorates, who are more inclined toward online and alternative news environments. By contrast, mainstream parties are more strongly associated with traditional media channels, such as television, radio, and established newspapers. This is partly due to their commitment to journalistic norms (e.g., credibility, fact-checking, and editorial oversight) (Heft et al., 2020), but also because their support base tends to include older demographics who consume news less through digital platforms and more through legacy media (Reiter & Matthes, 2023; Strömbäck et al., 2023). In this sense, party communication strategies and voter media habits reinforce one another: populist parties thrive on social media because their supporters are present there, while mainstream parties remain anchored in traditional media, where their audiences continue to seek consistency and reliability.

On one hand, research links the rise of populist parties to the flow of information in today's hybrid media system (Bos & Brants, 2014; Krämer, 2017; Mazzoleni, 2008). Social networks such as Facebook and X are particularly effective in promoting populist parties and candidates (Gerbaudo, 2018). Populists use these platforms more actively than traditional talk shows to share messages directly with large audiences at low cost, bypassing gatekeepers (Ernst et al., 2019; Engesser, Ernst, et al., 2017; Krämer, 2017). Their "us versus them" narratives, marked by fear and anger, fit the social media attention economy and attract visibility (Engesser, Fawzi, et al., 2017). Social media also enables populist actors to shape public discourse and involve citizens in spreading their messages (Faris et al., 2017; Müller & Schwarz, 2023). Overall, populist content and issue agendas are highly visible online, even to users not directly seeking them, reinforcing populist and exclusionary attitudes (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Hameleers et al., 2018).

On the other hand, recent studies find evidence that support the idea of mainstream media remaining one of the most influential sources for news consumption (Ramírez-Dueñas & Vinuesa-Tejero, 2021; Shehata et al., 2024; Tóth et al., 2023) and has been shown to reinforce mainstream political views. Norris (2001) argues that mainstream media tends to provide balanced coverage and promotes

centrist views, which in turn fosters support for mainstream parties. Similarly, Thussu (2007) argues that mainstream news often emphasizes stability and the status quo, aligning with the ideological perspectives of mainstream parties rather than those of radical right movements.

Mainstream media's editorial standards limit the sensationalism typical of radical right rhetoric and promote balanced, centrist perspectives (Strömbäck et al., 2013; Buyens & Van Aelst, 2022). In contrast, radical right parties thrive on alternative and social media, which lack similar journalistic constraints and enable direct, unfiltered communication with supporters (Mudde, 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2013; Buyens & Van Aelst, 2022). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

- H1a. The more people follow news on digital and social media channels, the more they intend to vote for a populist party (AUR).
- H1b. The more people follow news on media mainstream channels, the more they intend to vote for mainstream parties.

THE ASSOCIATION OF BELIEFS IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE WITH POPULIST VOTING BEHAVIOR

Beyond media consumption, research highlights the role of conspiracy-related orientations in shaping political behavior. However, the role of conspiracy theories on voting intention is a topic that remains underexplored in research on Eastern European countries. Conspiracy theories, often described as beliefs in covert malevolent operations, are pervasive in today's information environment. Imhoff et al. (2022) examined the "conspiracy mentality" or "conspiracy mindset" in Western Europe and the United States, revealing a connection between conspiracy beliefs and political decisions. Additionally, Imhoff et al. (2022) conclude that conspiracy theories about the government correlate with anti-elitism and political extremism.

While most research has concentrated on understanding the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories (Uscinski et al., 2018), there has been limited investigation into whether conspiratorial attitudes can predict certain political behaviors (Mancosu et al., 2017). Furthermore, the few studies that have explored this topic have produced mixed results or have not directly examined the connection between belief in conspiracy theories and the intention to vote for a populist party (Cantarella et al., 2023; Mancosu et al., 2017). Furthermore, research shows a link between a conspiracy mindset and a preference for right-wing parties (Christner, 2022; Loziak & Havrillová, 2024), with general political mistrust being an important predictor in the relationship between conspiracy mentality and voting behavior (Loziak & Havrillová, 2024). Despite these findings, there has been insufficient investigation into how conspiracy theories are connected to populist or nationalist ideologies in Eastern European countries.

In Eastern Europe, the intersection between conspiratorial orientations and voting behavior remains understudied, despite conditions that make this relationship especially salient: low levels of institutional trust, the persistence of disinformation, and high reliance on social media for news. Our study addressed this gap by examining whether skeptical orientations are associated with differential voting intentions. Although this measure does not capture the full range of conspiracy mentality, prior studies have used similar single items on health crises or institutional transparency as proxies for broader conspiratorial orientations. Research on COVID-19 misinformation links vaccine skepticism with general conspiracy thinking and distrust of elites (Bertin et al., 2020; van Mulukom et al., 2022; Earnshaw et al., 2020; Romer & Jamieson, 2020). Even narrow indicators of vaccine skepticism or institutional distrust can reliably predict political attitudes (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Freeman et al., 2020). Thus, while interpreted cautiously, our item validly reflects skeptical orientations overlapping with conspiracy beliefs and institutional mistrust.

Based on these insights, we aimed to investigate the role of skeptical orientations as a proxy of conspiracist thinking on voting intention:

> H2. Individuals with higher levels of skeptical orientations are more likely to intend to vote for a populist party (AUR) than for a mainstream party.

Furthermore, while we have substantial information on the demographics of populist voters, the reasons behind their choices remain less clear. Political knowledge is a key variable in understanding voting behavior, because it encompasses the amount and accuracy of information individuals possess about political processes, institutions, and actors. Traditionally, higher levels of political knowledge are associated with stable and predictable voting patterns, while lower levels correlate with reliance on heuristics and affective cues (Marcos-Marne et al., 2023; Stanley & Cześnik, 2022; van Kessel et al., 2020). This is particularly relevant for understanding the support for radical right parties, which often thrive on simplified messages and emotive appeals.

However, recent scholarship complicates this assumption by distinguishing between 'uninformed populists' and 'informed populists' (Stanley & Cześnik, 2022). The former may hold strong anti-elite attitudes, but their lack of political knowledge often prevents them from translating these attitudes into electoral behavior, making abstention more likely. By contrast, the latter group combines anti-elite orientations with enough political knowledge to recognize party platforms and to effectively channel their preferences into votes for populist radical right parties. Stanley and Cześnik (2022) suggest that higher political knowledge can either deter or encourage support for these parties, depending on voters' understanding of the parties' platforms and the broader political context. More

specifically, lower political knowledge correlates with higher levels of populism, and it is the 'informed populists' who are more inclined to vote for populist parties, whereas 'uninformed populists' are more likely to abstain from voting. There is evidence suggesting that individuals with lower levels of political knowledge are more likely to support populist parties (Bischof & Senninger, 2018; Oliver & Rahn, 2016). This can be attributed to several factors, including the communication strategies of populist parties, which often present their messages in simple, direct, and emotionally charged ways. These strategies resonate with voters who may not have political sophistication or the detailed knowledge necessary to critically evaluate more complex political issues or policies. Additionally, individuals with lower political knowledge are less likely to be engaged with or trust traditional political institutions and mainstream media, making them more receptive to populist rhetoric that challenges the status quo (Arzheimer, 2009; Rooduijn, 2019). Conversely, those with higher education are generally expected to possess more informed and stable political attitudes and to be better equipped to handle the complexities of globalization and digitalization, making them less susceptible to populist rhetoric.

Thus, one critical question that emerges is:

RQ1. How does the level of political knowledge impact vote intention?

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY CONTEXT, DATASET AND VARIABLES

STUDY CONTEXT: POLITICAL PARTIES IN ROMANIA:
AUR, PSD, PNL, USR AND UDMR

This study analyzes the populist party Alianța pentru Unitatea Românilor (AUR) (Crăciun & Țăranu, 2023; Soare, 2023) in relation to Romania's mainstream parties. Founded in 2019, AUR rapidly evolved from a fringe movement to a parliamentary force by 2020, positioning itself as a major challenger to the establishment. Identified as a far-right, ultranationalist, and anti-Western party (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), its motto "Family, Nation, Faith, and Freedom" reflects a conservative and exclusionary ideology. AUR leveraged public discontent with mainstream politics, promoting nationalist, traditionalist, and anti-elite narratives, especially online during the COVID-19 pandemic (Burciu, 2024).

By contrast, Romania's mainstream parties have stable roots. The Partidul Social Democrat (PSD) dominates among older and rural voters; the Partidul Național Liberal (PNL) appeals to urban, pro-European groups; the Uniunea

Salvați România (USR) began as a reformist alternative; and the Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România (UDMR) represents the Hungarian minority.

AUR's rise continued in 2024–2025, gaining 18% in the 2024 parliamentary elections, 13.9% in the first round of the 2024 presidential race, and 40.9% in the May 2025 rerun—confirming its establishment as a major force in Romanian politics.

DATA SET OF THREATPIE PROJECT

To test the hypotheses, we used an original dataset from an online representative survey conducted by Kantar/Lightspeed in Romania between May 16 and June 24, 2022. The survey covered multiple scales and variables and has been used in related studies on misinformation detection and political efficacy (Gehle et al., 2024; Schemer et al., 2024).

The analysis focused on the Romanian subsample (N = 1,500) of adults aged 18 and over, selected using soft quotas for age, education, and gender. Participants had a M_{age} = 40.56 years (SD_{age} = 12.78), 48.9% were male, and education levels were 11.7% low, 52.5% medium, and 34.5% high[1].

MEASUREMENTS

DEPENDENT VARIABLES

The study aimed to examine how news consumption influences voting for a challenger party. We used the intention to vote for the populist party AUR as the main dependent variable and included four mainstream parties (PSD, PNL, USR, UDMR) as comparison models. Voting intention was measured on a 5-point scale from 1 ("not at all probable") to 5 ("very probable") for each party.[2]

INDEPENDENT AND CONTROL VARIABLES

The main independent variable was operationalized in two types of news consumption of (i) mainstream media and (ii) digital and social media.

Assessment of the former variable was based on three items, each measured on a 5-point Likert scale indicating the frequency of following the news on TV, radio, print newspapers. The three items were grouped into one scale

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[1]   This study uses data for Romania from a larger dataset collected in 18 countries in Threatpie NORFACE project (threatpie.eu).

[2]   Details on variable measurements and descriptive statistics are provided in Appendix A (Tables A1–A2).

(with loadings from .740 to .843; α = .706). Assessment of the latter variable was also based on three items (News aggregators [such as Google News or Yahoo News], Social media sites such as [Facebook, X, etc.,] and Messaging services [such as WhatsApp, Telegram or Facebook Messenger]. We obtained one variable using the mean of the three items grouped into one factor (with loadings from .753 to .864; α = .761).

Conspiracy-oriented skepticism was assessed with a single item capturing agreement (from 1 = "Do not agree at all" to 5 = "Agree completely") with the statement: "Public health officials are not telling us everything they know about COVID-19 vaccines." Although this item does not directly measure conspiracy beliefs, it reflects a skeptical orientation toward official information, which we use as a proxy for conspiracy thinking (M = 3.62, SD = 1.38). General political knowledge originally consisted of four categorical variables, each representing a multiple-choice question designed to assess the respondents' knowledge of political figures and international organizations. Each variable provided several answer options, from which respondents could select. Subsequently, these categorical variables were recoded into four dummy variables, where a correct response was coded as "1" and an incorrect response was coded as "0." Finally, the four dummy variables were combined into a composite score by calculating the average of the four binary scores, resulting in a single continuous measure of political knowledge ranging from 0 (no correct answers) to 4 (all correct answers) (M = 1.46; SD = 1.06).

Several control measures were included to predict voting intentions for a radical right party. First, we considered respondents' outgroup feelings, measured through their evaluations of people with a separate ethnic background. We distinguished the role of the interest in politics, political orientation and fear towards the Russian – Ukraine war on voting intention. Finally, socio-demographic characteristics were included as control variables (see Appendix A for detailed information about the control variables).

METHODS

Based on the nature of our dependent variable, the most straightforward statistical model was to estimate OLS models to assess how the explanatory variables are related to vote intention. To estimate the significance and weight of our relationships, we computed the following equations[3]:

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[3] The findings should therefore be read against the distinction between mainstream and challenger parties discussed in the introduction: while mainstream actors (PSD, PNL, USR, UDMR) attract voters through established structures and programmatic stability, AUR functions as a challenger party, mobilizing disillusioned voters through populist rhetoric, distrustful orientations, and social media visibility.

$$Vote\ intention_i$$
$$= \beta_0 - \beta_1 * news\ consumption\ on\ mainstream\ media + \beta_2$$
$$* news\ consumption\ on\ digital\ and\ social\ media\ platforms\ + \beta_3$$
$$* general\ political\ knowledge + \beta_4 * skeptical\ orientations\ + \beta_5 * age + \beta_6$$
$$* Gender: male + \beta_7 * Education\ level\ + \beta_8 * political\ orientation\ + \beta_9$$
$$* Political\ interest\ + \beta_{10} * Outgroup\ feelings\ + \beta_{11} * Afraind\ of\ Russian$$
$$- Ukraine\ war\ + \varepsilon$$

FINDINGS

RESULTS OF LINEAR MODELS

The fixed effects in our models (see Tables 1 & 2) support H1a and H1b, as well as H2 and our RQ1: news consumptions on digital and social media channels, conspiracy theories and general political knowledge are significant predictors across all models. Individuals who follow news on digital and social media channels, who have skeptical orientation to conspiracy and who have low political knowledge have a higher probability of voting for a populist party like AUR.

HYPOTHESIS 1A: DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA NEWS CONSUMPTION

The first hypothesis (H1a) posits that the more individuals follow news on digital and social media channels, the more they intend to vote for a radical right party (AUR). The results from Table 1 support this hypothesis: individuals following the news on digital and social media channels have a higher probability of voting for a populist party. Compared, the effect of following news on digital and social media channels on vote intention for mainstream parties varies. For both PSD and PNL (see Table 2), the following news on digital and social media channels is a significant positive predictor of vote intention for these parties, however the effect is stronger for PSD. The vote for the other mainstream parties (USR and UDMR) is not impacted by the news consumption on digital and social media channels.

Table 1. OLS regression models predicting vote intention for Romania's radical right party *Alianța pentru Unitatea Românilor* (AUR)

	Vote intention for AUR	
	Standardized coefficient	**Standard error (SE)**
Following news on mainstream media	0.08[*]	(0.04)
Following news on digital and social media	0.11[***]	(0.04)

	Vote intention for AUR	
	Standardized coefficient	Standard error (SE)
General political knowledge	-0.12***	(0.04)
Conspiracy theories	0.12***	(0.03)
Age	-0.18***	(0.03)
Gender: male	0.004	(0.03)
Education level	-0.11***	(0.03)
Political orientation	0.002	(0.03)
Political interest	0.03	(0.05)
Outgroup feelings	-0.06*	(0.03)
Afraid of the Russian–Ukraine war	-0.01	(0.04)
Observations	1,011	
Adjusted R^2	0.11	
Residual Std. Error	0.95 (df = 999)	
F Statistic	12.67*** (df = 11; 999)	

Note: All coefficients are standardized (β). Robust standard errors (HC3) are reported in parentheses. Significance levels are denoted as † $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, and *** $p < 0.001$

Table 2. OLS regression models predicting vote intention for Romanian mainstream political parties: *Partidul Social Democrat (PSD), Partidul Național Liberal (PNL), Uniunea Salvați România (USR) and Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România (UDMR)*

	Vote intention for PSD, PNL, USR, and UDMR							
	PSD		PNL		USR		UDMR	
	Standardized coefficient	SE	Standardized coefficient	SE	Standardized coefficient	SE	Standardized coefficient	SE
Following news on mainstream media	0.10**	(0.04)	0.06	(0.05)	-0.08*	(0.05)	0.09*	(0.04)
Following news on digital and social media	0.12***	(0.04)	0.07*	(0.04)	0.03	(0.04)	0.04	(0.04)
General political knowledge	-0.15***	(0.04)	-0.02	(0.03)	-0.01	(0.03)	-0.14***	(0.04)
Conspiracy theories	0.08**	(0.03)	-0.12***	(0.03)	-0.11***	(0.03)	0.01	(0.03)
Age	0.03	(0.04)	-0.08**	(0.03)	-0.14***	(0.04)	-0.24***	(0.04)
Gender: male	-0.02	(0.03)	0.02	(0.03)	0.02	(0.03)	-0.01	(0.03)
Education level	-0.08***	(0.03)	-0.06**	(0.03)	-0.06*	(0.03)	-0.13***	(0.04)

| Vote intention for PSD, PNL, USR, and UDMR | | | | | | | |
| PSD | | PNL | | USR | | UDMR | |
Standardized coefficient	SE	Standardized coefficient	SE	Standardized coefficient	SE	Standardized coefficient	SE
Political orientation	-0.21***	(0.03)	0.25***	(0.03)	0.22***	(0.03)	0.07**	(0.03)
Political interest	0.14***	(0.04)	-0.02	(0.04)	0.05	(0.04)	0.02	(0.05)
Outgroup feelings	0.02	(0.03)	0.06*	(0.03)	0.03	(0.03)	0.01	(0.03)
Afraid of the Russian–Ukraine war	0.10***	(0.04)	0.13***	(0.03)	0.15***	(0.04)	0.09***	(0.03)
Observations	1,020		1,025		1,018		1,022	
Adjusted R^2	0.13		0.13		0.11		0.14	
Residual Std. Error	0.95 (df = 1008)		0.94 (df = 1013)		0.96 (df = 1006)		0.96 (df = 1010)	
F Statistic	14.94*** (df = 11; 1008)		15.23*** (df = 11; 1013)		12.64*** (df = 11; 1006)		15.69*** (df = 11; 1010)	

Note: All coefficients are standardized (β). Robust standard errors (HC3) are reported in parentheses. Significance levels are denoted as † $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, and *** $p < 0.001$

HYPOTHESIS 1B: DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS

Turning to H1b, the expectation was that following mainstream media would predict vote intention for mainstream parties more strongly than for the populist party (AUR). The findings provide partial support for this hypothesis. Specifically, PSD and UDMR vote intentions are positively and significantly associated with mainstream news consumption, while PNL and USR show no such relationship. Interestingly, the model (see Table 1) also indicates that AUR supporters continue to rely on mainstream media alongside social media, reflecting the party's growing visibility across the media ecosystem. We can assume a hybrid nature of AUR's media strategy: although it relies heavily on social media to mobilize, it also benefits indirectly from exposure through mainstream channels, whether directly viewed or consumed via online retransmission. This pattern suggests that mainstream media consumption does not uniformly consolidate support across all mainstream parties, but rather differentiates among them, with center-left and ethnic minority parties more clearly aligned with traditional news audiences.

HYPOTHESIS 2: SKEPTICAL ORIENTATIONS

H2 posits that the more individuals have a skeptical orientation towards conspiracy narratives, the more they intend to vote for a populist party (AUR). The results strongly support this hypothesis, as skeptical orientation (used as proxy for belief in conspiracy theories) is a significant positive predictor of vote intention for AUR in both models. In comparison, the role of skeptical orientation on voting intention for mainstream parties is mixed. For PSD, skeptical orientation positively predicts vote intention, however, for PNL and USR, belief in conspiracy theories negatively predicts vote intention.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

As expected in RQ1, political knowledge significantly affects voting intentions. Higher political knowledge reduces the likelihood of voting for the radical right AUR and, unexpectedly, also for the mainstream PSD, while it has no significant effect on PNL or USR. Thus, greater political knowledge is linked to lower vote intentions for AUR and PSD.

CONTROL VARIABLES

Higher education is associated with lower intentions to vote for AUR and PSD, similar to patterns observed for political knowledge. Age shows a negative association with AUR support, with younger individuals expressing higher voting intentions, while its relationship with mainstream parties varies, negative for PNL, USR, and UDMR, and non-significant for PSD. Consistent with previous studies, openness toward ethnic groups is negatively related to AUR voting intentions, indicating that exclusionary attitudes align with populist preferences.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper offered insights into voting intentions by comparing radical right and mainstream parties. The findings align with previous research (Betz, 1994; Christner, 2022; Crăciun & Ţăranu, 2023; Gross, 2023; Hameleers, 2020; Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020; Schulz, 2019; Schulz et al., 2024), highlighting shared and distinct factors shaping support for populist versus mainstream parties.

This paper focused on the role of news consumption and conspiracy theories beliefs on intention to vote. As noted, research has shown that news consumption is an important factor shaping vote choice, with patterns indicating that citizens who rely more on online news channels are more likely to support radical right parties, whereas those who follow traditional channels tend to support

mainstream parties (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Schumann et al., 2021). Although previous research has explored various news consumption habits, this article is the first to assess comparatively the predictors of vote intention for mainstream parties versus radical right parties, particularly in an Eastern European country context where the populist attitudes just started to rise again. Prior studies predominantly concentrated on the effect of radical right parties on Romania political arena and society (Crăciun & Ţăranu, 2023; Gherghina & Miscoiu, 2014; Soare & Tufiş, 2023), and less on what might determine citizens to support the radical parties.

In line with prior research, this study's findings confirmed that there are some variations in the role of news consumption on vote intention for radical right party, compared to mainstream parties. The study found the latter was more impacted by the traditional media, and the vote intention for some parties currently in the Romanian Parliament wass not significantly associate with any type of news consumption (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Schumann et al., 2021). An even more fascinating result for Romania is that the voters' profile of a left-wing political party (PSD) was similar with the voters' profiles of the radical right party (AUR). One primary explanation was that these parties' voters share common demographic characteristics, economic concerns, and a preference for populist, nationalist rhetoric (Busuioc, 2016; Chiruta, 2023). Both parties have successfully tapped into the sentiments of disenfranchised and conservative segments of the population, creating a significant overlap in their support bases (Chiruta, 2023; Momoc, 2018; Popescu, 2016).

In relation to the possible association between conspiracy theories beliefs and individuals' vote option, our findings have suggested that belief in conspiracy theories is a significant positive predictor of vote intention for a radical right party, while the results for mainstream parties are mixed with positively vote intention for social-democrat party and negatively vote intention for center right and liberal mainstream parties. This finding was in line with the research evidence on the effects of conspiracy theories beliefs on individuals' behavior, showing a link between a conspiracy mindset and a preference for radical right-wing parties (Christner, 2022; Loziak & Havrillová, 2024).

This article faced several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the issue of not using longitudinal data to observe how an individual's voting option evolves over time. Therefore, it is difficult to observe and assess the vote formation process, as well as to monitor the predictors of vote intention closely to 2024 electoral rounds. Despite the limitations posed by the absence of longitudinal recent data, the novelty of this large-scale dataset at the national level in Romania offers a unique opportunity. Second, we only measured individuals' voting intention and not the vote option in the previous elections, which could be a significant oversight. Assessing selection effects and not only social media exposure effects

would have allowed us to observe whether individuals who endorsed a populist radical-right party in the last election relied more frequently on social media for news than those who voted for any other party (Schulz, 2019; Schumann et al., 2021). Third, the measurement for conspiracy theory belief in this study was composed of only a single item specifically related to COVID-19 vaccines. The reliance on a single-item measure may have limited the generalizability and robustness of our findings regarding conspiracy theory beliefs.

Despite these limitations, the study offered three primary findings. First, news consumption had a significant impact on voting intention, suggesting that radical right parties' supporters were following more news on social media, while mainstream parties' supporters followed more news on traditional media or none. One exception is the *Partidul Social Democrat* (Social Democrat Party, PSD), whose supporters follow news on both traditional media channels and social networking sites, indicating a similarity in profiles with radical right party supporters. Second, the findings reflected that individuals believing in conspiracy theories were more prone to support radical right parties and social democrat parties, supporting again the idea that these parties share voters. Third, our findings indicated a negative trajectory for political knowledge and support for a radical right party, however this negative trend was valid for both radical right and mainstream parties. This trend might suggest that the proliferation of information sources, particularly through social media, has led to a saturation of information, making it difficult for individuals to discern accurate information from misinformation. This can erode political knowledge overall. Studies have shown that misinformation can negatively impact political knowledge and perceptions, contributing to confusion and distrust in both radical right and mainstream political entities. This exploratory finding should be further considered in studies discussing political knowledge and news knowledge.

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ANNEX

Table A1. Descriptive statistics

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Range
Voting for AUR (radical right)	1,500	2.19	1.51	1	5	4
Voting for PSD (social democrat mainstream party)	1,500	2.28	1.44	1	5	4
Voting for PNL (mainstream party)	1,500	2.3	1.40	1	5	4
Voting for USR (mainstream party)	1,500	2.34	1.44	1	5	4
Voting for UDMR (mainstream party)	1,500	1.56	1.06	1	5	4
Following news on mainstream media	1,500	3.11	-	1	5	4
Following news on SNS	1,500	3.24	-	1	5	4
General political knowledge	1,500	1.46	1.06	0	4	4
Conspiracy theories	1,500	3.69	1.38	1	5	4
Age	1,500	41.00	12.78	18	65	47
Gender: male	1,499	-	-	0	1	1
Education level	1,486	2.23	-	1	3	2
Political orientation (right)	1,500	5.84	-	0	10	10
Political interest	1,500	4.38	-	1	7	6
Outgroup feelings	1,500	68.50	28.16	0	100	100
Afraid of the Russian - Ukraine war	1,500	3.35	-	1	5	4

Table A2. Description of the variables

| Variable name	Measure
Vote intention	Categorial variable measuring which political party or candidate a respondent plans to vote for in an upcoming election. The original survey questions asked the respondents to rate their probability of voting for specific parties.
Following news on mainstream media	Measures the frequency with which a respondent follows news from mainstream media sources (e.g., newspapers, television news). It was measured on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means very often, and 5 means never. The scale was reversed that higher values indicate higher frequency of following the news on mainstream channels.
Following news on SNS	Measures the frequency with which a respondent follows news on SNS (e.g., social media platforms etc.). It was measured on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means very often, and 5 means never. The scale was reversed that higher values indicate higher frequency of following the news on mainstream channels.

Variable name	Measure
General political knowledge	Assesses the respondent's knowledge of political facts and current events. This battery had 4 items testing the general knowledge of the respondents: Who is the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care?, Who is the current General Secretary of the United Nations (UN)?, Which of the following countries does not belong to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)?, and Who leads the European Commission at the moment?. The final political knowledge was computed as an average of the correct answered given by a respondent. Higher values represent better level of political knowledge.
Conspiracy theories	Measures the extent to which a respondent believes in conspiracy theories. This can be assessed through agreement with statements on a Likert scale (e.g., strongly disagree to strongly agree). The item measured was Public health officials are not telling us everything they know about COVID-19 vaccines - Generally speaking, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?.
Age	The age of the respondent in years.
Gender: male	Dummy variable equal to one if respondent is female, zero otherwise.
Education level	The respondents were asked which is the highest education level they finished. The variable is coded on lower education, medium education and higher education.
Political orientation (right)	Placement on a left-right scale [In politics people sometimes talk of "left" and "right". Using this card, where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?]
Political interest	The respondents were asked 'Generally speaking, how interested are you in politics?' The variable is measured on a seven-item scale, where 1 means not at all interested, and 7 means very interested in politics.
Outgroup feelings	Measures a respondent's feelings towards groups they do not belong to, often using a feeling thermometer scale (e.g., 0-100, where 0 is very cold/unfavorable and 100 is very warm/favourable). The variable was measured on the item 'People who have a different ethnic background than I'
Afraid of the Russian - Ukraine war	The variable was measured on the item 'How afraid are you of the Russian war on Ukraine?'.

Table 3. Conceptual clarifications of main terms

Concept	Definition (as used in this study)	References
Mainstream parties	Established political parties with stable parliamentary presence and governing experience since the 1990s (e.g., PSD, PNL, UDMR, USR). They are institutionalized actors shaping Romania's political order, characterized by programmatic continuity, formal organizational structures, and access to state resources.	Hanley & Sikk (2016); Katz & Mair (1995); Sikk (2012)
Challenger parties	Political actors that contest the established political order, often with limited prior institutional experience. They mobilize support through anti-establishment rhetoric, outsider positioning, and rejection of mainstream norms. In the Romanian case, AUR is conceptualized as a challenger populist party despite its parliamentary representation.	De Vries & Hobolt (2020); Hanley & Sikk (2016); Sikk (2012)
Populism	A thin-centered ideology that divides society into two antagonistic groups: "the pure people" vs. "the corrupt elite", and claims that politics should express the general will of the people. In practice, it is often articulated through anti-elitist, anti-establishment rhetoric.	Mudde (2004); Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser (2017)

Concept	Definition (as used in this study)	References
Radical right	A party family combining nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Radical right parties advocate for exclusionary nationalism, restrictive immigration, and law-and-order policies, while positioning themselves against liberal-democratic pluralism.	Mudde (2007); Norris & Inglehart (2019)
Misinformation	False or misleading information that is shared without intent to deceive.	Tandoc et al. (2018); Wardle & Derakhshan (2017)
Disinformation	False information deliberately created and disseminated with the intent to deceive or manipulate.	Freelon & Wells (2020); Wardle & Derakhshan (2017)
Conspiracy theories	Beliefs that events are secretly manipulated by powerful and malevolent groups acting in covert coordination. Conspiracy beliefs attribute hidden motives to elites and institutions, often in ways that reinforce anti-elitist and populist worldviews.	Douglas et al. (2019); Imhoff & Bruder (2014); Uscinski et al. (2018)

Figure 1. Ideological map of mainstream and challenger parties in Romania
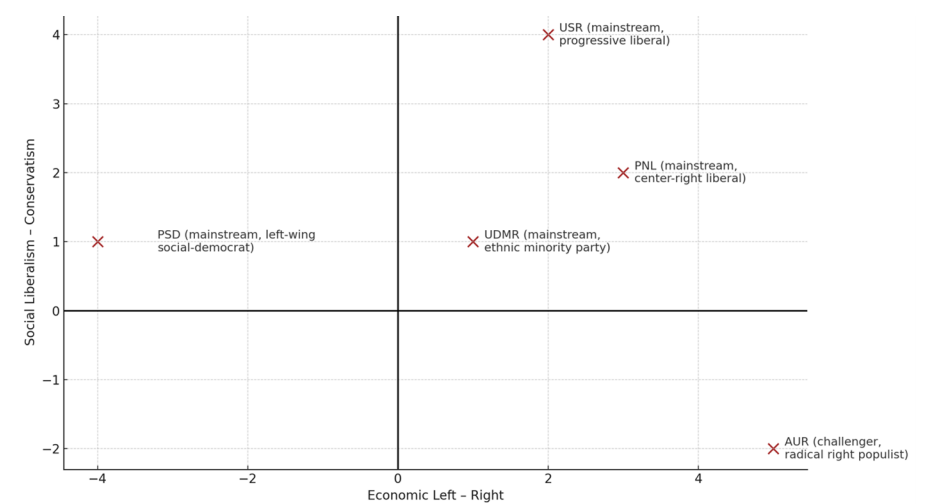
Source: Jolly, Seth, Ryan Bakker, Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, Jonathan Polk, Jan Rovny, Marco Steenbergen, and Milada Anna Vachudova. Forthcoming. "Chapel Hill Expert Survey Trend File, 1999-2019." *Electoral Studies.* https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102420

Table 4. Romanian parties by ideology and system position

Party	Ideology	Mainstream / Challenger	Justification
Social Democratic Party (PSD)	Center-Left, Social Democratic	Mainstream	Institutionalized party with continuous parliamentary presence and governing experience since the 1990s; largest left-wing force.
National Liberal Party (PNL)	Center-Right, Liberal-Conservative	Mainstream	Long-standing governing party, pro-European orientation, and historically one of Romania's main establishment actors.
Save Romania Union (USR)	Liberal, Progressive / Reformist	Mainstream	Newer but consolidated through stable parliamentary representation and participation in government; positions itself within the pro-European mainstream.
Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR)	Ethnic Minority, Centrist Pragmatic	Mainstream	Represents the Hungarian minority; consistently present in parliament and part of governing coalitions since the 1990s.
Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR)	Radical Right, Nationalist Populist	Challenger	Despite parliamentary representation, positions itself as anti-establishment, mobilizing voters through outsider rhetoric and opposition to mainstream elites.