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Autocracies win the minds of the democratic public: how Japanese citizens are persuaded by illiberal narratives propagated by authoritarian regimes

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the persuasive effects of illiberal narratives on citizens in democratic countries in the context of increasing influence operations by authoritarian states, focusing on Japan as a case study. We compare the impact of illiberal narratives originating from China and Russia with that of mainstream narratives prevalent in democracies. Study 1 shows that whereas both narratives shift public opinion, illiberal narratives exert a stronger influence. Authoritarian tendencies, conspiracy beliefs, and political sophistication do not moderate these effects. By simulating two-sided exposure, Study 2 finds that despite narratives tending to cancel each other out, the effect of illiberal narratives persists, especially when introduced after mainstream narratives. These findings highlight a potential vulnerability in democratic societies such as Japan, where mainstream narratives may not adequately counteract illiberal influences.

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KEYWORDS Narrative; persuasion; propaganda; sharp power; Japan

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of global democratic backsliding and the rise of authoritarianism,[1] the nature of authoritarian propaganda and public diplomacy has undergone significant changes. In particular, the transformation of the information environment brought about by the global proliferation of social media has created new avenues for authoritarian states to exert influence over democratic publics.[2] Notable examples include Russia's intervention in the 2016 U.S. presidential election[3] and the dissemination of disinformation regarding COVID-19 by Chinese diplomats.[4] These actions are referred to as "sharp power," defined as attempts to "pierce, penetrate, or perforate the information environments in the targeted countries"[5] with the aim of altering public

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opinion in democratic countries to favour authoritarian regimes.[6] Unlike soft power, which appeals to cultural and value-based attractions, sharp power operates as a means to destabilize target countries, weaken their commitment to democracy, and enhance the perceived superiority of authoritarian systems using disinformation and economic incentives.[7]

At the core of sharp power lies the narrative, which is a story-based message that appeals to emotions and values,[8] and by sustaining attention and fostering emotional resonance, narratives often influence audience behaviour more than objective statistical facts or logical arguments.[9] Given their persuasive power and emotional impact, narratives are a potent tool for shaping people's attitudes and behaviours. Political actors leverage narratives not only to strengthen their own position but also to undermine the arguments of opposing forces.[10] In particular, authoritarian governments use favourable narratives both domestically and internationally to reinforce the legitimacy of their regimes and to emphasise the superiority of authoritarian systems over democratic systems, thereby contributing to a global power shift.[11] In this context, narratives disseminated by authoritarian states in the global information environment, which challenge liberal narratives in democracies, are referred to as illiberal narratives.

Illiberal narratives often praise authoritarian regimes, justify their actions, or criticize democratic nations. A notable example of self-praising narratives is the "tell China's story well" strategy, which highlights China's COVID-19 response and the Belt and Road Initiative. For instance, China lauded its lockdown measures as evidence of the superiority of its authoritarian system to Western capitalism and promoted its nationalism as a counter to Western colonialism.[12] Narratives justifying controversial actions include Russia's claims regarding Crimea and Ukraine, where it emphasised the right to self-determination while spreading pro-Russian disinformation through national media outlets, such as RT and Sputnik.[13] Similarly, China justified its policies in Xinjiang amidst international criticism.[14] Authoritarian regimes also criticize democratic nations, as seen in China's narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic, which emphasised U.S. and European failures while portraying the Trump administration as chaotic.[15] More recently, China criticized Japan's handling of the Fukushima nuclear wastewater release.[16]

The discussion of illiberal narratives in the sharp power literature reveals two significant gaps. First, although the body of research on the content and disseminators of illiberal Chinese and Russian narratives is growing, few studies have examined their effects on their audience, with notable exceptions.[17] Second, there is a notable lack of research in the East Asian context. However, in democratic countries geographically close to China, its influence on their operations are increasingly observed.[18] To address these research gaps, we examine the persuasiveness of illiberal narratives originating in China and Russia, using Japan as a case study.

Studying the persuasive effects of illiberal narratives in Japan offers several significant advantages. First, while previous studies have suggested that such narratives disseminated by authoritarian states are less likely to be accepted in Western countries,[19] cultural proximity to authoritarian states may enhance their persuasive effects.[20] This underscores the significance of examining their effects in Japan, which is a democratic East Asian country. Second, as U.S.–China tensions intensify, the continued alignment of East Asian democracies like Japan with the U.S.-led liberal democratic order is crucial for its resilience.[21] China's public diplomacy is increasingly extending its influence into Japan's domestic politics, as shown by the Chinese Consul General in Osaka urging voters to

support a specific left-wing political party during the election of Japan's House of Representatives.[22] Therefore, investigating the persuasive effects of illiberal narratives in Japan contributes to explaining their domestic implications and provides insights into East Asian international relations and the broader U.S.–China rivalry.

2. Theories and hypotheses

Authoritarian states such as China and Russia leverage social media and state-controlled media to challenge the dominant narratives of the liberal international order and propagate illiberal narratives, thereby seeking to shape global public opinion in their favour.[23]

2.1. Persuasive effects of illiberal narratives

Strategic narratives employed by states typically encompass the elements of actors, temporality, and causality. Notably, the temporality and causality components provide a structured story framework that distinguishes them from related concepts, such as discourse and framing.[24] According to Miskimmon et al. (2014: 13), "narratives can either be understood as structuring the range of thoughts and actions of actors, or as tools that actors use to persuade each other." Consequently, the primary empirical question regarding illiberal narratives is whether they can persuade citizens of democratic societies.

Narratives are a powerful tool that appeals to the emotions and values of audiences through storytelling,[25] giving them a level of persuasiveness that surpasses mere information transmission.[26] Hinyard and Kreuter (2007) emphasise the particular ability of narratives to evoke emotions and empathy, making it more difficult for recipients consciously to construct counterarguments, thereby enhancing their acceptance of the message. Furthermore, recent studies applying narrative persuasion in the political domain highlight that narratives elicit greater empathy than statistical evidence.[27] This underscores that narratives are not merely vehicles for information delivery but deeply engage the emotions and values of recipients, thereby exerting a more powerful and enduring influence.

Based on the arguments, we first examine whether illiberal and mainstream narratives exert their intended persuasive effects. If illiberal narratives fail to persuade citizens in democratic countries, their use as a tool of sharp power would pose a minimal threat. Therefore, confirming their persuasive effects is a prerequisite for testing subsequent hypotheses. Furthermore, although not preregistered, as a corollary to the analysis of our first hypothesis (*H1*), it is also possible to compare the magnitude of their effects with those of mainstream narratives. *H1* is therefore as follows:[28]

> *H1: Illiberal and mainstream narratives both have the capacity to shift public opinion in the desired direction.*

2.2. Source effect

Next, we examine the source effect of illiberal narratives. Individuals who hold relatively favourable attitudes towards China or Russia are expected to be more receptive to illiberal narratives from these countries when the source is explicitly identified[29] because source attribution is an important antecedent of persuasive effects.[30]

Specifically, individuals are more likely to trust others for whom they have positive feelings and trusted sources are perceived as credible, which makes their narratives more convincing.[31] Conversely, narratives clearly associated with disliked sources are less likely to be accepted because of motivated reasoning.[32] Therefore, for example, Japanese people with a positive view of China are expected to find narratives they know to originate from China more persuasive than when the source is not disclosed. Thus, we test *H2*.

H2: Revealing the source of the narrative increases the effects of illiberal and mainstream narratives among those with positive attitudes towards the sender country, and reduces the effects among those with negative attitudes towards the sender country.

2.3. Factors enhancing the persuasive effects of illiberal narratives

Subsequently, we examine the factors expected to enhance the persuasive impact of illiberal narratives. Specifically, following Mader *et al.* (2022), we test moderation effects based on (a) authoritarian tendencies, (b) belief in conspiracy theories, and (c) political sophistication.[33]

First, authoritarian regimes often promote illiberal narratives, leading to the prediction that individuals with stronger authoritarian tendencies are more likely to "resonate" with such narratives. This resonance fosters empathy with the claims made in the narrative,[34] ultimately making these authoritarian individuals more likely to accept the narratives. Furthermore, democratic countries' citizens who exhibit strong authoritarian tendencies often harbour dissatisfaction with democratic performance and major institutions, such as legislatures, political parties, and the mainstream media.[35] This dissatisfaction may increase their receptiveness to illiberal narratives, which provide alternative perspectives to mainstream narratives. Consequently, individuals with more authoritarian tendencies are expected to be more strongly persuaded by illiberal narratives.

Second, belief in conspiracy theories is similarly expected to amplify the persuasive effect of illiberal narratives.[36] Strong believers in conspiracy theories are characterized by a deep distrust of existing democratic institutions.[37] In particular, they often perceive traditional mass media, which primarily disseminates mainstream narratives, as biased, thereby increasing their appetite for alternative perspectives and narratives. For instance, it has been reported that China and Russia disseminated a conspiracy theory on social media in 2023 that the large-scale wildfires in Hawaii were caused by the U.S.'s use of meteorological weapons.[38] This conspiracy theory was intertwined with narratives based on economic inequality, alleging that the fires were initiated to secure land for smart city development by Hawaii's wealthy elite, thus fuelling divisions within U.S. public opinion. Such conspiracy theories align closely with the objective of sharp power to exacerbate societal divisions within democracies. Consequently, individuals with stronger beliefs in conspiracy theories are likely to be more susceptible to the persuasive effects of illiberal narratives.

Third, the persuasive effects of illiberal narratives are expected to depend on the audience's level of political sophistication. Unsophisticated individuals, particularly those with limited political knowledge, are likely to struggle to recognize that illiberal narratives serve the strategic interests of authoritarian regimes. Moreover, they may be unaware of these states' motivations for undermining the credibility of mainstream

narratives in democratic societies, making it difficult for them to discount their credibility. Additionally, individuals with limited political knowledge are less likely to realize that authoritarian regimes typically restrict press freedom and that journalism in such regimes often bolsters the legitimacy of the state, leaving little room for critical reporting on domestic policies.[39] As a result, they may fail to discern the inherent differences between state-sponsored illiberal narratives and mainstream narratives based on independent reporting. More generally, individuals with limited political knowledge are less inclined to consider the basis of their attitudes, making them more susceptible to significant attitude shifts when even a single new consideration is introduced.[40] This susceptibility is likely to enhance the impact of illiberal narratives, which are relatively unfamiliar in democratic contexts and thus more likely to be a new consideration, thereby increasing their persuasive power.

The above arguments on effect heterogeneity led to the formulation of *H3*. Notably, Mader *et al.* (2022) provide empirical support for all the hypotheses included in *H3* in the German context. In this study, we test these hypotheses in the Japanese context.

> *H3: Illiberal narratives have larger effects among people (a) who score high on authoritarian tendencies, (b) have a tendency to believe conspiracy theories, and (c) score low on political sophistication.*

As a counterhypothesis, it is expected that individuals with weaker authoritarian tendencies, less inclination towards conspiracy theories, and higher levels of political knowledge will find mainstream narratives more persuasive, which is tested as *H4*.

> *H4: Mainstream narratives have larger effects among people (a) who score low on authoritarian tendencies, (b) have a low tendency to believe conspiracy theories, and (c) are politically sophisticated.*

2.4. Two-sided exposure to competing narratives

Thus far, *H1*–*H4* have focused on predicting the effects of exposure to a single narrative. While this approach is useful for isolating the persuasive effects of individual narratives, it does not fully capture the reality of the discursive environment, where multiple narratives often compete. In open information environments, particularly in democratic countries, both mainstream narratives and illiberal narratives propagated by authoritarian states can coexist. In such contexts, it is not uncommon for individuals to be exposed to both types of narratives. Therefore, it is necessary to examine not only the persuasive effects of individual narratives but also the effects of two-sided persuasion, where individuals encounter both mainstream and illiberal narratives.

Although there is little research on the persuasive effects of competing narratives presented in a two-sided manner, theoretical insights can be drawn from framing studies. In an environment where only a specific frame dominates–a one-sided flow of persuasive messages–the persuasive effect of that message is more likely to manifest.[41] However, especially in political contexts, it is common for individuals to be exposed to multiple competing frames, which reduces the experimental realism of studies that present only a single frame. Sniderman and Theriault (2004) conducted experiments that included conditions where multiple competing frames were presented and found that when two strong frames were presented in a two-sided manner, their effects tended to cancel each other out.[42] This line of research was

further developed by incorporating the effects of repetition and intensity of multiple frames.[43] The key point is that in a two-sided flow environment, where competing persuasive messages are available, the persuasive effects of individual messages tend to be offset,[44] a phenomenon also noted in studies on the effects of election campaigns.[45] Therefore, we test *H5*.[46]

> *H5: The effects of narratives are canceled out when both illiberal and mainstream narratives are presented (i.e. two-sided messages).*

3. Study 1

Using an online survey experiment, Study 1 tests *H1–H4* by comparing the persuasive effects of illiberal narratives originating in China and Russia with those of the dominant mainstream narratives in Japan.

3.1. Method

Studies on illiberal narratives have primarily focused on supply-side analyses, with limited exploration of audience perspectives. Among the few audience-focused studies, Mader *et al.* (2022) stand out for rigorously demonstrating the persuasive effects of illiberal narratives through experimental research. Therefore, this study adopts Mader *et al.*'s (2022) design to enhance comparability across research. Additionally, this design allows the analysis of multiple narratives within a single dataset to improve external validity, making it a strong methodological choice for investigating the persuasive effects of illiberal narratives.

In January 2023, an online survey experiment was conducted using Lucid, targeting Japanese nationals aged 18–79 years. The sample size was planned to be 2,500, based on a preregistered power analysis, and quota sampling was employed to match the distribution of gender, age groups, and residential regions to the population's marginal distribution.[47]

Participants in the experiment first provided consent via a consent form and responded to covariate questions and then participated in twelve experiments. Although each experiment addressed a different topic, the design was identical across all experiments. The twelve topics were as follows: the Hong Kong National Security Law; reeducation facilities in Xinjiang; the arrest of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou in Canada; Russia's invasion of Ukraine; the Belt and Road Initiative; the Zero-COVID policy; the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement; gun control in the U.S.; political polarization in the U.S.; the LGBTQ movement; Japan's "Resolution on China" by the House of Councillors; and a bipartisan delegation from Japan visiting Taiwan.

The twelve topics and their corresponding narratives were carefully selected based on a thorough examination of those circulating on Japanese social media during the data collection period. While we do not claim that these selections comprehensively represent all illiberal narratives then prevalent in Japan, the study provides a broader scope than previous research. Most prior studies have concentrated on illiberal narratives from a single country, such as China. In contrast, this study includes narratives from both China and Russia, and it addresses a wide range of Chinese topics, such as those concerning Hong Kong and Xinjiang. Furthermore, given that domestic issues

in Western countries, particularly the U.S., are often raised in illiberal narratives, this study incorporates such issues alongside narratives intersecting with Japanese domestic politics. By covering this diverse array of topics, the study draws inferences with greater external validity than research limited to only a few topics. Note that the illiberal narratives associated with these topics encompass the three types discussed in the Introduction: those that praise their own country, those that justify their actions in response to criticism, and those that criticize democratic nations.[48]

In each experiment, participants were randomly assigned to one of five groups, each receiving a corresponding vignette: control group, illiberal narrative group, illiberal narrative & source group, mainstream narrative group, and mainstream narrative & source group. In the control group, only neutral background information related to each topic was presented. In the illiberal narrative group, the narratives propagated by China or Russia were presented, whereas in the mainstream narrative group, the narratives dominant in Western democratic countries were presented, in addition to the neutral background information provided to the control group. In the illiberal narrative & source and mainstream narrative & source groups, the source of the narrative (e.g. Chinese government officials or Western political leaders) was explicitly identified. Below is an example of the vignette presented in the experiment regarding reeducation facilities in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.

> Since 2017, the Chinese government has established reeducation facilities in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, detaining over one million Uyghur citizens. *[Treatment]* How do you evaluate the reeducation facilities in Xinjiang?

The following text was inserted in the *[Treatment]* section of the vignette according to the experimental conditions.

> *Control group*: No additional text is provided.
> *Illiberal narrative group*: These reeducation facilities are part of China's anti-terrorism policy and are intended to prevent Uyghur citizens from adopting extremist ideologies. As a result, terrorist incidents by Islamic extremists, which had frequently occurred in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, have been eradicated.
> *Illiberal narrative & source group*: According to Chinese government officials, these reeducation facilities are part of China's anti-terrorism policy and are intended to prevent Uyghur citizens from adopting extremist ideologies. As a result, terrorist incidents by Islamic extremists, which had frequently occurred in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, have been eradicated.
> *Mainstream narrative group*: This policy is described as forced ideological indoctrination targeting specific ethnic and religious groups, and it is considered a serious violation of human rights since many Uyghur citizens who have no connection to extremist ideologies are being detained.
> *Mainstream narrative & source group*: According to government officials from Western countries, this policy is described as forced ideological indoctrination targeting specific ethnic and religious groups, and it is considered a serious violation of human rights since many Uyghur citizens who have no connection to extremist ideologies are being detained.

The order of the twelve experiments was randomized for each participant and random assignment to experimental conditions was conducted for each experiment. The dependent variable was the evaluation of the actions taken by the governments of authoritarian and democratic countries on each topic. When the dependent variable was the evaluation of actions by the Chinese or Russian governments, it was coded so that higher values indicated more favourable evaluations. Conversely, when the dependent variable was the evaluation of actions by the U.S. or Japanese governments,

it was coded so that lower values indicated more favourable evaluations. In other words, higher values on the dependent variable consistently represent more "favourable" attitudes to authoritarian regimes. For example, in the experiment regarding reeducation facilities in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, the question "How do you evaluate the reeducation facilities in Xinjiang?" was used to assess the actions of the Chinese government, and the dependent variable was measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "very good" to "very bad," coded so that higher evaluations corresponded to higher values. All dependent variables were rescaled to range from 0 to 1. See SI1 in the Appendix for all vignettes and measurements of dependent variables used in the twelve experiments.

3.2. Measurement

The pretreatment covariates used in *H2*, *H3*, and *H4* were measured as follows. The feeling thermometer for China was assessed on a scale from 0 to 100 and then rescaled to range from 0 to 1 ($M = 0.24$, $SD = 0.21$). The mean value of feelings towards China was significantly lower than the midpoint of 0.5, indicating that Japanese people hold very negative feelings towards China overall.

Authoritarian tendencies were measured using nine items from the Asian Barometer Survey, including statements such as "If the government is constantly checked by the legislature, it cannot possibly accomplish great things" and "If people have too many different ways of thinking, society will be chaotic." These items were rescaled to range from 0 to 1 (Cronbach's alpha = 0.70, $M = 0.47$, $SD = 0.13$).

Belief in conspiracy theories was measured using a single-item scale adapted from Lantian *et al.* (2016) to fit the Japanese context.[49] The item read, "It is sometimes said that official announcements concerning controversial political and social events, such as the new coronavirus vaccine, the outcome of the U.S. presidential election, or the assassination of former prime minister Abe, may be an attempt to hide the truth from the general public. In other words, the fact that these events were secretly planned and carried out by enormously powerful governments, multinational corporations, religious groups, etc., may be hidden. What do you think about this idea?" Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "absolutely wrong" to "absolutely right" and were rescaled to range from 0 to 1 ($M = 0.47$, $SD = 0.25$).

Political sophistication was measured with five quizzes on international politics. The number of correct responses was counted as a measure of political sophistication (range: 0–5, $M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.62$). The exact wordings of all covariates are provided in SI2 in the Supplementary Materials.

3.3. Analysis

To test *H1* using data with a nested structure across twelve experiments for each participant, we estimated the average treatment effects using a mixed-effects model. The dependent variable was the evaluation of the actions taken by authoritarian or democratic governments in each experiment, with higher values indicating a more favourable attitude towards authoritarian governments or a less favourable attitude towards democratic governments. The independent variables included the treatment (with the baseline being the control group) and fixed effects for the twelve experiments, which controlled for the idiosyncratic effects of each experiment. A random effect was

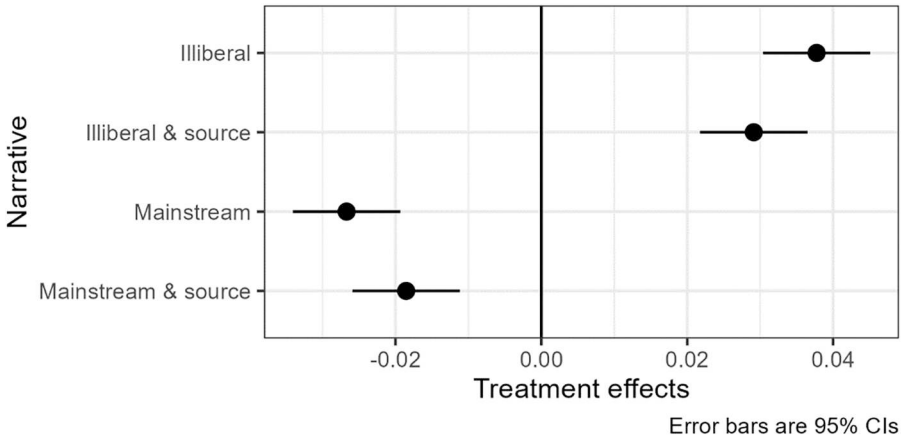


Figure 1. Average treatment effects (Study 1).

included in the intercept.[50] The full regression table is provided in Model 1 of SI3 in the Supplementary Materials. Figure 1 illustrates the average treatment effects.[51] The value of 0 on the x-axis represents the baseline of the control group: that is, a rightward shift indicates a more favourable attitude towards the claims of authoritarian states or a less favourable attitude towards the claims of Western democratic states, whereas a leftward shift indicates a less favourable attitude towards the claims of authoritarian states or a more favourable attitude towards the claims of Western democratic states.

Figure 1 demonstrates that the group exposed to the illiberal narrative exhibited attitudes favourable to authoritarian states–either supportive of the authoritarian government or unfavourable towards democratic governments–regardless of the presence of a source, compared with the control group, which was only provided with neutral background information. In contrast, the group exposed to the mainstream narrative showed attitudes favourable to democratic states, also irrespective of the presence of a source. Thus, both the illiberal and mainstream narratives were shown to have the intended persuasive effects, supporting *H1*. Although the presentation of a source tended to slightly reduce the persuasive effects of both illiberal and mainstream narratives, the differences were not statistically significant. Additionally, the illiberal narrative tended to demonstrate a larger effect size compared with the mainstream narrative, although the differences were not statistically significant at the 5% level.[52]

To test *H2*, an analysis focusing specifically on the illiberal narratives disseminated by China was conducted with five experiments concerning the Hong Kong National Security Law, the reeducation camps in Xinjiang, the arrest of a Huawei executive in Canada, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Zero-COVID policy.[53] We estimated a model that included the interaction between treatment and the feeling thermometer towards China. Figure 2 displays the marginal effects for groups with relatively positive ($M + SD = 0.45$) and negative ($M - SD = 0.03$) sentiments towards China. Note that even at 1 *SD* above the mean, the feeling thermometer score of 0.45 is still less favourable than the neutral midpoint of 0.5. The full regression table is provided in Model 2 of SI3 in the Supplementary Materials.

Figure 2 shows that the persuasive effect of the illiberal narratives tends to be smaller for those with relatively favourable attitudes towards China compared with

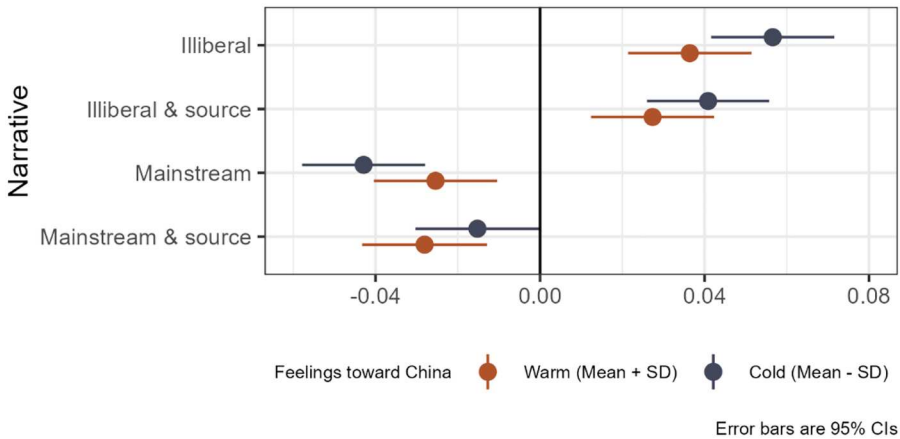


Figure 2. Moderation by feeling toward China.

those with relatively unfavourable attitudes, which is contrary to the prediction of *H2*. However, the difference in effects between those with relatively favourable and unfavourable attitudes towards China within the illiberal group was not statistically significant. Similarly, there was no significant difference between the two groups in the illiberal & source condition. These results lead to the rejection of *H2*. In the group exposed to the mainstream narrative, there was a tendency for those with relatively unfavourable attitudes towards China to exhibit stronger persuasive effects when no source was provided, whereas this relationship was reversed when a source was included. However, in both cases, the interaction between the treatment and the feeling thermometer towards China was not statistically significant.

To test *H3* and *H4*, we estimated a model that included the interactions between the treatment and authoritarian tendencies, conspiracy beliefs, and political sophistication. As in Figure 2, Figure 3 illustrates the treatment effects for values ± *SD* from the mean of each covariate. The full regression table is provided in Models 3–5 of SI3 in the Supplementary Materials.

The left panel of Figure 3 illustrates the interaction between authoritarian tendencies and treatment. None of the interaction terms showed statistically significant effects. Although there was a tendency for individuals with stronger authoritarian tendencies to be more susceptible to the persuasive effect of illiberal narratives, this effect was not significant. The middle panel shows the interaction between conspiracy beliefs and treatment, but again, none of the interaction terms were significant. Similarly, the right panel of Figure 3 depicts the interaction between political sophistication and treatment, with none of the interaction terms reaching statistical significance. Although there was a tendency for the persuasive effect of illiberal narratives to be stronger among individuals with higher levels of political knowledge compared with those with lower levels, this effect was not significant. These results lead to the rejection of *H3* and *H4*. Mader *et al.* (2022) found that individuals with stronger authoritarian tendencies, stronger conspiracy beliefs, and lower political knowledge were more likely to be persuaded by pro-Russian narratives; however, this trend was not observed in the Japanese context. In other words, Japanese individuals appear to be broadly susceptible to illiberal narratives, regardless of the levels of these covariates.

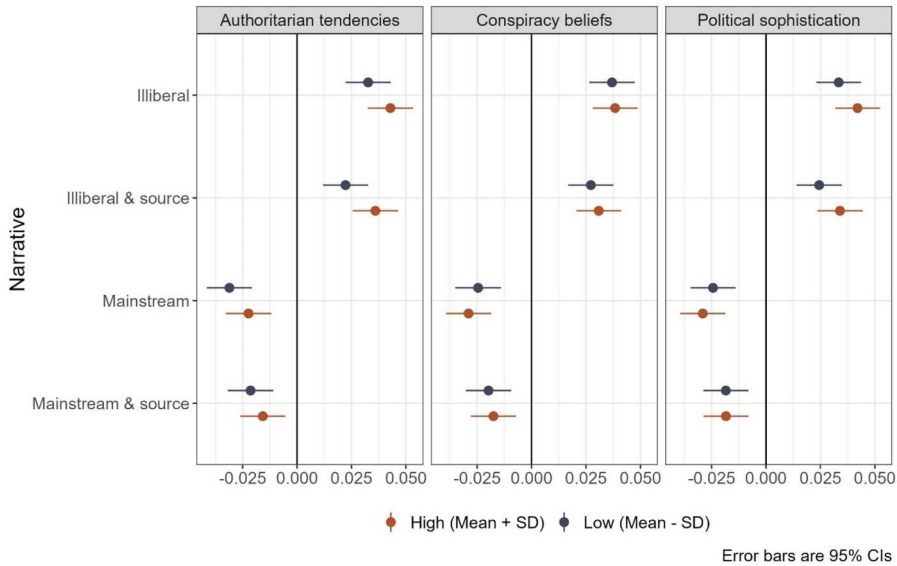


Figure 3. Moderation by authoritarian tendencies, conspiracy beliefs, and political sophistication.

4. Study 2

In Study 2, in addition to replicating the findings of Study 1, an experiment was conducted introducing a condition whereby participants were exposed to both illiberal and mainstream narratives to test *H5*.

4.1. Method

In July 2023, we conducted an online survey experiment of Japanese nationals aged 18–79 years recruited through Lucid. The sample size was planned to be 2,500 based on a power analysis, and quota sampling was employed to ensure that the distribution of gender, age groups, and residential regions matched the marginal distribution of the population. The final sample size was 2,574. Participants in Study 2 were distinct from those in Study 1, ensuring no overlap between the two groups. The experimental design was identical to that of Study 1, except for the following points.

The experimental setup consisted of four groups: a control group, an illiberal narrative group, a mainstream narrative group, and a two-sided group. Participants were randomly assigned to one of these groups. The groups in which the narrative source was presented, as in Study 1, were removed. In the two-sided group, both the illiberal narrative and the mainstream narrative were presented, but the order in which these narratives were shown was randomized. The vignettes for all groups across the twelve topics are provided in Table SI5 in the Supplementary Materials.

4.2. Analysis

To test *H5*, we estimated the average treatment effects using a mixed-effects model, as in Study 1. The dependent variable was the evaluation of the actions of authoritarian

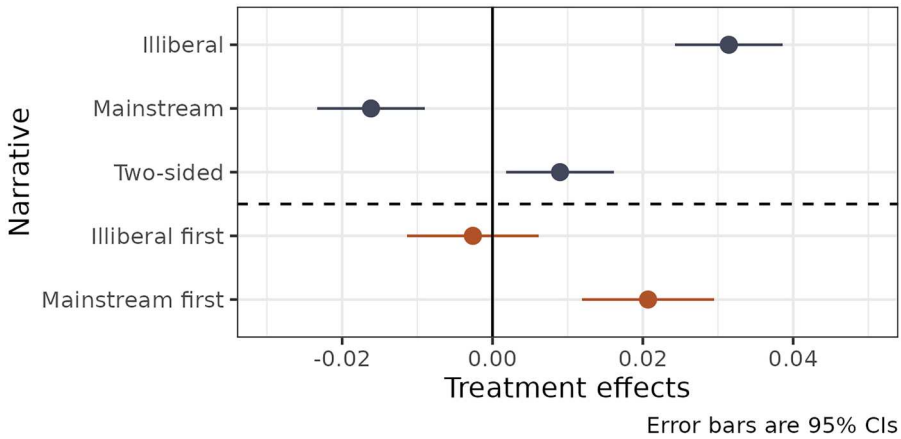


Figure 4. Average treatment effects (Study 2).

and democratic governments in each experiment, with higher values indicating a more favourable attitude towards authoritarian governments or a less favourable attitude towards democratic governments. The independent variables included the treatment (with the baseline being the control group) and fixed effects for the twelve experiments. A random effect was included in the intercept. The full regression table is provided in SI6 in the Supplementary Materials.[54] Figure 4 illustrates the effect of the treatment. The value of 0 on the x-axis represents the baseline of the control group; a rightward shift indicates a more favourable attitude towards the claims of authoritarian states or a less favourable attitude towards the claims of Western democratic states, whereas a leftward shift indicates a less favourable attitude towards the claims of authoritarian states or a more favourable attitude towards the claims of Western democratic states.

The area above the horizontal dashed line in Figure 4 indicates the treatment effects in the three experimental groups relative to the baseline established by the control condition (Model 1 in SI6 of the Supplementary Materials). On the one hand, the results show that the group exposed to the illiberal narrative displayed attitudes that were more favourable to authoritarian states compared with the control group: that is, they were either more favourable towards authoritarian governments or less favourable towards democratic governments. On the other hand, the group exposed to the mainstream narrative displayed attitudes more favourable to democratic states. Thus, both the illiberal and mainstream narratives were shown to have their intended persuasive effects, replicating the support for *H1* found in Study 1. Additionally, the tendency for the illiberal narrative to exhibit a larger effect size than the mainstream narrative, as observed in Study 1, further demonstrates the robustness of the results.[55]

In the two-sided group, as suggested by research on competing frames, the effects of the illiberal and mainstream narratives cancelled each other out, leading to a diminished effect size. However, rather than becoming entirely insignificant, the persuasive effect in the direction favourable to authoritarian states remained significant at the 5% level. This result partially supports *H5*.

Given that the order of the illiberal and mainstream narratives was randomized in the two-sided group, the group can be broken down based on which narrative was presented first. The area below the horizontal dashed line in Figure 4 shows the treatment

effects for the two-sided group when broken down by the order of presentation of the two narratives (Model 2 in SI6 of the Supplementary Materials). The estimates for the illiberal narrative and mainstream narrative groups are omitted, as they remained unchanged from the results shown above the dashed line.

In the group where the illiberal narrative was presented first, followed by the mainstream narrative (Illiberal first), the effects of the two competing narratives were completely cancelled out, rendering the persuasive effect insignificant. However, in the group where the mainstream narrative was presented first, followed by the illiberal narrative (Mainstream first), whereas the persuasive effect was weaker than in the Illiberal group, a significant persuasive effect in the direction favourable to authoritarian states was observed. In other words, the residual persuasive effect observed in the two-sided group, as shown in the upper part of Figure 4, can be attributed to the effect in the Mainstream first group.

Considering the real discursive environment in democratic countries, it is rather unlikely that individuals would first encounter illiberal narratives. Most political elites and mainstream media support liberal mainstream narratives, leading the public in democracies to engage with these narratives routinely. Therefore, for citizens in democratic countries, it is more common to first accept the mainstream narrative and then encounter illiberal narratives. This corresponds to the situation of the Mainstream first group shown in the lower part of Figure 4, where it is suggested that the mainstream narrative does not function as an inoculation, but rather may allow for the infiltration of illiberal narratives. In democratic countries like Japan, where liberal narratives that oppose illiberal narratives dominate, such a discursive environment may not necessarily be resilient against the spread of illiberal narratives.

5. Discussion

Authoritarian countries such as China and Russia seek to create international public opinion favourable to their interests and exercise sharp power to penetrate and influence democratic publics. In the exercise of sharp power, traditional top-down propaganda, which relied on conventional mass media, is increasingly being replaced by participatory propaganda, which leverages global social media to spread persuasive messages by encouraging bottom-up engagement from ordinary users. Central to participatory propaganda are illiberal narratives aimed at persuading citizens in democracies to adopt more favourable–or at least less critical–attitudes towards autocratic regimes.

Existing research tends to focus on the supply side of the issue, analyzing the content and sources of illiberal narratives, and their effects on audiences in democracies have been much less studied. Whereas the effects of illiberal narratives in Europe, Africa, and Latin America have been explored to some extent,[56] the impact of sharp power in East Asia, particularly in regions close to China and Russia, has been generally overlooked. Our study fills this gap by investigating the persuasive effects of illiberal narratives in Japan, a country proximate to both China and Russia.

In Study 1, we examined the persuasive effects of twelve different illiberal narratives by comparing them with the effects of mainstream narratives. The results showed that both illiberal and mainstream narratives produced persuasive effects in the intended direction. The effectiveness of the narratives did not diminish significantly even when their sources were disclosed, and illiberal narratives tended to have a greater

impact than mainstream narratives. Importantly, the effect heterogeneity reported by Mader *et al.* (2022) was not observed. Specifically, the persuasive effects of illiberal narratives were not moderated by several factors, such as feelings towards authoritarian states, authoritarian tendencies, conspiracy beliefs, or political sophistication. This suggests that it is not only specific segments of the Japanese population that are influenced by illiberal narratives, but rather that Japanese individuals are broadly susceptible to persuasion by illiberal narratives propagated by authoritarian states.

In Study 2, recognizing that mainstream and illiberal narratives often coexist in real discursive environments, we examined the effects of presenting both narratives consecutively. The results indicated that while the effects of the mainstream and illiberal narratives tend to cancel each other out, the effect of the illiberal narrative persists rather than being completely offset. Further analysis of the narrative presentation order revealed that the cancelling out was less likely when the illiberal narrative was presented after the mainstream narrative.

Overall, these results suggest that Japanese individuals are vulnerable to the persuasive effects of illiberal narratives. First, the absence of covariates that suppress the persuasive effect of illiberal narratives indicates that Japanese people across various attributes are broadly susceptible to persuasion by such narratives. The lack of a moderation effect of political sophistication, which was evident in Mader *et al.* (2022), is particularly noteworthy. It was expected that individuals with greater political knowledge would be less susceptible to persuasion by illiberal narratives, as they could recognize these narratives as favouring authoritarian governments. The results from Japan did not support this prediction. In general, individuals with higher levels of political knowledge or education tend to be less inclined to believe in conspiracy theories.[57] However, a larger body of political knowledge can induce motivated reasoning, leading individuals to believe in conspiracy theories to protect their partisan identity.[58] While illiberal narratives are not necessarily conspiracy theories, it is likely that those with greater political sophistication are more capable of critically scrutinizing existing mainstream narratives. For example, the illiberal narrative used in this study regarding the Hong Kong protests asserted that "the anti-government protests in Hong Kong were secretly instigated by the US under the guise of promoting democracy." While this is an illiberal narrative propagated by the Chinese and Hong Kong governments, it is also true that the U.S. has covertly or overtly intervened in the political instability of other countries (e.g. Iran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954, and Chile in 1973). Therefore, it is conceivable that the greater one's knowledge of the history of international politics, the more likely one is to find some plausibility in illiberal narratives, thus creating room for their persuasive effect to take hold.

The lack of moderating effects may be partially attributed to Japan's specific political, historical, and social contexts. First, compared with European countries, Japan shows less pronounced social divisions,[59] which may reduce the acceptance of illiberal narratives by specific population segments. For instance, in Germany, political divisions are evident between the former East and West Germany, and pro-Russian narratives tend to be more easily accepted in the former East Germany because of its historical experience of socialism.[60] In contrast, Japan lacks such clear social divisions, and its economic disparities are relatively small,[61] resulting in an absence of stratification. Additionally, the lack of fragmentation among the media audience also plays a role in curbing the acceptance of illiberal narratives by specific segments of the public. In Japan, partisan media outlets are not prevalent, and audiences on social

media are not fragmented.[62] These characteristics, namely the lack of clear social or economic divides and audience fragmentation, could be considered key explanations for the absence of moderating effects.

The second notable vulnerability is that mainstream narratives do not function as an inoculation against the persuasive effects of illiberal narratives. The analysis of order effects in Study 2 showed that when the illiberal narrative is presented after the mainstream narrative, the two do not cancel each other out, and the persuasive effect of the illiberal narrative remains significant. In democratic countries, where mainstream narratives are prevalent, it is likely that exposure to illiberal narratives will occur after exposure to mainstream narratives. If the mainstream narrative cannot neutralize the persuasive effect of the illiberal narrative in such cases, it suggests that once an illiberal narrative infiltrates the discursive space of a democracy, it may be difficult to prevent its further acceptance. To maintain support for liberal democracy, it is crucial to prevent such infiltration, although this is challenging within the open discursive space of democratic nations.

Third, illiberal narratives consistently exhibited greater persuasive effects than mainstream narratives in both Studies 1 and 2.[63] In democratic countries, conventional media outlets rarely disseminate illiberal narratives, making mainstream narratives more familiar to the public. Consequently, illiberal narratives may be perceived as more novel, potentially leading to greater attitude change among the audience, in line with the "quasi-Bayesian" update rule.[64] In other words, because many citizens in democratic countries have already been "pretreated" by mainstream narratives, the relatively higher novelty of illiberal narratives may result in stronger persuasive effects. This implies that once illiberal narratives begin to spread within a democracy, it may be inevitable that they will have a persuasive impact. While diversity in the discursive space is desirable, to prevent illiberal narratives from becoming dominant, it is vital to generate, disseminate, and share liberal counternarratives that can effectively challenge them.

These implications stem from analyzing the audience for illiberal narratives rather than the supply-side focus of prior research and from using Japan as a case study. While previous studies argue that illiberal narratives are less accepted in Western democracies,[65] this study shows that East Asian democracies closer to China and Russia are more receptive. Additionally, it identifies a unique finding for Japan: the moderating variables noted in earlier research[66] are ineffective. This offers a Japan-specific insight and calls into question the assumed alignment of East Asian democracies with the U.S.-led liberal democratic order.

This study has several limitations. First, although the experiments used twelve diverse illiberal narratives, it remains unclear whether the observed persuasive effects were due to narrative persuasion[67] or more conventional forms of persuasion based on arguments. To clarify this issue, future research should present the same message in both narrative and nonnarrative formats and examine the differences in their effects. Nonetheless, the absence of effect heterogeneity in the persuasive impact of the narratives suggests that narrative persuasion may have been at play. This is because when individuals are transported into a narrative, they are less likely to recognize the persuasive intent and are less prone to generate counterarguments based on various cognitive mechanisms, thereby making persuasion more likely.[68] If this is the case, the lack of moderation by political sophistication may be attributed to narrative persuasion.

Second, this study involved a one-off exposure to narratives and did not examine the effects of repeated longitudinal exposure to different types of narratives. Moreover, the dependent variable was limited to attitudes, and we did not explore sharing behaviour, which is a crucial action in participatory propaganda. Future research should investigate whether illiberal narratives are more likely to be shared and disseminated on social media compared with mainstream narratives. Relatedly, the dependent variables measured attitudes towards specific topics or incidents only, without examining the impact of illiberal narratives on confidence in democracy. Does persuasion by illiberal narratives lead to a decrease in confidence in democracy, potentially contributing to democratic backsliding? Given that the projection of sharp power and the competition over international public opinion will only intensify in the foreseeable future, there is a need for more audience-focused research in a wider range of contexts.

Notes

1. Cooley, "Authoritarianism Goes Global"; Diamond, *Ill Winds*.
2. Jia and Li, "Public Diplomacy Networks."
3. Badawy et al., "Characterizing the 2016 Russian IRA Influence Campaign."
4. Verma, "China's Diplomacy and Changing the COVID-19 Narrative."
5. Walker and Ludwig, "From 'Soft Power' to 'Sharp Power,'" 13.
6. Walker, "What is "Sharp Power"?"
7. Huang, "China's Propaganda and Disinformation Operations in Taiwan."
8. Barraza et al., "The Heart of the Story."
9. Zak, "Why Inspiring Stories Make Us React"; Kawata, McElwain, and Nakabayashi, "Narrative Premiums in Policy Persuasion."
10. Shenhav, "Thin and Thick Narrative Analysis"; McMahon and Kaiser, "Narrative Ju-Jitsu."
11. Hartig, "Communicating China to the World"; Chang, "The Post-Pandemic World"; Gurol, "The Authoritarian Narrator."
12. CMP Staff, "Telling China's Story Well"; Hellmann and Oppermann, "Photographs as Instruments of Public Diplomacy"; Lehman-Ludwig et al., "Chinese Anti-Westernism on Social Media."
13. Biersack and O'Lear, "The Geopolitics of Russia's Annexation of Crimea"; Ramsay and Robertshaw, "Weaponising News."
14. Alpermann and Malzer, "In Other News."
15. Ogden, "The Role of Competing Narratives in China and the West's Response to Covid-19."
16. Davidson, "State-Backed Disinformation Fuelling Anger in China over Fukushima Water."
17. Mader, Marinov, and Schoen, "Foreign Anti-Mainstream Propaganda and Democratic Publics"; Mattingly et al., "Chinese State Media Persuades a Global Audience that the 'China Model' is Superior."
18. Doublethink Lab, "Full Report Launch"; Ichihara, "Is Japan Immune From China's Media Influence Operations?"
19. Erlich et al., "Does Analytic Thinking Insulate against Pro-Kremlin Disinformation?"; Hagström and Gustafsson, "The Limitations of Strategic Narratives"; Turcsanyi and Kachlikova, "The BRI and China's Soft Power in Europe."
20. Min and Luqiu, "How Propaganda Techniques Leverage Their Advantages."
21. Buzan, "The Inaugural Kenneth N. Waltz Annual Lecture A World Order Without Superpowers."
22. Johnston, "How Reiwa Shinsengumi Managed to Overtake JCP in the Lower House."
23. Alpermann and Malzer, "In Other News."
24. Jones and McBeth, "A Narrative Policy Framework"; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives*.
25. Barraza et al., "The Heart of the Story"; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives*.
26. Green and Brock, "In the Mind's Eye."
27. Kawata, McElwain, and Nakabayashi, "Narrative Premiums in Policy Persuasion."

28. All hypotheses were preregistered on OSF Registries: https://osf.io/u6yzv/?view_only=69ced705ca35431ca909767abc35ef96. The hypotheses in the preregistration are worded slightly differently. Specifically, they employ the term "undemocratic narrative" rather than "illiberal narrative." However, since the narratives analysed in this study do not necessarily encompass a rejection of democracy, we have opted to use the term "illiberal narrative" throughout the paper. The content of the hypotheses remains unchanged.
29. Gehle et al., "Misinformation Detection in the Context of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine."
30. Wilson and Sherrell, "Source Effects in Communication and Persuasion Research."
31. Nelson and Garst, "Values-Based Political Messages and Persuasion."
32. Kunda, "The Case for Motivated Reasoning"; Lodge and Taber, *The Rationalizing Voter*.
33. Mader, Marinov, and Schoen, "Foreign Anti-Mainstream Propaganda and Democratic Publics."
34. Hinyard and Kreuter, "Using Narrative Communication as a Tool for Health Behavior Change."
35. MacWilliams, "Who Decides When The Party Doesn't?"
36. Clem, Herron, and Tepnadze, "Russian Anti-Western Disinformation, Media Consumption and Public Opinion in Georgia."
37. Albertson and Guiler, "Conspiracy Theories, Election Rigging, and Support for Democratic Norms."
38. Huang and Jingnan, "How Rumors and Conspiracy Theories Got in the Way of Maui's Fire Recovery."
39. Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China*.
40. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*.
41. Zaller; Nelson and Kinder, "Issue Frames and Group-Centrism in American Public Opinion."
42. Sniderman and Theriault, "CHAPTER 5."
43. Druckman, Schaffner, and Sellers, "Competing Frames in a Political Campaign."
44. Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China*.
45. Zaller et al., "The Myth about Massive Effect of Media Revived?"; Campbell, *The American Campaign*.
46. Although this hypothesis is referred to as *H3* in the preregistration, it is labeled as *H5* in this paper to align with the order of presentation (see https://osf.io/94k2q/?view_only=6eda69c26b8c4be49d3541ef11d68435). It should be noted that *H1* and *H2* in the preregistration correspond to the replication of Study 1.
47. Upon initially collecting the planned sample size, it became evident that there were issues with the settings in Qualtrics. Specifically, during the random assignment process for each of the twelve experiments, not only were the five groups randomized, but the item measuring response time was also inadvertently included in the randomization. As a result, approximately one-sixth of the responses in each experiment were missing. To address this, additional samples were collected to ensure that the number of responses for each experiment reached the planned target of approximately 2,500. Consequently, the final sample size, in terms of the number of participants, amounted to 3,270.
48. Narratives related to the Belt and Road Initiative and the Zero-COVID policy align with those that praise their own country. Narratives concerning the Hong Kong National Security Law, reeducation facilities in Xinjiang, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine fall into the category of justifying actions in response to criticism. Finally, narratives addressing the arrest of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou in Canada, the BLM movement, gun control in the U.S., political polarization in the U.S., the LGBTQ movement, Japan's "Resolution on China" by the House of Councillors, and the bipartisan delegation from Japan visiting Taiwan correspond to those that criticize democratic nations.
49. Lantian et al., "Measuring Belief in Conspiracy Theories."
50. This model follows Mader, Marinov, and Schoen, "Foreign Anti-Mainstream Propaganda and Democratic Publics."
51. The plots of the predicted values for each of the twelve experiments are provided in Table SI4 of the Supplementary Materials.
52. The general linear hypothesis tests indicated that the sum of the coefficients for the illiberal and mainstream groups was 0.01 ($p = 0.09$, 95% CI [–0.00, 0.02]), suggesting a statistically significant difference from zero at the 10% level. The sum of the coefficients for the illiberal & source

group and the mainstream & source group was 0.01 ($p = 0.10$, 95% CI [–0.00, 0.02]), showing no significant difference from zero.

53. Regarding Russia, the analysis was not conducted due to the limited number of cases, as there was only a single topic – the invasion of Ukraine.
54. The plots of the predicted values for each of the twelve experiments are provided in Table SI7 of the Supplementary Materials.
55. The general linear hypothesis tests indicated that the sum of the coefficients for the illiberal and mainstream groups was 0.02 ($p = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.03]), which is significantly larger than zero at the 5% level.
56. Mader, Marinov, and Schoen, "Foreign Anti-Mainstream Propaganda and Democratic Publics"; Mattingly et al., "Chinese State Media Persuades a Global Audience that the 'China Model' is Superior."
57. Miller, Saunders, and Farhart, "Conspiracy Endorsement as Motivated Reasoning"; Garrett and Weeks, "Epistemic Beliefs' Role in Promoting Misperceptions and Conspiracist Ideation"; Krouwel et al., "Does Extreme Political Ideology Predict Conspiracy Beliefs, Economic Evaluations and Political Trust?"
58. Meirick, "Motivated Misperception?"; Miller, Saunders, and Farhart, "Conspiracy Endorsement as Motivated Reasoning."
59. Gethin, "Political Cleavages and the Representation of Social Inequalities in Japan, 1953–2017"; Chiavacci, "Social Inequality in Japan."
60. Peisakhin and Rozenas, "Electoral Effects of Biased Media"; Rensmann, "The Peculiar Appeal of the 'Jewish Question.'"
61. Chiavacci, "Divided Society Model and Social Cleavages in Japanese Politics"; Moriguchi and Saez, "The Evolution of Income Concentration in Japan, 1886–2005."
62. Kobayashi et al., "News Audience Fragmentation in the Japanese Twittersphere."
63. The difference in the effects of illiberal narratives and mainstream narratives was statistically significant at the 10% and 5% levels in Studies 1 and 2, respectively.
64. Morley and Walker, "The Role of Importance, Novelty, and Plausibility in Producing Belief Change"; DellaVigna and Gentzkow, "Persuasion"; Broockman and Kalla, "When and Why Are Campaigns' Persuasive Effects Small?"
65. For example, Hagström and Gustafsson, "The Limitations of Strategic Narratives."
66. For example, Mader, Marinov, and Schoen, "Foreign Anti-Mainstream Propaganda and Democratic Publics."
67. Green and Brock, "In the Mind's Eye"; Bilandzic and Busselle, "Narrative Persuasion."
68. Green and Brock, "The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives."

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