



Political economy of disinformation electioneering in Ghana: Explaining the effect on voter behaviour

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ABSTRACT

Disinformation has become a structural feature of electoral competition worldwide, yet its drivers within political economy contexts and voter-level effects in emerging democracies remain underexplored. This paper analyses how party incentives, media market structures, and digital network dynamics shape disinformation electioneering in Ghana, and examines how exposure to such content affects citizens' institutional trust, turnout intentions, and vote choice. Drawing on the political-economics framework, disinformation is conceptualised as a low-cost campaign strategy yielding higher returns under conditions of political polarisation and weak fact-checking capacity. Using a cross-sectional design with a nationally representative voter survey (N = 1,200), exposure and belief were measured using validated scales. Statistical analysis employed OLS, logistic, and multinomial logit models, along with causal mediation analysis. Findings indicate that exposure to disinformation significantly reduces trust in democratic institutions ($b = -0.20$, $p < 0.001$) and reinforces partisan bias in vote choice ($b = 0.08$, $p = 0.016$). Although exposure slightly reduces turnout intentions, the effect is not statistically significant ($p = 0.095$). Media literacy emerges as a protective factor that strengthens institutional trust ($b = 0.06$, $p = 0.021$), though its influence on behavioural outcomes remains limited. Mediation results further show that affective polarisation explains part of the disinformation effect on voter behaviour. Based on the findings, this paper concludes that the winner-takes-all nature of Ghanaian politics, partisan media ecosystems, weak fact-checking infrastructure, and low digital literacy rates create conditions where disinformation flourishes as a rational campaign strategy. Ghana's democracy in the digital age requires both structural reforms and citizen-centered interventions to address the phenomenon of disinformation proactively. This can reinforce the legitimacy of her electoral processes, maintain competitive party politics, and continue her trajectory as a stable and inclusive democracy in sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: Democracy, Disinformation, Elections, Information, Misinformation, Politics, Polarisation, Voter Behaviour, Voting

I. INTRODUCTION

Elections constitute the cornerstone of democratic governance, providing citizens with mechanisms to select leaders and hold them accountable (Dahl, 1998; Norris, 2015). In Ghana, widely regarded as one of Africa's most stable democracies, elections have historically been hotly contested yet broadly legitimate. Since the transition to multiparty democracy in 1992, electoral competition has consolidated around two dominant political parties, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC), with peaceful alternation of power becoming a hallmark of the Ghanaian democratic experience (Gyimah-Boadi, 2019). However, recent elections have witnessed growing concerns about the rise of disinformation electioneering: the deliberate spread of false or misleading information by political actors to influence voter turnout, delegitimise opponents, and manipulate democratic processes (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

Globally, disinformation has become integral to electoral politics, fueled by digital platform expansion, low barriers to information dissemination, and algorithm-driven amplification of sensational content (Tucker et al., 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018). In Africa, social media proliferation has transformed political communication while intensifying the spread and manipulation of fake news (Mutsaers & Bebawi, 2019). In Ghana, stakes are particularly high due to NPP-NDC polarization, institutional trust fragility, and elections' centrality as determinants of state resource access

(Osei, 2012). Against this backdrop, disinformation electioneering emerges not merely as a communication strategy but as a political economy problem shaping incentives, redistributing political capital, and influencing democratic stability.

While Ghana has successfully avoided widespread electoral violence plaguing some African states, increasing disinformation strategy sophistication poses significant threats to electoral integrity and governance. Political actors exploit social media platforms, partisan radio, and online news outlets to circulate doctored videos, fabricated polls, ethnic stereotypes, and conspiracy theories (News, 2022). These practices undermine informed decision-making, exacerbate polarisation, and reduce trust in democratic institutions such as the Electoral Commission (EC) and judiciary.

Despite recognition of disinformation as a democratic challenge, empirical studies on its dynamics within Ghana remain limited. Existing studies have largely focused on journalism ethics, social media use, and election observation (Ofosu-Peasah et al., 2018), leaving a gap in understanding structural incentives driving disinformation. Political parties operating within a highly competitive and winner-takes-all system perceive electoral victory as essential for patronage, rents, and state resource access (Whitfield, 2009). This creates fertile ground for disinformation campaigns as cost-effective instruments for discrediting opponents and mobilising partisan bases. The issue extends beyond communication to the broader political economy of Ghanaian elections, where disinformation functions as both a strategy and a symptom of systemic governance challenges.

This paper contributes to scholarly and policy debates in the context of disinformation electioneering within the public choice framework, emphasising how political incentives and rent-seeking behaviour shape collective outcomes (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962). It empirically examines how disinformation exposure influences political trust, turnout, and vote choice, filling an empirical gap and providing evidence-based insights for policymakers, civil society, and electoral stakeholders.

1.1 Research Hypotheses

Ho₁: Disinformation exposure will negatively affect trust in electoral institutions.

Ho₂: Disinformation exposure will decrease voter turnout intentions.

Ho₃: Disinformation exposure will increase the likelihood of partisan-consistent vote choice.

Ho₄: Media literacy moderates the effect of disinformation, such that individuals with higher literacy are less affected by exposure.

Ho₅: Affective polarisation mediates the relationship between disinformation and electoral outcomes.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

The study of disinformation in electoral politics is situated within the broader political economy framework, which emphasizes how resource distribution, institutional incentives, and strategic behaviour shape political outcomes (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2019). In Ghana, political elites operate in a competitive two-party system characterised by high electoral stakes, patronage-based mobilisation, and contested election history (Gyimah-Boadi, 2019). Within such a context, disinformation serves as a low-cost but high-impact electoral strategy. Unlike traditional campaign advertising requiring substantial financial outlays, disinformation can be rapidly disseminated through digital media at minimal cost while potentially yielding significant electoral returns.

This dynamic reflects 'cheap talk' logic in political economy, where actors provide unverifiable but influential information shaping voter perceptions (Farrell & Rabin, 1996). False narrative, rumor, and fabricated scandal circulation thus becomes a rational strategy for political actors seeking to erode trust in opponents, weaken institutional legitimacy, and sway undecided voters. The political economy perspective frames disinformation not merely as a communication problem but as a resource-allocation and incentive-driven phenomenon embedded within Ghana's electoral competition.

Selective exposure theory suggests individuals are more likely to consume information aligning with pre-existing partisan identities (Stroud, 2011). In Ghana, partisan media ecosystems where newspapers, radio, and online portals often align with specific political parties create fertile ground for disinformation to reinforce partisan polarisation. Moreover, motivated reasoning psychological mechanisms imply that disinformation is not just passively consumed but actively believed if supporting partisan predispositions (Taber & Lodge, 2006). From a behavioural standpoint, exposure to disinformation is expected to affect three key electoral behaviour domains: (1) erosion of trust in electoral institutions like the EC by portraying them as biased or incompetent; (2) depression or mobilisation of voter turnout depending on whether messages encourage cynicism or anger; and (3) shaping of vote choice through false narrative construction about candidates' integrity, competence, or ethnic affiliations. These pathways align with previous research demonstrating how misinformation campaigns in Africa have distorted democratic accountability (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Mare, 2020).

While disinformation has broad effects, its effect is not uniform. Media literacy, the ability to critically evaluate and verify information, serves as a key moderating factor (Guess et al., 2020). In contexts where citizens possess higher

digital literacy, disinformation may be identified and dismissed, reducing its influence on attitudes and behaviors. Conversely, in settings with low literacy and limited fact-checking infrastructure, disinformation is more likely to penetrate public discourse. Affective polarisation, the extent to which partisans harbor animosity toward rival parties, also shapes disinformation susceptibility. Highly polarized individuals are more likely to accept falsehoods about opponents and resist corrections (Iyengar et al., 2019). In Ghana, where partisan identities often overlap with ethnic and regional cleavages, polarisation magnifies disinformation salience and effectiveness in campaigns. Thus, disinformation's political economy is intertwined with both individual-level literacy and macro-level polarization.

2.2 Empirical Review

A growing body of literature explores disinformation effects on electoral integrity, political trust, and voter behaviour globally. Studies in advanced democracies, such as the 2016 U.S. elections, demonstrate how digital disinformation undermined confidence in democratic institutions and exacerbated polarisation (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In Europe, research shows disinformation often amplifies populist narratives, leveraging xenophobia and anti-establishment sentiments (Humprecht et al., 2020). The political economy literature further situates disinformation within political entrepreneurs' rational strategies. Downsian electoral competition models suggest that when voters face high information costs, elites exploit this gap by providing selective or false cues to secure support (Downs, 1957). Game-theoretic approaches extend this logic and analyse disinformation as a strategic weapon in zero-sum electoral contests, where reputational damage inflicted on opponents outweighs detection risks (Guriev & Treisman, 2019).

Comparative research studies in Latin America and Eastern Europe demonstrate that disinformation campaigns are more prevalent where regulatory institutions, media independence, and fact-checking mechanisms are weak (Sanovich et al., 2018). These findings instruct African democracies, including Ghana, where institutional constraints and high partisan media engagement levels create fertile ground for disinformation electioneering.

African scholarship on disinformation has grown recently, particularly regarding digital technologies and electoral integrity. In Kenya, studies highlight how political elites utilised coordinated online campaigns and ethnic rhetoric to manipulate 2017 electoral outcomes (Ndunda, 2020). Similarly, in Nigeria, the 2019 election disinformation was systematically deployed through WhatsApp networks, exacerbating ethno-religious divisions (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). These examples underscore political economy logic whereby disinformation serves as a cost-effective strategy for mobilizing support and delegitimising rivals in resource-constrained contexts. In Ghana, while the 2016 and 2020 elections were widely regarded as peaceful and credible, scholars note growing concerns about disinformation campaigns and their electoral integrity implications. Empirical studies show political parties increasingly weaponize digital platforms, hiring social media influencers and deploying bots to spread disinformation narratives. Media Foundation for West Africa [MFWA], (2020) reports document coordinated online propaganda instances, ranging from fabricated economic statistics to personal scandals targeting candidates. Ghana's disinformation challenge is compounded by weak digital literacy, partisan media polarization, and the absence of a comprehensive regulatory framework for online political advertising (Gadjanova, 2020). These structural conditions allow elites to manipulate information flows with limited accountability. Consequently, disinformation electioneering not only distorts voter decision-making but also erodes trust in democratic institutions, particularly the Electoral Commission (Maame et al, 2023).

The relationship between disinformation and political trust is well established. Exposure to disinformation erodes citizens' confidence in institutions such as electoral commissions, courts, and mainstream media (Jamieson, 2018). In Ghana, anecdotal evidence suggests coordinated disinformation campaigns during the 2020 elections targeted the Electoral Commission's credibility and its chairperson, fueling suspicion of bias among opposition supporters (Maame et al., 2023). Disinformation also influences voter turnout and electoral participation. Experimental studies show that when citizens encounter conflicting or false information, they become more politically cynical, reducing voting likelihood (Guess, 2018). In contrast, some disinformation campaigns aim to mobilize partisans by heightening affective polarisation against political rivals (Iyengar et al. 2012). In Ghana, partisan disinformation during elections often frames opponents as corrupt, incompetent, or unpatriotic, thereby deepening polarization and shaping voting intentions. Finally, media literacy and fact-checking intervention roles constitute key literature focuses. Studies in Africa and beyond suggest that higher digital literacy reduces disinformation susceptibility and mitigates effects on trust and turnout (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). Ghanaian civil society initiatives such as Dubawa and Fact-Check Ghana have attempted to counter disinformation, but their reach remains limited compared to partisan narrative scales (MFWA, 2020).

Overall, literature converges on viewing disinformation electioneering as a rational political strategy with significant democratic stability implications, particularly in emerging democracies. While global and African research has examined disinformation spread and consequences, empirical studies specifically quantifying its impact on political trust, turnout, and vote choice in Ghana remain limited. Existing works are largely descriptive or journalistic, with few employing rigorous quantitative designs to measure causal relationships. This study fills this gap by employing a

statistical model to systematically assess how disinformation exposure affects voter trust in the Electoral Commission, turnout intentions, and partisan alignment in Ghana.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a cross-sectional survey design to examine the effects of disinformation exposure on electoral behaviour in Ghana. A cross-sectional design is appropriate because it allows simultaneous measurement of individual-level exposure to disinformation and related attitudinal and behavioural outcomes at a single point in time (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The approach aligns with the study's objective of testing theoretically informed hypotheses and identifying statistical relationships between disinformation and electoral outcomes. The analytical framework combines insights from political economy and political communication, operationalised through survey-based measures of disinformation exposure, trust in electoral institutions, voter turnout intentions, and vote choice. Moderating and mediating variables such as media literacy and affective polarisation are incorporated, enabling testing of conditional and indirect effects.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted across all sixteen regions of Ghana, including Greater Accra, Ashanti, Western, Eastern, Central, Volta, Northern, Upper East, Upper West, Bono, Ahafo, Bono East, Oti, Western North, North East, and Savannah regions. This comprehensive coverage ensures representation of Ghana's diverse political, economic, and cultural landscapes, including variations in media access, internet penetration, and partisan strongholds.

3.3 Target Population and Sampling

The target population consists of eligible Ghanaian voters aged 18 years and above. A multi-stage stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure representation across Ghana's sixteen regions, urban-rural divides, and major ethnic groups. This method reflects Ghanaian electorate heterogeneity while mitigating sampling bias (Babbie, 2020). The sample size was set at 1,200 respondents, based on power analysis to detect medium effect sizes at 95% confidence. Proportional allocation ensured that regions with larger voter populations (e.g., Greater Accra and Ashanti) contributed more respondents, while maintaining representation from smaller regions. Within each region, respondents were randomly selected, followed by systematic random sampling of constituencies and random selection of eligible voters.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Data collection relied on a structured questionnaire designed in accordance with the theoretical framework and piloted for reliability. A 12-item battery of common disinformation was administered, measured with binary recognition and confidence scales (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$). Four-item Likert scale assessing trust in the Electoral Commission, judiciary, police, and political parties (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.79$). Media literacy scale adapted from Guess et al. (2020) (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$); affective polarisation index based on feeling thermometers for in-party versus out-party (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.76$). The instrument was programmed in KoBo Toolbox for electronic data capture, reducing interviewer bias and enabling real-time monitoring. Data collection occurred over eight weeks, with two research assistants administering questionnaires in English and major local languages (Twi, Ewe, Dagbani, and Hausa).

3.5 Data Analysis

The paper employed descriptive statistics to characterised the sample. For hypothesis testing, OLS regression estimated disinformation exposure effects on institutional trust (H1). Logistic regression assessed effects on turnout intentions (H2) and partisan vote choice (H3). Interaction terms between disinformation exposure and media literacy were analysed to test moderation (H4). Causal mediation analysis (Imai et al., 2010) assessed the indirect role of affective polarisation in linking disinformation exposure to institutional trust and vote choice (H5). Clustered robust standard errors accounted for design effects and potential intra-regional correlations. Results are presented in regression tables with effect sizes, confidence intervals, and standardised coefficients where applicable. Statistical significance was assessed at $\alpha = 0.05$, with marginal significance noted at $\alpha = 0.10$.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University for Development Studies, Directorate of Quality Assurance. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents before data collection, with explicit explanation of study purposes, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw without penalty. Data were anonymised and stored securely, with

access restricted to research team members. No personally identifiable information was collected. Respondents received no compensation to avoid undue influence.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The analytic sample ($N = 1,200$) comprised respondents with an average age of 35.2 years ($SD = 11.6$). Approximately 52% identified as male, 48% as female. Educational attainment distribution included: no formal education (12%), primary (18%), JHS (35%), senior high (22%), and tertiary (13%). Regional representation ranged from 3% (smaller regions) to 18% (Greater Accra). The mean score for disinformation exposure was 2.87 ($SD = 0.91$) on a 1-5 scale, indicating moderate exposure. Media literacy averaged 3.24 ($SD = 1.02$) on a 5-point scale. Institutional trust had a mean of 3.15 ($SD = 1.01$). Affective polarization averaged 3.42 ($SD = 1.13$), indicating moderate levels of partisan animosity. Turnout intention was high (87% reported intention to vote), consistent with historical Ghanaian election participation patterns. These are presented in the table below.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Category / Scale	Statistic
Age	Years	Mean = 35.2 ($SD = 11.6$)
Gender	Male	52%
	Female	48%
Educational Attainment	No formal education	12%
	Primary	18%
	JHS	35%
	Senior high	22%
	Tertiary	13%
Regional Representation	Range across regions	3% (smaller regions) – 18% (Greater Accra)
Disinformation Exposure	1–5 scale (higher = more exposure)	Mean = 2.87 ($SD = 0.91$)
Media Literacy	5-point scale (higher = more literate)	Mean = 3.24 ($SD = 1.02$)
Institutional Trust	Scale (higher = more trust)	Mean = 3.15 ($SD = 1.01$)
Affective Polarisation	Scale (higher = more partisan animosity)	Mean = 3.42 ($SD = 1.13$)
Turnout Intention	Intend to vote	87%

Source: Field Data, 2025.

4.1.1 Disinformation and Trust in Institutions

An OLS regression was conducted to examine the relationship between disinformation exposure and institutional trust. Results revealed that disinformation exposure significantly reduced institutional trust ($b = -0.020$, $SE = 0.002$, $t(1194) = -10.9$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[-0.23, -0.16]$), supporting H1. Media literacy was positively associated with institutional trust ($b = 0.006$, $SE = 0.003$, $t(1194) = 2.30$, $p = 0.0021$, 95% CI $[0.01, 0.11]$), supporting the protective role hypothesized in H4. Affective polarization had no significant direct effect on institutional trust ($b = -0.004$, $SE = 0.003$, $p = 0.114$). Age positively predicted institutional trust ($b = 0.001$, $SE = 0.002$, $p = 0.0029$). Gender and education showed no significant effects, as indicated in the table below.

Table 2
OLS Regression Predicting Trust in Institutions ($N = 1,200$)

Predictor	B	SE	95% CI [LL, UL]	P
Intercept	4.81	0.022	[4.38, 5.25]	0.001
Disinformation	-0.020	0.002	[-0.023, -0.016]	0.001
Media Literacy	0.006	0.003	[0.001, 0.011]	0.021
Polarisation	-0.004	0.003	[-0.009, 0.001]	0.114
Age	0.001	0.002	[0.001, 0.009]	0.029
Gender (Male = 1)	0.007	0.007	[-0.007, 0.021]	0.331
Education	0.003	0.003	[-0.003, 0.009]	0.268

Source: Field Data, 2025. Notes: $R^2 = 0.14$, $F(6, 1193) = 32.4$, $p < .001$

4.1.2 Disinformation and Turnout Intention

A logistic regression assessed disinformation effects on turnout intention. Disinformation exposure negatively predicted the likelihood of intending to vote, although the effect was marginally non-significant ($b = -0.005$, $SE = 0.003$, $z = -1.67$, $p = 0.095$, 95% CI $[-0.11, 0.01]$). H2 was therefore not supported at conventional significance levels, though the negative direction is consistent with theoretical expectations. Neither media literacy ($b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = 0.292$) nor affective polarization ($b = 0.06$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = 0.131$) had significant effects on turnout intention. Age, gender, and education also showed no significant effects.

Table 3

Logistic Regression Predicting Turnout Intention (N = 1,200)

Predictor	B	SE	95% CI [LL, UL]	P
Intercept	-0.025	0.029	[-0.82, 0.32]	0.390
Disinformation	-0.005	0.003	[-0.11, 0.01]	0.095
Media Literacy	0.004	0.004	[-0.04, 0.13]	0.292
Polarisation	0.006	0.004	[-0.02, 0.14]	0.131
Age	0.004	0.004	[-0.003, 0.012]	0.284
Gender (Male = 1)	0.007	0.010	[-0.12, 0.25]	0.490
Education	0.005	0.004	[-0.03, 0.13]	0.215

Source: Field Data, 2025. **Notes:** Pseudo $R^2 = 0.03$, Log-likelihood = -412.3

4.1.3 Disinformation and Vote Choice

Logistic regression examined whether disinformation exposure influenced support for the ruling party versus the opposition. Results indicated that greater disinformation exposure significantly increased the likelihood of supporting the ruling party ($b = 0.008$, $SE = 0.003$, $z = 2.41$, $p = 0.016$, 95% CI $[0.02, 0.15]$), supporting H3. Affective polarization was also positively associated with ruling-party support ($b = 0.15$, $SE = 0.004$, $z = 3.30$, $p = 0.001$, 95% CI $[0.06, 0.23]$), providing initial support for H5's mediation pathway. Media literacy showed no significant effect on vote choice ($b = 0.003$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = 0.525$). Age, gender, and education were not significant predictors.

Table 4

Logistic Regression Predicting Ruling vs. Opposition Vote Choice (N = 1,200)

Predictor	B	SE	95% CI [LL, UL]	P
Intercept	-0.52	0.032	[-1.15, 0.11]	0.101
Disinformation	0.008	0.003	[0.02, 0.15]	0.016
Media Literacy	0.003	0.005	[-0.06, 0.13]	0.525
Polarisation	0.015	0.004	[0.06, 0.23]	0.001
Age	0.002	0.004	[-0.01, 0.01]	0.623
Gender (Male = 1)	-0.009	0.011	[-0.30, 0.12]	0.397
Education	0.001	0.005	[-0.08, 0.11]	0.765

Source: Field Data, 2025. **Notes:** Pseudo $R^2 = 0.08$, Log-likelihood = -724.6

4.1.4 Media Literacy Moderation

To test H4, interaction terms between disinformation exposure and media literacy were introduced into regression models. For institutional trust, the interaction term was positive but non-significant ($b = 0.003$, $SE = 0.002$, $p = 0.142$), indicating that media literacy's moderating effect on the disinformation-trust relationship was not statistically robust. For vote choice, the interaction was also non-significant ($b = -0.002$, $SE = 0.003$, $p = 0.498$). Thus, H4 received limited support; while media literacy showed direct positive effects on trust, its buffering effect against disinformation exposure was not confirmed.

4.1.5 Affective Polarisation Mediation

Causal mediation analysis (Imai et al., 2010) assessed whether affective polarisation mediated the relationship between disinformation exposure and electoral outcomes. For the pathway from disinformation to institutional trust, the average causal mediation effect (ACME) through polarisation was small but significant (ACME = -0.003, 95% CI $[-0.05, -0.01]$, $p = 0.008$), explaining approximately 15% of the total effect. For the pathway from disinformation to ruling-party vote choice, the ACME was also significant (ACME = 0.004, 95% CI $[0.02, 0.07]$, $p = 0.002$), explaining approximately 22% of the total effect. These results support H5: affective polarisation partially mediates the relationship between disinformation exposure and both institutional trust and partisan vote choice.

4.2 Discussion

This study investigated how disinformation in Ghanaian electioneering influences democratic outcomes, specifically examining relationships between disinformation exposure (independent variable) and three dependent variables: institutional trust (H1), turnout intention (H2), and vote choice (H3). Additionally, media literacy was tested as a moderator (H4) and affective polarization as a mediator (H5). The findings align with the theoretical framework in four important ways.

First, robust evidence confirms H1: disinformation exposure significantly erodes institutional trust ($b = -0.20$, $p < 0.001$). This direct negative relationship supports the political economy argument that disinformation functions as a strategic tool for delegitimising democratic institutions. The magnitude of this effect, a 0.20 standard deviation decrease in trust per unit increase in disinformation exposure, is substantively meaningful, particularly given Ghana's historically high trust levels in institutions like the Electoral Commission. Second, H3 received strong support: disinformation exposure increases the likelihood of partisan-consistent vote choice ($b = 0.008$, $p = 0.016$). This finding aligns with selective exposure and motivated reasoning theories, suggesting disinformation reinforces existing partisan attachments rather than persuading neutral voters. The ruling party's advantage observed may reflect incumbents' greater resources for disseminating favorable narratives. Third, H2 was not supported at conventional significance levels ($p = 0.095$), though the negative coefficient direction aligns with theoretical expectations that disinformation may depress turnout through cynicism. The non-significance may reflect Ghana's historically high turnout rates (exceeding 65%) and strong civic duty norms that buffer against demobilising effects. Alternatively, measurement limitations (turnout intention rather than actual behavior) may have attenuated observed effects.

Fourth, mixed results emerged for moderating and mediating pathways. Media literacy showed a direct positive effect on institutional trust ($b = 0.006$, $p = 0.021$), supporting its protective role, but the hypothesised moderation (H4) was not statistically significant. Affective polarisation, however, demonstrated significant partial mediation for both trust and vote choice outcomes (H5 supported), explaining 15-22% of disinformation's total effects. The finding that disinformation exposure significantly reduces trust in institutions aligns closely with prior studies demonstrating that falsehoods spread undermine confidence in electoral commissions, courts, and government agencies (Humprecht, 2019; Nielsen & Graves, 2017). In fragile democracies, trust in such institutions is critical for political stability and compliance with electoral outcomes (Diamond, 2019). This study extends this literature by providing empirical evidence from Ghana, where institutional trust has historically been a stabilising force.

The Ghanaian context provides a particularly instructive case. Since the return to multiparty democracy in 1992, institutions such as the Electoral Commission and judiciary have served as arbiters of political competition. However, partisan media outlets and social media disinformation campaigns have increasingly cast doubt on their impartiality (Gyampo, 2020). This study's findings reinforce concerns that disinformation weakens citizens' faith in institutional legitimacy, potentially fueling polarization and post-election disputes. The results corroborate Gyampo's (2022) observation that coordinated disinformation campaigns targeting the Electoral Commission's credibility during elections fueled suspicion of bias among opposition supporters in Ghana. Interestingly, the analysis also showed that media literacy positively predicts institutional trust. Respondents with higher critical media skills expressed greater institutional confidence, suggesting that citizens better able to evaluate information credibility may be more resistant to disinformation narratives portraying institutions as corrupt or incompetent. Such evidence underscores media literacy's protective role, echoing Guess et al. (2020) work on digital resilience and Pennycook and Rand's (2019) findings on literacy interventions reducing disinformation susceptibility.

Although disinformation exposure was negatively associated with turnout intention, the effect fell short of statistical significance. This partial finding resonates with mixed evidence in the global literature. In some contexts, disinformation depresses participation by fostering cynicism and disillusionment (Persily & Tucker, 2020). In others, exposure may instead mobilise citizens, particularly when misinformation aligns with pre-existing partisan preferences (Weeks, 2015). In Ghana, turnout has historically been high, with participation rates regularly surpassing 65 per cent (Electoral Commission of Ghana, 2021). The resilience of turnout may dilute disinformation's demobilizing impact. Citizens may feel a civic duty to vote regardless of misinformation, or may be mobilised through strong party networks that override disinformation effects. At the same time, the observed negative direction warrants caution. Even small turnout declines can have significant implications in tightly contested elections, such as Ghana's 2008 and 2020 polls. Moreover, if disinformation disproportionately discourages turnout among younger or less educated voters, it may exacerbate representational inequalities, a concern not fully captured by aggregate non-significance.

These findings align with Guess et al. (2018), who found that conflicting or false information increases political cynicism and reduces voting likelihood in experimental settings. However, the weaker effect in this observational study suggests that real-world contexts include countervailing factors, such as social pressure, party mobilisation, and civic norms that laboratory studies cannot capture. The finding that disinformation significantly increased the likelihood of supporting the ruling party, with affective polarisation amplifying this effect, highlights disinformation's strategic deployment in Ghana's political marketplace. In line with public choice theory, political elites act as rational actors

seeking electoral advantage. Disinformation becomes a low-cost tool to manipulate narratives, discredit opponents, and consolidate support among partisan bases (Downs, 1957; Buchanan & Tullock, 1962). In Ghana, ruling parties often enjoy greater access to state-aligned media outlets and resources, enabling favourable disinformation spread while delegitimising opposition narratives (Gyampo & Debrah, 2021).

This finding resonates with studies in other electoral democracies where incumbents weaponise disinformation to reinforce dominance (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). By shaping perceptions of economic performance, corruption scandals, or opposition credibility, disinformation can tilt the electoral playing field toward incumbents, undermining electoral competitiveness, a cornerstone of democratic consolidation. The results also align with Allcott and Gentzkow's (2017) U.S. election findings, where pro-Trump false narratives (e.g., Pope endorsement, Clinton criminal indictments) were widely believed and may have shifted vote choice. Similarly, in Ghana, fabricated economic statistics and personal scandals targeting opposition candidates (MFWA, 2020) appear to have shaped voter preferences consistent with the ruling-party advantage. The significant mediation by affective polarisation (H5) provides important theoretical insight. Disinformation appears to operate partly by intensifying negative feelings toward out-parties rather than solely by providing false information about in-party performance. This finding extends Iyengar et al.'s (2019) work on affective polarisation consequences, showing that disinformation not only reflects but actively amplifies partisan animosity. In Ghana's context, where partisan identities often overlap with ethnic and regional cleavage, this polarisation-mediated pathway may be particularly consequential for social cohesion and democratic stability.

The finding that media literacy did not significantly moderate disinformation effects (H4 not supported) requires careful interpretation. This contrasts with some prior studies showing literacy interventions reduce disinformation susceptibility (Guess et al., 2020; Pennycook & Rand, 2019). However, several factors may explain this discrepancy. First, the cross-sectional design cannot capture literacy interventions over time; static literacy levels may be insufficient to confer resistance when disinformation is emotionally resonant or repeatedly encountered. Second, Ghana's media literacy average (3.24 on a 5-point scale) may represent insufficient levels for effective buffering. Third, motivated reasoning processes (Taber & Lodge, 2006) may override literacy when disinformation confirms partisan identities. Individuals may know information is questionable but accept it anyway because it supports their side. Nevertheless, media literacy's direct positive effect on institutional trust suggests literacy promotion remains valuable for democratic health, even if its protective effects against disinformation exposure are indirect. This aligns with Mihailidis and Viotty (2017), who argue media literacy should focus not just on verification skills but on fostering civic values and institutional trust as complementary goals.

These findings collectively validate the political economy framework advanced in this study. Disinformation is not merely a technological or social problem but a structural challenge embedded in Ghana's political marketplace. Political elites' rational choice to employ disinformation strategies is shaped by weak regulatory institutions, partisan media structures, and winner-takes-all electoral incentives. The erosion of institutional trust and reinforcement of partisan voting observed here represent not just individual-level effects but aggregate-level threats to democratic consolidation. When citizens cannot trust electoral information or the institutions that certify election results, the legitimacy of democratic competition itself becomes precarious. The partial mediation through affective polarisation further illuminates disinformation's mechanism: it works not just by changing what voters believe about facts, but by intensifying how they feel about political opponents. This insight has important implications for intervention design. Fact-checking alone may be insufficient when disinformation's primary effect is emotional polarisation rather than factual belief change. Interventions addressing affective polarisation, such as cross-party dialogue, shared identity framing, or depolarisation media campaigns, may be necessary complements to literacy and fact-checking approaches.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence that disinformation undermines trust in institutions, influences partisan vote choice, and potentially depresses voter turnout in Ghana. The findings underscore that disinformation is not an isolated phenomenon but a strategic tool used by political elites to shape electoral outcomes. The findings demonstrate that exposure to false narratives significantly undermines confidence in the Electoral Commission and other democratic institutions while favouring ruling-party support and interacting with affective polarisation to amplify partisan biases. Media literacy emerges as a protective factor for institutional trust, though its moderating effects against disinformation exposure were not confirmed, highlighting the importance of citizen resilience in democratic consolidation.

The political economy framework used in this study situates disinformation as a strategic instrument within electoral competition, where elites seek to maximise political gain while minimising accountability. This perspective illuminates why disinformation is not merely a technological or social problem but a structural challenge embedded in Ghana's political marketplace. The findings show that the winner-takes-all nature of Ghanaian politics, partisan media ecosystems, weak fact-checking infrastructure, and low digital literacy rates create conditions where disinformation

flourishes as a rational campaign strategy. Based on the findings, Ghanaian democracy in the digital age requires both structural reforms and citizen-centered interventions.

5.2 Recommendations

Several interventions emerge from this analysis. First, strengthening independent fact-checking initiatives and embedding them into electoral processes could help counter disinformation. Civil society groups have made strides, but broader institutional support is needed. Second, enhancing media literacy education, particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels, could equip citizens with skills to critically evaluate political information. Given the positive association between media literacy and institutional trust, such programs could foster resilience against manipulative narratives. Third, regulatory reforms should focus on transparency in political advertising and social media campaigning. Collaborations between the Electoral Commission, the National Communications Authority, and platforms like Facebook and X (Twitter) could improve the detection and removal of coordinated disinformation campaigns. Finally, political actors themselves must be incentivised to reduce reliance on disinformation. This may involve electoral codes of conduct, stronger penalties for disseminating falsehoods, or reputational costs imposed by civil society and the media. Without altering the incentive structures of political elites, disinformation will remain an attractive strategy. Ghana needs to address the phenomenon of disinformation proactively. This can reinforce the legitimacy of her electoral processes, maintain competitive party politics, and continue her trajectory as a stable and inclusive democracy in sub-Saharan Africa.

Declaration of Interest

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