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ADAM J. BERINSKY, *POLITICAL RUMORS: WHY WE ACCEPT MISINFORMATION AND HOW TO FIGHT IT*, PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2023.

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Did George W. Bush allow the 9/11 attack to happen? Was Barack Obama born in the United States (US)? Did Russia tamper with vote tallies to help Donald Trump win the presidency in 2016? Was the 2020 US election rigged in favor of Joe Biden? Berinsky uses these and similar narratives as examples of *political rumors*, defining them as weaponized fanciful stories that insidiously circulate through the informational ecosystem, gaining influence through social transmission. Across seven chapters, he tackles critical questions essential for understanding information disorder, primarily within the US context but with clear implications for democracies worldwide: What constitutes a political rumor? Why do people find political rumors appealing? What strategies successfully counter these rumors?

Berinsky employs the analogy of a pebble in a pond to describe the dynamics of political rumors. He likens the initiation of a rumor to tossing a pebble into water. The ripples that spread out represent different groups' relationships to the rumor. Those who accept the rumor – the believers – and those who reject it – the disbelievers – are located closest to and furthest from the center, respectively. Between them lie the uncertain

– a group of people who, for one reason or another, have not made up their mind about the rumor. Most of the book is devoted to theorizing and testing how individuals come to align with one of these groups and how they might move to the disbeliever category. Berinsky argues that acceptance of political rumors is driven largely by a combination of conspiratorial disposition and partisanship. Simply put, Republican supporters are more likely to endorse rumors targeting Democrats, particularly if they are prone to conspiratorial thinking, and vice versa. In countering rumors, Berinsky emphasizes the effectiveness of debunking – providing factual corrections after rumor exposure. He finds evidence that debunking can be effective and shows that the source of the debunking message may be particularly consequential. In that respect, sources that are perceived to benefit more from perpetuating the rumor than from debunking it – referred to as “surprising sources” – are particularly impactful. Yet, this finding comes with a caveat: the effect of debunking on belief correction fades within a week, underscoring the persistent nature of misinformation. While the book stresses the importance of partisanship in rumor dynamics, Berinsky is also attentive

to a notable asymmetry: during the observed period in the US, the majority of rumors circulated within conservative circles. This observation is not to suggest conservatives are inherently more susceptible to rumors; instead, Berinsky blames Republican political elites, finding that they spread misinformation considerably more than their Democratic counterparts in addition to using ambiguous and weak statements even when attempting to refute rumors.

I find Berinsky's approach to political rumors and his emphasis on the uncertain to be the most thought-provoking parts of his argument. In contrast to the prevalence of works on disinformation and fake news in the mainstream literature, Berinsky puts the spotlight on political rumors conceptualized here as false narratives gaining traction through social transmission and moving from the fringes to the mainstream. It is this latter characteristic that makes political rumors a particularly impactful type of mis- or dis-information due to their endurance even in the presence of counter-evidence. Berinsky takes a firm stance: any position short of outright rejection is normatively undesirable. This includes the don't-knows or the uncertain. While acknowledging that this is probably a widely heterogeneous group – comprising, among others, the uninterested, the uninformed, and the skeptical – he contends that not rejecting the rumor regardless of the reason, keeps the rumor alive and fuels it. Berinsky suggests that debunking efforts should focus on reaching this group, as they are yet to make up their minds regarding the rumor and may be more open to corrections. Berinsky is clear that no single strategy is a panacea, but he clearly prioritizes debunking as superior to its alternatives, most notably inoculation strategies. Inoculation, or prebunking, rests on developing skills and mechanisms to deal with manipulation attempts prior to the exposure to misinformation. One of the

reasons Berinsky offers for discounting inoculation in favor of debunking is its reliance on media literacy that typically fosters skepticism. While acknowledging the value of skepticism, Berinsky warns that excess skepticism may be paralyzing and disruptive to a functioning democracy. But considering the epistemic uncertainty of contemporary information environments, too much skepticism is the last thing that should worry us. In addition, quality media literacy interventions teach more than “don't believe anything”. They foster doubt and a critical mindset but also self-reflection and skills necessary to assess the quality of evidence, reliability of sources, and the validity of arguments presented. Media literacy interventions help to cultivate a public that can engage constructively with the complexities of the modern information landscape. This, in turn, supports the foundations of a healthy democracy. In light of this book's findings on the short-lived positive effects of debunking, it is clear that a long-term strategy to combat misinformation cannot be envisaged without a media literacy component.

With no shortage of writings on mis-information in recent years, it is fair to ask what *Political Rumors* brings to this rich body of literature and who would benefit the most from reading it. Berinsky leverages his rich experience in studying public opinion and political behavior to provide a comprehensive insight into how political rumors operate, where their strength comes from, and what can be done about it. His arguments are tested with survey and experiment data collected over more than a decade of empirical research. This makes *Political Rumors* a must-read for researchers interested in contemporary information disorder, with valuable lessons for educators, practitioners, and policymakers interested in fostering more democracy-supporting political informational environments.