



Partisan language in a polarized world: In-group language provides reputational benefits to speakers while polarizing audiences

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ABSTRACT

We examine the impact of partisan language (i.e., language that describes events in a manner that supports a political agenda), both with regard to peoples' perceptions of the speakers who use it and their evaluations of the events it is used to describe. In two experiments, we recruited 1121 Democrats and Republicans from the United States. Using a set of liberal-biased (e.g., *expand voting rights*) and conservative-biased (e.g., *reduce election security*) terms, we find that partisans judge speakers describing polarizing events using ideologically-congruent language as more trustworthy than those describing events in a non-partisan way (e.g., *expand mail-in voting*). However, when presented to rival partisans, ideologically-biased language promoted negative evaluations of opposing partisans, with speakers attributed out-group language being viewed as far less trustworthy than non-partisan speakers. Furthermore, presenting Democrats and Republicans with ideologically-congruent descriptions of political events polarized their attitudes towards the events described. Overall, the present investigation reveals how partisan language, while praised by co-partisans, can damage trust and amplify disagreement across political divides.

Political polarization is on the rise. Partisan animosity is escalating in the United States (Finkel et al., 2020; Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, & Westwood, 2019; Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012) and other countries (Boxell, Gentzkow, & Shapiro, 2022; Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019; Marchal & Watson, 2019). In the United States, Democrats and Republicans share in their increasing disdain for one another, while expressing positive sentiments towards co-partisans (Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018). As Democrats and Republicans have polarized, so too has their political discourse. American politicians increasingly use partisan language to discuss polarizing issues in a preferred manner (Bayram, Pestian, Santel, & Minai, 2019; Gentzkow, Shapiro, & Taddy, 2019), with news organizations and partisan members of the public exhibiting similar linguistic biases (Fulgoni, Carpenter, Ungar, & Preotiuc-Pietro, 2016; Sterling, Jost, & Bonneau, 2020; see Fig. 1). For example, while a majority (80 %) of Republicans describe the January 6th United States

Capitol attack as a “protest,” a majority of Democrats use different language, endorsing the terms “insurrection” (70 %), “riot” (75 %), and “coup” (51 %; Nteta et al., 2021). In the present work, we examine the strategic value of using partisan language when communicating with co-partisans. Moreover, we investigate the consequences of partisan linguistic choice, assessing the extent to which partisan terms facilitate negative evaluations of political opponents and amplify disagreement across political divides.

1. Political polarization promotes partisan language

As citizens become more polarized, individuals—including politicians and political pundits—may face growing incentives to describe reality using language that supports specific ideological viewpoints (e.g., those of their political in-group or audience). Divisive political

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Tweets from the Political Left		Tweets from the Political Right	
January 6th United States Capitol Attack (Insurrection vs. Protest)			
 MSNBC @MSNBC · 20h Are Fox News hosts ready to call Jan. 6 an insurrection now? (via @MaddowBlog)	 Fox News @FoxNews · Jan 6, 2021 WATCH LIVE: Mitch McConnell speaks as Congress resumes Electoral College Count after protests , chaos at U.S. Capitol fxn.ws/2Xho1Xp		
 Senate Democrats @SenateDems · May 20, 2021 January 6th was a violent insurrection — not a “peaceful protest.” Who are you going to believe: Your own eyes or Republican Senator Ron Johnson?	 One America News @OANN · Jun 8, 2022 The fallout from the protest on January 6th continue to rock the world of millions of law abiding Americans. Join #OANN for a closer look at how Democrats worked together to bring about one of the largest criminal operations this country has ever seen.		
Laws Prohibiting Gender Transition Procedures for Minors (Gender-Affirming Care vs. Sex Change Surgeries)			
 Democracy Now! @democracynow · May 2 Montana Governor Signs Ban on Gender-Affirming Care for Trans Minors	 Daily Wire @realDailyWire · Mar 21, 2022 Disney Announces Plans To Oppose Texas Order Criminalizing Sex Change Surgeries On Children dvr.it/SM72c0		
 CNN @CNN · Feb 28 Transgender minors in Mississippi can no longer receive gender-affirming care in the state after its Republican governor signed a bill that prohibits health care professionals from providing both hormone treatments and surgical procedures	 Donald Trump Jr. @realDonaldTrump · Mar 6 Breaking: Mississippi becomes seventh state to outlaw sex change surgeries for minors... 43 more states to go!! How the hell is this not in every state? Good for Mississippi but scary that this isn't everywhere already!		

Fig. 1. Real-World Examples of Partisan Linguistic Differences on Twitter/X. This figure displays tweets from popular left-leaning and right-leaning accounts discussing the January 6th United States Capitol attack and laws prohibiting gender transition procedures for minors. Of note, is the use of the terms “insurrection” and “gender-affirming care” by left-leaning accounts and the terms “protest” and “sex change surgeries” by right-leaning accounts. These terms were featured in study materials and were judged, in context, as liberal-biased and conservative-biased by subjects in a pilot study (Supplementary Materials Part F). Additional examples of partisan linguistic differences on Twitter/X can be viewed in the Supplementary Materials (Part E).

content captures attention (Brady, Crockett, & Van Bavel, 2020; Brady, Gantman, & Van Bavel, 2020) and promotes audience engagement (Brady, Wills, Burkart, Jost, & Van Bavel, 2019; Brady, Wills, Jost, Tucker, & Van Bavel, 2017; Rathje, Van Bavel, & Van Der Linden, 2021; Yu, Wojcieszak, & Casas, 2023). Perhaps as a result of this engagement, American politicians with extreme ideological positions acquire more social media followers than their more moderate peers (Hong & Kim, 2016). Partisans exhibit greater trust in ideologically-congruent news (Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, & Matsa, 2014), being more likely to believe and share news that reflects positively on their in-group or negatively on their out-group (Pereira, Harris, & Van Bavel, 2023). Accordingly, as audiences become more polarized, news organizations may benefit from injecting more—rather than less—political bias into their content (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006).

Consistent with social identity theory (Abrams & Hogg, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), a large literature reveals peoples’ tendency to exhibit in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination (Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000; McLeish & Oxoby, 2011), including in cases in which group distinctions are based on trivial shared characteristics (as in a minimal groups paradigm; Diehl, 1990). Thus, partisan language—to the extent that it signals one’s political group membership—may allow individuals (and organizations) to reap social benefits from fellow group members. When identifying with a political party, people commonly adopt an “us vs. them” mentality, dividing the world into in-group and out-group members. This division leads people to attribute positive traits (e.g., open-mindedness) to co-partisans and negative traits (e.g., dishonesty) to their political opponents (Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2022). As such, language that signals one’s partisan affiliation can engender trust and warmth from in-group members while evoking distrust and animosity from rival partisans. People are responsive to the reinforcement contingencies in their environment. For instance, people more frequently behave in ways that signal their moral quality when others are watching (Kurzban, DeScioli, & O’Brien, 2007; Lacetera & Macis, 2010), suggesting that reputational consequences play a role in motivating behavior, even if implicitly. Therefore, irrespective of the consequences for society-at-large, people may be incentivized to use politically-biased language when

communicating with co-partisans¹ in order to signal their in-group status and be viewed favorably by in-group members.

There are many ways in which partisan content might polarize audiences, including everything from selective reporting (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014) to overtly dishonest misinformation (Au, Ho, & Chiu, 2021). In the present work, we isolate the impact of a more subtle factor: when describing a political event, speakers select among a variety of terms that are truthful (or at least not overt lies) but may nevertheless influence how an event is perceived (see Table 1). While some theorize that partisan messaging increases political polarization (Finkel et al., 2020), no experimental work, to our knowledge, has examined the extent to which partisans’ choices between factual—yet politically biased—terms deepen ideological divides.

2. Does partisan language exacerbate political polarization?

While individuals (and organizations) may benefit from using partisan language in certain social contexts, the increased prevalence of politically-biased rhetoric is likely to have negative consequences for society-at-large. Partisan language—while appearing objective to like-minded individuals—is often perceived as biased and dishonest by opposing partisans (Feldman, 2011; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). Therefore, partisans encountering the politically-biased communications of their political opponents may come to view political out-group

¹ Notably, to the extent that individuals privilege social feedback from political in-group members, they may also be incentivized to use partisan rhetoric when communicating within politically heterogeneous social networks. For example, on social media, partisan content may simultaneously evoke praise from political in-group members and disapproval from rival partisans. Nevertheless, users may readily privilege feedback from fellow partisans as these individuals are likely to represent more important connections in their social network. Likewise, partisan news organizations have a financial incentive to privilege social feedback from their subscriber base, a majority of which will share the organization’s political leanings and support the organization’s ideologically-congruent content (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Peterson et al., 2021; Stroud, 2008, 2010).

Table 1

Experiment 1: item example.

Liberal Statement	Neutral Statement	Conservative Statement
Andrew promoted a social media platform whose relaxed content moderation facilitates <i>misinformation</i> .	Andrew promoted a social media platform known for its relaxed content moderation.	Andrew promoted a social media platform whose relaxed content moderation facilitates <i>free speech</i> .
Factual Event Description: Andrew Dodson, an online content creator, promoted the social media platform Chatter to his many online followers in a video in which he praised Chatter and encouraged his followers to join him on the platform. Chatter is known for moderating the content that its users post far less than other social media platforms. Chatter markets itself as an unbiased platform where users are free to express themselves. However, Chatter's hands off approach to content moderation has resulted in the spread of much information on the platform that experts say is false and, in some cases, harmful.		

Note. Participants were presented with an item's factual event description as well as either the item's liberal, neutral, or conservative statement. All statements were presented as the public statement of a fictitious person in the public sphere. Participants judged each person attributed a public statement on multiple dimensions based on the person's statement and its correspondence with a factually described event.

Table 2

Experiment 2: item example.

Liberal Statement	Neutral Statement	Conservative Statement
Carol, an elected politician, supporting a bill that would <i>expand voting rights</i>	Carol, an elected politician, supporting a bill that would relax voter ID requirements and expand mail-in voting	Carol an elected politician, supporting a bill that would <i>reduce election security</i>
Additional Details: Specifically, Carol supported a bill that would make it easier for people in her country to vote in elections. If passed, this bill would relax voter ID requirements by allowing voters to vote without identification if they complete a sworn written statement attesting to their identity. Additionally, this bill would expand mail-in voting nationwide, permitting all eligible voters to vote by mail.		

Note. An example of an item featured in Experiment 2 for which one half of participants were provided with additional details regarding the actions they evaluated. These details were presented along with corresponding liberal, conservative, or neutral action-depicting statements, for which participants stated their level of agreement with each action described.

members as untrustworthy, amplifying partisan animosities. Likewise, exposure to the divisive linguistic choices of out-group members may dissuade individuals from participating in political discussions across party lines, precluding the potential benefits of intergroup contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, 2011). As such, we expect partisans to express minimal interest in discussing politics with speakers using out-group—as opposed to in-group or ideologically-neutral—language. Similarly, we expect speakers attributed out-group language to be viewed as less trustworthy and moral as well as more closed-minded and deserving of criticism. Consistent with an identity-based perspective, we hypothesize that perceptions of a speaker's political identity will be associated with evaluations of their character (e.g., trustworthiness), such that the more people perceive a speaker's political identity as distinct from their own the more negatively they will view them. In sum, we predict that partisan language, when viewed by political out-group members, will amplify distrust and animosity across party lines and reduce interest in participating in intergroup discussions that have the potential to facilitate goodwill and compromise.

Along with arousing partisan animosities, partisan language may contribute to the polarization of attitudes across political lines. Subtle linguistic choices can shape political attitudes (Novoa, Echelbarger, Gelman, & Gelman, 2023; Simon & Jerit, 2007; Walker et al., 2021). For example, Simon and Jerit (2007) demonstrate that substituting the word "fetus" with the word "baby" in an article describing an abortion procedure increases Americans support for regulating this procedure. More generally, an extensive literature investigating the persuasive effects of communication frames (i.e., statements that emphasize specific considerations) reveal that peoples' political attitudes are sensitive to the way in which issues are framed (Carbone, Harell, & Soroka, 2024; Chong & Druckman, 2007a, 2007b; Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Jacoby, 2000; Nelson & Oxley, 1999; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2019; Wagner & Gruszczynski, 2016). While liberals and conservatives endorse different political viewpoints independent of language, differential exposure to divergent linguistic choices may further divide the attitudes of partisans. People more frequently interact with political in-group—as opposed to out-group—members (Cinelli, De Francisci Morales, Galeazzi, Quattrocchi, & Starnini, 2021; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011) and exhibit a proclivity to seek out ideologically-congruent news (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Peterson, Goel, & Iyengar, 2021; Stroud, 2008, 2010). Consequently, partisans may often be selectively exposed to ideologically-congruent linguistic framings of political

events that strengthen their existing viewpoints, making their beliefs appear more justified than they otherwise would given a neutral framing. In the present work, we investigate the extent to which describing polarizing events using different partisan terms (e.g., "insurrection" vs. "protest") polarizes the event-related attitudes of Democrats and Republicans. We hypothesize that Democrats and Republicans attitudes regarding a variety of politically contentious events will be more polarized when events are described with partisan—as opposed to politically neutral—language. Furthermore, consistent with recent work showing that providing contextual information can reduce peoples' susceptibility to linguistic persuasion (Walker et al., 2021) and promote attitude change (e.g., reduce belief in genetic essentialism; Donovan et al., 2024; Nam & Sawyer, 2024), we predict that the polarizing influence of partisan language will be reduced when people are provided with additional details about each politically contentious event (see Table 2).

3. The present research: an overview

Across two experiments, we examine the consequences of partisan linguistic choice within different social and informational environments. First, in Experiment 1 we investigate the reputational consequences of describing political events using partisan—as opposed to politically neutral—language when communicating with political in- and out-group members (see Table 1). As such, this study provides insight into the reputational consequences promoting or dissuading individuals from using partisan language within different social contexts. Next, in Experiment 2 we examine the extent to which describing polarizing events using ideologically-congruent—as opposed to politically neutral—language polarizes the attitudes of Democrats and Republicans. We assess this research question within different information contexts, manipulating participants' knowledge of the polarizing events described (see Table 2). Taken together, this work highlights individual incentives that promote the use of partisan language in specific contexts. Furthermore, in revealing the potential for partisan linguistic choice to inflame partisan animosities and polarize partisans' assessments of politically-relevant actions, we provide a novel demonstration of how the subtle and ostensibly honest use of partisan terms can deepen political divides.

4. Transparency and openness

For both experiments, we collected the full sample prior to data analyses and report all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures used. All measures and materials presented within Experiments 1 and 2 can be viewed in the supplementary materials (Part B). All data and analysis scripts have been made publicly available (<https://osf.io/e32qs/>). The hypotheses, methods, and analysis plan for Experiments 1 and 2 were preregistered through Open Science Framework. These pre-registrations can be viewed via the following links (Exp 1: <https://osf.io/mh2fr/>; Exp. 2: <https://osf.io/3rwyq/>). There were minor deviations from each preregistration (see Supplementary Materials Part C). Of note, for the purposes of concision, we report the results of two pre-registered hypotheses of secondary interest exclusively in the supplementary materials (Part H).² Additionally, since it is possible that the current political climate shaped how people perceived liberal-biased, conservative-biased, and politically neutral statements, we note that data collection took place between February 7th, 2023 and February 8th, 2023 for our statement pre-test, February 16th, 2023 and February 24th, 2023 for Experiment 1, and between March 31st, 2023 and April 3rd, 2023 for Experiment 2. All experiments were reviewed and received ethics clearance from a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee. All participants provided informed consent prior to their participation.

5. Experiment 1

In Experiment 1 we assessed how the political bias of a person's linguistic choices influences their reputation among political in- and out-group members. We hypothesized that describing polarizing events using a partisan term would lead to reputational benefits when communicating with political in-group members and reputational costs when communicating with rival partisans.

5.1. Methods

5.1.1. Participants

We recruited 461 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk. All participants endorsed English as their first language, resided in the United States, possessed a 99% approval rating on Mechanical Turk, and self-reported either a liberal or conservative political ideology. Based on exclusion criteria, we excluded data from 70 participants (see *Data Preparation*), leaving data from 391 participants (52% Female; $M_{age} = 42.37$, $SD_{age} = 14.02$; 207 Democrats, 184 Republicans) to be analyzed. A sensitivity power analysis ($1 - \beta = 0.95$, $\alpha = 0.05$, two-tailed) indicated that this remaining sample ($n = 391$) could detect an effect size (Cohen's d) of 0.18 with a probability of 0.95.

5.1.2. Materials and measures

Experiment 1 featured 12 items, each of which included a liberal, conservative, and politically neutral description of a polarizing event. Liberal and conservative statements differed only with regards to a single partisan term (see [Table 1](#)). Pre-test data revealed that liberal statements were judged by a politically diverse sample as exhibiting a liberal bias while conservative statements were judged as featuring a conservative bias.³ Conversely, neutral statements were viewed as being largely free from political bias (see Supplementary Materials Part F for a full report of this pre-test, Part D for a detailed account of item creation).

² A full list of all pre-registered hypotheses can be viewed in the supplementary materials (Part A) as well as within the linked pre-registrations of Experiments 1 and 2.

³ Liberal and conservative statements were also judged to be largely truthful descriptions of their item's corresponding factual event description (see Supplementary Materials Part D).

Each item also featured a detailed description of the polarizing event being described (referred to as a "factual event description"). Participants were instructed to treat these event descriptions as completely factual.⁴ On each experimental trial, participants were presented with an item's factual event description along with the item's liberal, conservative, or neutral statement. Statements were attributed to a fictitious person (speaker) said to be in the public sphere and have full knowledge of the event they were describing. Participants were asked to judge each speaker on multiple dimensions based on their public statement and its correspondence with a factual event description.

Trustworthiness. Participants judged the trustworthiness of each speaker using a 7-point scale that ranged from "Untrustworthy" to "Trustworthy."

Moral Character. Participants assessed the morality of each speaker using a 7-point scale that ranged from "Immoral" to "Moral."

Criticism. Participants indicated how much criticism they felt each speaker deserved using a 7-point scale that ranged from "Deserves No Criticism" to "Deserves Criticism."

Open-Mindedness. Participants assessed the open-mindedness of each speaker using a 7-point scale that ranged from "Closed-minded" to "Open-minded."

Perceived Speaker Political Identity. Participants judged the political identity of each speaker by responding to the question: "Based on [Name's] public statement, which political party do you believe [he/she] identifies with?" They responded to this question using a 7-point scale that ranged from 1 (Strong Democrat) to 7 (Strong Republican). The midpoint of this scale was labelled as 4 (Independent).

Political Discussion. We asked participants "Based on [Name's] public statement, how interested would you be in having a political discussion with [Name]?" Participants responded to this question using a 7-point scale that ranged from 1 (Not at all interested) to 7 (Very interested).

5.1.3. Design and procedure

Participants were presented with the public statements of 12 individuals and were asked to judge each individual on multiple dimensions based on the individual's public statement and its correspondence with a factual description of a politically-relevant event. All participants were presented with and evaluated four speakers attributed a liberal statement, four speakers attributed a conservative statement, and four speakers attributed a neutral statement. As participants were recruited on the basis that they possessed either a liberal or conservative ideology and indicated their political affiliation (Democrat or Republican) within this experiment, we categorized liberal and conservative speakers as political in- and out-group speakers based on the match (or mismatch) between a participants' political affiliation and the type of statement attributed to a speaker. Participants began Experiment 1 by self-reporting their political identity, ideology, and level of political engagement. Next, they responded to five items that assessed their level

⁴ This allowed participants, regardless of their political beliefs, to possess the same "ground truth" regarding each polarizing event described and prevented them from needing to infer which of two potentially conflicting reports (a speaker's statement or an event description) contained biased or misleading information. More generally, the ground truth provided by factual event descriptions facilitated speaker judgments, as they provided a context for which a speaker's political identity, trustworthiness, morality, and open-mindedness could be assessed. While integral to our experimental design, it is worth noting that in real-world settings partisan statements may be consumed by individuals with minimal event information or information of unknown veracity. Nevertheless, for many polarizing events, certain event details are readily available, well-documented, and minimally disputed across party lines. Therefore, we believe that Experiment 1 mirrors many (but not all) real-world contexts in which people are knowledgeable of certain event details but nevertheless are exposed to different partisan terms that suggest distinct evaluations of key political actors.

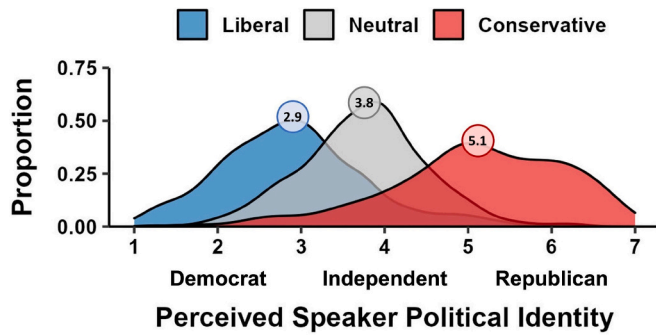


Fig. 2. Experiment 1 Results: Perceived Speaker Political Identity. This figure shows the distribution of participants' mean perceived speaker political identity judgments by statement type (Liberal, Neutral, Conservative). Mean values are indicated by a circle and numerical value attached to the relevant distribution.

of identification with their preferred political party. Following these items, participants completed experimental trials, after which they concluded Experiment 1 by answering four demographic questions.⁵

5.1.4. Data preparation

Consistent with pre-registered criteria, we excluded data from 65 participants who reported engaging in random responding, provided multiple outlier or incoherent responses, failed an attention check item, or completed Experiment 1 in under 360 seconds. We excluded data from an additional five participants who self-identified as a Democrat while self-reporting a conservative ideology as, for these participants, it was unclear whether liberal or conservative statements (if either) could be categorized as featuring in-group language. This final exclusion criterion was not pre-registered. However, applying this criterion did not alter the statistical significance of any of the results reported below, nor did it significantly change the magnitude of the effects observed. Notably, analyses featuring data from our full sample were consistent with those incorporating the aforementioned exclusions. Therefore, the results of Experiment 1 were robust to some degree of participant inattention as they were shown not to be dependent on pre-registered exclusion criteria (see Supplementary Materials Part G).

5.2. Results

First, we verified that speakers attributed a liberal [conservative] statement were, on average, perceived as identifying with the Democratic [Republican] party, while those attributed a neutral statement were judged largely as Independents. A repeated-measures ANOVA revealed a significant effect of Statement Type (liberal, neutral, conservative) on participants' perceptions of speaker political identity, $F(2, 780) = 582.94, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .599$ (see Fig. 2). Follow-up paired-samples t -tests confirmed that speakers attributed liberal statements were perceived as Democrats ($M = 2.90, SD = 0.87$) more strongly than those attributed neutral statements ($M = 3.75, SD = 0.75$), $t(390) = -15.75, p < .001, d = -1.05, 95\% CI [-1.22, -0.89]$. Likewise, speakers attributed conservative statements were judged as more strongly identified with the Republican party ($M = 5.11, SD = 1.04$) compared to neutral speakers, $t(390) = 21.52, p < .001, d = 1.50, 95\% CI [1.30, 1.70]$.

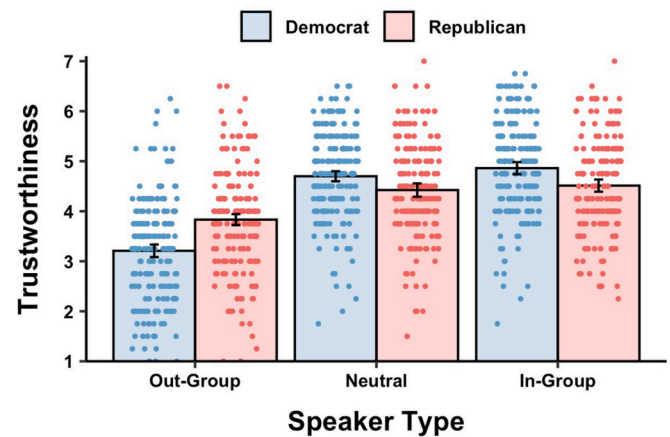


Fig. 3. Experiment 1 Results: Trustworthiness. Bars display the mean trustworthiness judgments of Democrat and Republican participants when evaluating out-group, neutral, and in-group speakers. Dots represent individual participants' mean trustworthiness judgment within a specific Speaker Type. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

5.2.1. The reputational and social consequences of partisan and non-partisan language

We assessed the reputational consequences of using in-group-biased, out-group-biased, or politically neutral language when describing politically contentious events to a partisan audience by conducting 2 (Participant Political Identity: Democrat, Republican) \times 3 (Speaker Type: in-group, out-group) mixed ANOVAs for judgments of trustworthiness, moral character, criticism, and open-mindedness. These analyses revealed a main effect of Speaker Type, $F(2, 778) > 214.36, p < .001, \eta_p^2 > .354$, and a Participant Political Identity by Speaker Type interaction, $F(2, 778) > 42.74, p < .001, \eta_p^2 > .098$, for each dependent variable. We did not observe a main effect of Participant Political Identity for any of these judgments (all p 's $> .05$). Follow-up t -tests revealed that participants judged out-group speakers as less trustworthy and moral as well as more closed-minded and deserving of criticism than in-group, $t(390) > 15.58, p < .001, d > 0.98$, and neutral speakers, $t(390) > 14.80, p < .001, d > 0.89$. Democrats judged in-group speakers more positively, $t(390) > 3.04, p < .003, d > 0.31$, and out-group speakers more negatively, $t(390) > 5.91, p < .001, d > 0.59$, than Republicans. For instance, while participants trusted in-group speakers ($M = 4.70, SD = 0.96$) more than neutral speakers ($M = 4.57, SD = 0.92$), $t(390) = 2.69, p = .007, d = 0.14, 95\% CI [0.04, 0.23]$, and neutral speakers more than out-group speakers ($M = 3.50, SD = 1.09$), $t(390) = 16.82, p < .001, d = 1.06, 95\% CI [0.90, 1.21]$, these effects were more pronounced for Democrats ($d = 0.18$ and $d = 1.56$, respectively) compared to Republicans ($d = 0.09$ and $d = 0.59$, respectively, see Fig. 3). This same pattern of results was observed for judgments of moral character, criticism, and open-mindedness (see Supplementary Materials Part H).

We also assessed whether the linguistic choices of speakers impacted participants' interest in having a political discussion with them. A 2 (Participant Political Identity: Democrat, Republican) \times 3 (Speaker Type: in-group, neutral, out-group) mixed ANOVA revealed a main effect of Speaker Type, $F(2, 778) = 183.67, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .321$ and a Participant Political Identity by Speaker Type interaction, $F(2, 778) = 20.08, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .049$. We did not observe a main effect of

⁵ For both Experiments 1 and 2, exploratory analyses featuring data from secondary measures can be viewed in the Supplementary Materials (Part H).

Participant Political Identity, $F(1, 389) = 0.28, p = .598, \eta_p^2 < .001$. Follow-up t -tests revealed that participants expressed more interest in having a political discussion with speakers using in-group ($M = 3.90, SD = 1.36$) compared to neutral language ($M = 3.60, SD = 1.27$), $t(390) = 6.69, p < .001, d = 0.23, 95\% CI [0.16, 0.30]$. Relatedly, participants expressed more interest in having a political discussion with speakers using neutral compared to out-group language ($M = 2.89, SD = 1.31$), $t(390) = 13.82, p < .001, d = 0.55, 95\% CI [0.46, 0.63]$. Democrats were particularly uninterested in having a political discussion with out-group speakers ($M = 2.68, SD = 1.21$), as despite expressing slightly more interest in discussing politics with in-group and neutral speakers (compared to Republicans), they were less interested than Republicans ($M = 3.13, SD = 1.37$) in having a political discussion with out-group speakers, $t(390) = 3.40, p < .001, d = 0.35, 95\% CI [0.15, 0.55]$.

5.2.2. Association between perceptions of speaker political identity and reputational judgments

We hypothesized that participants would judge speakers more favorably the more strongly they perceived them as members of their political in-group. This hypothesis was supported. Within each speaker type, we observed small-to-moderate correlations ($.23 < |r| < .40$; see Supplementary Materials Part H) between perceptions of speaker political identity and trustworthiness, moral character, criticism, open-mindedness, and political discussion judgments (all p 's $< .001$). That is, the more participants perceived speakers as sharing their political identity the more they viewed speakers as trustworthy, moral, open-minded, and undeserving of criticism and the more interested they were in discussing politics with them.

6. Experiment 2

In Experiment 2 we assessed the potential for ideologically-congruent language to strengthen the in-group attitudes of partisans and amplify disagreement across political divides. Participants stated their level of agreement with twelve polarizing actions. Actions were described using either ideologically-congruent or politically-neutral language and featured different levels of event information (see Table 2). We hypothesized that Democrats and Republicans would express stronger in-group attitudes when actions were described with partisan—as opposed to non-partisan—terms. Furthermore, we predicted that the polarizing influence of partisan language would be reduced when participants were provided with additional act information. That is, when the details of an event are ambiguous people have the affordance to imagine a variety of event happenings. In this context, partisan terms may readily evoke event interpretations that support specific ideological viewpoints. Conversely, absent this ambiguity, both liberal-biased and conservative-biased terms may evoke the same set of happenings (i.e., those known to have occurred), reducing the influence of politically-biased language.

6.1. Methods

6.1.1. Participants

We recruited 660 participants from Prolific. All participants endorsed English as their first language, resided in the United States, possessed a 99% approval rating on Prolific, and self-identified as either a Democrat or Republican. Based on exclusion criteria, we excluded data from 54 participants (see Data Preparation), leaving data from 606 participants (48% Female; $M_{age} = 43.35, SD_{age} = 15.00$; 300 Democrats, 306 Republicans) to be analyzed. A sensitivity power analysis ($1 - \beta = 0.95, \alpha = 0.05$, two-tailed) indicated that this sample ($n = 606$) could

detect an effect size (η_p^2) of .021 with a probability of 0.95.

6.1.2. Materials

Experiment 2 featured the same 12 items as Experiment 1, and thus included the same 12 liberal, conservative, and neutral statements. For participants randomly assigned to a Details condition, action-depicting statements were presented alongside additional act information (see Table 2). Conversely, participants assigned to a No Details condition evaluated each action-depicting statement without additional information.

6.1.3. Measures

Action Evaluation. For each action-depicting statement, participants responded to the question “How much do you agree or disagree with [Name’s] actions?” using a 7-point scale that ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree with) to 7 (Strongly Agree with). Depending on the item and participants’ political identity, ideologically-congruent statements were expected to facilitate agreement with an action in some cases and disagreement in others. As such, consistent with our pre-registered intent, we recoded participants’ action evaluations (see Fig. 4) onto a 7-point scale that ranged from -3 (Strong Out-Group Attitude) to 3 (Strong In-Group Attitude). Responses made within the current study supported this recoding (see Supplementary Materials Part I), revealing in-group attitudes for both Democrats ($M = 1.60, SD = 0.74$) and Republicans ($M = 1.03, SD = 0.83$) across conditions.

6.1.4. Design and procedure

Experiment 2 featured a 2 (Statement Type: in-group, neutral [within]) \times 2 (Information Type: details, no details [between]) mixed design. Participants evaluated the actions described within 12 statements. Those self-identifying as Democrats evaluated actions described within six liberal-biased and six neutral statements while self-identified Republicans evaluated actions depicted within six conservative-biased and six neutral statements. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of two Information Type conditions, determining whether they evaluated action-depicting statements with (Details condition) or without (No Details condition) additional act details. As in Experiment 1, participants began Experiment 2 by self-reporting their political identity, ideology, and level of political engagement before responding to five political identity strength questions. Following all action evaluation judgments, participants concluded Experiment 2 by completing a deceptive language detection measure and four demographic questions.

6.1.5. Data preparation

We excluded data from 41 participants based on a set of pre-registered criteria. Excluded participants reported responding randomly during the experiment, failed an attention check item, or completed Experiment 2 in under 240 seconds (Details condition only). Additionally, we excluded data from 13 participants who self-identified as a Democrat while self-reporting a conservative ideology or self-identified as a Republican while endorsing a liberal ideology. This final exclusion criterion was not pre-registered. Nevertheless, applying this criterion did not change the interpretation of any inferential statistics performed, nor did it significantly alter the magnitude of the effects reported. Notably, analyses including data from our full sample were again consistent with those applying the aforementioned exclusions. Thus, the results of Experiment 2 were robust to some degree of participant inattention as they were shown not to be dependent on applying pre-registered exclusion criteria (see Supplementary Materials Part G).

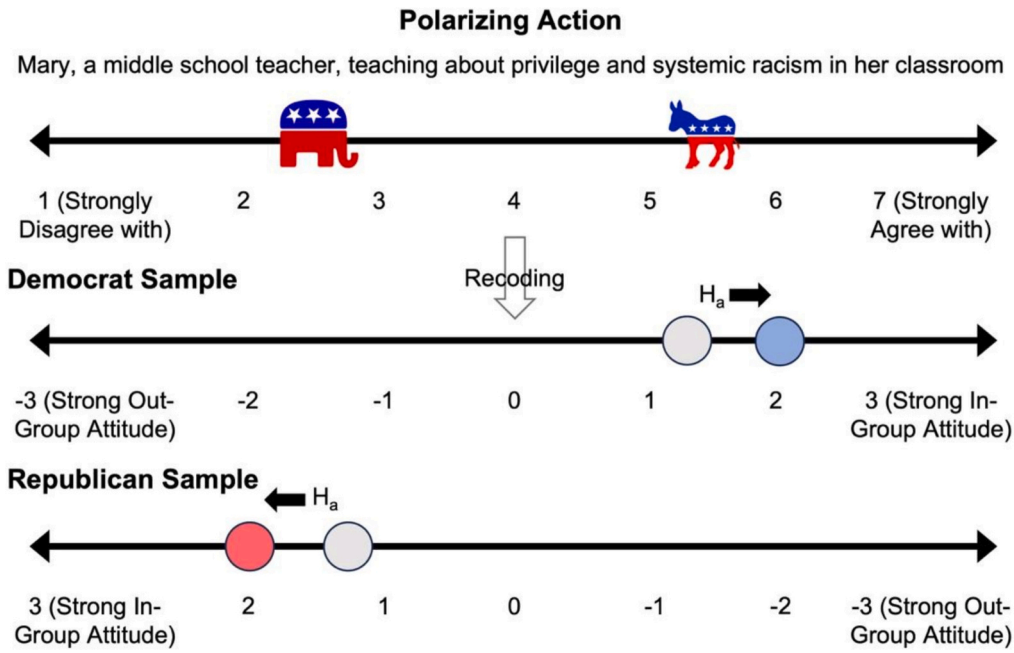


Fig. 4. Experiment 2: Action Evaluation Recoding. All 12 items described a polarizing action in which Democrats and Republicans differed with regards to how much they agreed with the actions of a target actor (e.g., Mary). In this example, Democrats, in the aggregate, agreed more with Mary’s actions compared to Republicans. As such, we recoded Democrats’ action evaluations such that agreement with Mary’s action represented an in-group attitude (positive values) and disagreement an out-group attitude (negative values). Likewise, we recoded Republicans’ action evaluations such that disagreement with Mary’s action represented an in-group attitude and agreement an out-group attitude. Based on this recoding, as the action evaluations of Democrats and Republicans polarize the absolute value of recoded judgments becomes larger (with positive values indicating divergence in the predicted [in-group] direction). Relatedly, as the action evaluations of Democrats and Republicans converge the absolute value of recoded judgments becomes smaller (i.e., their recoded judgments increasingly mirror each other [e.g., 1/−1] and the full sample mean approaches zero). We hypothesized (H_a) that describing actions using liberal-biased (blue circle) and conservative-biased (red circle) language would make the action evaluations of Democrats and Republicans more partisan compared to when these actions were described using politically neutral language (grey circles). (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure note, the reader is referred to the online version of this article.)

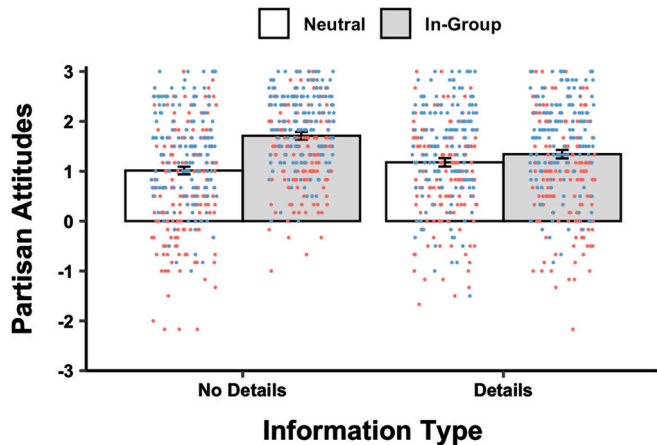


Fig. 5. Experiment 2 Results. Bars display the mean action evaluations (recoded as partisan attitudes: 3 = Strong in-group attitude to −3 = Strong out-group attitude) when evaluating actions described with in-group or politically neutral language across Information Type conditions. Dots represent individual Democrats’ (Blue) and Republicans’ (Red) mean partisan attitudes within a specific condition. Error bars represent 95 % confidence intervals. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure note, the reader is referred to the online version of this article.)

6.2. Results

A 2 (Statement Type: in-group, neutral [within]) x 2 (Information Type: details, no details [between]) mixed ANOVA with participants’ recoded action evaluations as the dependent variable revealed a main effect of Statement Type, $F(1, 604) = 111.28, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .156$ and a

Statement Type by Information Type interaction (see Fig. 5), $F(1, 604) = 42.83, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .066$.⁶ As hypothesized, participants in the No Details condition evaluated actions in a more partisan manner (i.e., expressed stronger in-group attitudes) when actions were described with an ideologically-congruent term ($M = 1.71, SD = 0.78$) as opposed to neutral language ($M = 1.01, SD = 1.07$), $t(312) = 12.69, p < .001, d = 0.73, 95\% CI [0.60, 0.86]$. Nevertheless, the polarizing influence of partisan language was mitigated when participants were provided more details about the actions they evaluated. Ideologically-congruent language produced stronger in-group attitudes in the No Details ($M = 1.71, SD = 0.78$) compared to the Details condition ($M = 1.34, SD = 1.04$), $t(604) = 4.91, p < .001, d = 0.40, 95\% CI [0.24, 0.56]$. Relatedly, while ideologically-congruent language produced stronger in-group attitudes ($M = 1.34, SD = 1.04$) than neutral language ($M = 1.18, SD = 1.00$) within the Details condition, $t(292) = 2.70, p = .007, d = 0.16, 95\% CI [0.04, 0.28]$, the effect of Statement Type was greater when participants evaluated actions without additional act information ($d = 0.73$ vs. $d = 0.16$). Thus, while Democrats and Republicans unsurprisingly held different attitudes towards a host of politically polarizing actions,

⁶ We also conducted a 2 (Participant Political Identity: Democrat, Republican) x 2 (Statement Type: in-group, neutral) x 2 (Information Type: details, no details) mixed ANOVA with participants’ recoded action evaluations as the dependent variable in order to explore potential asymmetries within the action evaluations of Democrats and Republicans. These analyses revealed that, while Democrats displayed more partisan action evaluations compared to Republicans, both were equally influenced by Experiment 2’s linguistic and informational manipulations. That is, while we observed a main effect of Participant Political Identity ($p < .001$), this factor did not interact with Statement Type or Information Type, nor did we observe a three-way interaction (all p ’s > 0.05; see Supplementary Materials Part H).

ideologically-congruent language, particularly in minimal information environments, strengthened the in-group attitudes of partisans, leading to the polarization of attitudes across political divides.

7. General discussion

Prior work reveals the distinct linguistic choices of Democrats and Republicans within different political contexts (Bayram et al., 2019; Gentzkow et al., 2019; Sterling et al., 2020; Sterling & Jost, 2018). Nevertheless, the reputational consequences promoting or dissuading the use of partisan—as opposed to politically neutral—language remained poorly understood. In Experiment 1, we demonstrate the reputational benefits available to speakers using partisan language when communicating with co-partisans. That is, we find that American partisans judge in-group speakers describing polarizing events with an ideologically-congruent term as more trustworthy, moral, and open-minded, than speakers describing the same events in a non-partisan way. Similarly, Democrats and Republicans alike express more interest in discussing politics with speakers using ideologically-congruent—as opposed to politically neutral—language. Partisan language was shown to signal one’s political identity (Experiment 1) and strengthen the in-group attitudes of co-partisans (Experiment 2). As such, individuals wishing to signal their political identity, promote in-group attitudes, or attract a partisan audience may benefit from using partisan language when communicating with political in-group members, regardless if non-partisan speakers are, at times, also viewed as trustworthy, moral, and open-minded by co-partisans.

While benefiting *individuals* in certain contexts, the divisiveness of partisan language can be damaging to society-at-large. In Experiment 1, out-group speakers—whose partisan linguistic choices were ideologically incongruent with their audience—were judged to be far less trustworthy, moral, and open-minded than non-partisan speakers.⁷ Thus, when encountered by political out-group members, partisan language can promote negative evaluations of political opponents, helping to explain why increasing partisans’ exposure to the social media posts of political out-group members increases—rather than diminishes—political polarization (Bail et al., 2018). Overall, the results of Experiment 1 were consistent with a social identity account of in-group favoritism and out-group prejudice (Abrams & Hogg, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Participants perceived the political identities of fictitious speakers based on their use of a single liberal-biased (e.g., “gender-affirming care”) or conservative-biased term (e.g., “sex change surgeries”), with speakers attributed a liberal-biased term reliably being perceived as Democrats and those attributed a conservative-biased term as Republicans. Importantly, perceptions of speakers’ political identities were associated with how participants evaluated their various traits. The more [less] participants perceived a speaker’s political identity as similar to their own the more [less] they viewed them as trustworthy, moral, and open-minded. Thus, the present work suggests that partisan language—even when consisting of the subtle and ostensibly honest use of a single partisan term—can be used to signal one’s political identity, with this signal boosting one’s reputation among in-group members while prompting negative evaluations from opposing partisans. Consequently, this work also reveals a significant societal challenge: in certain social contexts, individuals receive reputational benefits for using language that promotes distrust and animus among their political

⁷ Some scholars argue that conservatives exhibit more partisan bias than liberals (Baron & Jost, 2019; Jost, 2017; although see Ditto et al., 2019). However, contrary to such claims, liberals (compared to conservatives) exhibited more positive evaluations of in-group speakers and more negative evaluations of out-group speakers in Experiment 1. Nevertheless, this observed asymmetry was constrained to partisans’ evaluations of speakers, as liberals were not more susceptible to having their evaluations of polarizing actions be shaped by in-group language (Experiment 2).

opponents.

Along with amplifying partisan animosities, partisan language can polarize the attitudes of partisans, intensifying political disagreements. In Experiment 2, Democrats and Republicans expressed divergent attitudes towards a host of politically relevant actions, independent of how these actions were described. Nevertheless, this divergence of attitudes was exacerbated by the subtle use of ideologically-biased, yet ostensibly accurate, partisan terms. Describing politically relevant actions with an ideologically-congruent term resulted in the action evaluations of Democrats and Republicans becoming more ideologically extreme and consequently, more polarized compared to when actions were described in a non-partisan way. Notably, partisans may frequently be selectively exposed to ideologically-congruent descriptions of political events as a result of their tendency to seek out ideologically-congruent news (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Peterson et al., 2021; Stroud, 2008, 2010) and preferentially interact with political in-group members (Cinelli et al., 2021; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Huber & Malhotra, 2017; Mosleh, Martel, Eckles, & Rand, 2021). Therefore, the persuasive and polarizing influence of partisan language may represent one manner by which partisan media and communication within politically homogeneous “echo chambers” increases ideological extremity and amplifies political polarization (Binder, Dalrymple, Brossard, & Scheufele, 2009; Levendusky, 2013).

While partisan language increased the ideological extremity of participants’ evaluations of different politically-relevant actions, the persuasive (and polarizing) influence of partisan terms was reduced when participants were provided with additional act details. Thus, while individuals’ attitudes may be significantly influenced by politically-biased terms when unaware of key event details, this susceptibility is reduced as people become more knowledgeable about the events in question. When lacking event knowledge, the resulting ambiguity allows people to imagine a variety of happenings. In these cases, the use of a partisan term can lead people to interpret events in a way that promotes specific ideological attitudes (e.g., those favored by a speaker). Conversely, when a person is fully knowledgeable about an event or issue, this reduction in ambiguity can restrict the flexibility with which they may interpret an event, leading individuals—including those across the political aisle—to imagine a similar set of happenings regardless of how an event is described. For example, if witnessing an interrogative act firsthand, a speaker using the terms “torture” or “enhanced interrogation” to refer to that act may conjure up identical images of the act that occurred. However, if largely unaware of the act that took place (besides knowing that some act of interrogation occurred), one may imagine a more or less egregious action depending on whether the act was described as “torture” or “enhanced interrogation.” Of course, even when working with the same factual knowledge, Democrats and Republicans may often disagree about an act’s acceptability and hold distinct event-related attitudes. Nevertheless, consistent with the results of Experiment 2 and recent work on linguistic manipulation (Walker et al., 2021),⁸ this account predicts that disagreement will be exacerbated when audiences a) lack knowledge of event details and b) are selectively exposed to in-group language that leads them to interpret events in a manner consistent with their existing ideological biases.

⁸ Of note, this account, along with the results of Experiment 2, appear inconsistent with theories of opinion formation in the face of competing frames which state that “a consideration highlighted by a frame cannot impinge on an attitude unless it is available in memory” (Chong & Druckman, 2007a, p. 110), which is claimed to, by definition, require knowledge. Nevertheless, this discrepancy may result from differences between communication frames highlighting specific issue considerations and partisan terms suggesting certain ideologically-biased event interpretations and evaluations. Similarly, knowledge of specific issue considerations, as opposed to knowledge of event details, may have a distinct impact on individuals’ susceptibility to persuasive influence.

7.1. Combating political polarization

The present work provides insight for those wishing to develop interventions to combat rising partisan animosities and the polarization of political attitudes across ideological divides. First, increasing citizens' knowledge of politically contentious events represents one promising avenue to reduce the polarizing influence of partisan language and curb disagreement across political divides. Nonetheless, effectively increasing citizens' knowledge of events at scale represents a significant challenge, particularly in fast-paced information environments characterized by attention-grabbing headlines, 280-character quips, and distrust in key information sources (Newport, 2019; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). This may be especially true within the political realm in which polarizing events—including the large political gatherings, legislative bills, and interrogative actions described in the present work—are often complex, opaque, or involve privileged information. Moreover, even when the details of an event are understood, partisan terms may exert a small influence on political attitudes (as seen in Experiment 2). Fortunately, describing politically contentious events in a non-partisan way was shown to reduce the extremity of partisan's event-related attitudes and consequently, the extent to which these attitudes were polarized across party lines. Thus, interventions that reduce the prevalence of partisan rhetoric—in favor of more politically-neutral language—also show promise for reducing political polarization.⁹

Revealing the reputational benefits available to speakers using partisan language when communicating with political in-group members, the present study highlights individual incentives that must be combated if partisan language is to become less prevalent. Nevertheless, there remain reasons for optimism. Across the political spectrum, Americans are united by their desire for a less divided nation, with cross-partisan majorities expressing support for “news that is as non-partisan as possible” (Schleifer, Friedman, & McNally, 2021). In Experiment 1, both Democrats and Republicans provided largely positive evaluations of non-partisan speakers, suggesting that describing polarizing events with politically-neutral language can facilitate trust across political divides. In fact, politically-neutral language produced the most positive reputational consequences when considering the judgments of Republicans and Democrats simultaneously. Thus, interventions that increase the extent to which individuals (and organizations) attend to the social feedback of both Democrats and Republicans may incentivize individuals to describe political events in non-partisan ways.

7.2. Limitations and future directions

Speaking to the generalizability of the observed effects, Experiments 1 and 2 featured a diverse set of liberal-biased, conservative-biased, and politically neutral terms which were used to describe a variety of politically contentious events. Nevertheless, the polarizing events (and partisan terms) presented within these experiments necessarily included only a subset of that which could have been chosen. As such, it is possible that item selection influenced the current findings. Large scale analyses of social media posts, political speeches, and news articles may prove fruitful, allowing for the conceptual replication of the present work in a naturalistic setting. Furthermore, participants did not have information about the people describing each action, representing a limitation of this work. In real-world contexts, people can attend to source information, including a source's political affiliation and personal biases. Thus, future work may investigate the influence of partisan language when used by explicitly partisan individuals.

⁹ Such interventions may be most needed in situations where citizens lack event knowledge, as it is in these cases in which people exhibit the greatest susceptibility to having their attitudes shaped by partisan terms.

7.3. Conclusion

Across two experiments, we demonstrate the reputational consequences promoting the use of partisan language and reveal the persuasive and polarizing influence of ostensibly honest partisan terms. As such, we show that, in many social contexts, people are incentivized to describe polarizing events using politically-biased language that reduces trust and amplifies disagreement across party lines. While many people express a desire for non-partisan news and concerns about rising partisan animosity, divisive partisan content continues to receive more engagement and ideologically-congruent content more praise. If we want to live in less divided nations we need to work to reverse these trends, as the type of political rhetoric we reward is likely to be the type of rhetoric we encounter. If accomplished, liberals and conservatives will continue to disagree, however without the polarizing influence of partisan language such disagreements may more frequently promote productive discussion and compromise.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Alexander C. Walker: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Jonathan A. Fugelsang:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Investigation, Funding acquisition. **Derek J. Koehler:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Investigation, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of competing interest

none.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2024.106012>.

Data availability

All data, analyses scripts, and experimental materials have been made available on OSF (links in manuscript) and will be publicly available to all upon publication.

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