

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 (language used to support a political agenda), both with regard to peoples' perceptions of the speakers who use it and their evaluations of events it is used to describe. Two experiments recruited 1,121 Democrats and Republicans from the United States. Using a set of liberal-biased (*expand voting rights*) and conservative-biased (*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 (*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 especially untrustworthy. 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.

Keywords: partisan language, political polarization, political rhetoric, political discourse, linguistic framing, trust

Research Transparency Statement

General Disclosures

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Experiment One

Preregistration: The hypotheses, methods, and analysis plan were preregistered (<https://osf.io/mh2fr>) on 2023-02-16, prior to data collection which began shortly after registration (i.e., also on 2023-02-16) and completed 2023-02-24. There were minor deviations from the preregistration (see Supplementary Materials Part B). Materials: All study materials can be viewed in the supplementary materials (Part A). Data: All data are publicly available (<https://osf.io/e32qs/>). Analysis scripts: All analysis scripts are publicly available (<https://osf.io/e32qs/>).

Experiment Two

Preregistration: The hypotheses, methods, and analysis plan were preregistered (<https://osf.io/3rwyq>) on 2023-03-30, prior to data collection which began on 2023-03-31 and completed 2023-04-03. There was a minor deviation from the preregistration (see Supplementary

Materials Part B). Materials: All study materials can be viewed in the supplementary materials (Part A). Data: All data are publicly available (<https://osf.io/e32qs/>). Analysis scripts: All analysis scripts are publicly available (<https://osf.io/e32qs/>).

Partisan Language in a Polarized World: In-Group Language Provides Reputational Benefits to Speakers while Polarizing Audiences

Political polarization is on the rise. Partisan animosity is escalating in the United States (Finkel et al., 2020) and other countries (Boxell et al., 2022). 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 (Gentzkow et al., 2019), with news organizations and partisan members of the public exhibiting similar linguistic biases (Fulgoni et al., 2016; Sterling et al., 2020). 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.

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 content captures attention (Brady et al., 2020a, 2020b) and promotes audience engagement (Rathje et al., 2021). 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 et al., 2014), being more likely to believe and share news that reflects positively on their in-group or negatively on their out-group (Pereira et al., 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).

There are many ways in which partisan content might polarize audiences, including everything from selective reporting to overtly dishonest misinformation. In the present work, we isolate the impact of a more subtle factor: when describing a political event, speakers select amongst a variety of terms that are truthful (or at least not overt lies) but may nevertheless influence how an event is perceived (see Figure 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.

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.

Figure 1. Experiment 1: Item Example. 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.

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—will often be perceived as biased and dishonest by opposing partisans. As such, partisans encountering the politically-biased communications of their political opponents may come to view political out-group members as untrustworthy, amplifying partisan animosities. Likewise, exposure to the divisive linguistic choices of out-group members may dissuade individuals from participating in productive political discussions across party lines. Along with arousing partisan animosities, partisan language may contribute to the polarization of attitudes across political lines. Subtle linguistic choices can shape political attitudes (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. 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 et al., 2021; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011) and exhibit a proclivity to seek out ideologically-congruent news (Peterson et al., 2021). 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.

The Present Research

Across two experiments, we examine the consequences of partisan linguistic choice within different social and informational environments. First, Experiment 1 investigates 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 Figure 1). As such, this study provides insight into the reputational consequences promoting or dissuading individuals from using partisan language within different social contexts. Next, Experiment 2 examines 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. 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.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 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 opposing partisans.

Methods

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 ($1 - \beta = 0.95$, $\alpha = .05$, two-tailed) indicated that this remaining sample ($n = 391$) could detect an effect size (Cohen's d) of 0.18 with a probability of .95.

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 Figure 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.¹ Conversely, neutral statements were viewed as being largely free from political bias (see Supplementary Materials Part D for a full report of this pre-test, Part C for a detailed account of item creation). 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. 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

¹ Liberal and conservative statements were also judged to be largely truthful descriptions of their item's corresponding factual event description (see Supplementary Materials Part C).

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).

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 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.²

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.

Results

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

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 Figure 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, $t(390) = 21.52, p < .001, d = 1.50, 95\% CI [1.30, 1.70]$.

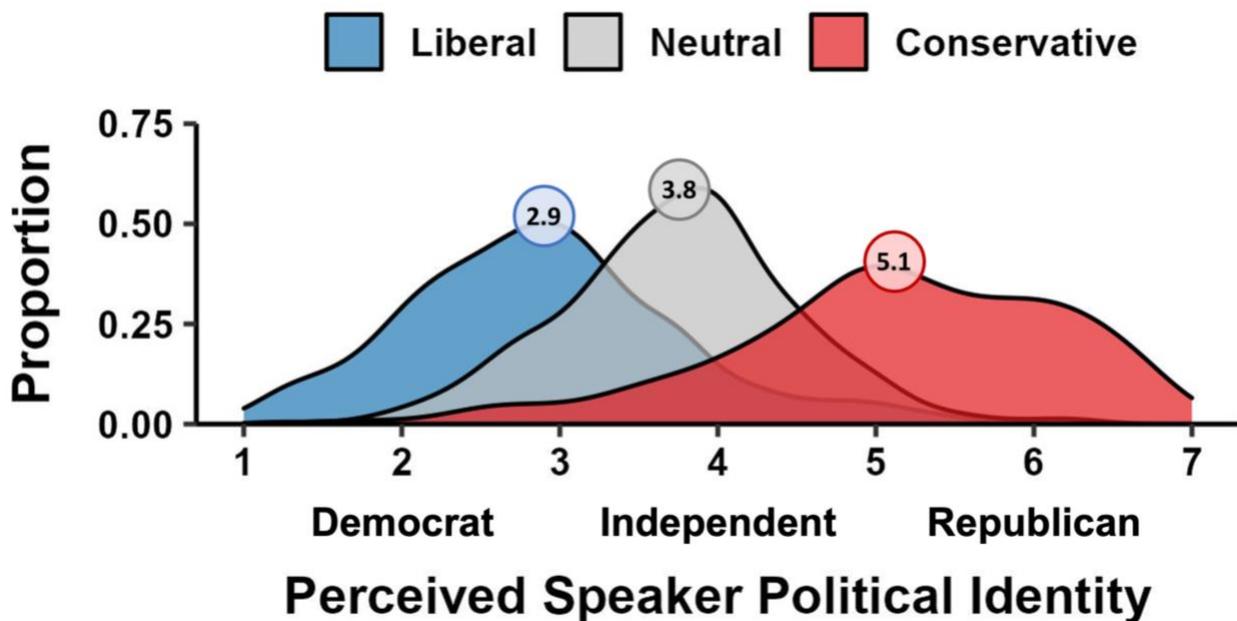


Figure 2. Experiment 1 Results: Perceived Speaker Political Identity. This figure shows the distribution of participants' mean perceived speaker political identity judgments by statement type (Liberal, Neutral, Conservative). Mean values are indicated by a circle and numerical value attached to the relevant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

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) x 3 (Speaker Type: in-group, neutral, 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 Figure 3). This same pattern of results was observed for judgments of moral character, criticism, and open-mindedness (see Supplementary Materials Part E).

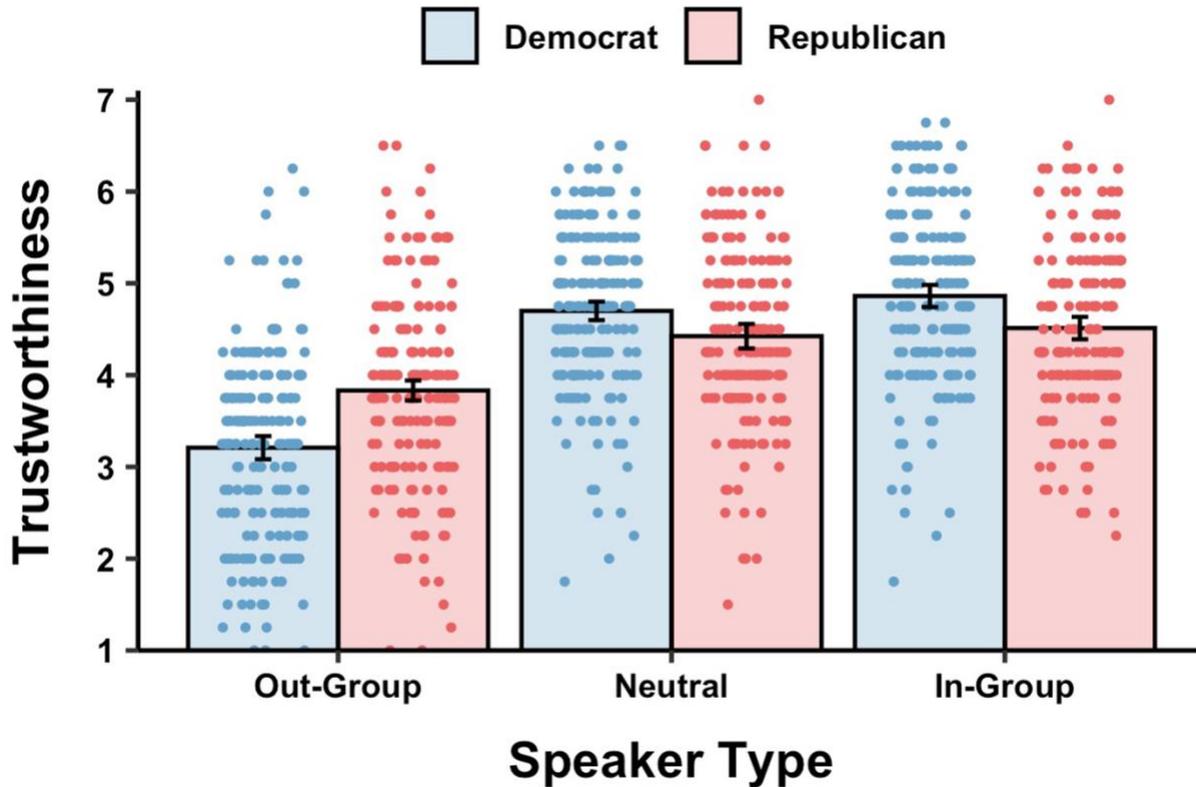


Figure 3. Experiment 1 Results: Trustworthiness. Bars display the mean trustworthiness judgments of Democrat and Republican participants when evaluating out-group, neutral, and in-group speakers. Dots represent individual participants' mean trustworthiness judgment within a specific Speaker Type. Error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

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) x 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 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].

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 E) 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.

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 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 Figure 4). 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.

Liberal Statement	Neutral Statement	Conservative Statement
Carol, an elected politician, supporting a bill that would expand voting rights	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 reduce election security

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.

Figure 4. Experiment 2: Item Example. 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.

Methods

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 ($1 - \beta = 0.95$, $\alpha = .05$, two-tailed) indicated that this sample ($n = 606$) could detect an effect size (η_p^2) of .021 with a probability of .95.

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

Figure 4). Conversely, participants assigned to a No Details condition evaluated each action-depicting statement without additional information.

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 Figure 5) 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 F), revealing in-group attitudes for both Democrats ($M = 1.60$, $SD = 0.74$) and Republicans ($M = 1.03$, $SD = 0.83$) across conditions.

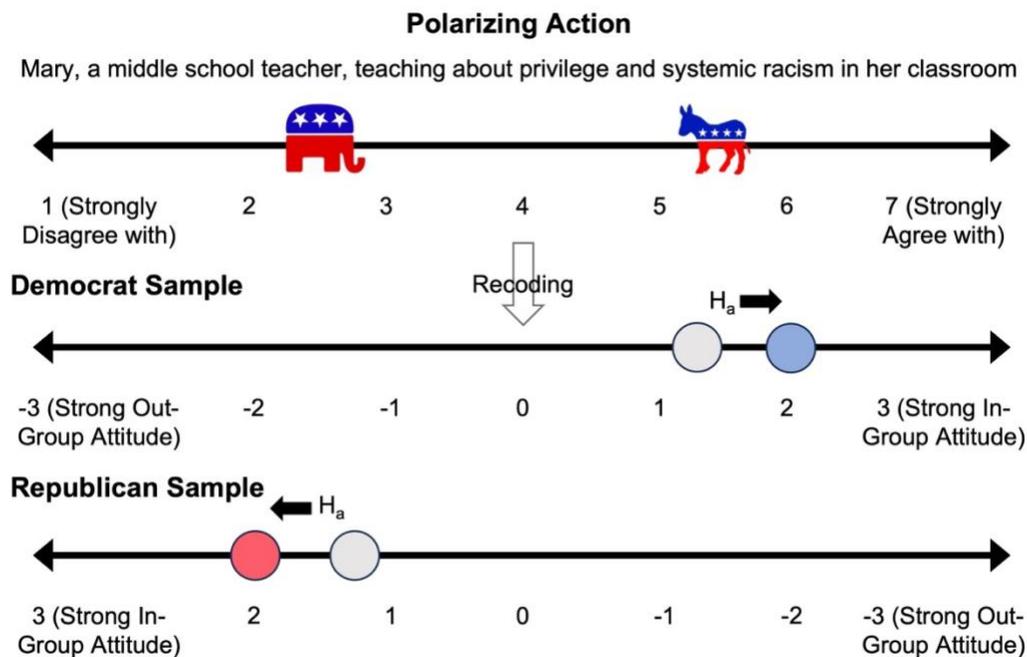


Figure 5. Experiment 2: Action Evaluation Recoding. All 12 items described a polarizing action in which Democrats and Republicans differed with regards to how much they agreed with the actions of a target actor (e.g., Mary). In this example, Democrats, in the aggregate, agreed more with Mary's actions 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 (respectively) more partisan compared to when these actions were described using politically neutral language (grey circles).

Design and Procedure

Experiment 2 featured a 2 (Statement Type: in-group, neutral [within]) x 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.

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.

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 Figure 6), $F(1, 604) = 42.83, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .066$. 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, ideologically-congruent language, particularly in minimal information environments, strengthened the in-group attitudes of partisans, leading to the polarization of attitudes across political divides.

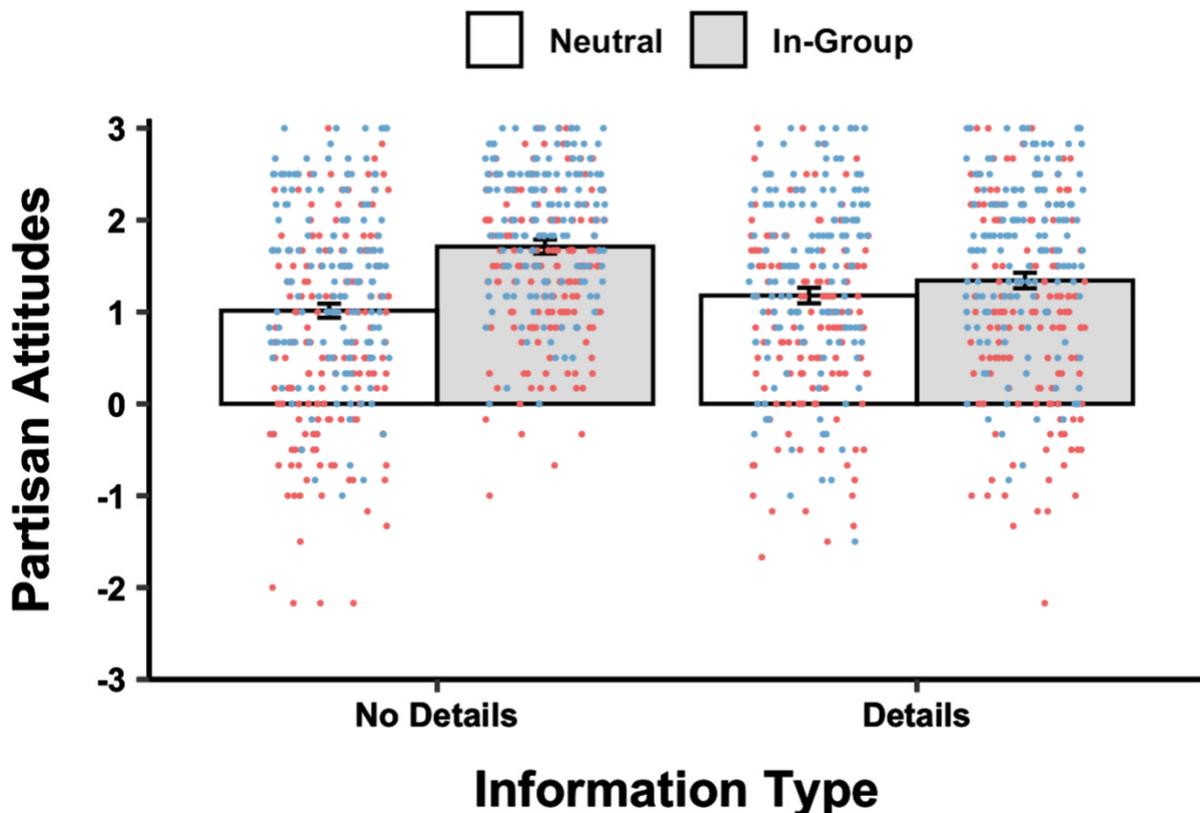


Figure 6. Experiment 2 Results. Bars display the mean action evaluations (recoded as partisan attitudes: 3 = Strong in-group attitude to -3 = Strong out-group attitude) when evaluating actions described with in-group or politically neutral language across Information Type conditions. Dots represent individual Democrats' (Blue) and Republicans' (Red) mean partisan attitudes within a specific condition. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

General Discussion

Prior work reveals the partisan linguistic choices of Democrats and Republicans (Gentzkow et al., 2019). 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 partisan Americans 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. While participants' preference for in-group speakers was small, the lack of reputational *costs* associated with the use of ideologically-congruent language is itself notable. 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, with partisan linguistic choices failing to harm (and potentially bolstering) their reputation among political in-group members.

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. 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 reveal a significant societal challenge: in certain

social contexts, individuals receive reputational benefits for using language that promotes distrust and animus among their political 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 (Peterson et al., 2021) and preferentially interact with political in-group members (Cinelli et al., 2021). Therefore, the persuasive and polarizing influence of partisan language may represent one manner by which partisan media and communication within politically homogenous “echo chambers” increases ideological extremity and amplifies political polarization (Binder et al., 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 made more knowledgeable about each action. Nevertheless, event knowledge did not make participants immune to the persuasive influence of partisan language. Thus, even when the details of an event are well-understood, partisan terms may exert some small influence on political attitudes. Nonetheless, people commonly make

important judgments and form consequential beliefs without a perfect understanding of the acts they are evaluating or the ideas they are contemplating. 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.

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.

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 may be incentivized to describe polarizing events using ideologically-biased language that reduces trust and amplifies disagreement across party lines. 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 et al., 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.³ 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.

³ In fact, politically-neutral language produced the most positive reputational consequences when considering the judgments of Republicans and Democrats simultaneously. Thus, individuals sensitive to their reputation among both Democrats and Republicans may be incentivized to describe political events in a non-partisan way.

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