

The Effect of Counter-Stereotypical Partisan Exemplars on Partisan Stereotypes and Affective Polarization

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Abstract:

Partisans hold negative and inaccurate stereotypes of members of the out-party. Yet, little research has explored where these stereotypes come from. Drawing on theories of stereotype construction from psychology, we argue that stereotypes of the out-party are constructed from the stream of partisan exemplars that an individual encounters, either in person or, more commonly, through the media. Drawing on an established experimental paradigm for studying racial stereotypes, we test this theory using an experiment that presents with either ideologically stereotypical or ideologically counter-stereotypical exemplars of the party they do not identify with. We evaluate the effect of these exemplars on stereotypes of and affect towards out-partisans. The results suggest that counter-stereotypical exemplars can moderate stereotypes of partisan ideology and improve affect towards the out-party. These results have important implications for understanding how the media shape partisan stereotypes, and also suggest methods for reducing inter-partisan animosity.

Recent explanations for the rise of affective polarization have focused on biased mental representations of the out-party. These “pictures in our heads” (Lippman 1922) – the stereotypes we hold about the out-party – cast the out-party as more likely to possess negative personal traits (Rothschild 2019), more demographically “other” (Ahler and Sood 2018, Mason and Wronski 2018, Valentino and Zhirkov 2019), and more ideologically extreme (Rothschild 2019, Myers 2020) than they really are. These negative, and often incorrect, pictures are associated with negative affect towards the out-party, increased perceived polarization, and greater party loyalty (Ahler and Sood 2018, Busby et al. 2021). Yet, this work fails to explain what causes these biased stereotypes. How did we arrive at these distorted images of the out-partisans in the first place?

One explanation is rooted in exemplification theory, which holds that stereotypes are not fixed mental objects, but are shaped by the set of individual group members stored in memory. These exemplars may come from in-person contact, or, particularly for socially-distant out-groups, from the (often inaccurate) exemplars presented in the media (Entman and Rojecki 2000). For example, stereotypes associating blacks with criminality and government dependence are produced and maintained by media coverage that almost exclusively presents Black exemplars who are welfare recipients or violent criminals (Gilens 1999, Entman and Rojecki 2000). However, the fact that stereotypes depend on the store on exemplary individuals means that they are malleable; exposure to counter-stereotypical exemplars of a group (Dasgupta and Greenwald 2001, Mastro and Tukachinsky 2011) or changes in the stream of exemplars of a group presented in the media (Goldman and Mutz 2014), can change stereotypes by changing the exemplars individuals use to construct their stereotypes.

We extend this exemplar-based theory of stereotypes to explain stereotypes of partisan groups by testing whether exposure to counter-stereotypical out-party exemplars changes stereotypes of and affect towards the out-party. We focus, in particular, on ideologically stereotypical and counter-stereotypical exemplars. Existing work shows that partisans perceive more ideological polarization than actually exists (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016a), and that these misperceptions drive affective polarization (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016b, Ahler and Sood 2018). Levendusky and Malhotra (2016b) find that articles about high levels of ideological polarization increase perceived polarization and offer suggestive evidence that this is driven by ideologically extreme quotes from individual Democrats and Republicans. Finally, recent work suggests that ideology and issue-positions, rather than group identities, form the core part of partisan stereotypes (Rothschild et al. 2019, Myers 2022). If exposure to out-group exemplars drive stereotypes of the out-group, we expect that exposure to ideologically moderate exemplars of the out-party should reduce ideological stereotyping, relative to exposure to ideologically typical exemplars. We further expect this to improve affect towards the out-party.

We test these hypotheses using an experiment where respondents are exposed to descriptions of four sitting members of Congress from the out-party. We manipulate whether participants are exposed to four ideologically stereotypical out-party members or to one ideologically stereotypical and three ideologically moderate out-party members. After exposure, we measure perceptions of out-party extremity and out-party affect. We find general support for this theory, finding that experimental participants exposed to moderate exemplars have more moderate perceptions of out-group ideology and more positive affect towards the out-party than participants exposed to ideologically typical exemplars. However, these effects are only

statistically significant for Republicans in our sample, suggesting a possible partisan asymmetry in the effect of exposure to more moderate out-party exemplars.

Exemplification Theory and Counter-Stereotypical Exemplars

Stereotypes play an important role in social and political judgement, guiding attitudes and behavior towards out-group members. Exemplification theory holds that these stereotypes are constructed from the stream of exemplary individuals from that group encountered either in person or via the media (Smith and Zárate 1992, Brosius 2003, Garcia-Marques et al. 2006). According to this theory, stereotypes are not fixed mental objects, but instead are constructed as needed by retrieving from memory a set of exemplary individual members of the group (Kahneman and Miller 1986, Garcia-Marques et al. 2017). For many out-groups mediated contact is far more common than actual in-person contact, so the stored set of exemplary individuals come to mirror the (often inaccurate) exemplars that dominate media coverage of a group (Entman and Rojecki 2000). For example, stereotypes associating blacks with criminality and government dependence are produced and reproduced by media coverage that rarely includes example of blacks as anything other than welfare recipients and violent criminals (Gilens 1997, Entman and Rojecki 2000). These stereotypes, in turn, drive affect and attitudes towards the out-group.

Exemplification theory's focus on the store of group exemplars as the determinant of group stereotypes suggests that providing counter-stereotypical exemplars can change the content of an out-group stereotype, and with it out-group affect and attitudes. Indeed, a range of studies in psychology demonstrate that this is the case. Dasgupta and Greenwald (2001) introduce this paradigm in an experiment that exposes subjects to liked black exemplars (e.g.

Martin Luther King) and disliked white exemplars (e.g. Jeffrey Dahmer), or disliked black exemplars (e.g. Mike Tyson) and liked white exemplars (e.g. Tom Hanks) and found a large positive effect of the liked-black/disliked-white condition racial attitudes. Further studies found similar effects of exposure to well-liked celebrities from racial out-groups (Mastro and Tukachinsky 2011, Ramasubramanian 2011, 2015 Mares Forthcoming), and that counter-stereotypical exemplars also extend to non-racial outgroups such the elderly (Dasgupta and Greenwald 2001, Study 2), women leaders (Dasgupta and Asgari 2004), and gays and lesbians (Dasgupta and Rivera 2008). In high-powered replication studies, Joy-Gaba and Nosek (2010) and Pinkston (2015) replicate the positive effect on out-group implicit attitudes, though they find much small effect sizes that reported in the original Dasgupta and Greenwald study.¹ Finally, a series of laboratory experiments suggest that exposure to Barack Obama has a positive effect on white implicit attitudes and stereotypes (see Columb and Plant 2016 for a review, cf. Schmidt and Nosek 2010, Schmidt and Axt 2016).

Relatively little work has examined the effect of exemplar exposure outside of the laboratory, though Tukachinsky et al. (2015) document a correlation between racial attitudes and portrayals of racial minorities in primetime television, and Dixon (2008) connects the content of local news to stereotypes of blacks as criminals (see also Valentino 1999). One important exception to this is work by Goldman and co-authors on the so-called “Obama effect” (Goldman 2012, Goldman and Mutz 2014, Goldman and Hopkins 2019). Goldman argues that Obama’s prominent depiction in the media as a counter-stereotypical black exemplar caused an abrupt change in the stream of black exemplars encountered by whites during the 2008 and 2012

¹ Dasgupta and Greenwald (2001) report standardized effect sizes in the range of .82 and .89 standard deviations in experiments with 48 and 21 subjects, respectively. Joy-Gaba and Nosek (2010) report effect sizes of .17, .14, .03, .16, and .11 standard deviations with samples of 796, 1,191, 1,081, 95, and 77, respectively.

presidential campaigns. They find that this change reduced white racial prejudice during these campaigns. However, this change appears to have only lasted for the duration of the campaign (Goldman and Mutz 2014, Pasek et al. 2014), after which white racial attitudes return to their pre-campaign state; Goldman argues that this is because the stream of black exemplars returned to its normal state.² Kerevel and Atkenson (2015) report a similar pattern of findings when examining the effect of female mayors in Mexico on stereotypes about gender and leadership.

Two existing studies examine the effect of partisan exemplars on polarization. First, as part of a larger study examining the effect of media coverage of polarization, Levendusky and Malhotra (2016a) include moderate and extreme quotes from partisan exemplars, in this case average voters, in news articles that either depicts Americans as polarized and divided or moderate and centrist. They found that articles that the treatment that depicted Americans as polarized increased perceptions of polarization. However, their treatments different in a number of ways beyond these exemplars, making it difficult to discern how much of this effect is due to the varying exemplars. Huddy and Yair (2021) use treatments that describe a meeting between Mitch McConnell and Chuck Schumer as either affectively warm or cold and either compromising or uncompromising. Like ours, this study used members of congress in its experimental treatments, but varies the nature of exemplars' inter-personal interaction, rather than the ideological extremity of the exemplars themselves

Hypotheses

To test whether partisan exemplars can shape ideological stereotypes of and affect towards the out-party, we conduct a preregistered experiment where we present individuals with four out-party exemplars, operationalized here as members of Congress. These exemplars are

² Goldman and Mutz (2014) argue that this is because media coverage and public attention to Obama fell after the campaign period.

either ideologically stereotypical (i.e. conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats) or counter-stereotypical (i.e. moderate Republicans and Democrats). We then measure out-party affect and perceptions of out-party ideology. We test two primary hypotheses:

H1: Respondents in the Moderate Out-Party Exemplars Condition will report more moderate perceptions of out-party ideology than respondents in the Ideologically Typical Out-Party Exemplar condition.

H2: Respondents in the Moderate Out-Party Exemplars Condition will report more positive affect towards the out-party than respondents in the Ideologically Typical Out-Party Exemplar condition.

In addition to these primary hypotheses, Appendix B reports a second set of tests comparing these two conditions to a no-treatment control condition. This design and hypotheses were pre-registered prior to conducting the experiment (<https://osf.io/p2g6s>).³

Method

To test these hypotheses, we conduct a survey experiment in which respondents are assigned to read about stereotypical or counter-stereotypical members of their out-party, or to a control. Notably, while the theory described above describes stereotypes as changing in response to changes in the stream of group exemplars, this experiment tests the effects of a single-shot treatment on stereotypes (Searles et al. 2022). This provides a hard test for our theory, since

³ Our pre-registration includes a set of hypotheses about the effect of these exemplars on implicit attitudes. Because of programming errors, the implicit attitude test that we attempted to implement through Qualtrics produced unreliable data, so we do not analyze this data.

exposure to a handful of exemplars may not weigh much against the store of exemplars stored from years of encountering out-partisans through the mass media.

Pre-Test of Exemplars

We employ sitting members of congress as partisan exemplars in our treatments. Members of congress are useful as exemplars because they are clearly group members and frequently appear in media accounts as exemplars of their parties. Their official position with the party makes them clear exemplars of the party and reduces the possibility that they will be dismissed as atypical (“the exception that proves the rule”) or subtyped (see Schneider and Bos 2014). It also reduces the chance that they will be seen as artificial or unrealistic by subjects, as might be the case with hypothetical or fake candidates. Further, members of congress have concrete records that can be used to characterize them as either stereotypical or counter-stereotypical, yet are, for the most part, not sufficiently well-known for people to have concrete negative or positive attitudes towards them. Finally, recent work suggesting that measures of partisan affect primarily capture affect towards party elites supports using such elites as exemplars instead of exemplars drawn from the mass public. Figure 1 shows an example of one of these profiles, in this case of a moderate Democrat.



Ben McAdams is a Democratic Member of Congress from Utah, first elected in 2018. He is a member of the Blue Dog Coalition, a group of centrist Democrats in the House. McAdams is pro-life, and signed a Republican-led petition to advance an anti-abortion bill. He does not support the proposed “Green New Deal” resolution which pushes for the United States to use 100% renewable, zero-emission energy sources. McAdams voted against a House bill to increase the federal minimum wage to \$15 per hour.

Figure 1: Example of Member of Congress Profiles

To ensure that the presented exemplars are perceived as ideologically moderate or ideologically typical of their party, we conducted a pre-test using respondents from Lucid’s Theorem platform.⁴ We drafted profiles of ten moderate Democrats, ten liberal Democrats, ten

⁴ Lucid is an online aggregator of survey respondents that offers demographically representative samples via quota sampling. Coppock and McClellan (2019) show that respondents from Lucid largely match ANES demographic and behavioral benchmarks; they also replicate several prominent experimental findings from probability samples using Lucid subjects

moderate Republicans, and ten Conservative Republicans, and then asked 162 respondents to read each profile from one party and report their perception of each members' general ideology, position on taxes, abortion, and immigration, and how typical they thought the member was of their party. As counter-stereotypical exemplars, we selected the three exemplars that were rated as (relatively) moderate, as well as being rated as at least moderately representative of their party as a whole. As stereotypical exemplars, we chose the exemplars that were rated as moderately conservative for Republicans and fairly liberal for Democrats, relative to the other exemplars, and as moderately representative of their party as a whole, again relative to the other exemplars. More details of the pre-test are reported in Appendix A.⁵

Experimental Procedure

We recruited 3,167 respondents over the Lucid Theorem platform to participate in an academic research study of people's opinions.⁶ Democrats and Republicans were assigned to different branches of the experiment, and true independents were divided equally between these branches. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of three conditions: a control condition, a Moderate Out-Partisan Exemplar condition or an Ideologically Typical Out-Partisan Exemplar condition. To reduce variance and facilitate the calculation of heterogeneous treatment effects,

⁵ Available at <https://z.umn.edu/MyersAPSA2022Appendix>.

⁶ This sample size represents a deviation from our Pre-Analysis Plan, which called for recruiting 1,733 respondents. This sample size was determined by the number of respondents necessary to achieve .8 power to detect a difference of means of Cohen's $d = .35$ on the partisan BIAT. Since the BIAT can only be completed by respondents using devices with keyboards, we expected 866 of the 1,733 responses to complete the BIAT, of whom 760 would provide useable responses. However, the percentage of respondents who completed the BIAT was, in fact, closer to 25%, partially because a higher percentage of respondents than expected used mobile devices and partially because a significant percentage of those with keyboards had difficulty with the BIAT. To achieve the pre-specified power for the BIAT, we recruited an additional 1,212 respondents. We also include data from 220 respondents who completed the treatment and provided responses to at least one independent variable, but who did not complete the survey and thus were not counted as completes by Lucid.

participants were assigned to experimental conditions using block randomization, blocking on strength of partisanship and a binary indicator of political interest split at the expected median.

Participants first answered two pre-treatment questions measuring interest in politics. After these, participants in non-control conditions were introduced to the treatment with the following instruction: “Thank you for taking part in this study of people's opinions about individual members of Congress. There are 435 members of Congress and we find that most people don't know much about members other than their own representatives. In this part of the study we will present you with four brief profiles of ordinary members of Congress. Please read each profile carefully. You've been selected to view randomly-selected, ordinary members the <Republican/Democratic> Party. After each profile, we will ask you two questions to get your thoughts about the member of Congress.”

Participants were then presented sequentially with four profiles. All Democrats (Republicans) read the same profile first, that of a conservative Republican (liberal Democrat). Those in the Moderate conditions then read profiles of three moderate Republicans/Democrats while those in the Liberal Democrat or Conservative Republican condition read profiles of three conservative Republicans or liberal Democrats. At the bottom of each profile two questions asked subjects how familiar they were with the member of Congress and how positive or negative they felt towards the member of Congress. These questions were intended to encourage participants to actively think about the exemplar in a way that would not encourage or discourage sub-typing by, for example, asking how liberal or conservative or how representative they perceived the exemplar to be.

Following these four profiles, participants completed measures of out-party affect and perceptions of the two parties' ideologies, the order of which was counter-balanced. The complete survey can be seen at <https://osf.io/ax52t/>.

Measures

We use the measure of partisanship in Lucid's demographic data, which uses a standard 7-point ANES format.⁷ We measure political interest using two items,⁸ which we used to create an additive index (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$). After treatment, we measure perceptions of out-party ideology using two measures. First, we ask respondents to place the average Republican and average Democrat on a standard seven-point ideological scale. Second, following Levendusky and Malhotra (2016), we ask respondents to place the average Republican and the average Democrat on three issue position scales: capital gains taxes, deportation of immigrants who arrived as children, and abortion. We expected to analyse these three items as a scale, but because of low scale reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .52$ for Democrats' issue positions, $.53$ for Republicans' issue positions) our primary analysis is of the individual items.

We use three different measures of out-party affect, drawn from Druckman and Levendusky (2019). First, an index that combines two measures of out-party affect. First, the out-party feeling thermometer, corrected for individual neutral point by subtracting the mean

⁷ We know of no work that evaluates the reliability of Lucid-supplied demographics. In the pretest ($n = 147$) we asked the traditional ANES 7-point question and compared this to the Lucid-supplied party ID. For 83.7% of respondents, response to this question matched the Lucid-supplied party ID question exactly; for an additional 10.9% of respondents the party matched, but strength of partisanship was different. Based on this, we are fairly comfortable relying on the Lucid-supplied measurement, particularly as this provides us with a pre-treatment measure (Montgomery et al. 2018) that does not run the risk of priming partisanship (Klar et al. 2019).

⁸ These questions are "Generally speaking, how interested are you in politics?" with response options Extremely interested (1), Very interested (2), Somewhat interested (3), Slightly interested (4), Not at all interested (5) and "How much of the time would you say you follow what's going on in government and public affairs?" with response options Most of the time (1), Some of the time (2), Only now and then (3), and Hardly at all (4).

score of four other feeling thermometers (labor union, big business, feminists, Christian fundamentalists) as suggested by Winter and Berinsky (1999). Second, an index of two items measuring trust in each party ($\alpha = .90$ for trust in Democrats, $.89$ for trust in Republicans).⁹ These items, the out-party thermometer and the trust index, formed a scale measuring general out-party affect ($\alpha = .78$ for affect towards Democrats, $.77$ for affect towards Republicans). Additionally, we measured preferences for social distance from the out-party using a scale comprised of three items ($\alpha = .88$ for social distance from Democrats, $.89$ for social distance from Republicans).¹⁰ We do not combine these social distance items with other measures of affect because of Druckman and Levendusky (2019)'s finding that social distance items measure a different dimension of affective polarization than other commonly used items.

Analysis

We analyze Republicans and Democrats separately. For both sub-samples, we evaluate hypotheses using difference in means tests, accounting for the experiment's blocking scheme. We generate confidence intervals and p -values (one-sided, in the hypothesized direction) using randomization inference. For analyses comparing moderate to liberal/conservative conditions we drop inattentive respondents, defined as respondents who spend less than eight seconds on the initial profile. Since this profile was the same for moderate and conservative conditions, this

⁹ These items asked "How much of the time do you think you can trust <Republicans/Democrats> to do what is right for the country?" with response options "Almost always" (5), "Most of the time" (4), "About half the time" (3), "Once in a while" (2), "Almost never" (1) and "Do you trust Republicans to work for the interests of average Americans?" with response options "Definitely yes" (4), "Probably yes" (3), "Probably not" (2), and "Definitely not" (1).

¹⁰ These are "How comfortable are you having close personal friends who are <Republicans/Democrats>?" and "How comfortable are you having neighbors on your street who are <Republicans/Democrats>?", both with response options "Extremely comfortable" (4), "Somewhat comfortable" (3), "Not too comfortable" (2), and "Not at all comfortable" (1), and "Suppose a son or daughter of yours was getting married. How would you feel if he or she married a <Republican/Democrat>?" with response options "Not at all upset" (4), "Not too upset" (3), "Somewhat upset" (2), and "Extremely upset" (1).

provides a pre-treatment measure of respondent attentiveness. For hypotheses comparing a treatment condition to the control condition we cannot perform a similar calculation, since the control condition did not see any profiles. Instead, we calculate the Intent-to-Treat effect (ITT) using all subjects, and the Complier Average Causal Effect (CACE), treating respondents in the treatment condition who spent eight second or more on the first profile as compliers (Harden et al. 2019).

Results

Figure 1 tests H1, the hypothesis that moderate exemplars will lead partisans to stereotype the out-party in a more ideologically moderate manner.¹¹ All DVs are rescaled from 0-1, and the standard deviation of the DVs ranges from .243 to .315 (Republicans' perceptions of Democrats' position on taxes and Republicans' perception of Democrats' position on Abortion, respectively). In general, exposing Republican respondents to moderate exemplars does lead them to view Democrats as holding more moderate views. The exception is Republicans' perceptions of Democrats' views on taxes, which is in the expected direction but not statistically significant. Exposing Democrats' to moderate exemplars of Republicans has less of an effect. For all DVs except perceptions of Republicans' views on taxes the effect is in the expected direction, but the only statistically significant effect is on perceptions of Republicans' views on Abortion. Thus, we find support for H1 among Democratic respondents but not Republican respondents.

¹¹ This figure include the results of a scale of all three issue positions. However, since this scale's reliability falls below our pre-registered value our focus is on the individual items.

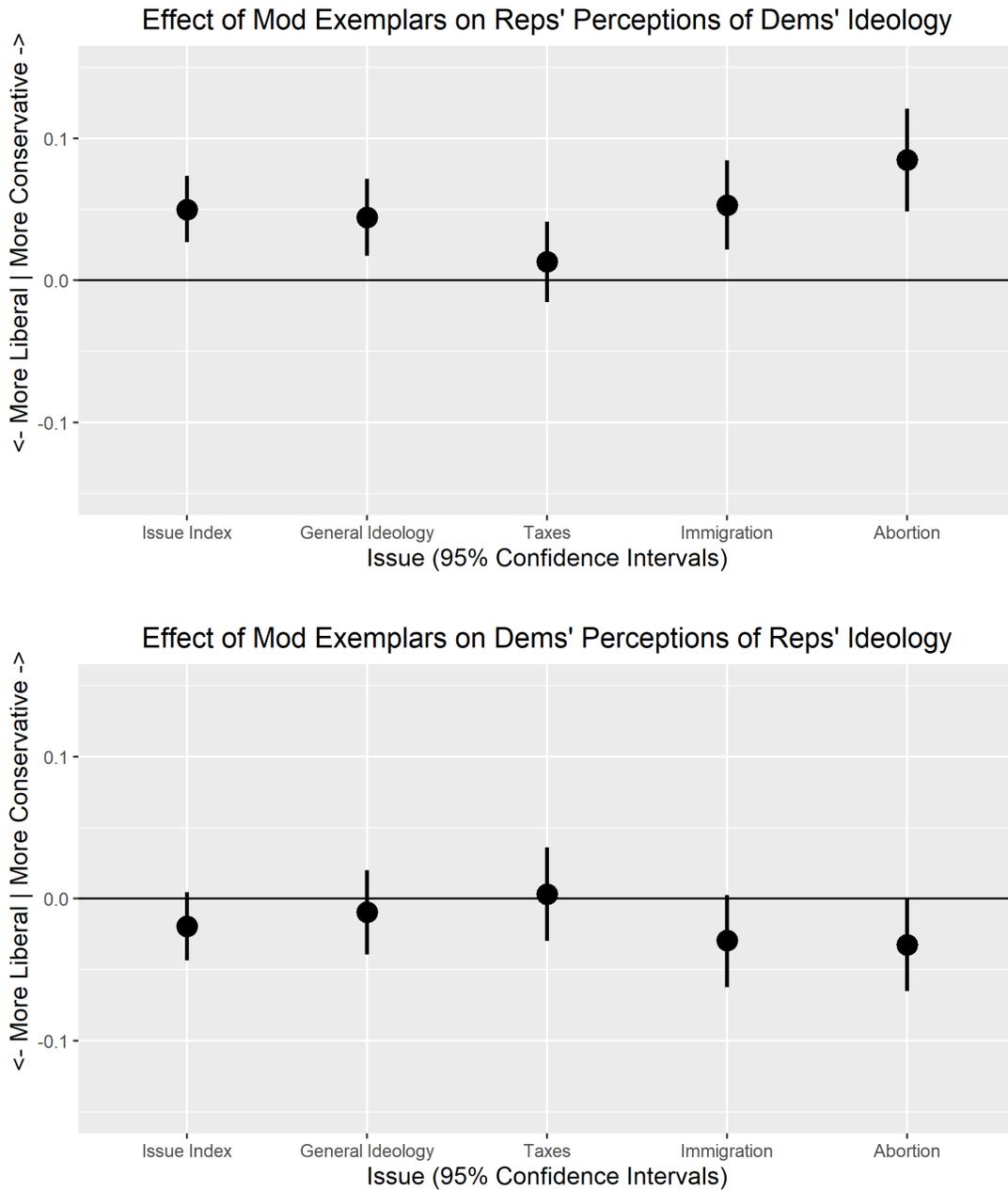


Figure 1: Effect of Moderate vs. Extreme Exemplars on Perceptions of Out-Party Ideology

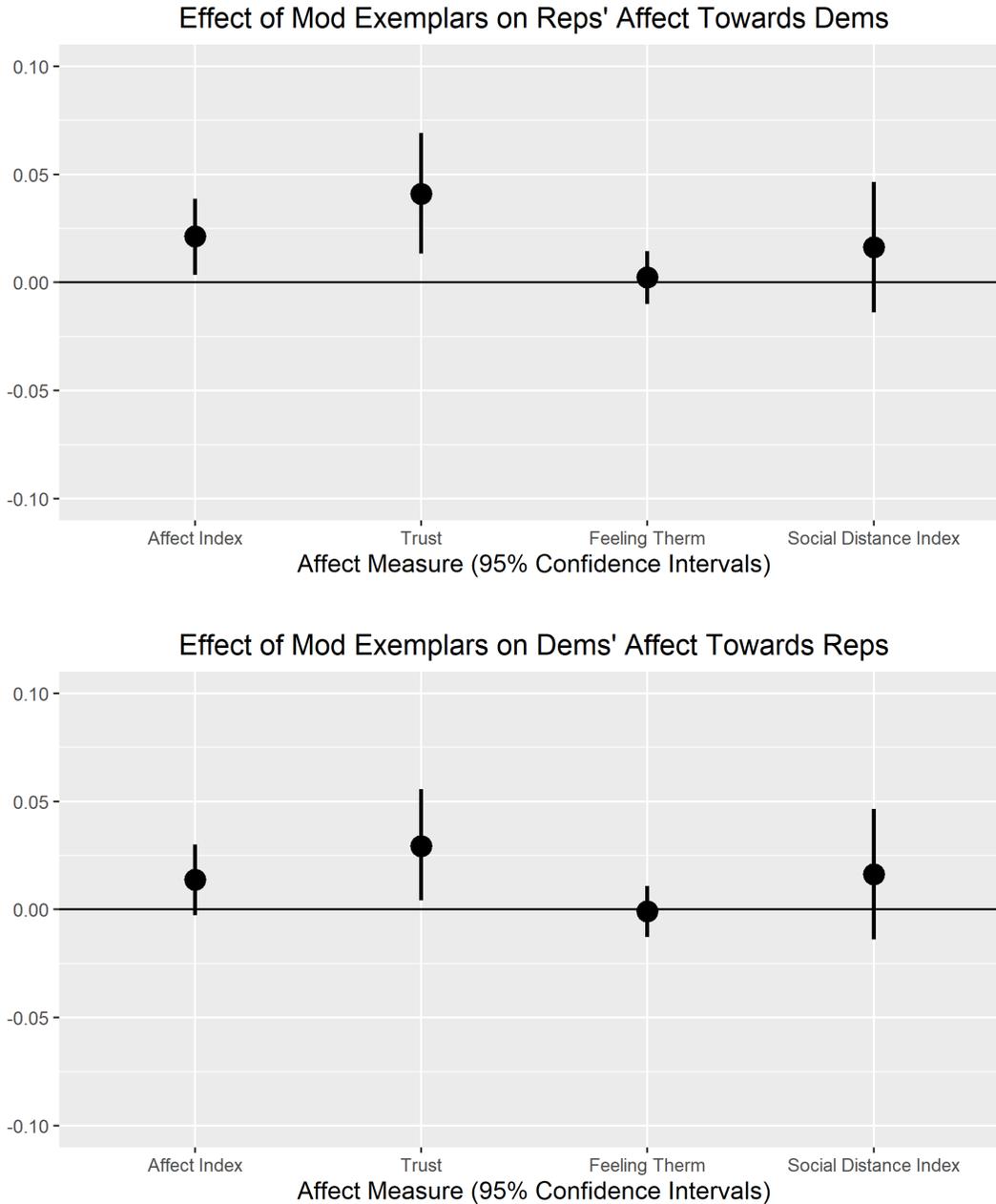


Figure 2: Effect of Moderate vs. Extreme Exemplars on Affect Towards Out-Party

Figure 2 shows the test of H2, the hypothesis that exposure to moderate exemplars will increase affect towards the out-party. For both parties we find a positive effect on the index of out-party affect, though this effect is not statistically significant for the effect on Democrats' affect towards Republicans ($p = .079$). Decomposing this index into its components, we find that

for both parties, exposure to moderate exemplars has a positive effect in trust in the other party, but no effect on the out-party feeling thermometer. We also find a positive but not statistically significant effect on preferences for social distance from the out-party. Possibly, this pattern of results is because the trust measures are more focused on political elites, like those used in the experimental treatments.

In sum, we find some evidence that exposure to moderate exemplars of the out-party, relative to extreme exemplars, changes perceptions of out-party ideology in a more moderate direction and has a positive effect on affect towards the out-party. Notably, these effects are larger for Republicans in our sample – exposing Democrats to ideologically moderate exemplars of Republicans has effects in the hypothesized direction, but not large enough to reach statistical significance. The effects also appear to be larger for perceptions of the out-party's position on social issues (abortion and immigration) than economic issues (taxes), and for trust in the out-party, as opposed to general affect as measured by feeling thermometers or to preferences for social distance.

Conclusion

Why do partisans hold such negative, and distorted, pictures of the other party? Drawing on exemplar-based theories of stereotyping, we argue that individuals' stereotypes of the partisan other are constructed from the exemplars of partisans that they are exposed to. We test this theory using an established paradigm in the study of racial stereotypes, exposing partisans to stereotypical or counter-stereotypical exemplars of the out-party. We find general evidence that exposure to counter-stereotypical exemplars has a moderating effect on stereotypes of out-party ideology and a positive impact on trust in the out-party. These findings suggest a mechanism by

which stereotypes of the out-party might become so distorted, and how they might be changed to be more accurate.

Since most exemplars of the out-party are encountered through the media, these results have important implications for how the media might drive affective polarization. Existing explanations for how changes in the media environment might be connected to the increase in affective polarization tend to focus on selective exposure of individuals to partisan media outlets, though evidence for these effects is mixed at best (Prior 2013, Iyengar et al. 2019, pg. 135). These results suggest a different mechanism: Changes in the partisan exemplars that members of the mass public encounter in the media, such that individuals see fewer ideologically moderate and more ideologically extreme members of the out-party. Such a change could be the result of consumption of partisan media but also of the increasing nationalization of news consumption (Hopkins 2018, Padgett et al. 2019) or of elite polarization providing an increased supply of extreme exemplars. Further research into the factors that affect the supply of different kinds of partisan exemplars will help shed light on the sources of partisan animosity, misperceptions about polarization, and the contentious nature of our current politics.

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