



Who is the Party? The Effect of Counter-Stereotypical Partisan Exemplars on Inter-Party Stereotypes and Affect

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Abstract

Partisans hold negative and inaccurate stereotypes of members of the out-party. In this paper we test the effectiveness of exposure to counter-stereotypical exemplars as a strategy for changing stereotypes and reducing partisan animosity. This strategy builds on the exemplification theory of stereotype formation, which holds that stereotypes of out-groups are constructed from exemplary group members that are salient in an individual's memory. Drawing on an established experimental paradigm for studying racial stereotypes, we test this theory using an experiment that exposes partisans to either ideologically stereotypical or ideologically counter-stereotypical exemplars of their out-party. This strategy is notably more indirect than most strategies tested to reduce affective polarization, which rely on directly providing information, often in the form of misperception correction, about the distribution of out-party views. Despite this more indirect approach, our results suggest that exposure to counter-stereotypical exemplars can moderate stereotypes of partisan ideology and improve affect towards the out-party, relative to exposure to stereotypical exemplars. These results have important implications for our understanding of how negative and inaccurate views of the out-party form, and also suggest methods for reducing 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” (Lippmann, 1922) – the stereotypes we hold about the out-party – cast the out-party as more likely to

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possess negative personal traits (Busby et al., 2021), more demographically “other” (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Mason & Wronski, 2018; Zhirkov & Valentino, 2022), and more ideologically extreme (Busby et al., 2021; Myers, 2023) 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 & Sood, 2018; Busby et al., 2021; Myers, 2023).

In response to these findings, a range of studies have tested strategies for reducing affective polarization by correcting these misperceptions. In general, these strategies have adopted the paradigm of misinformation correction (Vraga & Bode, 2020); they start by soliciting some kind of perception of the out party, such as the out-party’s demographic composition (Ahler & Sood, 2018) or issue positions (Voelkel et al., 2022; *Correcting Policy Misperceptions Chatbot* study), and then provide correct information about the out-party that corrects any misperception; other approaches directly provide information about the distribution of opinions in the two parties (Voelkel et al., 2022; *Party Overlap on Policies* study). These studies have found some success in reducing affective polarization. However, this strategy differs from the way citizens most often encounter information about the out-party.

In this paper we evaluate a different approach: Exposing partisans to ideologically moderate exemplars of the out-party. This approach builds on exemplification theories of stereotypes, which argue that stereotypes of a group update in response to changes in the set of individual group members that can be easily retrieved from memory when the stereotype is activated (Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Brosious, 2003; Garcia-Marques et al., 2006). These individual group members, or exemplars, need not be well-known or high-profile group members, so long as they are encoded in memory as group members, and thus available for retrieval when a group stereotype is needed. Exemplars may come from in-person contact, or, from the (often unrepresentative) exemplars presented in the media (Entman & Rojecki, 2000).

Exposure to stereotypical exemplars – those that embody the attributes central to an individuals’ stereotype of the group – has little direct effect beyond reinforcing existing stereotype content. However, exposure to counter-stereotypical exemplars – those who embody attributes that contradict central elements of an individuals’ stereotype of the group – can change this stereotype content by changing the exemplary individuals who come to mind when a stereotype is retrieved from memory. These changed stereotypes can improve affect towards the outgroup (Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Mastro & Tukachinsky, 2011; Goldman & Mutz, 2014). 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 & Rojecki, 2000), but can be changed by exposure to Black exemplars who run counter to these traits (Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Goldman & Mutz, 2014).

We extend this exemplar-based theory of stereotypes, developed primarily to explain racial stereotypes, to explain stereotypes of partisan groups. We do this by testing whether exposure to counter-stereotypical out-party exemplars changes stereotypes of the out-party and reduces affective polarization. We focus, in particular, on exposure to ideologically stereotypical and counter-stereotypical exemplars. Recent work shows that ideology and issue positions are central elements of partisan stereo-

types (Busby et al., 2021; Dias & Lelkes, 2022; Myers, 2023), that partisans perceive more ideological polarization than actually exists (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016a), and that these misperceptions of out-party ideology drive affective polarization (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016b; Ahler & Sood, 2018). If partisan stereotypes are malleable in the way that exemplar-based theories predict, then we would expect exposure to ideologically moderate exemplars of the out-party to reduce ideological stereotyping and 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 counter-stereotypical (i.e., moderate) out-party members. After exposure, we measure perceptions of out-party extremity and out-party affect. We find general support for these hypotheses. Experimental participants exposed to moderate exemplars have more moderate perceptions of out-group ideology and, on some measures, more positive affect towards the out-party than participants exposed to ideologically stereotypical exemplars. These effects are larger and more consistently statistically significant for Republicans in our sample, suggesting a possible partisan asymmetry in the effect of exposure to more moderate out-party exemplars.

These results have important implications for the burgeoning literature on affective polarization reduction as well as for understanding the roots of affective polarization. Existing work has shown that directly correcting misperceptions about the ideological extremity of the out-party by, for instance, providing feedback on how far apart Democrats and Republicans actually stand on various issues, can reduce affective polarization (Voelkel et al., 2022; *Correcting Policy Misperceptions Chatbot* study). However, despite the efforts of civil society groups, these kinds of direct corrections are unlikely to occur in most people's lives. We demonstrate the effectiveness of a more indirect route to changing perceptions of the out-party, but one that mirrors the common experience of encountering out-party exemplars in the media. These results also suggest a mechanism by which increased media coverage of more extreme partisans (Wagner & Gruszczynski, 2018; Padgett et al., 2019) has contributed to the rise of affective polarization, as well as a theoretical framework for understanding how some techniques for partisan animosity reduction, such as imagined intergroup contact, might work.¹

Exemplars and Stereotypes

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 set of exemplary individual group members stored in memory, which may come from in-person contact or via the media (Smith & Zárate, 1992; Brosius, 2003; Garcia-Marques et al., 2006). According to this theory, stereotypes are not fixed mental objects, but instead are constructed on an

¹ For example, several studies in Voelkel et al. (2022).

as-needed basis by retrieving from memory a set of exemplary individual members of the group (Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Garcia-Marques et al., 2006; Garcia-Marques et al., 2017). This process mirrors Zaller (1992)'s theory of survey response – just as Zaller describes a respondent's answer to a survey question as a product of the respondent sampling a set of “considerations” from those made salient by the survey question, exemplification theory describes stereotypes as a product of sampling exemplary individuals from the group members made salient by the social and motivational factors produced by the current social context.²

These exemplars need not be prominent members of the group but do need to be clearly coded in memory as part of that group. 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 atypical) exemplars that dominate media coverage of a group (Entman & 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, leading to changes in out-group affect and attitudes. Indeed, a range of studies in psychology find support for this when it comes to racial stereotypes. Dasgupta and Greenwald (2001) introduce an experimental paradigm that exposes subjects to liked Black exemplars and disliked white exemplars, or disliked Black exemplars and liked white exemplars, and found a large positive effect of the liked-Black/disliked-white condition on racial attitudes. Further studies found similar effects of exposure to well-liked celebrities from racial out-groups (Mastro & Tukachinsky, 2011; Ramasubramanian, 2011, 2015; Mares, 2020), and that counter-stereotypical exemplars also extend to non-racial outgroups such the elderly (Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001, Study 2), women leaders (Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004), and gays and lesbians (Dasgupta & Rivera, 2008).³ Finally, a series of laboratory experiments suggest that exposure to Barack Obama improves whites' implicit attitudes towards and stereotypes of Blacks (see Columb & Plant, 2016 for a review, cf. Schmidt & Nosek, 2010; Schmidt & Axt, 2016).

Work outside the laboratory has built on these studies to show that changes to the stream of exemplars presented in the media can change racial stereotypes and attitudes. 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). In political science, work by Goldman and co-authors finds 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 presidential campaigns, a change that reduced white racial prejudice during these campaigns (Goldman, 2012; Goldman & Mutz, 2014; Goldman & Hopkins,

² We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this parallel which, to our knowledge, the existing literature on exemplification theory has not noted.

³ 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 smaller effect sizes than reported in the original Dasgupta and Greenwald study.

2019). However, this change in racial attitudes reversed after the campaign, as the stream of Black exemplars returned to its normal state (Goldman & Mutz, 2014; Pasek et al., 2014).⁴ Kerevel and Atkinson (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 identified as members of the two parties, in mock news articles that either depict Americans as polarized and divided or as moderate and centrist. They found that exposure to articles that depicted Americans as polarized led to increased perceptions of polarization. However, their treatments also vary reported polling data and general observations from the articles' authors, 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 Senate leaders 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; however, their study varies the nature of exemplars' inter-personal interaction, rather than the ideological extremity of the exemplars themselves.

Reducing Inter-Partisan Bias

A growing literature in political science examines strategies for reducing affective polarization and inter-partisan bias (for recent reviews, see Hartman et al., 2022; Druckman & Levy, 2022). Many of the proposed and studied antidotes for these negative attitudes focus on intergroup contact between Democrats and Republicans (Warner & Villamil, 2017; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020; Simonsson et al., 2022), or on emphasizing shared identities and values (Carlin & Love, 2018; Levendusky, 2023; cf. Iyengar & West, 2022). However, some of the most promising interventions attempt to correct misperceptions about the out-party. This work is motivated by fears of widespread political misinformation as well as findings that individuals who hold inaccurate perceptions about the out-party are also more affectively polarized (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Moore-Berg et al., 2020; Pasek et al., 2022). The misperceptions being corrected range from perceptions of out-partisans' endorsement of anti-democratic values to meta-perceptions of out-partisans' attitudes and behaviors towards in-party groups. However, the work most closely related to the present study is work on correcting misperceptions of the demographic and ideological make-up of the parties.

This work begins with Ahler and Sood (2018)'s seminal study of misperceptions about the demographic makeup of the two parties, or what they call the parties' "socio-political brand[s]." Ahler and Sood (2018) find that survey respondents

⁴ Goldman and Mutz (2014) argue that this is because media coverage and public attention to Obama fell after the campaign period.

report inaccurate perceptions of the percent of the out-party that is part of stereotypically party-aligned groups; for example, Republicans guess that 46% of Democrats are Black and Democrats guess that 44% of Republicans are over 65; both of these guesses are roughly double the true percentage (pg. 968).⁵ Further, this study finds that respondents randomly assigned to receive a correction of their demographic misperception perceive the out-party as less ideologically extreme and display less affective polarization.

Subsequent work focuses directly on misperceptions of the out-party's ideological make-up. People tend to overestimate the extremity of out-partisans' ideologies (Krupnikov & Ryan, 2022; Druckman et al., 2022; Myers, 2023), and these misperceptions are particularly important to stereotypes of partisans and especially correlated with affective polarization (Myers, 2023). Two studies that formed part of the Strengthening Democracy Challenge (SDC, Voelkel et al., 2022) directly provide information about out-party policy views. In the *Party Overlap on Policies* study, respondents report their own opinions about a series of policy questions and are then shown graphics depicting the high level of partisan overlap on opinions of the same policies. In the *Correcting Policy Misperceptions Chatbot* study, partisans are first asked to guess where Democrats and Republicans stand on a variety of political issues and are then given accurate description of how far apart, or close together, the parties actually are. Both studies find that directly correcting misperceptions about the difference between Democrats' and Republicans' policy views significantly reduces partisan animosity.

We build on these studies of direct corrections of misperceptions about the out-party by testing a more indirect, but more ecologically valid, strategy that relies on the previously described exemplification theory of stereotypes. These direct-correction strategies show that perceptions of the out-party are consequential and malleable and suggest practical ways to reduce affective polarization. Direct corrections, however, are unlike the way that most people, most of the time, develop their image of the out-party. In contrast, portrayals of exemplary members of the out-party, particularly those with official institutional positions, is a frequent feature of media coverage of politics. By studying the effect of ideologically stereotypical and counter-stereotypical exemplars on perceptions of and affect towards the out-party, our study sheds light on how this kind of coverage might have contributed to our current polarized environment, as well as offering a different approach to reducing affective polarization.

Hypotheses

To test whether partisan exemplars can shape ideological stereotypes of and affect towards the out-party, we conduct a preregistered experiment⁶ where we present individuals with four out-party exemplars, operationalized here as members of Congress. These exemplars are either ideologically stereotypical (i.e. conservative Republicans

⁵ Though see Landy et al. (2018)'s argument that this is a result of a general tendency to misestimate proportions, not specific misinformation about the demographic composition of political parties.

⁶ <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/P2G6S>.

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.⁷

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 no-treatment control condition. This design mirrors those used to test the effect of counter-stereotypical exemplars of racial and ethnic groups (e.g. Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Mastro & Tukachinsky, 2011).⁸

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 members of their respective political parties – that is, a Republican member of Congress is very clearly a member of the group “Republicans” and a Democratic member of Congress a member of the group “Democrats.” This increases the chance that they will function as exemplars of their respective groups, in that respondents will encode them as members of their party, making them available for retrieval when, later in the survey, respondents must construct a stereotype that party. Members’ official position within the party also reduces the possibility that they will be dismissed as atypical (“the exception that proves the rule”) or subtyped (see Schneider & Bos, 2014).⁹ 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

⁷ 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.

⁸ Following these studies, we measure the effect of these exemplars on intergroup attitudes, not their direct effect on the exemplars stored in respondents’ memory. We suggest this as a direction for future work in the conclusion.

⁹ Subtyping refers to when individuals resolve dissonance between a stereotype and an atypical exemplar by creating a new mental category for the atypical exemplar.

of Congress have concrete records that can be used to characterize their ideologies. However, they are, for the most part, not sufficiently well-known for people to have concrete negative or positive attitudes towards them as individuals. Finally, recent work suggesting that measures of partisan affect primarily capture affect towards party elites (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019) supports using such elites as exemplars instead of exemplars drawn from the mass public.

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.¹⁰ We drafted profiles of ten moderate Democrats, ten liberal Democrats, ten 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 moderately liberal for Democrats, and as representative of their party as a whole, relative to the other exemplars. More details of the pre-test are reported in Appendix C. Figure 1a and b show examples of counter-stereotypical (moderate) and stereotypical (liberal Democrats, conservative Republicans) profiles.

Using real members of Congress as exemplars also has downsides. Most notably, accurately describing members in a narrative, biographical form limits our control over the precise differences between experimental conditions. We rely on our pretest to establish that these exemplars were, in fact, perceived as ideologically stereotypical or counter-stereotypical, but are limited in our ability to say which of the several ways that the ideologically stereotypical or counter-stereotypical exemplars differed from each caused this difference in perception, and thus any differences in our dependent variables. Future work should test these hypotheses using treatments that allow for more experimental control.

Experimental Procedure

We recruited 3,167 respondents over the Lucid Theorem platform to participate in an academic research study of people's opinions between Nov 29, 2019, and Dec 17, 2019.¹¹ Democrats and Republicans were assigned to different branches of the exper-

¹⁰ Lucid is an online aggregator of survey respondents that offers demographically representative samples via quota sampling (Coppock & McClellan, 2019). Notably, these data were collected prior to concerns about a decline in Lucid data quality during the pandemic (Ternovski and Orr, 2020).

¹¹ 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 0.8 power to detect a difference of means of Cohen's $d=0.35$ 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

12/19/2019

Qualtrics Survey Software



Joe Cunningham is a Democratic Member of Congress from South Carolina, first elected in 2018. He is a member of the Blue Dog Coalition, which is a group for centrist Democrats in the House, as well as a member of the New Democrat Coalition, a Congress-wide group of a similar nature. In his first vote in the House, Cunningham declined to back Nancy Pelosi for Speaker of the House. He was one of only six House Democrats who voted against H.R. 582: Raise the Wage Act, which provides for increases in the Federal minimum wage.

12/19/2019

Qualtrics Survey Software



Christopher Smith is a Republican Member of Congress from New Jersey, first elected in 1980. He believes in climate change and strongly opposes offshore drilling for oil. Smith also opposes laws that allow people to carry concealed firearms, was one of four Republicans to receive a 100% rating from the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, and he was one of only five Republicans to co-sponsor HR 8 in the 116th Congress, which would require mandatory background checks for gun sales. He is in favor of collective bargaining and voted against the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, one of only twelve Republicans to oppose the Trump Administration on this legislation.

<https://www.qualtrics.com/QualtricsSectionBlock.aspx?GetSurveyProfileView>

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Fig. 1 Examples of Ideologically Moderate Member of Congress Profiles. Two profiles of ideologically moderate members of Congress, Joe Cunningham (D-SC) and Christopher Smith (R-PA), used as treatments in the experiment. Each includes a photo of the member, and a brief biography and description of their positions on key issues. Examples of Ideologically Stereotypical Member of Congress Profiles. Two profiles of ideologically typical of Congress, French Hill (R-AR) and Steven Horsford (D-NV), used as treatments in the experiment. Each includes a photo of the member, and a brief biography and description of their positions on key issues

iment, 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, 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 of the < Republi-

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.



Steven Horsford is a Democratic Member of Congress from Nevada, first elected in 2012. He believes that healthcare is a right, not a privilege, and opposes repealing the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare). He supports a gun-reform package that would include background checks, a ban on assault weapons and bump stocks, and an end to the "gun-show loophole." Horsford supports same-sex marriage and public funding for abortion services.

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pendents from all analyses.¹³ We measure political interest using two items,¹⁴ which we used to create an additive index (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.87$).¹⁵ After treatment, we measure perceptions of out-party ideology and affect towards the out-party, our two primary dependent variables.

We measure perceptions of out-party ideology in two ways. First, we ask respondents to place the average Republican and average Democrat on a standard seven-point ideological scale. Second, as an issue-based measure of perceived ideology we employ questions used by Levendusky and Malhotra (2016b). This asks 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. Our goal was to use this as a second measure of perceived ideological polarization by turning this into a three-item scale. However, the reliability of this scale was below the level specified in our pre-analysis plan, so our primary analysis is of the individual items (pre-registered Cronbach's $\alpha=0.7$; Actual $\alpha=0.52$ for Democrats' issue positions, 0.53 for Republicans' issue positions).¹⁶

We use two different measures of out-party affect, drawn from Druckman and Levendusky (2019). First, to measure general out-party affect we use an index that combines two common measures: the corrected out-party feeling thermometer¹⁷ and a two-item measure of trust in each party.¹⁸ The reliability of the index created from these items is higher than our pre-registered level of 0.7 ($\alpha=0.78$ for affect towards Democrats, 0.77 for affect towards Republicans), so our pre-registered analysis treats these as an index. Additionally, we measured preferences for social distance from the out-party using a scale comprised of three items ($\alpha=0.88$ for social distance from

¹³ 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., 2020).

¹⁴ 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).

¹⁵ See Appendix B for a test of whether political interest moderates the effects of the treatment.

¹⁶ Since the profiles were written to convey a general sense of being ideologically stereotypical or counter-stereotypical they varied in whether they mentioned the three issues that make up this scale. 11 of the 14 profiles mentioned abortion, 3 of 14 mentioned taxes, and none of the profiles mentioned immigration. A range of other issues were mentioned (e.g. gun control, gay marriage, and climate change), as well as membership in ideological caucuses and other indicators of general ideology. This means that even in those profiles that mentioned abortion, this was at most one sentence in a paragraph-long profile.

¹⁷ Following Winter and Berinsky (1999), we corrected for individual neutral point by subtracting the mean score of four other feeling thermometers (labor union, big business, feminists, Christian fundamentalists).

¹⁸ The reliability of the trust indices was $\alpha=0.90$ for trust in Democrats, 0.89 for trust in Republicans.

Democrats, 0.89 for social distance from Republicans).¹⁹ 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. All survey items are listed in Appendix E.

Analysis

We first analyze Republican and Democratic respondents pooled together, and then analyze the two partisan subsamples separately.²⁰ We rescale all dependent variables so that they run from 0 to 1. We evaluate each hypothesis using a difference in means test, 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 provides a pre-treatment measure of respondent attentiveness.

Results

Figure 2 tests H1, the hypothesis that moderate exemplars will lead partisans to stereotype the out-party in a more ideologically moderate manner.²¹ The first panel shows the effects of moderate exemplars (relative to stereotypical exemplars) pooled across the full sample. We find significant effects in the expected direction on perceptions of the out-party's general ideology ($p=.019$; $d=0.094$). Since the index of three issue positions did not reach the pre-registered level of scale reliability, we analyze the effect on each issue position separately. Relative to exposure to ideologically stereotypical exemplars, exposure to moderate exemplars produces more moderate perceptions of the out-party opinion on abortion ($p<.001$; $d=0.173$) and immigration ($p=.002$; $d=0.135$) but no effect on perceived position on taxes ($p=.379$; $d=0.013$). Though it is not our pre-registered test, the effect on this issue index is statistically significant ($p<.001$; $d=0.148$).

Within the two partisan subsamples we find that moderate exemplars moderate perceptions of out-party ideology and issue positions, though the effects are generally statistically significant for the Republican subsample but not for the Democratic

¹⁹ 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).

²⁰ We thank an anonymous reviewer for the suggestion to analyze the data pooled across all respondents. We note that only the analysis of the partisan subsamples was pre-registered.

²¹ This figure includes 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.

subsample. Exposure to moderate Democratic exemplars has a statistically significant effect on Republicans' perceptions of Democrats' general ideology ($p=.004$, $d=0.18$), position on abortion ($p<.001$, $d=0.254$), and position on immigration ($p=.005$, $d=0.186$); the effect on perceptions of Democrats' views of taxes is in the expected direction but smaller and not statistically significant ($p=.224$, $d=0.051$). The non-preregistered test of the effect on the index of three issues was also statistically significant ($p<.001$, $d=0.231$). Exposing Democrats to moderate exemplars of Republicans moved Democrats' perceptions of Republicans' views in a moderate direction, though the effects were smaller and not significant at the pre-registered $\alpha=0.05$. The effects on abortion ($p=.055$, $d=0.100$), and immigration ($p=.066$, $d=0.096$) approached conventional significance, though the effect size estimates were roughly half of the equivalent effect on Republican respondents. The effect on perceptions of Democrats' position on taxes ($p=.561$, $d=0.01$), and general ideology ($p=.302$, $d=0.033$), was essentially null. The non-preregistered analysis of the effect on the three-issue index also approached conventional levels of statistical significance ($p=.091$, $d=0.084$). Thus, we find support for H1 among Republican respondents but not Democratic respondents.

Figure 3 shows the test of H2, the hypothesis that exposure to moderate exemplars will increase affect towards the out-party. Following our preregistration plan, we focus our analysis on the index measuring general out-party affect and the measure of social distance preference. When respondents from both parties are pooled together, we find a significant positive effect of exposure to moderate exemplars on the affect index ($p=.008$, $d=0.105$), though not the measure of social distance preferences ($p=.700$, $d=0.023$). While our preregistered analysis does not call for analyzing the components of this index, an analysis of the measure of out-party trust and the out-party feeling thermometer finds that this effect is largely driven by out-party trust ($p=.001$, $d=0.137$), with essentially no effect on the out-party feeling thermometer ($p=.446$, $d=0.006$).

This pattern of results is similar across partisans, with a positive effect on the affect index though. As with the measures of perceived issue polarization, the effect on Republican respondents is larger and statistically significant at the pre-registered α ($p=.021$, $d=0.139$), while the effect on Democratic respondents is only marginally significant ($p=.084$, $d=0.085$). As with the pooled sample, a non-preregistered analysis of the components of this index finds that this effect is driven by a positive effect on trust in the other party (Republican respondents: $p=.007$, $d=0.177$; Democratic Respondents: $p=.030$, $d=0.118$); we find no effect on the normalized out-party feeling thermometer (Republican respondents: $p=.374$, $d=0.019$; Democratic Respondents: $p=.547$, $d=0.007$). However, we find conflicting but statistically insignificant effects on social distance preferences (Republican respondents: $p=.187$, $d=0.093$; Democratic Respondents: $p=.934$, $d=0.060$). Thus, we find mixed support for H2, with positive effects on our measure of general positive affect but no impact on social distance preferences. The lack of effect on social distance preferences may be the result of the implausibility of thinking about the social distance items in terms of political elites (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019).

In sum, we find evidence that exposure to moderate exemplars of the out-party, relative to ideologically stereotypical exemplars, changes perceptions of out-party

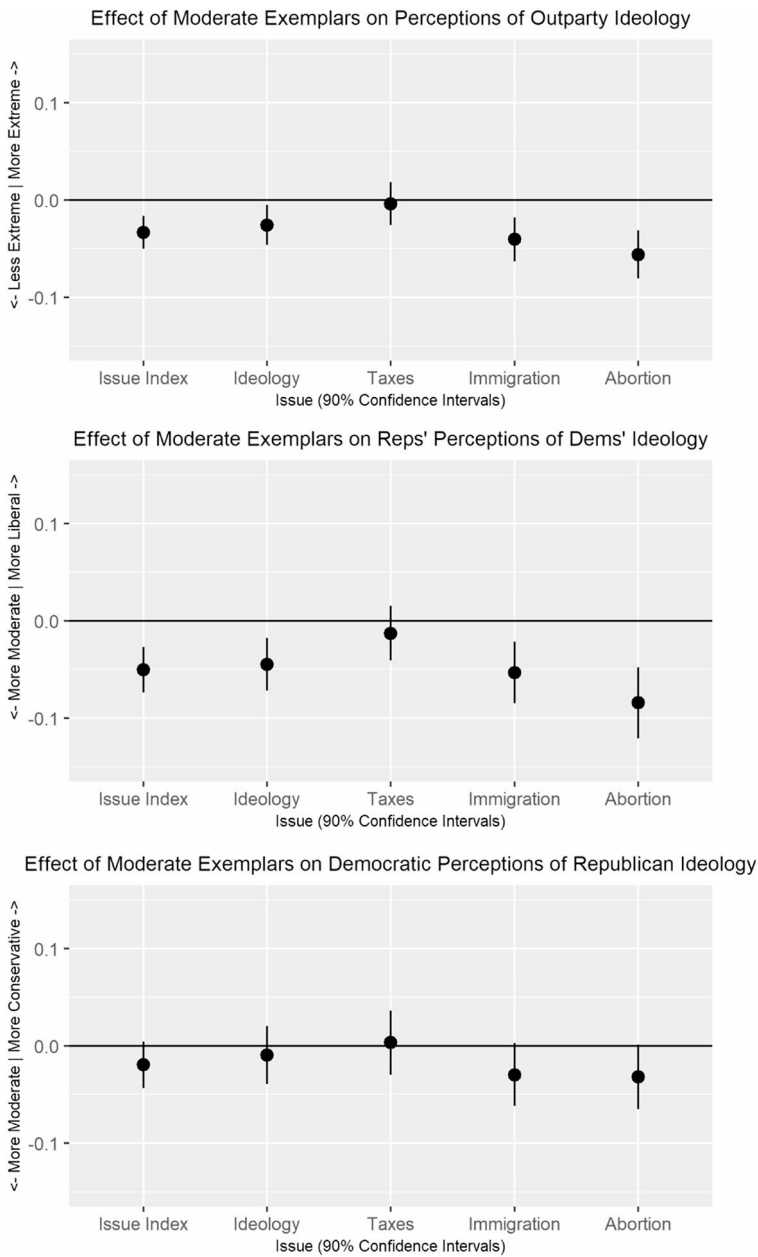


Fig. 2 Effect of Moderate vs. Stereotypical Exemplars on Perceptions of Out-Party Ideology. Two Coefficient Plots showing the effect of treatments for Republicans perceptions of Democrats' ideology and Democrats' perceptions of Republicans' ideology. Moderate exemplars moved Republicans' perceptions in a moderate direction on all issues; this effect was statistically significant for all issues except for taxes. Moderate exemplars moved Democrats' perceptions in a moderate direction on all issues except taxes; this effect was only statistically significant for perceived position on abortion

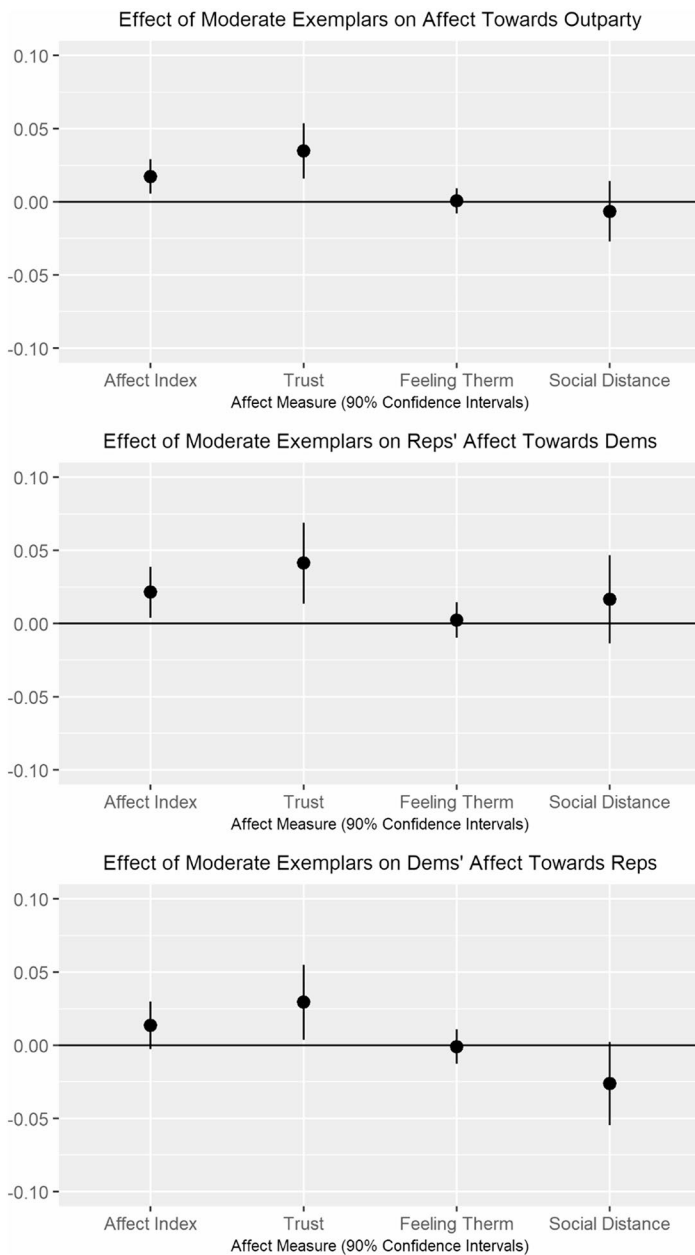


Fig. 3 Effect of Moderate vs. Stereotypical Exemplars on Affect Towards Out-Party. Two Coefficient Plots showing the effect of treatments for Republicans affect towards Democrats and Democrats' affect towards Republicans. Moderate exemplars moved Republicans' affect in a positive direction for all measures of affect; this effect was statistically significant for the overall affect index and the trust index. Moderate exemplars moved Democrats' perceptions in a positive direction for the overall affect index and the trust index; the effect was statistically significant for the trust index. Moderate exemplars moved Democrats' affect in a negative direction on the feeling thermometer and social distance index, though neither of these effects were statistically significant

ideology in a more moderate direction and has a positive effect on some measures of 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 in all tests. 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 general affect, rather than preferences for social distance.

In general, these effects are smaller than, but of comparable magnitude to, findings of other studies in the literature on reducing partisan animosity. For example, in the Stanford Megastudy of interventions to reduce affective polarization the median size of the effect on partisan animosity was $d=0.22$, while those of the most similar studies in the Megastudy, the “policy overlap” treatment and “policy chatbot” treatment, had effect sizes of $d=0.17$ and $d=0.16$, respectively. We find an effect of $d=0.14$ for Republican respondents and 0.09 for Democratic respondents (0.11 for the pooled sample). Like our study, the interventions in the Stanford Megastudy had relatively small effects on preferences for social distance from the out-party; the median effect size was a decrease in preferences of social distance by $d=0.04$, and the two most similar studies actually increased preferences for social distance by $d=0.04$. The results of these studies are not directly comparable to ours, as they use different measures of partisan animosity and, as we note in our literature review, a more direct correction of misperception. However, they suggest that in the context of a dependent variable that is difficult to change, partisan animosity, the relatively small effects observed here are nevertheless substantively meaningful.

To situate our findings on the perceived ideological extremity of the out-party, we can compare the effects observed in our study to those in Ahler and Sood (2018)’s study of misperceptions of the group composition of parties. Ahler and Sood (2018) do not report standardized effect sizes, but like our analysis they report effects of their experimental manipulation, which directly corrects misperceptions about party composition by telling respondents the correct proportion of the out-party that is part of different party-aligned groups, on a standardized 0–1 scale (Online Appendix 4). Their standardized effect sizes on an index of policy views range from -0.02 to -0.05 , depending on how they specify the dependent variable. Our most directly comparable outcome, the effect of moderate exemplars on the index of issue positions pooled across partisans, is in the middle of this range (-0.033), while the effects on perceived positions on individual issues, which range from 0.003 (the effect on Democrats’ perceptions of Republicans’ position on taxes) to 0.08 (the effect on Republicans’ perception of Democrats position on abortion) are all of comparable magnitude to those found by Ahler and Sood (2018). Thus, while the effect sizes observed here are not large, they are of similar substantive significance as other experimental treatments reported in the literature.

Conclusion

What can be done about the negative, often inaccurate stereotypes partisans often hold about the out-party? Existing work shows that directly providing information about the distribution of views or demographic attributes, often in the form of a misperception correction, can reduce affective polarization. However, these interventions differ from the way most partisans learn about the out-party, limiting their utility as a strategy for addressing misperceptions and their ability to help us understand the roots of mass polarization. We test a less direct strategy that attempts to change stereotypes of and affect towards the out-party by exposing partisans to counter-stereotypical exemplars of the out-party. This strategy builds on exemplar-based theories of stereotyping, which suggest that stereotype content is relatively flexible, responding to changes in the supply of partisan exemplars. In a study that builds on an established paradigm in the study of racial stereotypes, 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 have become so extreme, and how they might be changed to become more moderate. They also suggest an underlying theory, the exemplification theory of stereotype formation, on which researchers can ground future work on partisan animosity reduction. Other work that successfully reduces partisan animosity, such as experiments using imagined group contact, can be understood through the lens of exemplification theory.²² Finally, the results contribute to work that argues that affective polarization is rooted in the stereotypes that partisans hold about the out-party (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Busby et al., 2021; Myers, 2023). Understanding partisan animosity as a problem of group stereotyping helps connect this issue to a long theoretical literature in social and cognitive psychology (Hilton & von Hippel 1996; Schaller, 2001; Bodenhausen et al., 2012).

The effects observed are not large, though comparable in magnitude to other effect sizes reported in studies aimed at reducing partisan animosity through the provision of correct information. We interpret this as further evidence that animosity towards and misperceptions of the out-party are deeply ingrained and difficult, but not impossible, to change. We think this is particularly notable because the method used in our study is less direct than the methods used in other studies in this literature; our treatment relies on respondents to generalize from counter-stereotypical out-party exemplars to the out-party in general. While less direct, we would argue that this treatment is more ecologically valid; outside of the confines of an experiment, partisans are more likely to encounter news about a moderate out-party member than, for example, a chatbot that directly corrects their misperceptions about the distribution of policy views in the out-party (Voelkel et al., 2022; *Correcting Policy Misperceptions Chatbot* study). Moreover, while we cannot speak directly to the effect of repeated exposure to these exemplars over time, we suspect that the cumulative effect would be larger.²³

²² We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

²³ We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

Our results are stronger and more consistently statistically significant for Republicans in our sample than for Democrats. We suggest several possibilities related to how these exemplars were perceived. First, moderate Democratic exemplars might have been more effective because they were less likely to be perceived as a distinct sub-type of Democrats, making it easier to generalize from the exemplars provided to Democrats in general.²⁴ They may also have simply been more believable to participants – Democrats may have doubted our claim that a moderate Republican member of Congress named “Christopher Smith” exists. On the other hand, moderate Democrats may have been more novel to Republican respondents than moderate Republican exemplars were to Democratic respondents; this would make the “moderate Democrat” treatment a stronger counter-stereotypical treatment than the “moderate Republican” treatment. Any of these possibilities might be driven by asymmetries in the supply of moderate exemplars produced by asymmetric polarization in Congress (Mann & Ornstein, 2012), asymmetric presentation of ideologically extreme members of Congress in the media (Padget et al., 2019), or asymmetries in consumption of ideological media (Eady et al. 2019, Guess, 2021). We are unable to adjudicate between these possibilities but offer them as conjectures to motivate future research.

Several limitations to this study point to directions for future research. This study was designed to mirror designs in classic studies of the effect of exemplar exposure on racial prejudice; future work should expand the range of exemplars used (i.e. not just members of Congress). Future work might also benefit from directly measuring who respondents’ out-partisan exemplars are, providing a more direct test of the effect of the mechanism hypothesized by our theory; our current data cannot directly demonstrate that exposure to moderate out-party exemplars actually changes respondents’ set of out-party exemplars.²⁵ The one-shot nature of this experiment means that we cannot speak to the persistence of effects over time, nor to the effect of changes in the exemplars that individuals are chronically exposed to. Given that it is these changes in these patterns of chronic exposure that likely cause durable shifts in stereotype content, future work should go beyond one-shot designs to test the effect of longer-term changes in partisan exemplar exposure (Searles et al., 2022).

A final caveat is that while our study aims to make perceptions of out-party ideology more moderate, it does not necessarily make them more accurate. Exposure to counter-stereotypical exemplars runs the risk of convincing people that these exemplars are more typical than they actually are and, in turn, that the out-party is more ideologically moderate than it actually is. Given the findings that most people perceive the out-party as more ideologically extreme than it actually is, an intervention that moderates these perceptions likely improves accuracy, at least on average. Still, we cannot rule out the possibility that our study left some participants with less accurate perceptions than they started with. Strategies based on directly providing information about the distribution of out-party views have the advantage of being able to

²⁴ On subtyping politicians, see Schneider and Bos (2014).

²⁵ We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion. We would counsel some caution about whether respondents are consciously aware of and can accurately report these exemplars in a survey question. Creative approaches, such as Klar and Krupnikov (2016, Ch. 4)’s study asking respondents to find images that represent partisanship, might get around this.

present precisely correct information. Given increasing and asymmetric polarization in Congress (Lewis et al., 2024), there may be a tension between promoting perceptions that reduce partisan animosity and promoting accurate perceptions of the political world.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no conflicts of interests.

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