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Influence of Political Affiliation on Perceived Media Bias and Trustworthiness in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL AFFILIATION ON PERCEIVED MEDIA BIAS AND

TRUSTWORTHINESS IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

by

TABITHA LAMBERTH

(Under the Direction of Ryan Couillou)

ABSTRACT

Partisanship and news source attribution may influence perceived media bias and trust in COVID-19 information. This study aimed to explore how the similarity liking effect relates to political identity and perceived credibility. Our main hypothesis was that individuals would find news sources that shared their political affiliation as more trustworthy than other news sources. To test our hypothesis, 216 undergraduate students participated in a study that measured participants' trustworthiness of a news article with randomized source attribution from a liberal, conservative, and neutral source. A 2X3 ANOVA tested the relationship between our participants' political affiliation, measured by the 12-item Social and Economic Conservatism Scale (Everett, 2013), the news sources' political affiliation, and trustworthiness rating given to the articles by the participants. The results of the ANOVA were not significant; therefore, our data did not support our hypothesis. An exploratory analysis revealed a significant main effect for self-reported affiliation. Specifically, participants who identified as "Other" rated the articles as significantly less trustworthy than Democratic and Republican participants. Our results suggest that there may be other factors that are more prominent in influencing the trustworthiness of news sources apart from political affiliation. Further research is needed to gain an

understanding of how social identity theory influences news and media consumption in the United States.

INDEX WORDS: Social identity theory, Similarity liking effect, Political affiliation, Media bias, Trustworthiness, COVID-19

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background of American Politics

Political parties existed before the United States was established. Johnston et al. (1892) best summarized how American political parties came to be after the United States won its independence. During the American Revolution, there were two parties, loyalists, who remained loyal to the crown, and patriots, who did not. After the American Revolution, the next set of political parties in the United States were the Democratic-Republicans and the Federalists. In 1777, the United States was a brand-new nation, with a new governing document, the Constitution. Americans interpreted the meaning of the Constitution differently, ultimately causing the party divide. The Democratic-Republicans wanted to follow the Constitution strictly with an emphasis on limited power from the federal government. The Federalists called for a loose interpretation of the Constitution, allowing for more federal control. These two political views are the basis for all legitimate political parties in the U.S. In the 1970s and 1980s, the political parties endured reforms brought on by activists to align the parties back into their set sides on the conservative and liberal continuums (Jackson, 2014). The Republicans are situated on the conservative side of the spectrum and the Democrats on the liberal side.

The Republican Party and Democratic Party are the two main political parties in the United States. The Republican Party maintains the strict constitutionalist view that Democratic-Republicans once had. According to the Republican Party (2016) Platform, the official party places importance on reducing the government's scope regarding free markets, taxation, minimum wage, and health care; however, they favor increased military spending. The Republican Party emphasizes constitutional rights, such as preserving the first amendment right

to freedom of speech, the second amendment right to bear arms, and the fifth amendment right to protect human life. Individualism is a critical component in the Republican Party's official stances. The Democratic Party (2020) platform boasts its support in raising the minimum wage, protecting workers' rights to unionize, raising taxes on higher-income earners and corporations, and supporting the fight against racism, classism, and sexism. The Democratic Party supports marriage equality, access to abortion, universal healthcare, and gun laws. Democrats want more government regulation to protect the people. Democrats and Republicans are similar in their desire to help the country reach its true potential--their strategies are what sets them apart.

News and Political Identity

Researchers have explored the idea that social media feeds act as echo chambers that reinforced political beliefs (Bakshy et al., 2015). Cinelli et al. (2021) found that different social media platforms experience echo chamber clusters at varying rates, with Twitter and Facebook having the most significant numbers of "homophilic clusters" or echo chambers. These clusters or chambers consisted of like-minded individuals sharing biased narratives among themselves. However, research has also found that social media echo chambers may not be the only online phenomenon responsible for political belief reinforcement. One study found that partisans, conservatives especially, became more polarized after following a Twitter bot that retweeted posts from elected officials and commentators with opposing views (Bail et al., 2018). This contrast may be because the positive online intergroup contact typically associated with more openness to opposing views was absent and replaced with opinions from political leaders (Bail et al., 2018; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

News organizations are also a major source of partisan tensions, and Americans seem divided on which organizations they can trust (Pew Research Center, 2017a). Specifically, 40%

of Trump voters identified Fox News as their primary source of news for the 2016 election, while 18% of Clinton supporters used CNN and 9% used MSNBC (Pew Research Center, 2017a).

People stick with their news outlet because they believe it will provide them with the most accurate representation of the world, without bias from their rival political party (Landreville & Niles, 2019). Landreville and Niles (2019) found that when conservatives exclusively turned to conservative news sources, they believed that the opinions of the news hosts were actual factual statements. When viewers are receiving these one-sided opinions represented as facts, it can be hard for them to discern facts from opinions, which can prevent them from making fully formed decisions on topics. How political content is presented to viewers may discourage them from doing their research into topics.

Bruchmann et al. (2018) found that political attitudes have strong similarity liking effects, meaning that individuals will like individuals or organizations more if they believe they share the same political affiliation. The similarity liking effect can influence everything from how well individuals remember faces to the likelihood of a romantic relationship. That bond may be strengthened or weakened depending on how well the individuals' moral foundations align. Bruchmann and colleagues tested this theory between individuals with Facebook profiles identified as pro-Trump, pro-Republican, pro-Clinton, and pro-Democrat. The results imply that if an individual feels that a particular news organization shares their political affiliation or moral foundations, they are more likely to tune into that outlet and receive their news from them (Bruchmann et al., 2018; Marks et al., 2018). This directly correlates with the research from Landreville and Niles (2019) that found that "like-minded partisanship associated with a partisan news host encouraged greater perceived source credibility of the news hosts" (p. 191).

Strong relationships with media organizations and political involvement can affect the way individuals see the world. Morris (2007) found that individuals who watched Fox News as their primary news source viewed political affairs differently, whether positively or negatively, than individuals watching other television news stations. The basis for this strong relationship with a matching partisan news station is consistent with research done by Lin et al. (2016), where researchers found that the individual and group identity plus the medium in which media is consumed all play a significant role in perceived media bias. Individuals who had a stronger ingroup connection with their political party were more likely to perceive a hostile bias from mainstream media coverage.

When individuals perceive more bias against their ingroup, their feelings towards that group tend to strengthen, which leads to strengthened and more extreme political beliefs (Lin et al., 2016). Continually strengthening political beliefs furthers individual polarization, which can turn into more obstinate partisan views. The more obstinate an individual becomes politically, the more likely it is to ignore their party's performance or neutral facts to support their party (Ardevol-Abreu & Gil De Zuniga, 2020). Yair and Sulitzeanu-Kenan (2018) found that people may hear about ingroup bias and attest that they want politically neutral news; however, their opinions on acting against biased news changes if the bias harms or aids their political ingroup. Bias that harms an individual's ingroup is seen as more threatening; therefore, in need of a call to action instead of when bias aids one's ingroup, meaning that individuals are not as likely to take corrective action (Yair & Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2018).

Political identity gives individuals an opportunity to be in an ingroup with individuals who have the same beliefs. In addition to being in an ingroup, partisans may see similarity-like effects with those in their own party, exacerbating a feeling of belonging and identity

(Bruchmann et al., 2018). Once individuals have identified their political ingroup, they will gravitate towards news sources that promote their party's ideas and will be less likely to find sources that oppose their views as credible (Landreville & Niles, 2019). Partisans then become more extreme (Lin et al., 2016) and obstinate in their political views (Ardevol-Abreu & Gil De Zuniga, 2020).

Bias as a Political Pawn

The notion of political bias has existed in American media for over half a century (Schiffer, 2017). According to Schiffer (2017), the charge of a liberal bias can be traced back to 1964 when Goldwater defeated Rockefeller for the Republican nomination. Republicans were coming out of a 36-year "drought" for conservatives in Congress and in the presidential election. During that time, publications such as the National Review started publishing works that attacked the New Deal and the liberalism that came from it. These attacks were what gave Republicans a push to bring back the conservative movement. Goldwater wrote the book, *The Conscience of a Conservative* in 1960, detailing goals for those in the conservative movement, acting as a how-to manual for activists. This manual won him the nomination and gave Republicans an answer to the New Deal liberalism of the time. However, since his take on conservatism was so new, it was hard to be taken seriously by the Republican party, let alone the mainstream media. When the mainstream media did not see this new stream of conservatism as legitimate, the accusation of a liberal media bias was born (Schiffer, 2017).

When examining the charge of bias, the different types of biases need to be examined as well. Schiffer (2017) identified four types of bias: gatekeeping, coverage, tone, and quality. Gatekeeping is described as when the accusation is out of two equally newsworthy issues; one side receives more coverage than the other. This type of bias is typically seen during political

scandals. Biased coverage is when news outlets are accused of giving one side of an issue more analysis than the other. Tone bias consists of one side receiving more positive coverage than the other, and quality bias is when a news story is accused of including errors that favor one side over the other (Schiffer, 2017).

Pew Research Center (2011) found that approximately 52% of Americans see bias in the way news is covered. When the sample was broken down into political affiliations, they found that 62% of Republicans, 61% of conservatives, and 52% of Independents saw this bias. In comparison, the numbers were slightly lower for Liberals at 46% and Democrats at 47%. However, research into the topic of bias in news coverage and researchers agree that there is not a significant partisan bias in news coverage either way (Hassell, Holbein, & Miles, 2020). If the research does not support the media bias charge, why do nearly half of Americans believe in it?

Eveland and Shah (2003) found that there are certain indicators that can predict if an individual will perceive media bias. Those strongly involved in politics and Republicans, in general, tend to hold the view that there was a bias towards their views in the media. The disparity between Democrats and Republicans might be explained by the talking point among conservative elites that there is a liberal bias in the news and rampant fake news. Eveland and Shah also found that another predictor of having those feelings of perceived bias was having an environment conducive to safe discussions with like-minded individuals. Essentially, having a safe space had a significant effect by increasing perceived bias.

In 2019, Weeks et al. found that following politicians on social media indirectly links to the perception of media bias. Following politicians on social media manifests itself as ebullience for one's favorite politician or candidate and hostility for those in the opposing party. The study also found that individuals who chose to follow politicians were more likely to be more

emotional in politics, making them more susceptible to perceiving a hostile bias in the media. This rise in hostile media bias perception could be accounted for due to politicians turning to social media as a means of interacting with constituents (Kreiss, Lawrence, & Mcgregor, 2020).

In review, approximately half of Americans believe that there is a partisan bias, whether liberal or conservative, in American news coverage (Pew Research Center, 2011). Republicans are more likely to perceive a partisan bias in mainstream news coverage (Eveland and Shah, 2013), as well as individuals who follow politicians on social media (Weeks et al., 2019). Despite all of the commotion about a partisan bias in mainstream news coverage, which would qualify as quality bias (Schiffer, 2017), researchers have not found evidence to support this claim (Hassell, Holbein, & Miles, 2020).

News Coverage

The sensation of media bias is not a myth that has spiraled out of control; Groeling (2008) found that the media did have a bias in presidential election coverage in the past. The stereotype of outlets such as CBS and NBC being liberal was consistent with the findings that they overwhelmingly displayed favorable news coverage for Bill Clinton and unfavorable coverage for George Bush. Groeling also found that Fox News fell into the conservative stereotype by promoting good news coverage for Bush and bad coverage for Clinton.

In 2018, Investors Business Daily released an article detailing a relevant account of media bias by comparing how the media covered two different acts of political violence. In 2017, a Bernie Sanders supporter who wanted to "terminate the Republican Party" shot into a Republican charity baseball game and put a member of the House in the hospital. A year later, a Trump supporter sent out pipe bombs to democratic lawmakers, which did not result in injury. After analysis, researchers found that only 30% of articles mentioned the shooter's support for

Bernie Sanders, with no blame on his rhetoric or political affiliation. It contrasts how the media handled coverage of the pipe bomber. Seventy percent of news coverage mentioned his support for Trump, some even before his identity was made public. Events like this further the belief among Americans that news they receive from mainstream media has a partisan bias.

Research found that news organizations had more commonalities than differences and that organizations tend to cover stories in a relatively non-partisan or moderate way. The vast amount of bias published by these organizations came from critiquing the opposing side more than their own instead of outright advocating for their own party (Budak et al., 2014). However, researchers came to this conclusion after removing political scandals from their research. Researchers found that Democratic-leaning newspapers covered Republican scandals far more than scandals involving Democrats and vice versa for Republican-leaning newspapers (Puglisi & Snyder, 2008). Although there has not been evidence to support an ideological bias in recent media coverage, there is a bias in how partisan-leaning sources cover stories about their side versus the opposing party. This may account for the liberal/conservative bias Americans seem to perceive.

When individuals trust news sites that add this political slant to their news coverage, their perceptions of reality can be shaped. A political slant in news reporting can alter their understanding of expert conclusions or shape their beliefs beyond what available evidence dictates. Basically, beliefs can change from what partisans know about the evidence to what the media reports. Using partisan news outlets makes it more likely for individuals to believe falsehoods that favor political affiliation, even if they know that experts, scientists, and fact-checkers disagree (Garrett, Weeks, & Neo, 2016).

Fake News

The worry about bias in the news stems from the prevalence of fake news circulating on the internet from seemingly legitimate news outlets. Fake news is a term used for news stories that may be entirely fake, partially true, or written in a way to lead one to a false or biased conclusion (Desai, Mooney, & Oehrli, 2020). Researchers found that during the 2016 election, fake news articles could have been as persuasive as legitimate campaign ads, especially for voters who already held strong partisan views (Hunt & Gentzkow, 2017). Legitimate fake news articles on the internet are concerning, but they are not where the concern of fake news ends.

Voters must deal with the prevalence of the term 'fake news' and its consequences, as well. Linden and colleagues (2010) found that the majority of voters associated the term fake news with Fox News and CNN, two of the most popular mainstream news stations in the country. This comes from a phenomenon known as the "Fake news effect," which can also affect how viewers see the world and trust the media. The fake news effect is when partisans throw out the term fake news to discredit opposing media sources (Linden, Panagopoulos, & Roozenbeek, 2010. There are multiple examples of this on President Donald Trump's Twitter page. One of his most recent Tweets reads, "I've been getting really good polls, some over 50%, except for one Fake poll done by @ABC NEWS, which gives NO INFORMATION about the sample, R or D, or anything else. They did this last election, with one week to go, down 12 points, and I won. They are disgusting Fake News!" (Trump, 2020).

Bias and Public Trust

Fake news is not all Americans worry about when getting their news from the media when multiple news networks are owned by the same individual. In 2018, Americans were shocked when multiple local news stations recited the same script to their viewers across the country. The script was essentially a speech by the local news anchors to put viewers' worries about fake news to rest by assuring news coverage would be fair and unbiased; however, it had the opposite effect. The Sinclair Broadcast Group owns almost 200 television stations and dispersed the same script among them. The footage of anchors across the country reading the same script caused an uproar and controversy over how trustworthy local television stations are and questions as to why one private company owns a majority of stations (Fortin & Bromwich, 2018). When companies have a monopoly over news stations and use those stations to push an agenda, the public loses trust in that form of media. This could be disastrous, especially when local news stations were the most trusted news source in a poll done by Pew Research Center in 2017(b). Pew Research Center (2017b) found trust in local news held for Republicans, Democrats, and Independents, with the differences in trust between national and local news ranging from 2 to 13 percent. Even though the Sinclair Broadcast Group scandal did not involve outright ideological bias, it still made the general public suspicious that their most trusted news sources were susceptible to corruption and could have led to more fake news charges.

Americans perceive bias in the media, but according to Feldman (2010), they may also have a bias against bias. In other words, partisans are not as likely to perceive bias in opinionated news in which they are predisposed to agree. If a bias is perceived, it is typically less than what Independents and opposing partisans would detect. Pew Research Center (2018) found that members of both major political parties were more likely to label factual and opinion statements

as factual when they aligned with their political party. If partisans thought that a statement was factual, they tended to agree with it, but they would call it an opinion if they disagreed. This study confirmed Fragale and Heath's research from 2004--people assume that their own beliefs are true, and because they are true, they must come from credible sources. People will rate a news source as more credible if their beliefs align because they see it as more accurate.

The opposite is also true when partisans are exposed to information that may go against their party's beliefs. If the news partisans are receiving does not actively praise or agree with their beliefs, they are more likely to perceive it as biased than individuals who do not identify with a party. This aligns with multiple works of research that have found that partisans of opposing beliefs can perceive identical news articles as being biased against their side (see Arpan and Raney, 2003; Christen et al., 2002; Chia et al., 2007; Gunther and Christen, 2002; Hartmann and Tanis, 2013; Reid, 2012; Vallone et al., 1985).

Gallup and the Knight Foundation (2018) conducted an online study to examine public trust in the media by creating an online platform. The online platform generated news articles and put them into conditions that would either hide the source, image, both, or neither for each article. Participants' political affiliation was recorded and used in an analysis that compared the rated trustworthiness of the outlets with political affiliation and source and image availability. They found that source attribution resulted in lower overall trustworthiness and that heuristics based on partisanship affected trustworthiness. Participants were more likely to rate a source as trustworthy or not based on the perceived affiliation of that outlet than based on the information in the article.

Essentially, Americans have a trusting relationship with their local news station that can be strained when they suspect that an agenda is being pushed (Pew Research Center, 2017b).

Local news stations need to actively work to maintain the publics' trust and keep the reputation of being unbiased. Although people are worried about receiving biased news, they will not perceive a bias if the information or opinions support their beliefs (Fragale & Heath, 2004). However, individuals will perceive a bias if the information does not support their stances or if the information comes from a source that does not share their political values (Gallup and the Knight Foundation, 2018).

Bias during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The difference between the perceived realities of Americans became apparent with the COVID-19 outbreak. Pew Research Center (2020b) surveyed respondents from March to May 2020 and found a partisan divide between Republicans and Democrats when it came to viewing COVID-19 as a threat to the U.S. Democrats showed an overall increase in the belief that COVID-19 is a public health and economic threat, while Republicans showed an initial increase and then decrease of belief in a public threat, with an overall increase in the belief of an economic threat.

The two parties oppose each other on almost every front, making political polarization more common and apparent. This political polarization affects many aspects of everyday life for Americans. Social media feeds are filled with hyper-partisan content that pushed Americans to divide politically further (Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018). Researchers have found that members of Congress were able to politicize and polarize the COVID-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2020. Democrats discussed the topic more frequently, emphasizing public health and financial aid, while Republicans were more concerned with the economy and Chinese involvement (Green, Edgerton, Naftel, Shoub, & Cranmer, 2020).

Along with the politicization of COVID-19 on social media by Congress, research found that the type of media consumed affected one's views of COVID-19. The study by Jamieson & Albarracin (2020) measured the amount of information about lethality and prevention, and levels of misinformation individuals had about COVID-19 and where they received their information. Democrats were more likely to be more knowledgeable about its lethality and believe the information coming from the CDC. Individuals who received their information from broadcast and print media were more likely to be knowledgeable about the virus, even with political affiliations accounted for. Conservative and social media was correlated with less knowledge about COVID-19 and more misinformation about the virus and conspiracy theories. Several studies have found that viewers of different types of media, Fox News especially, had different responses, such as non-compliance with social distancing and stay at home orders, during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ash et al., 2020; Bursztyn et al., 2020; Simonov et al., 2020).

In 2020, trusted news sources were needed more than ever with the COVID-19 outbreak. Most Americans do not read scientific articles, so they rely on the journalists and the organizations that report on them. In a pandemic, not believing a news article can quickly turn into not believing in evidence-based science and ways to stay healthy. In a recent survey by Pew Research Center (2020), 66% of Democratic individuals or Democratic-leaning individuals said that they believe that media coverage of COVID-19 is accurate, while only 31% of Republicans or Republican-leaning individuals believe that coverage is accurate.

In the present study, we will build on the current literature that has found that partisans perceive news bias differently, dependent upon matching political affiliations with the news source. In Gallup and the Knight Foundation's (2018), a peer-reviewed survey was not used to measure trustworthiness; we will address this using the Source Credibility Scale created by

McCroskey and Teven (1999). This study will also address the practical concerns addressed in Cohen's (2003) study by exploring the effect of political ingroup influence on real-life news, specifically about the COVID-19 pandemic. This study will also explore the findings that partisans and viewers of different news sources perceive information about COVID-19 differently (Ash et al., 2020; Bursztyn et al., 2020; Jamieson & Albarracin, 2020; Simonov et al., 2020). The following research questions will be explored concerning social identity theory and its impact on American news consumption. Can perceived news outlet political affiliation influence how trustworthy individuals of different political parties view it? Does political affiliation influence how partisans perceive information about COVID-19? If so, is there an interaction between matching political affiliation with a news source and perception of COVID-19 information? Our first hypothesis is that individuals will find news sources that they perceive to hold the same political affiliation as themselves as more trustworthy than other news sources. Our second hypothesis is that individuals are more likely to believe information about COVID-19 if their political affiliation matches the news source's political affiliation.

CHAPTER 2

METHODS

Participants

The sample consisted of one-hundred and fifty-five students from a southeastern

university who participated in this study (108 females, 45 males, 2 non-binary/third gender). The

participants' ages ranged from 18 to 35 (*M*= 19.68, SD=2.316); there were 97 freshmen, 25

sophomores, 21 juniors, 8 seniors, and 4 in post-baccalaureate programs. Of our participants, 1

was American Indian or Alaskan Native, 5 Asian, 41 Black or African American, 91 White and

17 identified as mixed race. Initially, we had 276 participants take our survey, but we had to

exclude 121 participants after they failed the manipulation check or failed to complete the entire

survey. This led to our sample being less than our anticipated 216 students. A power analysis

was ran using G*Power (Faul, et al., 2007). Using an effect size of 0.25, significance level of .05

and power equal to .80. The 0.25 effect size was chosen due to its use in previous studies into

political affiliation and news consumption (Ardevol-Abreu & Gil De Zuniga, 2020; Kim & Kim,

2018; Metzger, Hartsell, & Flanagin, 2015).

Materials

Measures

The measures included a demographics questionnaire; the 12 Item Social and Economic

Conservatism Scale (SECS; Everett, 2013); and the Source Credibility Scale (McCroskey &

Teven, 1999). The 12 Item Social and Economic Conservatism Scale (SECS; Everett, 2013) was

selected due to its use in prior research into politics and COVID-19, short length and how its

items will stand up over time (Karwowski et al., 2020; Thunstrom, Ashworth, Shogren,

Newbold, & Finnoff, 2020). The scale consists of 12 words relating to dominant conservative

issues that participants are asked to rate with a 'feeling thermometer.' The feeling thermometer is a 0-100 scale, with 0 being negative and 100 being positive, to rate each item. The scale allows for participants to indicate strong and neutral feelings about conservative issues. The benefit of this scale is that it does not require extensive political knowledge, includes fiscal and social items and can be used in conjunction with other measures of political orientation, such as a self-report measure on a demographics questionnaire (Everett, 2013). The SECS has been cited in many social and cognitive psychology articles that focus on political affiliation of adults and college students (Beyer, 2020; Costello, Bowes & Lilienfeld, 2020; Rollwage, Dolan, & Fleming, 2018). Upon data analysis the SECS scale had a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .84$.

The McCroskey and Teven (1999) Source Credibility Scale was selected due to its popularity and longevity in the field of trust and credibility research. Researchers have applied the SCS in several studies involving news and media credibility (Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2012; Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2014). We received approval from Dr. Teven to adapt this study to measure news source credibility. The Source Credibility Scale measures competence, goodwill, and trustworthiness by asking participants to rate between constructs, such as one question that states this source is trustworthy, then a 1-7 scale, too untrustworthy. The scale ratings range from 1 to 7 for each construct, with 1 and 7 indicating very strong feelings and 4 indicating a neutral feeling on the subject. The Source Credibility Scale had a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .95$.

Vignette

Participants were exposed to a vignette that mimics news articles from news organizations that have partisan connotations. The vignette covered the COVID-19 pandemic, along with various labels from news organizations. It mimicked a post from Associated Press as

an unbiased source. Researchers have found that when compared to other American news organizations liberals and conservatives generally rate Associated Press as unbiased (Allsides Media Bias Chart, 2020; Perceived Accuracy and Bias in the News Media, 2018). Associated Press was used as the control, being the unbiased or politically neutral source. The Fox News label was used as the Republican or Conservative political organization label and CNN as the Democratic or Liberal political organization label. These organizations were chosen with previous literature in mind concluding that Democratic individuals are more likely to use CNN and Republicans use Fox as primary news sources (Allsides Media Bias Chart, 2020; Gramlich, 2020; Perceived Accuracy and Bias in the News Media, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2017a).

An article reporting a speech by Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, at a press conference about the severity and potential public-health threat downgrade COVID-19 poses was used as the vignette. The article void of partisan words (i.e., republican, conservative, democrat, liberal), Dr. Fauci replaced with "Center for Disease Control" and void of mention of the current presidential administration was created to keep the vignette content politically neutral.

Procedure

Participants were recruited online through SONA at Georgia Southern University and completed the study through Qualtrics. Students received incentives to participate in research projects with course credit or extra credit. The participants were presented with an informed consent form before participating in the study. The participants were then given a vignette with varying conditions. The vignette being the same article but with a different news organization label, depending on the condition. The participants then filled out the Source Credibility Scale after the vignette. At the end of the study, participants completed a demographic questionnaire, a

quick manipulation check, along with the 12 Item Social and Economic Conservatism Scale (SECS). Upon completion of the study, participants were shown a page thanking them for their time.

Design

A two-way between groups ANOVA was conducted to examine the effect that personal political affiliation and perceived political leanings of news sources had on perceived trustworthiness of news articles. The independent variables being the political affiliations of the participants and the political leanings of the news sources. Participant political affiliation was split into two levels, conservative and liberal, categorized by doing a median split of the SECS. Using a median split for the participants' results on the SECS will allow for a firm cutoff and categorization of their political affiliations. News source political leanings were split into three levels conservative, liberal, and neutral as determined by previous literature, noted above. The dependent variable being the level of trustworthiness of the article perceived by the participants, which was determined by the Source Credibility Measure.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Analysis

A 2 X 3 between groups ANOVA was used to determine if there was a relationship between personal political affiliation and if the perceived political leanings of news sources influenced how trustworthy the news source was rated. Participants were divided into two groups according to their score on the SECS (M = 70.13, range = 81.90), a median split was calculated from the data as a divider for the groups (liberal = 1 - 70.0; conservative = 70.01 - 100). The analysis revealed that there was not a significant effect between personal political affiliation and news source political affiliation on perceived news article trustworthiness, $F(2,149)$ =0.185, p = 0.831. Perceived trustworthiness was similar between liberals who read articles from the control (M = 34.42, SD = 4.83), democratic (M = 32.59, SD = 5.27), and republican (M = 32.24, SD = 5.15) sources and conservatives who read the article from the control (M = 33.65, SD = 5.95), democratic (M = 32.00, SD = 5.94), and republican (M = 32.69, SD = 6.32) sources. The main effects for political affiliation, $F(1,149)$ = .112, p = .738, and news source political affiliation, $F(2,149)$ = 1.514, p = .223, did not reach statistical significance.

Figure 1

News Source Trustworthiness by Political Affiliation
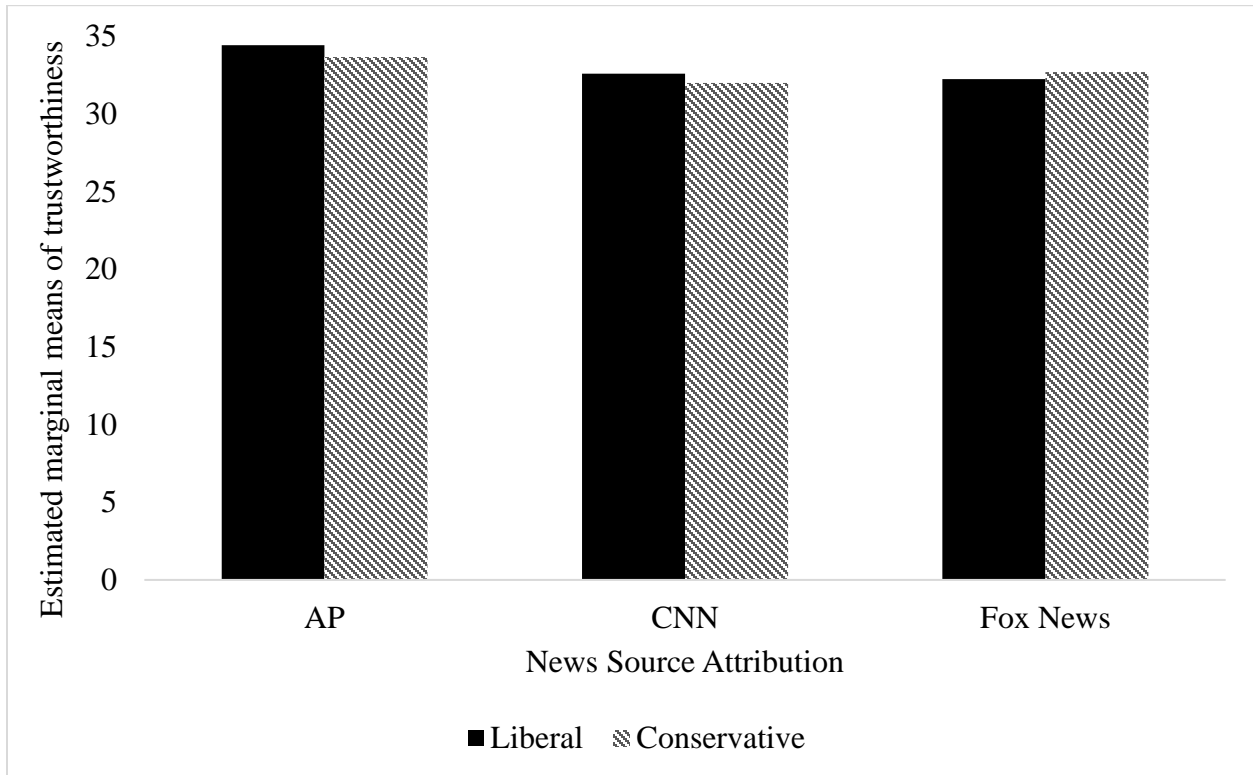
Table 1

ANOVA Results for Main Analysis

Predictor	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
(Intercept)	165346.69	1	165346.69	5315.95	.000
News Source	94.20	2	47.10	1.51	.223
Political Affiliation	3.48	1	3.48	.112	.738
News Source x Political Affiliation	11.52	2	5.76	.185	.831
Error	4634.47	149	31.10		

Exploratory Analysis

An exploratory 3 X 5 analysis was used to determine if self-reported political affiliation and the

perceived political leanings of news sources could influence how trustworthy the news source

was rated. For this test, political affiliation was based solely on responses from the

demographic's questionnaire. Forty more participants reported their political affiliation than

completed the SECS allowing us to work with a slightly larger sample, which also aided in our

decision to pursue an exploratory analysis. The results were similar to the initial ANOVA. The

interaction of rated trustworthiness between self-reported political affiliation and news source

political affiliation was not statistically significant, $F(8,175) = 1.196$, $p = .304$. There was a

statistically significant main effect for self-reported political affiliation, $F(5,175) = 3.983$, $p =$

.002. Tukey post-hoc test was used to further examine the group differences. There was a

significant difference between those who identified as Democratic ($n = 66$, $M = 34.225$, $SEM =$

.724) and Other ($n = 19$, $M = 27.762$, $SEM = 1.346$) and a difference between those who

identified as Republican (n = 62, M = 33.106, $SEM = .756$) and Other ($n = 19$, $M = 27.762$, SEM

= 1.346) such that those who identified as Republican or Democratic rated the article more

trustworthy than those who identified as Other. The main effect for news source political

affiliation, $F(5,175) = 3.983$, $p = .150$, was not statistically significant. See table 4 for frequency

distribution and means of self-reported political affiliation.

Figure 2

News Source trustworthiness by self-reported political affiliation
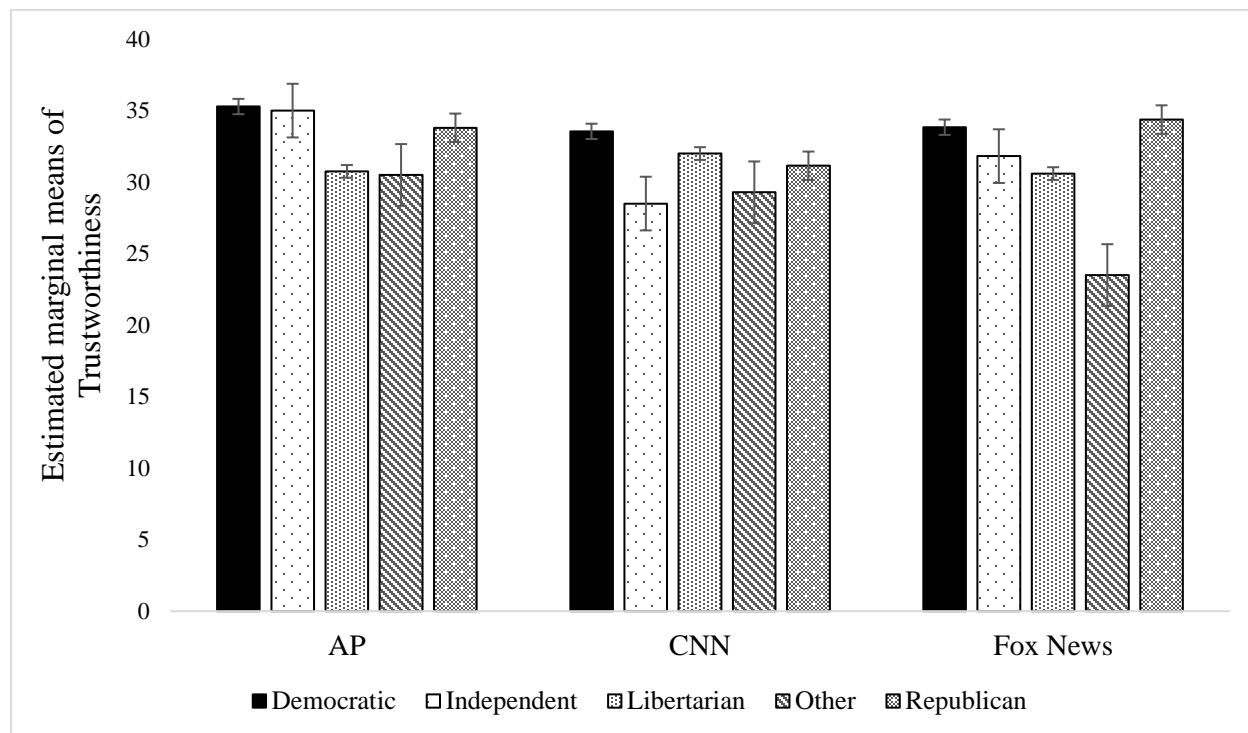
Table 2

ANOVA Results for Exploratory Analysis

Predictor	Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	*p*
(Intercept)	50840.44	15	50840.44	1484.97	.000
News Source	131.53	2	65.77	1.92	.150
Self-reported Political Affiliation	681.78	5	136.36	3.98	.002
News Source x Self-reported Political Affiliation	327.63	8	40.95	1.196	.304

Error	5991.43	175	34.23

Table 3

Comparison of self-reported political affiliation by 12-item SECS

Self-reported Political Affiliation	12-item SECS		
	Liberal	Conservative	Total
	n		*n*
Democratic	45	15	60
Republican	9	39	48
Green Party	1	0	1
Libertarian	6	5	11
Independent	14	13	27
Other	7	6	13
Total	82	78	160

Note. Participants' self-reported political affiliation was reported from the demographic's questionnaire at the end of the survey. Participants' classification as liberal or conservative was determined by their scores from the 12-item Social and Economic Conservatism Scale (Everett, 2013).

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

This study examined the influence of political affiliation and perceived news outlet political affiliation on how trustworthy they rated a news article about COVID-19. Our hypothesis was that participants would rank the article as more trustworthy if they shared the same political affiliation with the news source. The vignette was based on COVID-19 leading us to our second hypothesis that participants would be more likely to believe information about COVID-19 if their political affiliation matches the news source's political affiliation.

Upon data analysis, we noted there was not a statistically significant relationship between political affiliation and news source political affiliation on perceived article trustworthiness. The lack of statistical significance indicates that our first hypothesis was not supported by the data. Specifically, there was no difference in how conservatives and liberals rated the news article from the three sources: Associated Press, CNN, and Fox News, in terms of trustworthiness. Our findings are intriguing because they are not supported by previous literature regarding the similarity liking effect in respect to politics and news trustworthiness (Arpan and Raney, 2003; Christen et al., 2002; Chia et al., 2007; Gallup and the Knight Foundation, 2018; Gunther and Christen, 2002; Hartmann and Tanis, 2013; Reid, 2012; Vallone et al., 1985).

To test our second hypothesis, we examined the main effect for political affiliation on article trustworthiness which was also not statistically significant. This means the political affiliation of the participants did not have an effect on trustworthy ratings. From this result we can conclude that political affiliation did not impact how participants rated the COVID-19 article on trustworthiness. Conservatives and liberals gave all versions of the COVID-19 article high

ratings of trustworthiness, which was not anticipated when looking at previous studies by Pew Research Center (2020).

After looking at our primary results we then decided to do an exploratory analysis in which we replaced participant political affiliation with a different variable from the demographics questionnaire. For our main analysis, political affiliation was determined by the participants' scores on the 12-item Social and Economic Conservatism scale (Everett, 2013). For this exploratory analysis, we used participants' self-reported political affiliation from the demographic's questionnaire. Once again, there was not a significant relationship between self-reported political affiliation and news source political affiliation on news article trustworthiness. Meaning that self-reported political affiliation and the news source political affiliation did not influence the participant when rating the trustworthiness of the article. The rating of article trustworthiness for participants of each different self-reported political affiliation (Democratic, Republican, Libertarian, Independent, Other) was independent of its apparent neutral (AP), republican (Fox News), or democratic (CNN) source. However, there was a main effect for political affiliation.

The post-hoc analysis revealed that participants who identified as Democratic or Republican rated the articles as significantly more trustworthy than individuals who identified as Other. Individuals who identified as Other had the option to clarify their political beliefs. Their responses were as follows: "Whoever has my true interest," "unknown," "not sure," "none," "I vote for who I feel is doing right," "I don't know yet," "not speaking on," "N/A," "Moderate," "Leftist," and "political parties are scams." The main consensus among those who identified as Other was that they were unsure where their beliefs fell or felt as though established political parties did not align with their views. A few factors could account for the significant difference

in media trust for individuals with Other political beliefs. If our participants' identification was based on political apathy or politically based cynicism, then our results go along with the previous findings of Tsafati and Ariely (2014). Essentially, these individuals might be less trusting in general than our other participants leading to lower ratings of article trustworthiness (Tsafati & Ariely, 2014). Likewise, a study by Lee (2010) found that cynical personalities, along with assessments of the economy, predicted evaluation of government and trust in news media. However, the responses we received for Other were not homogenous; therefore, we cannot be sure that all these individuals were cynical.

Even though our study did not provide the results that we expected, there are a few explanations for its deviation from previous literature. Perry's theory of intellectual and ethical development focuses on college students and the stages they go through for intellectual development (*The Perry Scheme of Intellectual Development*, n.d.). He noted that most freshmen start in the dualism stage, meaning that information is either right or wrong and knowledge from authority figures is absolute (*The Perry Scheme of Intellectual Development*, n.d.). Most of our participants were college freshmen, ages 18 and 19, meaning that there is a good chance they could have been in this dualism stage. According to Perry's (1981) theory, articles noting information from the Center for Disease Control, an authority on diseases, could lead to overall trust in the article. Sophomores and juniors made up the second largest population of our sample. These individuals are typically transitioning out of the dualism stage and coming into the multiplism stage, meaning that they see information and knowledge on a broader spectrum and not just black and white (Tomlinson & Johnson, 2015). In this stage, individuals see others' opinions as valid on various issues (Perry, 1981). This may account for why the affiliation of the news source did not appear to impact the ratings of trustworthiness along with authority

perceived when quoting the CDC. Essentially, quoting the CDC in the article may have had a more considerable impact than the similarity liking effect.

Limitations

A combination of time constraints and participants failing the manipulation check led to a smaller sample size than calculated by G*Power (Faul et al., 2007). Our first limitation is based on the fact that 61 more participants were needed to accurately test for an interaction between political affiliation and news source political affiliation on news article trustworthiness. Our second limitation came from the age of our participants. We collected data through Georgia Southern's research website, SONA, which awards credits to students for participating in surveys. Much of our sample consisted of freshman students ages 18-19 who may be in earlier stages of intellectual development (Perry, 1981) or may not have developed strong ties to a political ingroup. Our sample had a relatively young average age (M= 19.68) compared to previous studies looking at political affiliation, credibility, and media bias, where average ages ranged from 21 to 48 (Arpan and Raney, 2003; Ash et al., 2020; Budak et al., 2014; Feldman, 2010; Hartmann and Tanis, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2018). Our participant ages ranged from 18 to 35, while previous studies ranged from college-aged to the 50's and 60's (Ash et al., 2020; Budak et al., 2014; Feldman, 2010; Hartmann and Tanis, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2018). The 12-Item Social and Economic Conservatism Scale (Everett, 2013) may have also been a limiting factor in our study. There is a possibility that some of the issues measured by the scale, such as fiscal responsibility, the family unit, and traditional family values, may not have been as applicable to our participant pool due to their young age and the rapid evolution of political parties.

A potential limitation may have been the format of our news article vignette. A poll by Head et al. (2018) found that 89% of college students used social media to check the news,

meaning that the heuristics they typically rely on may not have been at play. Social media users tend to follow bandwagon heuristics, such as the number of followers, likes, retweets of a post, and expertise heuristics, such as profiles of organizations such as the CDC or FDA when assessing the credibility of information on social media platforms (Jenkins et al., 2020).

Future Research

For future research, the use of multiple vignettes should be utilized to vary the content and increase generalizability. Ideally, varying the content (social/economic) of the vignettes along with including articles or stories that do not directly quote sources typically viewed as authority figures. The wording and content of our current vignette were politically neutral; therefore, future research should aim to vary the level of political language in vignettes to mimic real-world articles. Future research should also focus on broader age groups to explore group dynamics and intellectual and political development differences.

Conclusion

Our study did not find an interaction between political affiliation and news source political affiliation on news article trustworthiness. The study failed to demonstrate how politics and social identity theory work in combination to influence perceptions of source credibility. We did find that the self-reported political affiliation of Other rated articles across all sources as less trustworthy than Democratic and Republican participants. This provides some support for the notion that political affiliation, or lack thereof, influences news consumption and trustworthy rankings. We also found that other factors may be more salient in influencing the trustworthiness of news sources other than political affiliation. Further investigation into different populations is needed to determine the different ways that social identity theory impacts American news consumption.

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APPENDIX A

COVID-19 VIGNETTE NEWS ARTICLE

Last Wednesday, the CDC stated that the extensive use of vaccines and public-health measures, COVID-19 could be downgraded from a public threat and normalcy could make an appearance before 2022. COVID-19 is responsible for almost 40 million cases and 1 million deaths, leading businesses and officials to worry about the potential length and severity of the pandemic. In 2002, SARS, another coronavirus, infected over 8,000 people while killing 774 with its attack on the respiratory system. SARS wasn't nearly as contagious as COVID-19, meaning that it's less likely for COVID-19 to be eradicated, according to the CDC. However, through the use of vaccines and public health prevention, COVID-19 could be removed from the public-health threat category. "If you have a vaccine that is highly effective, but very few people get vaccinated you're not going to realize the full important effect of having a vaccine. The fundamental goal is to get the level of infection in the country so low that when there are little blips of infection, you can easily control them," the spokesperson for the CDC said.

APPENDIX B

SOURCE CREDIBILITY SCALE

Instructions: On the scales below, indicate your feelings about the article you previously read and the organization that it came from. Numbers 1 and 7 indicate a very strong feeling. Numbers 2 and 6 indicate a strong feeling. Numbers 3 and 5 indicate a fairly weak feeling. Number 4 indicates you are undecided.

1) Intelligent 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Unintelligent

2) Untrained 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Trained

3) Cares about me 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Doesn't care about me

4) Honest 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Dishonest

5) Has my interests at heart 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Doesn't have my interests at heart

6) Untrustworthy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Trustworthy

7) Inexpert 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Expert

8) Self-centered 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Not self-centered

9) Concerned with me 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Not concerned with me

10) Honorable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Dishonorable

11) Informed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Uninformed

12) Moral 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Immoral

13) Incompetent 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Competent

14) Unethical 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Ethical

15) Insensitive 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Sensitive

16) Bright 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Stupid

17) Phony 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Genuine

19) Not understanding 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Understanding

SCORING: To compute your scores, add your scores for each item as indicated below:

Recode BOLDED questions with the following format:

1=7

2=6

 3=5

4=4

5=3

6 = 2

7 = 1

Competence Factor (1, 2, 7, 11, 13, and 16) _____

Caring/Goodwill Factor (3, 5, 8, 9, 15, and 18) _____

Trustworthiness Factor (4, 6, 11, 12, 14, and 17) _____

APPENDIX C

12-ITEM SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONSERVATISM SCALE (SECS)

"Please indicate the extent to which you feel positive or negative towards each issue. Scores of 0 indicate greater negativity, and scores of 100 indicate greater positivity. Scores of 50 indicate that you feel neutral about the issue."

1. Abortion (reverse scored). (S)

2. Limited government. (E)

3. Military and national security. (S)

4. Religion. (S)

5. Welfare benefits (reverse scored). (E)

6. Gun ownership. (E)

7. Traditional marriage. (S)

8. Traditional values. (S)

9. Fiscal responsibility. (E)

10. Business. (E)

11. The family unit. (S)

12. Patriotism. (S)

APPENDIX D

DEMOGRAPHICS

Age:_____

Gender: Female   Male   Non-Binary /Third Gender Other: _____

Ethnicity: Asian/Pacific Islander   African American/Black   Caucasian/White

Hispanic/Latino   Middle Eastern   Native American   Other:_____

School Year: Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior   Post-Baccalaureate

Political Affiliation: Democratic   Republican   Green Party   Libertarian   Independent

Other_____

APPENDIX E

MANIPULATION CHECK

There are many news sources individuals can choose from. Please do not choose an answer

choice below and click the next button at the bottom of the page. This is so we can gauge your

attentiveness.

☐ Social Media i.e., Twitter/Snapchat
☐
☐ News from outlet websites

   News from outlet t.v. stations

APPENDIX F

Exploratory Frequency Distribution, Means, and Standard Deviations Table

Table 4

Frequency Distribution, Means, and Standard Deviations of Self-reported Political Affiliation

Self-reported Political Affiliation	*n*	%	*M*	*SD*
Democratic Party	69	34.5	34.21	5.29
Green Party	1	0.5	29.00	
Independent	32	16.5	31.88	6.67
Libertarian Party	12	6.0	30.91	5.92
Republican Party	62	31.0	33.05	5.96
Other	19	9.5	27.84	6.76
No Answer	4	2.0		
Total	199	100	32.56	6.16
Participant description of Other				
	n	*%*		
"Leftist"	1	.6		
"no opinion"	1	.6		
"not speaking on"	1	.6		
"none"	2	1.3		
"not sure"	1	.6		
"nothing"	1	.6		
"political parties are scams"	1	.6		
"unknown"	1	.6		
"Whoever has my true interest"	1	.6		
No response	149	93.1		
Total	160	100.0		

Note. Self-reported political affiliation and description of Other were gathered from the demographics survey at the end of the study.