REJOINING THE CULT:
UNDERSTANDING AND REDUCING BLATANT POLITICAL BIAS

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Abstract: Partisan bias poses serious challenges for democracies. For example, such bias leads to support for controversial laws aimed at diminishing the political power of the other party, belief in factually incorrect and/or conspiratorial information, uncivil discourse, and greater tolerance for political violence. Yet scholars rarely study the determinants of partisan bias directly, often instead treating it as a theoretical mechanism, or as moderator that can accentuate or attenuate causal effects. Further, despite individual-level bias existing in degrees, extant scholarship has yet to systematically study partisan bias in its most extreme form. In this study, we posit that such bias can be defined as support that is *unconditional*. We refer to this as "blatant bias" and contend that it represents a theoretically distinct category of partisan bias. Using nationally representative data, we first explore individual-level correlates of blatant bias. Second, we present two pre-registered survey experiments to examine whether exposure to blatant bias coming from the opposing party influences one's likelihood of voicing blatant bias in favor of their own party. In both experiments, we find that such exposure significantly lowers the likelihood of engaging in blatant bias. Our results thus indicate that partisan bias is more malleable than is often assumed. More broadly, our study suggests that polarization may foster a self-correcting injunctive norm: exposure to greater bias from the other side may motivate some citizens to avoid engaging in blatant bias when evaluating politicians in their own party.

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Partisan bias poses serious challenges to democracy. When political partisans are motivated by their desire to support party-congenial narratives (i.e., partisan-motivated reasoning or PMR), a variety of negative consequences emerge (Ditto et al. 2025). For example, the psychological tendency towards PMR can lead to the adoption of misinformed and incorrect perceptions of social and economic reality, thereby confounding democratic accountability (e.g., Bartels 2002; Bisgaard 2015). Such biases can also support troublingly negative views of the opposition (Abramowitz and McCoy 2019). Further, PMR can engender support for candidates who propose controversial and antidemocratic policies (e.g., Bartels 2018), and erode support for Constitutional provisions for democratic governance when those provisions stand in the way of party leaders (Graham and Svolik 2020; Krishnarajan 2023). PMR can even strengthen partisans' willingness to support political violence in pursuit of their political goals (Kalmoe and Mason 2022). Altogether, PMR weakens the willingness of party members to push back against actions by inparty politicians that might substantially harm the body politic.

And yet, though rarely studied as such, partisan bias exists along a spectrum of intensity. We posit that, at the most extreme end of this spectrum, bias takes the form of political support that is *unconditional*. In contrast to typical levels of partisan bias, this unconditional—or, "blatant"—bias is categorically distinct, and thus comes with a variety of consequential implications. For example, blatant bias implies that citizens' support for a leader will not diminish, regardless of the issue stances that the leader embraces. Additionally, such partisans will accept even the most egregious violations of the public trust committed by co-partisan leaders, regardless of negative consequences for the public, policy, or institutions of governance (Funck and McCabe 2022; Rothschild, Keefer, and Hauri 2021; Schönhage and Geys 2022). Thus, blatant bias is a special

form of partisan bias, carrying with it the potential to thoroughly undermine processes of accountability and power-sharing in a democracy (e.g., Levendusky and Stecula 2021).

Yet despite its importance, both the nature and consequences of blatant partisan bias remain understudied. Our study aims to address this gap in several unique ways. First, we situate blatant bias as a distinct *outcome*, rather than—as is often the case in existing literature— a theoretical *mechanism* driving downstream political behavior (e.g., Kane and Anson 2025; Pink et al. 2021), or as a moderator that is measured via indirect means (e.g., party identification strength; see Huddy, Davies, and Sandor 2020). Second, and as a result, we are able to identify both the predictors and prevalence of blatant bias among both major parties in the American public. Third, drawing upon the literature on injunctive norms, we identify a means by which this blatant bias can be meaningfully reduced.

To accomplish these aims, we first examine a variety of nationally representative survey datasets from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) collected over the past decade. We find that large shares of both Biden and Trump supporters exhibit blatant bias, with the latter group exhibiting a sharp increase in more recent years. Second, we find that while blatant bias is strongly predicted by partisan strength in both parties, other factors—most notably, education and age—do not operate in uniform ways across both parties. Third, we find that, even after taking political and demographic factors into account, blatant bias remains a strong predictor of support for political violence.

Finally, having found blatant bias to be both predictable and prevalent, we turn to two pre-registered survey experiments to examine how partisans respond to blatant bias when it is exhibited by the *opposing* party. We find that, rather than further inflaming partisan loyalties, exposure to blatant bias (as opposed to more qualified support) serves to *reduce* partisans' likelihood of

exhibiting blatant bias in favor of their *own* party's leader. We find evidence for this effect among both Democrats and Republicans, and on matters related to leaders' policy stances as well as leaders' personal conduct.

In sum, our study provides a novel examination of a particularly extreme form of political bias, while also shedding light on how it can be potentially reduced. These results support the idea that experiencing egregious bias from the "other side" may motivate citizens to avoid engaging in this behavior when evaluating politicians from their own political party. More broadly, our findings suggest that, in terms of partisan bias, polarization may possess something of a self-correcting mechanism: observing blatant political bias "on the other side" enables inparty members to determine that unconditional partisan loyalty is an unsavory practice. In all, the present study helps to advance our understanding of both the causes and the durability of unconditional support for political elites.

POLICY STANCES & PERSONAL CONDUCT THROUGH A PARTISAN LENS

The tendency for partisans to engage in motivated reasoning is explained by partisans' needs to achieve a variety of goals (e.g., Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017; Kunda 1990). One especially dominant goal is to maintain consistent loyalty to one's inparty, even when confronted with a challenge to one's own prior assumptions. For example, a partisan may change their own stance to conform with the elite's new stance on the issue (Barber and Pope 2019; Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018). This logic can also extend to scandals (Lee et al. 2023). A partisan might claim that a scandal involving a trusted partisan leader has been manufactured by the opposition, evincing a form of disconfirmation bias. Or, they may seek out information to defend their trusted leader in the face of the scandal, showcasing confirmation bias instead (Taber and Lodge 2006). When employed together, these processes can allow partisans' views to sharply deviate from objective reality.

Partisans may thus expend a great deal of cognitive effort in order to tolerate, if not openly support, elites' objectively dubious behavior (Petersen et al. 2013, but see Pennycook and Rand 2019). By responding to an inparty politician's transgressions—e.g., shifts away from preferred policy stances and/or political scandals—dismissively or incredulously, motivated reasoning allows the partisan to reduce cognitive dissonance and maintain a strong commitment to their preferred party (e.g., Festinger 1962). PMR thus stands to undermine the value of two common metrics by which citizens commonly evaluate political leaders: policy stances (e.g., Costa 2021) and personal conduct (e.g., Funk 1996; von Sikorski, Heiss, and Matthes 2020).

BIAS AS A CONTINUUM

While the PMR literature documents a clear tendency for partisans to reason in a party-congenial fashion, extant theories argue that most partisans will eventually admit to their party's wrongdoing in the presence of sufficient evidence (Redlawsk, Civettini, and Emmerson 2010). In other words, while attitudinal change may be difficult in the face of both confirmation and disconfirmation biases (and especially among politically sophisticated reasoners; e.g., Taber and Lodge 2006), some information may nevertheless wield enough influence to overwhelm partisans' desire to express fealty to the party.

Indeed, a great deal of current research seeks to improve strategies to correct partisans' biases along these lines, often finding (at least) short-term success (e.g., Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017; Mernyk et al. 2022; Vidigal and Jerit 2022). Efforts to encourage partisan understanding and correct misperceptions, for example, often yield meaningful treatment effects on political attitudes (e.g., Saveski et al. 2022; Traberg, Roozenbeek, and van der Linden 2022). Alternatively, stimuli communicating that partisan leaders have violated democratic norms and practices can weaken partisans' support for those allied politicians going forward. This may be true even if eroding

support is not immediately visible in individuals' voting behavior (Aarslew 2023). In addition, signals that an inparty politician has alienated members of one's political party has also been shown to lower inparty members' support that politician (Kane 2019).

Yet while such stimuli have been shown to exert average effects among partisans *as a whole*, the existing literature often neglects to emphasize that partisan bias exists *along a continuum*. Importantly, the existence of a continuum implies that there are likely citizens whose partisan bias is so strong that these aforementioned types of stimuli would scarcely affect their political allegiances. Indeed, such a tendency may help explain why, for example, some efforts to correct factual misperceptions struggle to demonstrate reliable effect on downstream political attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Dias et al. 2024; Druckman 2023).

Blatant Bias

We propose that bias in its most extreme form would, by definition, take the form of *unconditional* loyalty. We refer to such bias as "blatant bias." In practical terms, blatant bias amounts to a refusal, under any circumstances, to diminish one's evaluation of a political target within their party. Such unconditionality echoes recent scholarly and media discussions of political leaders with "cult-like" followings. Goldsmith and Moen (2025), for example, note that U.S. media has increasingly used a frame associating Trump followers with the word "cult" since 2016. The authors further show evidence that core supporters of Donald Trump are high scorers on the Big Five personality trait of conscientiousness, and within that trait, the facet of self-discipline. This high level of conscientiousness is often seen in studies of highly dogmatic supporters of authoritarian leaders (e.g., Duckitt 2009).

Cult membership framing has been used to describe the core supporters of other public figures in recent times. For instance, prominent anti-government figures like Elon Musk and Javier Milei have recently been described as acolytes of a "cult of disruption," promising to overhaul the public sector using aggressive tactics that might unintentionally imperil the well-being of citizens (Woolridge 2024). Even then-Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) critiqued Republican supporters of Hungary's Viktor Orbán as having "form[ed] a cult of personality around" the European leader (Martin 2024). Implicit in these claims is the idea that supporters of these leaders are uncritical—that is, that the leaders' actions have no bearing on whether they will continue to receive support from their loyal followers.

We propose that blatant bias is likely supported by a strong psychological motivation to remain consistently loyal to one's preferred party, as well as by external social pressures to openly express allegiance to one's party (e.g., Connors 2023; Franzen and Mader 2023; Suhay 2015). Much like in classic sociological accounts of cult membership, learning disconfirming news about a co-partisan can force partisans to choose between rejecting the party or raising the stakes of commitment (Festinger et al. 1956). Rejecting the party may incur a variety of social costs for partisans who have previously signaled their commitment to the party. Thus, the preferred course of action is often to "double down:" in effect, rejecting any information that appears to be aimed at subverting one's commitment to a certain politician. The partisan asserts to her peers, in essence, "There is no information that could possibly diminish my support for this inparty politician."

CHANGING BLATANT BIAS? INJUNCTIVE NORMS AND OUTPARTY CUES

A longstanding literature on partisanship highlights the strength of motivated reasoning in the face of attempts at correction (e.g., Stanley et al. 2020). Often, simply presenting partisans with disconfirming information is not enough to produce meaningful or lasting shifts in attitudes, especially because they might find ways to "explain away" the correction (Bisgaard 2015). When partisan commitments are strong, it may be challenging to reorient partisans away from an attitude of intransigence.

Thus, while this study first aims to identify both the prevalence and predictors of blatant bias, a second question quickly comes to the fore: how can it be changed? In particular, can partisans come to express more openness to information that threatens the standing of their preferred politicians?

Partisans, like all citizens, are sensitive to how their actions and statements are perceived by others (Prewitt-Freilino et al. 2012). Injunctive social norms can be defined as the beliefs one holds about how others in society expect them to behave (Gavrilets 2020). Such norms can be enforced through social pressure, rely upon social transmission to remain prevalent in the public (Mesquita and Shadmehr 2023), and pertain to a wide array of topics. For example, people may make decisions about their health based upon injunctive norms involving mask-wearing or handwashing (e.g., Wu and Huber 2021).

Importantly, injunctive norms have also been shown to influence a variety of political attitudes and behaviors (Bischof et al. 2024), including voter turnout and campaign participation (e.g., Fieldhouse, Cutts, and Bailey 2022). Muddiman et al. (2021), for example, assert a role for injunctive social norms in curbing uncivil behaviors in political campaigns. Additionally, You and

Lee (2024) argue that perceptions of the inparty's social norms can condition Americans' willingness to endorse partisan violence, among other expressions of incivility and affective polarization.[3]

To the degree that the appearance of objectivity—including *political* objectivity—is regarded as normatively good in U.S. culture (e.g., Schudson 2001), citizens should seek to avoid being regarded as blatantly biased by their peers.[4] That is, there likely exists an injunctive norm to express political objectivity and impartiality rather than unconditional allegiance to a particular leader or party (à la blatant bias). Indeed, such a norm helps to explain the "bias blind spot"—a phenomenon wherein individuals tend to perceive others as being significantly more biased than themselves (Pronin, Lin, and Ross 2002). Thus, the desire to appear unbiased represents a force that can potentially counterbalance partisans' desire to demonstrate political fealty to members of their party.

Might partisans become more conscious of this injunctive norm—and, therefore, alter their behavior—in the presence of blatant bias? As is the case with various other types of political stimuli, the *source* is likely to matter a great deal (Chong and Druckman 2011). If an inparty member demonstrates blatant bias, for example, the expression is already congenial to other inparty members' beliefs and, thus, may not even be interpreted blatant bias. Further, because partisans tend to see inparty members as morally superior, politically expert, and justified in their actions relative to members of the outparty (e.g., Rothschild et al. 2019), such behavior may be

[3] Partisans can also react to events that implicate the in- and outparty in ways that condition their support for political violence. For instance, Trump supporters became less supportive of political violence in the wake of the 2024 assassination attempt against Trump (Holliday, Lelkes, and Westwood 2024).

[4] A longstanding literature on civics education proposes that most Americans receive information and values from their primary school civic curriculum, and that this pedagogy serves to inculcate shared beliefs that support the social desirability of actions like civic participation and reciprocity (e.g., Lin 2015).

viewed as not only socially acceptable, but perhaps even as a sign of being a "good partisan" (Connors 2023).

Yet were blatant bias to be exhibited by a member of the *outparty*, we reason that the outcome stands to be quite opposite. First, an outparty member's expressed allegiance to an outparty politician should be far more recognizable as clear violation of objectivity. Second, in possessing negative stereotypes of the outparty (Myers and Hvidsten 2024), partisans likely desire to contrast their own behavior with that of outparty members. In other words, in an effort to maintain their existing stereotypes of inparty and outparty members, partisans should not only be better at recognizing violations of injunctive norms (e.g., political objectivity) when they are committed by outparty members, but also feel a motivation to behave in an *opposite* manner. The partisan may thus reflect upon their own attitudes and practices *in contrast to* those of the (blatantly biased) outparty member, ultimately concluding that exhibiting blatant bias is "bad" behavior. In short, if the expression of blatant bias is perceived as something that "members of the *other* party do," inparty members should be less willing will exhibit such behavior themselves.

We therefore theorize that outparty members can (inadvertently) make inparty members more conscious of the injunctive norm of political objectivity. In response, inparty members should be more inclined to eschew blatant bias, both because the behavior is then associated with the outparty, and because reducing one's own bias helps to maintain perceived superiority of the inparty's competencies and moral qualities over those of the outparty.

As such, we anticipate that when exposed to blatantly biased statements from the outparty that describe the actions of outparty politicians, inparty members will become less likely to express the same blatantly biased positions in service of their own party's politicians (**H1**).

DATA & METHODS

In this section, we first explore correlates of blatant bias using nationally representative survey data from the Public Religion Research Institute's (PRRI) recurring American Values Survey. We then test, experimentally, whether exposure to blatant bias in the outparty can reduce the likelihood that inparty members will exhibit blatant bias.

Study 1: Exploratory Analyses with PRRI Data

Our first set of analyses combines data from nationally representative surveys fielded by the PRRI. In multiple survey years (2017, 2019, 2020, and 2023), the PRRI featured a survey item that asked respondents to indicate how favorably they viewed Donald Trump. Respondents who indicated that they viewed Trump favorably were then asked the following question: "Which better describes your opinion: 'Donald Trump could do something to lose my support,' or 'There's almost nothing Donald Trump could do to lose my support.'" Using this item, we constructed a binary item for which any respondent who selected the latter statement was coded as 1 (blatantly biased), while any respondent who selected the former statement was coded as 0 (a supporter, but not blatantly biased). For the first three surveys (2017, 2019, and 2020), approximately one-third of Trump supporters indicated being blatantly biased. For the final survey wave available (2023), 45% of Trump supporters indicated being blatantly biased.[5]

In 2023, PRRI also asked respondents to indicate their favorability toward (then-President) Joe Biden. The same survey item measuring blatant bias was then asked, except in reference to Biden

[5] Of course, social desirability pressures likely lead some respondents to indicate that they are not blatantly biased when, in fact, they are. We thus acknowledge that these figures may represent *underestimates* of the actual level of blatant bias. That said, our key interest is less in the absolute *level* of bias and more in the factors that stand to *raise* or *lower* it.

instead of Trump (this item was not featured in previous survey years). In 2023, 39% of Biden supporters indicated being blatantly biased.

Because the same measure of blatant bias among Trump supporters was featured in multiple survey years, we combined the four datasets together for a total *n* in our analyses of nearly 3,000 Trump supporters. Our analysis of Biden supporters (again, only possible in the 2023 survey) includes 1,020 respondents.

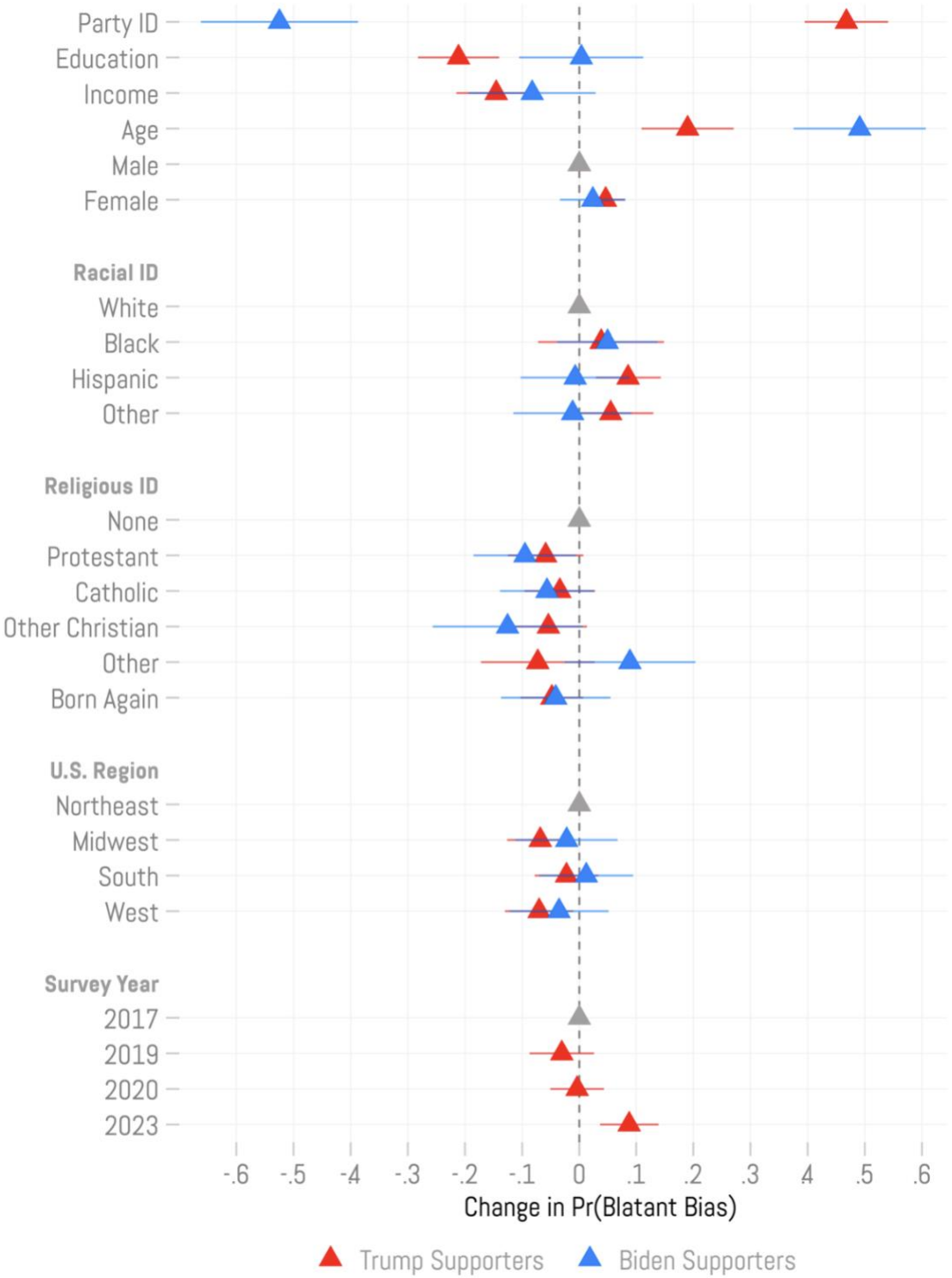
A number of socio-demographic and theoretically relevant measures were also included in all four survey years: party identification (measured on the canonical 7-point scale), educational attainment, household income, respondent's age, gender identification, racial identification, religious identification, and geographical region. Using these measures, we specified logistic regression models to predict respondents' probability of exhibiting blatant bias.[6] All predictors were recoded to range from 0 to 1 for interpretive ease. This analysis was conducted separately for Trump and Biden supporters.[7] In the case of the former, we also include a fixed effect for the survey year to account for differences between samples, as well as to analyze changes in Trump supporters' blatant bias over time.

The results of these analyses are featured in Figure 1. Beginning with Trump supporters, unsurprisingly, changing from strong Democratic identification to strong Republican identification yields the largest increase in probability of exhibiting blatant bias (47 percentage points, $p<.001$). But beyond the predicably large effect of party identification, several other patterns are worth

[6] See the Supplemental Appendix (forthcoming) for details regarding how each of these covariates was coded within each survey year.

[7] Although it is technically possible that the same individual could express support for both Trump and Biden (and thus be included in both analyses), 0 respondents in the sample expressed support for *both* politicians.

FIGURE 1. Predictors of Blatant Bias Among Trump and Biden Supporters



Notes: Estimates indicate change in probability of exhibiting blatant bias (model=logistic). Blatant bias indicates nothing target (Trump or Biden) could do would cause respondent to lower support. Baseline categories shown in gray. Blatant bias question asked for Biden only in 2023. Total N for Trump Supporters = 2,916. Total N for Biden Supporters = 1,020. Data = PRRI American Values Surveys (2017, 2019, 2020, and 2023).

highlighting. Most notably, the change from least educated Trump supporters to most educated Trump supporters yields a 21 percentage-point decrease in the probability of exhibiting blatant bias ($p<.001$). Similar to the result for education, the change from lowest to highest income predicts a 14.5 percentage-point decrease in the probability of exhibiting blatant bias. Age, on the other hand, predicts a significant increase (19 percentage points; $p<.001$). Perhaps more surprisingly, female and Hispanic identification both predict significant *increases* in the probability of exhibiting blatant bias (4.6 and 8.6 percentage points, respectively; $p<.01$ in both cases) relative to their baseline categories (male and White identification, respectively). Religious identification does not appear to strongly predict blatant bias in favor of Trump. In fact, relative to no religious identification ("None"), any type of religious identification predicts slightly *lower* probabilities (though not at the .05 level). Regionally, it appears that—relative to the Northeast—respondents from the Midwest and West are roughly 7 percentage-points *less* likely to exhibit blatant bias ($p<.05$ in both cases). Finally, the figure reveals a nearly 9 percentage-point increase in blatant bias among Trump supporters compared to 2017 ($p=.001$).

Though the sample size is substantially smaller for the analysis of Biden supporters (again, owing to this item only being asked in 2023), the results nevertheless provide two noteworthy asymmetries vis-à-vis the results for Trump supporters. First, whereas greater educational attainment predicted a substantially lower likelihood of blatant bias among Trump supporters, among Biden supporters, education has virtually no association with blatant bias ($p=.949$). Second, while age is positively associated with more blatant bias among Trump supporters, this positive relationship is dramatically larger in magnitude among Biden supporters. Going from youngest to oldest age predicts a 49.1 percentage-point increase in the probability of blatant bias

($p<.001$). The remaining demographic and regional variables do not exhibit clear patterns in terms of which Biden supporters are most likely to exhibit blatant bias.

Figure 1 thus establishes several important points. First and foremost, blatant bias appears to be a construct that is *predictable*, both by political variables that should theoretically be associated with greater bias (e.g., party identification strength), as well as by socio-demographic variables (e.g., education and age). Second, the factors associated with blatant bias among Trump vis-à-vis Biden supporters are not necessarily symmetrical (e.g., education is a strong predictor among Trump supporters, but not for Biden supporters, whereas age is a substantially stronger predictor among Biden supporters when compared to Trump supporters). Third, blatant bias is not necessarily most prevalent among groups that are commonly associated with each party's base (e.g., Rothschild et al. 2019). For example, residents of the U.S. South, Whites, and Born-Again Christians are, *ceteris paribus*, *not* the Trump supporters who are most inclined to exhibit blatant bias. Similarly, it is not the case that non-White and female Biden supporters are substantially more likely to exhibit blatant bias.

As a final exploration of the correlates of blatant bias, we also investigated whether blatantly biased supporters are (1) more willing to turnout to vote, (2) more likely to view democracy as an unimportant issue, (3) more tolerant of a leader "breaking rules," and (4) more accepting of political violence.[8] Collectively these items stand to provide a sense whether blatant bias is associated with great political mobilization and differential attitudes toward democracy and general democratic norms.

[8] The SA (forthcoming) features question wording and response options for these, as well as descriptive statistics.

The results of these analyses are featured in Figure 2. Conditioning on the same set of covariates featured in Figure 1, we do not find—for either Biden supporters or Trump supporters—that blatant bias is significantly predictive either of the first two items. This indicates that blatantly biased supporters are not necessarily more mobilized than ordinary supporters, nor that they generally prioritize democracy any less so than ordinary supporters.

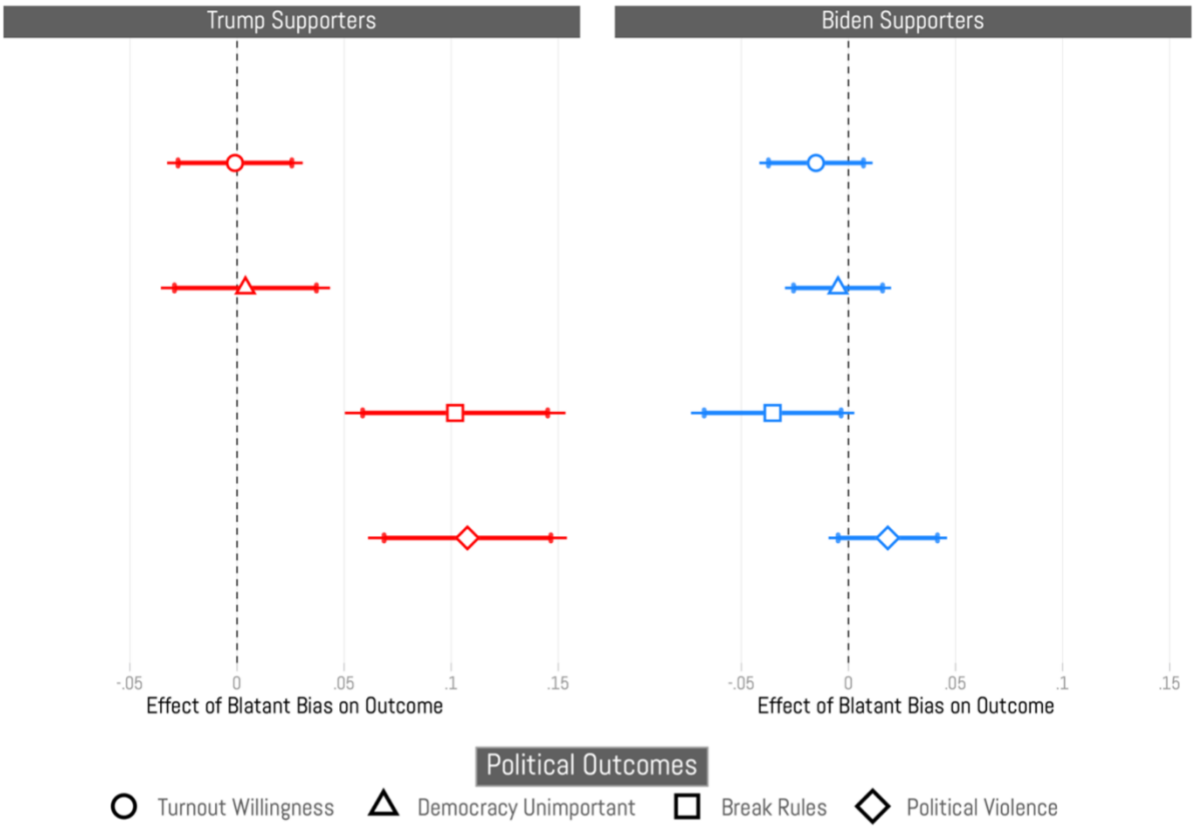
However, blatant bias appears to be far more consequential for outcomes involving political norms. Among Trump supporters, those who are blatantly biased are approximately 10 percentage points more accepting of a leader who is "willing to break some rules if that's what it takes to set things right" (p<.001). Blatantly biased Trump supporters are also approximately 11 percentage points more accepting of citizens "resort[ing] to violence in order to save our country" (p<.001) compared to Trump supporters who are not blatantly biased.[9] Importantly, party identification strength exhibits a near-zero effect in these models (p >.4 in both cases), whereas blatant bias exhibits sizeable effects on the outcome.

We do not, however, observe symmetrical patterns among Biden supporters. As shown in the right panel of Figure 2, the effects of blatant bias are negative for the *Break Rules* and *Political Violence* outcomes among this group. The effects are smaller in magnitude than those observed for Trump supporters, however, and neither is significant at the .05 level. Those who are blatantly biased in favor of Biden do not appear to differ a great deal from other Biden supporters.

In all, these exploratory analyses serve as important tests of validity. While we contend that blatant bias is a theoretically valuable construct, the results in Figure 1 confirm that blatant bias is

[9] In using the term "true American patriots," this item is arguably charged and may have more appeal to Trump supporters than Biden supporters. However, the primary contrast of interest in this analysis is blatantly biased supporters vis-à-vis ordinary supporters, not differences between the two parties as a whole.

FIGURE 2. Blatant Bias & Political Outcomes



Notes: Left panel displays Trump supporters (n=795). Right panel displays Biden supporters (n=1,002). Each x-axis displays the effect of blatant bias (coded 1 for blatantly biased supporters, and 0 otherwise) on one of the four outcomes. All outcomes recoded to range from 0 to 1. "Turnout Willingness" and "Democracy Unimportant" outcomes are logistic; "Break Rules" and "Political Violence" outcomes are OLS. Data from PRRI (2023).

also empirically predictable. Further, the results shown in Figure 2 suggest that blatant bias, particularly among Trump supporters, is potentially consequential for outcomes that are of substantial concern to both citizens and scholars (Druckman 2023b; Kalmoe and Mason 2022; Muddiman, Warner, and Schumacher-Rutherford 2021).

Study 2: Experimentally Altering Blatant Bias

What kinds of information could cause partisans to reduce their blatant bias (i.e., become more critical of their inparty politician)? While various experimental interventions have been deployed

to reduce bias in the form of processing information in a more accurate fashion (e.g., Pennycook and Rand 2022), blatant bias is *not*, fundamentally, about perceiving reality in an accurate fashion. Rather, blatant bias constitutes unconditional support for a politician; an admission that no information—irrespective of its accuracy—will affect their support for a politician.

This implies that a different kind of cue may be needed to meaningfully reduce blatant bias. We theorize that blatant bias is likely to be (1) better recognized as such, as well as (2) regarded as less palatable, when exhibited by *outparty* members (as opposed to inparty members). Therefore, per **H1** above, were partisans to observe outparty members engaging in blatant bias, they may be less likely to do so themselves.

To test this proposition, we fielded two substantively similar experiments, both of which were preregistered via OSF.[10] In December of 2023 we fielded a study via Prolific (hereafter Prolific Study) that featured quotas for age, gender, race/ethnicity, and geographical region, to ensure that the sample was nationally representative (n=1,107). Following this study, we fielded a second experiment via Lucid Theorem (hereafter Lucid Study) in March of 2024. This study also featured quotas for race/ethnicity, gender, age, and geographic region to ensure national representativeness (*n*=3,270).

Both studies measured partisanship at the start of the study (well before the experiment itself). Using this measure, respondents were randomly assigned to read a (fabricated) statement from a purported member of the outparty. Specifically, all Democrats were assigned to read a statement by a Trump voter, while all Republicans were assigned to read a statement by a Biden voter.[11]

[10] The verbatim text of each preregistration can be found in the Supplemental Appendix (forthcoming).
[11] Respondents who indicated that they "lean" toward one party were classified as partisans and included in the experiment.

The manipulation is a simple randomization into one of two conditions. Respondents were randomly assigned to read one of two statements by a purported outparty member: one indicating political support but not blatant bias ("Supporter" condition), and one statement indicating blatant bias ("Blatant Bias" condition). Because the blatant bias condition involves a substantial amount of political information, the *Supporter* condition serves as a valuable baseline: it communicates political support for a politician, but not to the same degree as in the *Blatant Bias* condition. The contrast between these two conditions, therefore, helps to isolate blatant bias from other political information that may exert an effect. Further, because both Donald Trump and Joe Biden served as president, it allows the vignette language to be virtually identical for both Democratic and Republican respondents alike. Table 1 features the exact wording used in both experiments.

Both studies also featured a third, "pure control" condition that included no statement from an outparty member. Because this condition differs from the *Supporter* and *Blatant Bias* conditions in numerous ways, it does not help to isolate blatant bias from other political content. Nevertheless, it is a potentially informative to examine levels of blatant bias absent any political information.

Following this randomization, respondents were asked three outcome questions (see Table 1). The first two items were designed to probe blatant bias more deeply than did the PRRI item featured above. When respondents are asked about "anything a [politician] could do" that could result in losing the respondent's support, respondents may consider qualitatively different kinds of actions. One important distinction is that of policy-related actions versus otherwise inappropriate behavior. As such, one item in our experiment focuses specifically on policy-related actions, while the second item focuses on "corruption or…other inappropriate behaviors while in office." For both items, respondents were asked if there were any such actions that Joe Biden (if the respondent is a Democrat) or Donald Trump (if the respondent is a Republican) "could engage in that

TABLE 1. Experimental Vignettes & Outcome Measures (Prolific & Lucid Studies)

Experimental Text	
Supporter Condition	*Earlier this year, voters across America were interviewed by the nonpartisan American Politics Research Organization (APRO). The APRO has published some of the statements made by ordinary Americans in their interviews. Below is one statement from a supporter of [outparty president]:* "I voted for *[outparty president]* in the last election. I follow news about him pretty regularly and generally pay attention to what he says and does. Personally, I think he has helped people. He did some good things during his presidency, even if it wasn't perfect. I haven't made up my mind yet, but I am leaning toward voting for him again in the next election."
Blatant Bias Condition	[Same introductory text as in Supporter Condition] "I voted for *[outparty president]* in the last election and will support him no matter what he says or what he does. Whenever I hear something bad about him, I just don't believe it. He has helped people more than any other president ever will. Everything he did during his presidency was perfect and should not be criticized. He has my vote in the next election no matter what!"
Pure Control	[*No information provided; proceed to outcome measures*]
Outcome Measures	
Policy Bias	*Politicians sometimes change positions on policies, taking a position we do not agree with.* *When thinking about [inparty president], is there any policy position Joe Biden could take that would cause him to lose your vote?* (0="Yes, there is a policy position he could take that would cause him to lose my vote"; 1= "No, there is no policy position he could take that would cause him to lose my vote")
Behavior Bias	*Politicians also sometimes engage in corruption or in other inappropriate behaviors while in office.* *When thinking about [inparty president], is there any corrupt or inappropriate behavior that Joe Biden could engage in that would cause him to lose your vote?* (0="Yes, there is a behavior that would cause him to lose my vote"; 1= "No, there is no behavior that would cause him to lose my vote")
Voluntary Criticism	*Would you be willing to tell us something that, personally, you don't really like about Joe Biden? If so, please write it in the space below. If not, please type "NO" in the space below.* (0=No answer; 1=Wrote a criticism)

Notes: Table features all experimental conditions, vignette and outcome wording.

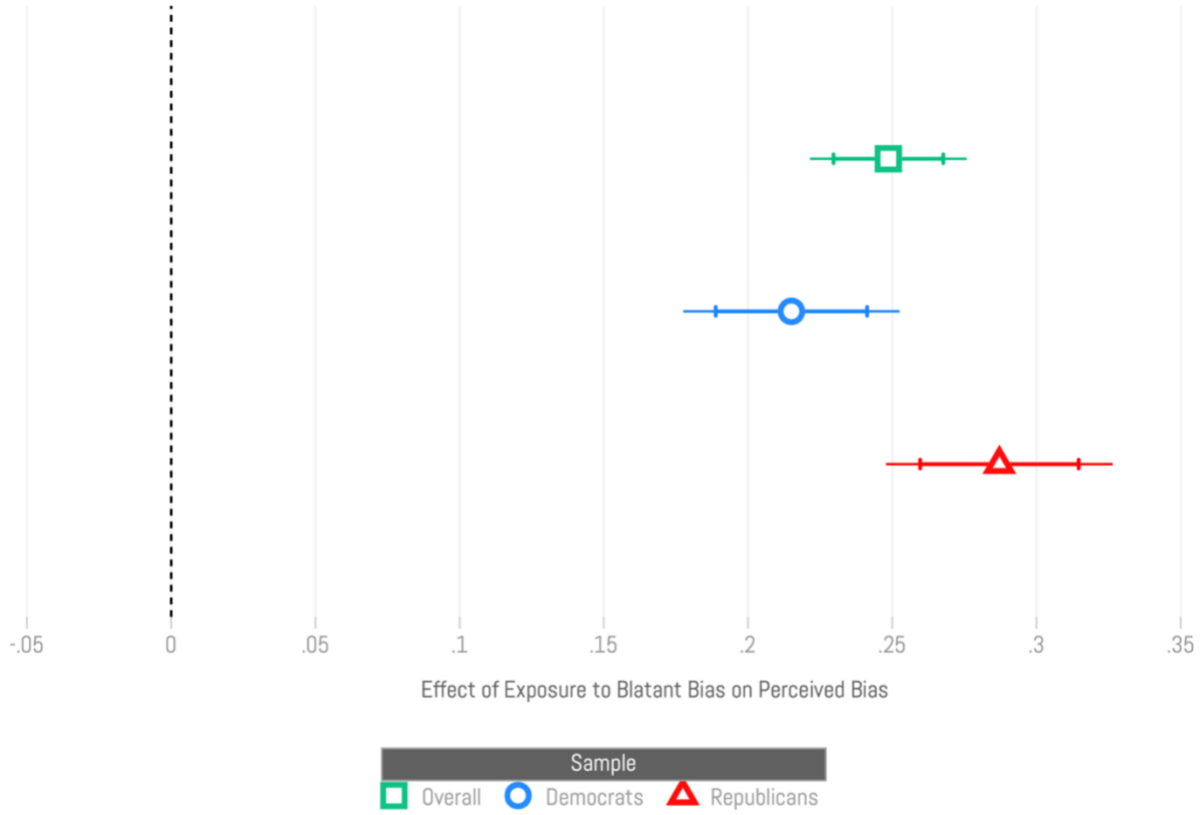
would cause him to lose your vote." As with the PRRI measure above, respondents could choose one of two outcomes. Respondents who indicated "No" were assigned a 1 (blatant bias), while respondents who indicated "Yes" were assigned a 0 (not blatantly biased).

Lastly, respondents were asked if they would be willing to provide an open-ended response to communicate "something [they] really don't like" about the politician in question. Though a more difficult test because it asks respondents to voluntarily offer a response, it nevertheless represents a reasonable extension of **H1**: if the manipulation serves to reduce blatant bias, it may also make respondents more willing to voluntarily state something negative about their preferred party's leader.

Results

The primary aim of the experiment is to manipulate the level of perceived bias of the target featured in the vignette. To confirm that this manipulation was successful, we asked respondents in the Lucid study to indicate how biased they perceived the target to be (1= "Not biased at all"; 5= "Extremely biased"). Figure 3 displays the effect of going from the *Supporter* condition to the *Blatant Bias* condition on this outcome (recoded to range from 0 to 1). As intended, this manipulation greatly increases the perceived level of bias. For the sample as a whole (i.e., all partisans), this effect amounts to approximately 25 percentage points (pp) (p<.001), or 43%. Though the effect is significantly larger for Republican respondents (29 percentage points) vis-à-vis Democratic respondents (22 percentage points; p<.01), Figure 3 confirms that respondents recognized unconditional support for a politician as being far more biased than the statements that were shown in the *Supporter* condition. We also conducted a factual manipulation check (Kane and Barabas 2019) and confirmed that partisans were far more likely to report the outparty

FIGURE 3. Manipulation Check (Lucid Study)



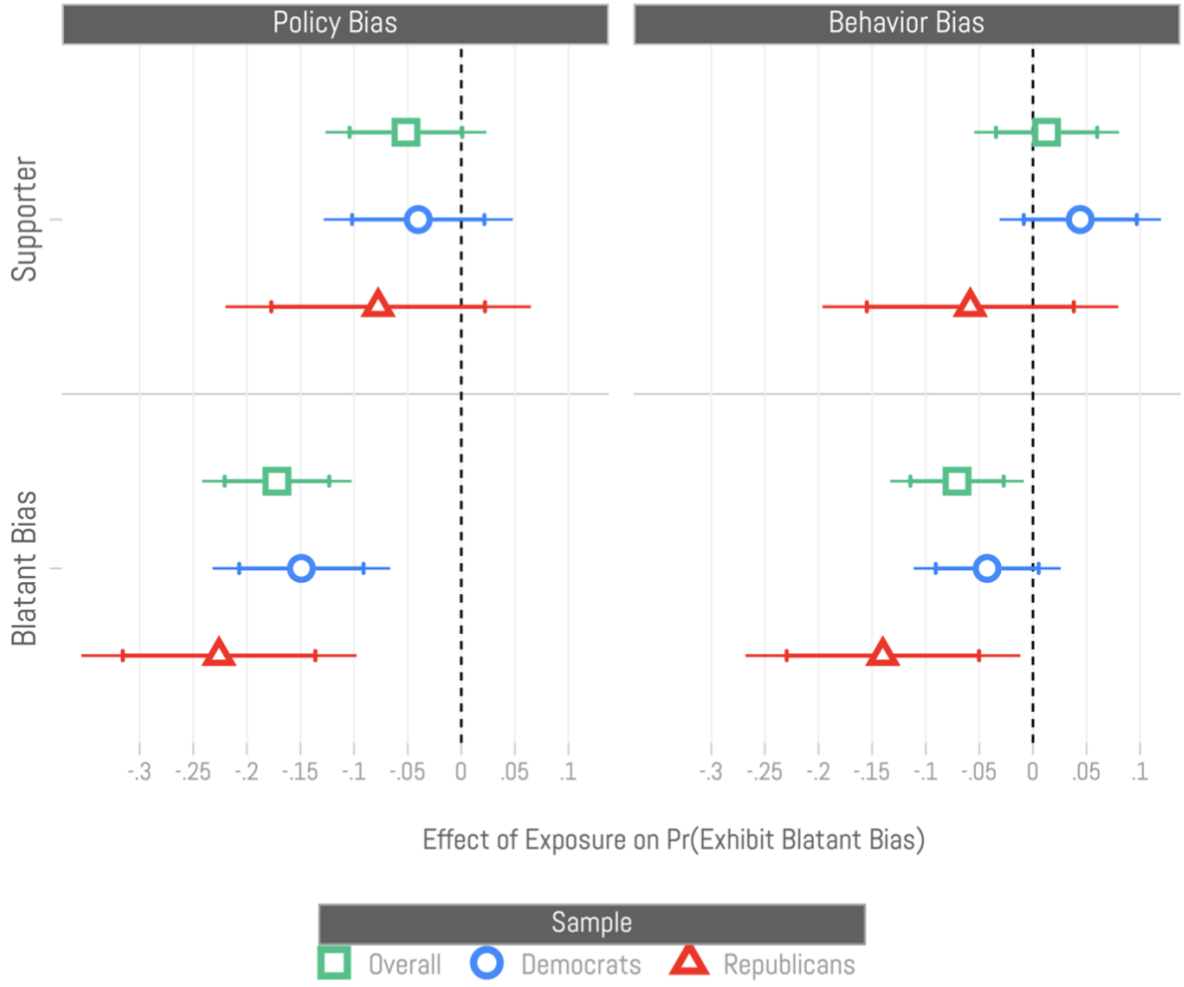
Notes: Outcome is perceived bias of target shown in experiment, measured on a five-point scale (1=Not biased at all; 5=Extremely biased) that was subsequently recoded to range from 0 to 1. The "Supporter" condition serves as the baseline. The figure shows OLS coefficients with 83% and 95% confidence intervals. Total n=1,813 (965 Democrats and 848 Republicans). Data = Lucid.

politician was mentioned in the vignette vis-à-vis the inparty (or other) politician (approximately 87% of respondents answered this item correctly).[12]

We now turn to the main results of the experiments. Beginning with the Prolific Study, we observe in Figure 4 that, consistent with **H1**, the *Blatant Bias* treatment overall tended to significantly reduce respondents' own blatant bias—both compared to the *Supporter* condition

[12] See Supplemental Appendix (forthcoming) for complete results.

FIGURE 4. Experimentally Changing Blatant Bias (Prolific Study)



Notes: Panels on the left feature the Policy Bias outcome, while panels on the right feature the Behavior bias outcome (1 (0) indicates respondent does (does not) exhibit blatant bias). The effect of the "Supporter" (Blatant Bias) condition is shown in the top (bottom) row. All estimates feature the "Pure Control" group as the baseline. The *x*-axes indicate the change in probability of exhibiting blatant bias. Underlying models are logistic regression (one model for all partisans, one for Democrats only, and one for Republicans only). CIs are 83% and 95%. Total *n*=908 (641 Democrats and 267 Republicans). Data = Prolific.

(shown in the top panels) and compared to the pure control group (represented by the vertical dashed line in each panel).

Compared to the *Supporter* condition, the *Blatant Bias* condition significantly lowered the probability of exhibiting Policy Bias for the overall sample as well as for each partisan group. For

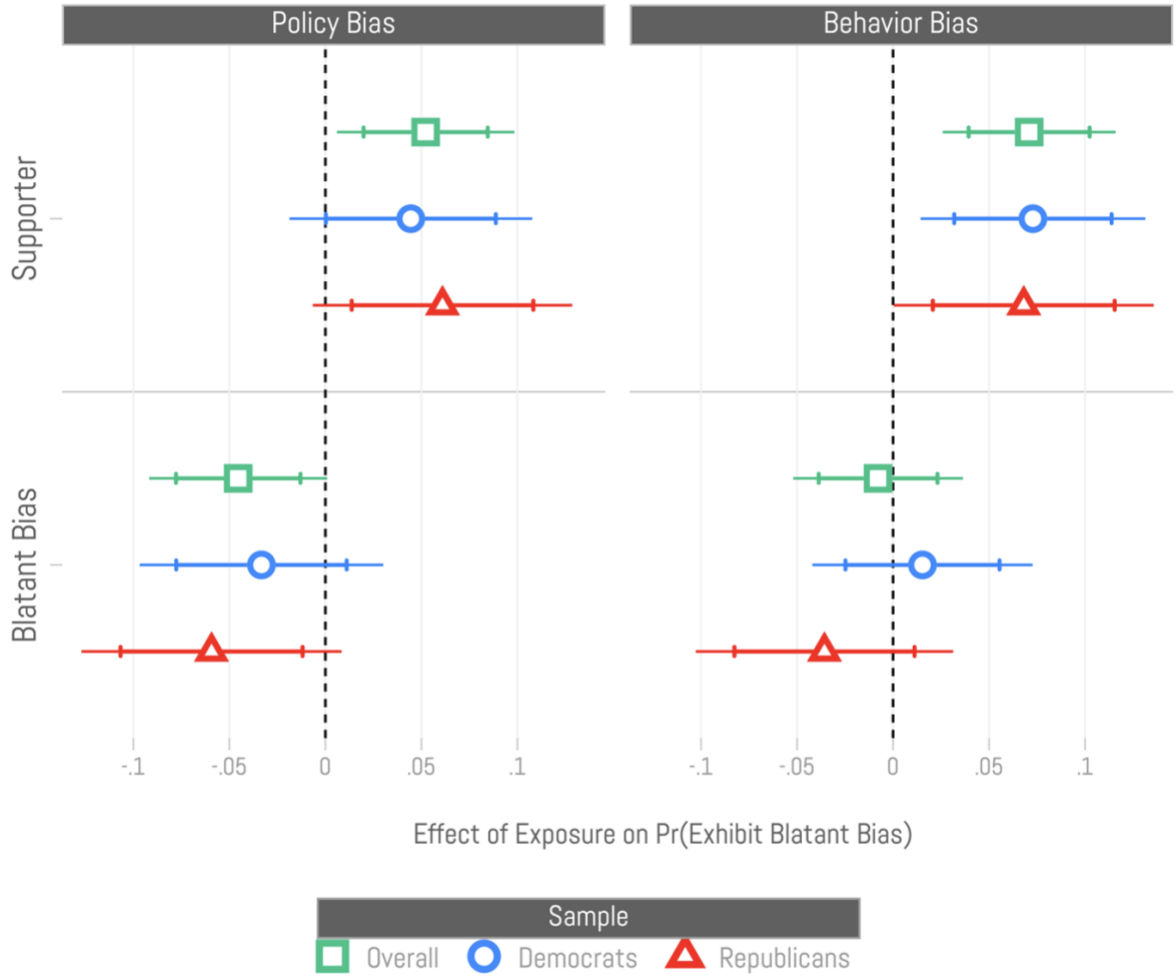
the overall sample, we observe a 12 pp decrease (p=.001), with Democrats exhibiting an 11 pp decrease (p=.01) and Republicans exhibiting a 15 pp decrease (p=.03). Further, we observe even larger effects on the Policy Bias outcome when comparing the *Blatant Bias* condition to the pure control group (represented by the vertical dashed line).

Very similar patterns are observed for the Behavior Bias outcome, though the effects tend to be slightly smaller in magnitude. Comparing the *Blatant Bias* condition against the *Supporter* conditions, we observe an 8.4 pp decrease in the probability of exhibiting blatant bias (p=.01). Similarly sized effects were found for each partisan group, though given the relatively smaller size of the Republican sub-sample (n=266), the effect among Republicans was not statistically significant. When comparing the Blatant Bias condition against the pure control, however, we observe a significant effect for the overall sample (a 7 pp decrease, p<.05)) and for Republicans (a 14 pp decrease, p=<.05), though not for Democrats (a 4.3 pp decrease, p=.22)).

Finally, for the sample as a whole, as well as for each partisan group, the *Supporter* condition (relative to the pure control) did not significantly change partisans' likelihood of exhibiting either kind of blatant bias (Policy Bias nor Behavior Bias).

Figure 5 presents the results for the Lucid Study. Similar to the Prolific Study, we consistently observe that the *Blatant Bias* condition lowered partisans' blatant bias relative to the *Supporter* condition. The effect on Policy Bias for partisans overall is nearly 10 pp (p<.001) and is also significant for both Democrats and Republicans (though Republicans exhibit a slightly larger effect). The effect on the Behavior Bias outcome for partisans overall is nearly an 8 pp decrease (p=.001), with Democrats and Republicans again each exhibiting negative treatment effects. Lastly, while the pure control group does not allow us to isolate blatant bias from other factors, we

FIGURE 5: Experimentally Changing Exhibition of Blatant Bias (Lucid Study)



Notes: Panels on the left feature the Policy Bias outcome, while panels on the right feature the Behavior bias outcome (1 (0) indicates respondent does (does not) exhibit blatant bias). The effect of the "Supporter" (Blatant Bias) condition is shown in the top (bottom) row. All estimates feature the "Pure Control" group as the baseline. The *x*-axes indicate the change in probability of exhibiting blatant bias. Underlying models are logistic regression (one model for all partisans, one for Democrats only, and one for Republicans only). CIs are 83% and 95%. Total n=2,696 (1,438 Democrats and 1,258 Republicans). Data = Lucid.

nevertheless continue to see a negative and significant treatment effect on the Policy Bias outcome relative to this condition (-4.5 pp, p=.03), though not for the Behavior Bias outcome.

Given concerns with data quality in Lucid samples (Stagnaro et al. 2024), we followed the strategy proposed by Kane, Velez and Barabas (2023), and tested whether the effects of the *Blatant*

Bias condition (versus the *Supporter* condition) are stronger among those who performed better on a pretreatment measure of attentiveness. Providing even more support for **H1**, we find that this effect grows substantially more negative among more attentive respondents (see [forthcoming] Appendix for details). For example, for the Policy Bias and Behavior Bias outcomes, we estimate the effect among the most attentive to be a 14.3 and 10.5 pp decrease in the probability of exhibiting blatant bias, respectively.

Finally, we did not observe any significant effects on the open-ended outcome (see full results in the Supplemental Appendix (forthcoming)). However, we also find that respondents with stronger partisanship and ideological self-placement scores were either no less likely (Prolific Study) or significantly *more* likely (Lucid Study) to provide an open-ended criticism of their inparty politician compared to those with weaker partisanship and more moderate ideological self-placement. Given these patterns, willingness to offer a single criticism via survey may not serve an ideal indicator of bias.[13]

Summary of Experimental Results

Though we find a slight tendency for the effects to be stronger for the policy-related (rather than behavior-related) form of blatant bias, the overall pattern of results clearly indicates that, compared to exposure to political support, exposure to blatant bias consistently reduced blatant bias toward one's own party (**H1**). The effects were similar for both partisan groups, indicating that one party is not necessarily more resistant to reducing blatant bias than the other. Interestingly, because a pure control group was also included, the results suggest that exposure to mere political

[13] In addition, it may be that our experimental treatment reduced the most egregious form of partisan bias, but not to the point that respondents were willing to expend effort toward constructing and communicating a criticism of their preferred politician.

support for an outparty politician either had no significant effect (Prolific Study) or served to *increase* blatant bias in favor of one's inparty politician (Lucid Study). Exposure to blatant bias, on the other hand, tended to have the opposite effect: in every case, relative to the pure control group, the estimated effect of the *Blatant Bias* treatment for the overall sample indicates a *reduction* in blatant bias toward one's preferred politician.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Theories of partisan-motivated reasoning (PMR) assert that partisan motivations are balanced by a psychological need for accuracy that can serve to constrain bias (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014). Yet injunctive social norms, or a person's beliefs about what others expect them to do, might also constrain the degree to which partisans exhibit bias. To investigate this possibility, it is necessary to both define and measure partisan bias directly.

We propose that partisan bias in its most severe form can be defined as *unconditional* support for a particular politician or party. We contend that, though this "blatant bias" represents a theoretically valuable construct, our understanding of its nature and consequences remains limited. Whereas social scientists have commonly treated partisan bias as an unmeasured mechanism or an indirectly-measured moderator, our study sought to measure it directly and in its most extreme form. Using nationally representative cross-sectional data, we consistently find that blatant bias is empirically predictable, and that is, in some cases, is associated with consequential political outcomes (e.g., support for democratic rule-breaking and political violence). Further, we uncover important asymmetries between the parties in terms of the factors that are associated with blatant bias (e.g., higher education predicts lower blatant bias among Republicans but is unrelated to blatant bias among Democrats). We also find evidence that blatant bias has significantly increased in recent years among supporters of Donald Trump.

Our experiments, in turn, investigate whether blatant bias can be reduced with a particular type of cue—namely, exposure to blatant bias *occurring in the outparty*. When exposed to this behavior, partisans tend to be substantially *less* likely to exhibit blatant bias in favor of their own party's politician. An important implication of the experimental results is that, while blatantly biased partisans might be insensitive to any negative information about their preferred candidate (again, because the support is unconditional upon the politician's actions), this does not mean that these partisans cannot become less biased. By associating blatant bias with the *outparty*, we theorize that this enables partisans to better recognize blatant bias and, as a consequence, exhibit less blatant bias themselves. We theorize that this could occur because (1) partisans become more aware that blatant bias is "wrong", and/or (2) partisans wish to differentiate themselves from outgroup members, and behaving in a less biased fashion represents one means of doing so.

Our paper thus contributes to the growing literatures on partisanship and partisan bias by both (1) identifying a uniquely extreme form of bias, and (2) demonstrating that it can be influenced by social cues involving injunctive norms. Further, because we were able to analyze the phenomenon of blatant bias within each party separately, our results contribute to the growing interest in party asymmetries—or lack thereof—in partisan bias (Ditto et al. 2019).

Of course there likely exist other cues that stand to reduce blatant bias. Cues from *inparty* members to behave in a more objective fashion, for example, may be more trusted and, thus, have larger effects than cues from other sources (e.g., Pink et al. 2021; Zaller 1992). Future research should investigate such possibilities, though we do note that such cues are, in the real world, likely to be less commonplace than the type of cue featured in the present study.

Lastly, though we focus on unconditional support for an inparty politician, blatant bias could also be studied in the form of *unconditional opposition* to the outparty. Given the increasing

interest in negative partisanship (Abramowitz and Webster 2016), this outparty form of blatant bias also represents an important construct to understand. Thus, future research should examine whether the factors that predict outparty blatant bias are similar to those that predict the inparty form of blatant bias that we study here.

In conclusion, our study finds that blatant bias is both predictable and malleable. It also appears to be an increasingly common stance among American partisans. In a broad sense, however our study implies a caveat: Partisan bias may contain something of a self-correcting mechanism. That is to say, the more that partisans observe blatant bias occurring on the *other side*, the less willing they may be to engage in it themselves.

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