

“THEY SAW AN ARREST”: SITUATION DEFINITION, POLARIZATION, AND AFFECT CONTROL THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Political affiliation impacts how people understand and describe events, but it is unclear where in the event understanding process these differences originate. Using the framework of affect control theory, the authors test for political differences in three places relevant to event understanding: labeling, fundamental sentiments about labels, and transient impressions about actors and behaviors in events.

Methodology/Approach: To test for political differences in fundamental sentiments, the authors survey Democrats and Republicans about their views of a set of social identities and behaviors. To test for political differences in labeling and transient impressions, and how such differences may vary across events, the authors show a separate sample of participants animated videos of a police officer interacting with a civilian portrayed as either a lost child (nonpolitical condition) or an immigrant (political condition). The authors ask them to label and rate the affective meanings of the characters and their behaviors.

Findings: The authors find limited political differences in fundamental affective meanings of political actors. In the political but not the nonpolitical condition, the authors find substantial political differences in situation labeling and differences in transient impressions on the evaluation dimension.

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Research Limitations/Implications: *The authors cannot determine what precisely about the authors’ two events led to differences in the effects of political affiliation on labeling and transient sentiments. In addition, the authors only measured fundamental meanings on a relatively small set of terms.*

Originality/Value of the Paper: *Research in affect control theory has rarely considered partisan differences in meanings or processes of situation definition.*

Keywords: Affect control theory; situation definition; social psychology; political polarization; cultural meaning

INTRODUCTION

Political polarization is a phenomenon of enduring concern in the United States, with ramifications for conflict and the health of democracy (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; McCoy et al., 2018). In this piece, we focus on one particular site of polarization, which leads opposing partisans to interpret events they see in different ways. Partisan affiliations, and their accompanying identities and group loyalties, lead people to perceive the things copartisans do as less problematic. For example, partisans consider “dirty political tricks” like stealing yard signs and providing deceptive information about voting less serious and more justified when perpetrated by members of their own party than the opposite party (Claassen & Ensley, 2016). Partisans shown a video of a protest were less likely to say they saw protestors engage in illegal activity when told the protest was consistent with their political beliefs (Kahan et al., 2012). Such patterned biases in event understandings and reactions have the potential to deepen partisan rifts by reinforcing and perpetuating partisan narratives about how the social world works.

While previous work has shown that people can come to strikingly different interpretations of the same events (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954), and that partisan affiliation can pattern such differences (Collett & Pierce, 2023; Seron et al., 2004), it is less clear at what part of the event definition process partisan affiliations affect judgments. Do partisans define situations differently by assigning different labels to their components, as the subtitle of Claassen and Ensley’s (2016) piece – “Mine is a Likeable Rogue, Yours is a Degenerate Criminal” – would suggest? Or do partisans define situations in the same ways, but draw on different repertoires of cultural meanings that give the same actor and behavior labels different connotations?

We explore these questions, and the extent to which their answers depend on the nature of the event in question, with a series of two studies: first, a survey in which we asked respondents to rate their affective impressions of political and nonpolitical actors and behaviors, and second, a survey experiment in which we asked respondents to label and provide affective impressions of characters and their behaviors in a short video. Our results suggest that differences in understandings of political events between Democrats and Republicans exist primarily on the evaluation dimension and stem primarily from differences in how they label political actors. Outside of specific, political event contexts, we find remarkably consistency in the affective meanings partisans hold for terms, with party differences limited to perceptions of how good or bad a small number of strongly politicized terms are.

SITUATION DEFINITION

Much of social life consists of observing and participating in interactions with others. How these interactions proceed and are perceived is structured by the labels – and associated affective meanings – that we apply to the people involved and the behaviors they are engaging in. The story of *Robin Hood stealing from the rich to give to the poor* takes an entirely different meaning when framed as that of a *criminal robbing citizens to reward his friends*. The alternate frame shifts a reader's affective understandings of the actor, from an admirable person whose actions are justified and righteous to an amoral one whose actions are reprehensible.

Before people can come to these kinds of affective judgments, or decide how to respond, the situation must be defined, meaning that participants and the things they are doing must be categorized, or labeled (Berger et al., 1977, pp. 12–15; Heise, 1979, p. 3). Labeling decisions can come from a variety of sources and be informed by a variety of kinds of information. Often labels are provided by other people, such as when someone reads about an event in the news or hears about it from a friend (Hunzaker, 2016; Jacobs & Quinn, 2022). Such events must be labeled in order to be communicated through language. When someone witnesses an event themselves, they may label the participants and their actions by drawing on visual cues (Mondada, 2020), settings (Heider, 1958; Smith-Lovin, 1987b), and expected relationships to other actors, behaviors, and institutions (Heise, 2019; Joseph & Morgan, 2022; Sacks, 1972) based on cultural schemas (Hunzaker, 2014).

Political identities may affect these labeling processes through their associations with schemas. Political parties and partisans frequently engage in discursive framing work to define which people are “good” and “bad”, “deserving” and “undeserving” (Matthes, 2012). These frames may become internalized as schemas that can affect individuals' perceptions, opinions, and behavior (Lizardo, 2017, 2021; Wood et al., 2018). Democrats and Republicans have, in some instances, differing schemas (Martin & Desmond, 2010; Valentino & Warren, 2024), a possible consequence of these framing processes. Schemas affect actions and behavior through automatic cognition (Miles et al., 2019; Vaisey, 2009), meaning it is plausible such schema differences could lead people, largely unconsciously, to make different decisions about which labels apply. For example, Hunzaker and Valentino (2019) find that Democrats and Republicans have different schemas for “poverty,” leading them to see the typical “poor person” differently. It is possible, then, they may also make different decisions regarding who to refer to as “poor,” and that these different labeling decisions may lead to differences in downstream event understandings.

THE AFFECTIVE ASSOCIATIONS OF LABELS: AFFECT CONTROL THEORY

Labels are central to social cognition because they are resources (Sacks, 1972). They make available additional information in the form of meanings associated

to categories (Hannan et al., 2019). These generalized category meanings help people make sense of what is occurring in a specific event and affect how they come to specific judgments of the people and behaviors they are observing (Rogers, 2018). Once a situation has been defined, the relevant labels bring its participants and observers new information that can be used to make judgments about what is happening.

Here, we focus on the *affective* connotations of social labels. We do so through the framework of affect control theory, a computational social psychological theory of affect in interaction (Heise, 2007; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2018). In foundational work, Osgood et al. (1969, 1957, 1975) identified three dimensions that, across cultures, structure affective understandings. They are *Evaluation*, or how good or bad something is, *Potency*, or how powerful or weak it is, and *Activity*, or active or inactive it is. **Together, these three dimensions are referred to with the abbreviation EPA.** These three dimensions form a three-dimensional space (*EPA space*) that all social identities and behaviors can be placed within. For example, grandmothers are typically viewed as quite good, slightly powerful, and slightly inactive, while grandchildren are typically viewed as quite good, slightly powerless, and quite active.

Affective meanings are related to important social outcomes, like performance expectations (Dippong & Kalkhoff, 2015), occupational prestige orders (Freeland & Hoey, 2018; Maloney, 2020), and health outcomes (Combs, Freeland, et al., 2023). They predict behavior in the context of interactions (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 1992), telling us what is expected and unexpected (Heise & Mackinnon, 1988; Rogers, 2021). Because someone labeled as a *grandmother* ought to be somewhat quiet and inactive and not very powerful, it would be surprising to see her *rallying protesters* – a powerful, active behavior. If she were instead labeled as an *activist*, a more powerful and active identity, this same behavior would be much less surprising. In this way, labeling decisions make available associated affective meanings that change subsequent interpretations of events. The initial, out-of-context affective connotations applied to identities and behaviors are known within affect control theory as *fundamental sentiments*. Events, like *grandmother rallies protesters*, change those meanings in a temporary way – the grandmother will likely be seen as more active and powerful than a typical grandmother, because she engaged in an active and powerful behavior. These temporary meanings that apply within particular situational contexts are referred to as *transient impressions*. Affect control theorists have estimated equations that reliably predict transient impressions of events given the affective meanings of the event’s actor, behavior, and object (Morgan et al., 2016; Rogers, 2018; Smith-Lovin, 1987a).

CONSENSUS IN MEANINGS AND OPINIONS

Two people may label an event in the same way and yet still come to different understandings of it if they hold different affective meanings for those labels. Affect control theorists have not yet investigated whether there are systematic partisan differences in fundamental meanings that might lead to such

disagreement between people of different parties. However, expectations might be derived from literatures on the general prevalence of consensus and dissensus in culture, cultural meanings, and political opinion.

Affect control theory rests on the symbolic interactionist tenet that culture, in the form of the symbolic meanings communicated through language, is shared (Heise, 2010; Mead, 1934). Shared cultural meanings are required for smooth interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Empirical work on affective meaning has largely supported the assumption of shared meanings within cultures, albeit with some patterned variation along sociodemographic lines like class and region (Ambrasat et al., 2014; Ambrasat & von Scheve, 2021; Dametto et al., 2023; Romney et al., 1986). There is also evidence of broad consistency within cultures in impression formation processes, which determine how people use fundamental sentiments of the elements of an event to come to transient impressions (Rogers, 2018). Between cultures, these impression formation processes show more variation (Kriegel et al., 2017; Smith-Lovin, 1987a).

Some polarization researchers, too, argue for cultural consensus. Though elite polarization has increased over the past several decades (Hetherington, 2009; McCarty et al., 2006; Shor & McCarty, 2022), as have lay perceptions of polarization (Enders & Armaly, 2019), the story among the mass public is more complex. While increasing elite polarization has allowed people to better sort themselves by their political beliefs, most Americans are disinterested in politics and hold collections of political views that are relatively incoherent, relatively unpolarized and have not changed much over time (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008; Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). Some data on issue opinions show not widespread differences organized by partisanship, but rather general consensus, with polarization limited to a small handful of “take-off” issues with heightened political salience (DiMaggio et al., 1996; Evans, 2003; Fiorina et al., 2005).

If partisanship operates similarly to other sociocultural traits that distinguish people within cultures, then we, like most other researchers who have investigated consensus in affective meanings, may expect to find only limited, minor partisan differences in the fundamental sentiments about categories, with the possible exception of particularly politically salient concepts.

DISSENSUS IN MEANINGS AND OPINIONS

Other work within the sociology of culture has put greater emphasis on variability. Some have argued that while people may know, for the most part, what the cultural consensus is – in other words, they may share public codes – their own sociocultural location may affect how they interpret and deploy that knowledge (Cerulo, 2018; Swidler, 2001). Others have argued that there is simply too much culture for any single person to know, and so instead we all acquire somewhat different “tool kits” (Swidler, 1986) – or, perhaps, “junkyards” (Martin, 2010) – to draw from in particular situations. With respect to affective meanings, Rogers argues that finding variability is a matter of looking in the right places – that as “the natural byproduct of individuals’ social location [...] cultural

variegation is not the exception, it is the rule” (Rogers, 2019, p. 222). In a sample of students from two US universities differing on racial and socioeconomic composition, she finds differences in affective meanings similar in magnitude to differences between cultures. These differences are patterned by race, parental education and marital status, and disruption versus stability in attachment (Rogers, 2019).

In contrast to those arguing polarization is limited to specific domains, other polarization researchers have found evidence of substantial, broad based and increasing polarization among a wide swath of Americans (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; DellaPosta, 2020). Many of these authors highlight the role of affect and affective polarization, finding Americans increasingly dislike and distrust political outgroups (Iyengar et al., 2019). Because they allow people to define ingroups and outgroups, political identities play a key role in affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2018; McCoy et al., 2018). In order to combat this polarization, a growing literature investigates ways to disconnect partisan labels from affective judgments (Combs, Tierney, et al., 2023; Hartman et al., 2022).

A third group of polarization researchers has worked to bridge the divide between those arguing polarization is limited and those arguing it is widespread, arguing that whether and to what extent you find polarization depends on what you are looking for and where you look for it (Baldassari & Bearman, 2007). Polarization is not occurring evenly among the public, but rather occurs to a larger extent among partisans and the politically engaged. Partisans who are politically engaged respond more to elite polarization than do people who are politically disengaged (Moral & Best, 2023). They have also become more ideologically consistent, have diverged more from opposing partisans, and dislike opposing partisans more than the public at large (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008; Lelkes, 2016). Such results underscore the importance of political identities in polarization processes (Mason, 2015).

Taken together, this work suggests less consensus in meanings in general, and a potentially larger role for partisanship in structuring cultural knowledge. It also highlights the importance of partisanship as an identity and of ingroup–outgroup dynamics in the determination of affect.

POLARIZATION EFFECTS IN LABELING PROCESSES

Based on these literatures, we identify three places where partisanship could impact event perceptions and understandings. First, Republicans and Democrats may hold different *fundamental sentiments* for identities and behaviors outside of event contexts, which may impact how those identities and behaviors are understood within events. Therefore, we ask:

RQ1: Are there partisan differences in fundamental sentiments of social identities and behaviors?

Second, Republicans and Democrats may choose different *labels* for the people and behaviors that make up events. Most work in affect control theory takes labels as given and studies their downstream consequences (e.g., [Fields & Huft, 2024](#); [Restrepo Ochoa, 2022](#)). Just a few studies consider how labels get applied to events in the first place ([Collett & Pierce, 2023](#); [Joseph & Morgan, 2022](#); [Nelson, 2006](#)).

[Collett and Pierce \(2023\)](#) have previously studied the effects of partisanship on event labeling decisions. Their work, like ours, focuses on events involving police. They find that liberals were more likely to interpret ambiguous headlines involving police by assuming they had behaved badly toward good people (e.g., “someone innocent”), while conservatives were more likely to assume police had behaved badly toward bad people (e.g., “criminal”). Their data show that the labels liberals and conservatives select differ primarily on the evaluation dimension. These results suggest potential differences in labeling processes between parties, but as their experimental design was text-based, respondents never needed to label the entire event; a label for at least one component was always provided. Our video-based design allows us to build on their results by studying partisan differences in labeling in a completely unlabeled context. We ask:

RQ2a: Are there partisan differences in the labeling of actors in events?

RQ2b: Do partisan differences in event labeling depend on the nature of the event?

Finally, Republicans and Democrats may come to different *transient impressions* of the participants and behaviors that make up events. If situation definition is important to event understanding, we would expect such differences to be, in large part, downstream consequences of partisan differences in labeling and fundamental sentiments. Therefore, we ask:

RQ3a: Are there partisan differences in transient impressions of the elements that make up events?

RQ3b: Are partisan differences in transient impressions explained by partisan differences in fundamental sentiments and labeling?

METHODS

To answer these questions, we conducted a pair of studies. Study 1,¹ designed to hew closely to guidelines for collecting affect control theory sentiment dictionary data ([Heise, 2010](#)), was an online survey in which Democratic and Republican respondents were asked to rate the evaluation, potency, and activity of a set of social identities and behaviors. This allowed us to test for partisan differences in fundamental sentiments. Study 2 was an online survey experiment in which Democratic and Republican respondents watched short, animated videos about police interactions with civilians, labeled the characters, and rated their

evaluation, potency, and activity. This allowed us to test for partisan differences in event labeling and transient sentiments.

Sampling

Both studies were fielded in early 2022. They were approved by the Institutional Review Board at Duke University. We programmed our surveys in Qualtrics and recruited respondents through Prolific. Prolific allowed us to recruit a more diverse and representative sample of participants than would have been possible with an in-lab study. To ensure respondents were well-inculcated into US culture, we required them to be US citizens who currently resided in the United States². We used quota sampling to obtain samples that were approximately balanced between Democrats and Republicans. Independents and people who identified with third parties were counted with the party they leant toward, while pure independents were excluded. We also used quotas to obtain samples that roughly matched 2019 American Community Survey marginals for race and gender. After

Table 1. Respondent Descriptive Characteristics.

		Study 1	Study 2
Party	Republican/Republican leaner	228 (0.51)	174 (0.43)
	Democrat/Democrat leaner	219 (0.49)	233 (0.57)
Gender identity	Man	217 (0.49)	189 (0.46)
	Woman, nonbinary, other	230 (0.51)	218 (0.54)
Race/ethnicity	Non-Hispanic White	300 (0.67)	214 (0.53)
	Black, Hispanic, multiracial, other	147 (0.33)	193 (0.47)
Education	4-year degree or higher	244 (0.55)	195 (0.48)
	Less than 4-year degree	203 (0.45)	212 (0.52)
Recent experience with US criminal justice system	Yes		65 (0.16)
	No		342 (0.84)
Experience with US immigration system	Yes		149 (0.37)
	No		258 (0.63)
Mean age		37.9 (13.6)	35.2 (14)
Total N		447	407

Notes: For categorical variables, values shown are counts, and values in parentheses are proportions. For age, the mean age is provided with standard deviation in parentheses.

excluding respondents who failed attention checks, we were left with 447 respondents in Study 1 and 407 respondents in Study 2. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics of both samples.

Study 1: Fundamental Meanings

We designed Study 1 to test for partisan differences in fundamental affective meanings, to answer *RQ1*. Following common practice in affect control theory (ACT) research, we measured fundamental affective meaning by asking respondents to rate concepts on each of the three affective scales (Heise, 2007, 2010). These scales are bipolar and are anchored at each end by antonym sets of words intended to evoke the dimension in question: “bad, awful” and “good, nice” for evaluation, “powerless, little” and “powerful, big” for potency, and “slow, quiet, inactive” and “fast, loud, active” for activity. Though the scale is continuous, it is marked as a nine-point bipolar Likert scale, with the endpoints labeled “infinitely” and the midpoint labeled as “neutral.” In analysis, these scales are treated as running from -4 to 4 . An example of this scale as employed in our survey instrument is shown in Fig. 1.

After a short set of instructions and a demonstrative example of the task, we asked respondents to rate 7 to 8 randomly selected concepts from a list of 28 terms – 14 identities and 14 behaviors – on each of the three affective meaning dimensions. Each term was rated by an average of 53 Republicans and 50 Democrats.

We selected these terms from those rated by US-based respondents in a 2015 affective meaning data collection using an Amazon Mechanical Turk sample (Smith-Lovin et al., 2015). We preferentially selected terms that were relevant to police–civilian interactions and that we included as label options in Study 2. To ensure our results are generalizable to other kinds of terms, we also included some additional terms chosen to broaden the set’s range over Evaluation, Potency,



Fig. 1. Instrument for Measuring Fundamental Meanings. The Scale for Evaluation is Shown.

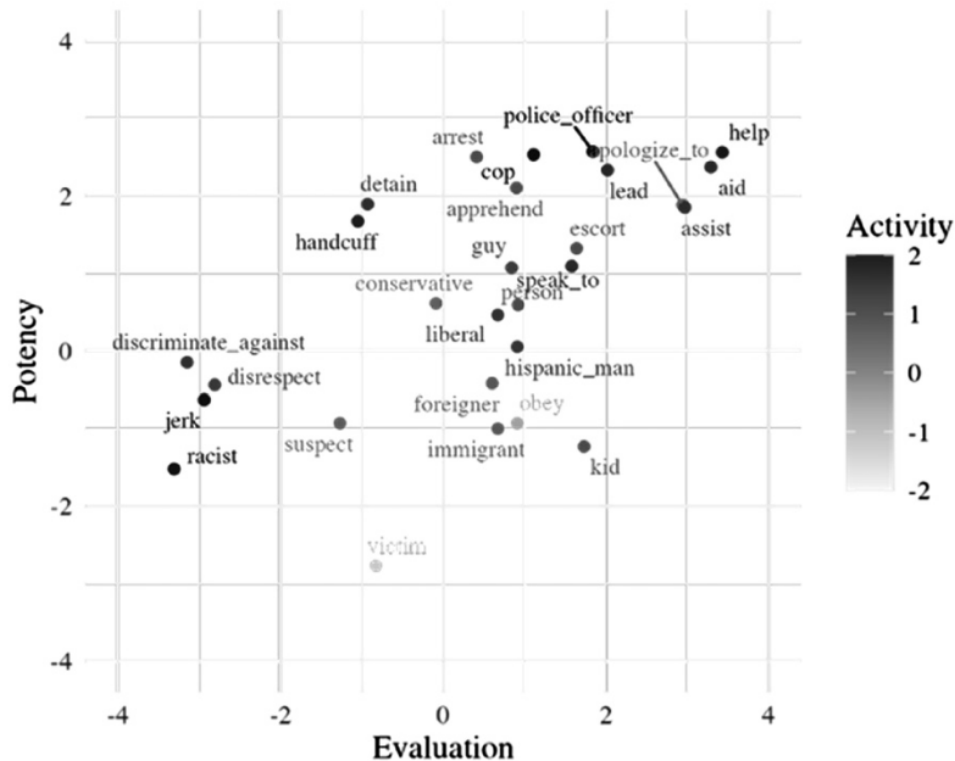


Fig. 2. Distribution of Study 1 Terms in EPA Space. According to data from [Smith-Lovin et al. \(2015\)](#).

Activity (EPA) space. The distribution of our chosen terms, according to data collected by [Smith-Lovin et al. \(2015\)](#), is shown in Fig. 2.

After rating the terms, respondents answered a short set of questions about their sociodemographic characteristics. In total, the survey took respondents approximately 12 minutes. We compensated each of them \$2.08 for their time.

Study 2: Event Labeling and Transient Impressions

In Study 2, we investigated the effect of partisanship on event labeling and impressions by asking respondents to watch and respond to short, animated videos of police officers interacting with civilians.

Experimental Conditions

To test the extent to which event interpretations might depend on event context, we randomly split respondents into two experimental conditions. Both used videos with a uniformed police officer as the main actor, but one was designed to be politically salient, while the other was designed to not be politically salient. Comparing results between these two events involving the same main actor

allows us another angle by which to explore the question of the extent to which partisan differences are specific to particular contexts, as opposed to applying more generally across contexts. We wished to use generic videos that were not overly reminiscent of any specific, real-world event that respondents may have already defined. This led us to make our own animated videos using Vyond, an animation software, rather than use footage of real people. Both videos are provided in the online supplement.

In the nonpolitical condition, a uniformed, White, male police officer approaches a crying girl in a park who cannot find her mother. The police officer helps her get back to her mother, exchanges a few words with the mother, and leaves the scene. The video is 37 seconds long. The event in this video was meant to connect to longstanding schemas of police officers as public servants and to keep relevance to contemporary political debates about police and policing to a minimum.

In the political condition, respondents watched a scene in which the same police officer character arrests a Spanish-speaking immigrant on the street outside of a store. The police officer sees the immigrant and a friend jaywalking, questions the immigrant, who says nothing and appears scared, and then arrests him after he determines he is not a US citizen. This video was meant to tap into partisan political discourses about police and policing practices, as well as about immigration and its supposed relationship to criminal activity. The video is 42 seconds long. The interaction is meant to be somewhat ambiguous – there is not enough information to determine whether the police officer is acting legally, or whether the immigrant is documented or undocumented. We left these facts unclear in order to leave respondents more space for interpretation.

Table 2 shows the events we aimed to illustrate in these videos – “police officer helps girl” and “police officer arrests immigrant” – with the evaluation, potency, and activity scores of all components and the corresponding deflection values. Deflection is a measure of how far an event moves transient impressions from their fundamental sentiment baseline (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2018). “Arresting” is a less good but approximately as powerful and active an action as “helping,” and an “immigrant” is less good and less powerful than a “girl.” When put together, “arresting an immigrant” is more affectively compatible – evidenced by lower deflection – for the identity of “police officer” than “helping a girl.” We

Table 2. Events Depicted in the Two Experimental Conditions.

Condition	Actor	Behavior	Object	Deflection
Political	Police officer (1.84, 2.57, 1.97)	Arrest (0.41, 2.5, 2.22)	Immigrant (0.67, -1.00, 0.23)	2.9
Nonpolitical		Help (3.43, 2.56, 1.62)	Girl (2.03, 0.57, 0.85)	17.2

Notes: With fundamental evaluation, potency, and activity values shown as an (E, P, A). Triplet in Parentheses (2015 Amazon Mechanical Turk Dictionary; Smith-Lovin et al., 2015) and Deflection Scores (US 2010 Equations; Morgan et al., 2016).

note that we did not actually label the components of these events for the respondents; this is one of their primary study tasks. These scores show our best a priori expectation of the affective similarities and differences between the experimental conditions. While more closely aligning the affective profiles of the events would have better allowed us to untangle affective effects from those of the political nature of the context, we found such alignment difficult to accomplish while also preserving a strong political/nonpolitical divide between conditions and creating events that were sufficiently realistic and also possible to animate. As such, differences between experimental conditions should be considered in light of both their political and affective differences.

Video Pretest

We initially considered two versions of the political video which varied how active, or agentic, the immigrant behaved. In the passive version, the immigrant did not speak and looked scared. In the agentic version, he spoke directly with the police officer and looked angry. We pretested both videos before deciding to use the passive version in the main study. In addition, we used data from the pretest to select label response options in the main study.

For the pretest, we used Prolific to recruit 157 participants to watch one of the three original videos (nonpolitical, passive political and agentic political). Once participants watched the videos, we asked them to write a sentence or two describing what happened. We used these data to verify participants interpreted the videos as we expected them to. We then asked participants to label the characters in the video. First, we asked them to describe each character in their own words. Then we asked them to pick the most appropriate label from a set of potential labels we provided. We selected these label options to fit the situation while also covering affective space to the extent possible. For example, in the political videos, we provided participants a list of identities that included cop, police officer, jerk, bully, professional, and hero.

After the pretest, we eliminated those label options which few or no respondents chose and added several that they provided in the free response questions, such as "patriot" and "racist" for the police officer; "Hispanic man" and "foreigner" for the immigrant; and "discriminating against" and "detaining" for the behavior.

We found that Democrats and Republicans labeled the police officer more differently in the video in which the immigrant acted in a passive way than the video in which the immigrant acted in an agentic way. Because this larger difference suggested to us greater ambiguity in the event, and because "passive" better aligns with the relatively low potency and activity of "immigrant" than "agentic" does, we chose to use the passive version of the political video in the main study.

Table 3. Response Options for Forced-Choice Label Questions.

Nonpolitical			Political		
Actor	Behavior	Object	Actor	Behavior	Object
Cop	Abducting	Child	Bully	Abusing	Criminal
Fellow	Aiding	Girl	Citizen	Apprehending	Foreigner
Fool	Assisting	Grouch	Cop	Arresting	Friend
Guy	Befriending	Kid	Jerk	Bothering	Guy
Hero	Escorting	Lost child	Patriot	Confronting	Hispanic man
Person	Helping	Person	Police officer	Detaining	Immigrant
Police officer	Intimidating	Troublemaker	Professional	Discriminating against	Person
Professional	Leading	Young girl	Man	Handcuffing	Suspect
Man	Rescuing	Youngster	Racist	Humiliating	Victim

Study Tasks

In Study 2, respondents first watched the video corresponding to the experimental condition – political or nonpolitical – they were assigned. After watching the video, as in the video pretest, they were asked to write a sentence or two describing what happened. Then, they were asked to choose the best label for the actor, behavior, and object, each from a list of nine options informed by the pretest. These response options are shown in Table 3. In these questions, we indicated which element we wanted respondents to label using video screenshots and arrows, in order to avoid priming respondents with any labels ourselves. Examples of these indicatory images are shown in Fig. 3. The question text accompanying these images for the actor and object was “Thinking back on the



Fig. 3. Examples of Images Used to Indicate the Element of Interest to Respondents. Images Are Screenshots From the Videos. The Left Panel Shows the Political Video and Indicates the Actor. The Same Image, Paired With the Behavior Text, was Used to Indicate the Behavior. The Right Panel Shows the Nonpolitical Video and Indicates the Object.

character indicated here, what word best describes them in this situation? Base your answer on your first impression, rather than on logical reasoning.” For the behavior, it was “Which of these verbs best describes what the character indicated is doing in this scene? Base your answer on your first impression, rather than on logical reasoning.”

After labeling the elements of the event, participants rated the evaluation, potency, and activity of each. We used the same scales to collect evaluation, potency, and activity ratings as we did in Study 1 (shown in Fig. 1). Above the slider, we included the same indicatory images as we used in the forced choice label section, with the question text “Please rate *the indicated character* in this scene on the slider scale below. Base your rating on your first impression, rather than on logical reasoning” for the actor and object, and “Please rate *what the indicated character is doing* in this scene on the slider scale below. Base your rating on your first impression, rather than on logical reasoning” for the behavior. These ratings serve as our measure of transient impressions.

After the labeling and impression-rating tasks, we asked respondents to provide sociodemographic information, including gender and racial identities and educational attainment. We also asked two questions about personal experience with the topics of the political video: “Do you, a family member, or a close friend have any personal experience using the services of the US immigration system?” and “During the past 12 months, were you or any of your family members or close friends stopped or questioned by a police officer?”.

RESULTS

Partisan Differences in Fundamental Meanings

We begin with our first research question: outside of particular event contexts, are there partisan differences in fundamental meanings of social identities and behaviors? We address this question using data from Study 1. Table 4 presents the mean evaluation, potency, and activity rating of each term separately for Republicans and Democrats. Standard deviations are provided in parentheses.

To determine whether the differences demonstrated here are meaningful and attributable to partisan identity, rather than associated demographic factors, we model the ratings for each term-dimension combination. We use partisan identity (Republican/Democrat) as the independent variable and control for respondent gender identity (man/not man), racial identity (White/not White), education (4-year degree/no 4-year degree), and age (years; square root taken and then standardized to range from 0–1). This yields 84 models, one for each term-dimension combination, with an average N of 103. All models are linear.

Fig. 4 shows the coefficient estimates for the effect of being a Republican (as compared to a Democrat) in each model. The line color/point shape indicates statistical significance at the $p < 0.05$ level after a Holm correction to account for the number of comparisons. After the correction, there are only four significant party effects. All are on the Evaluation dimension. Controlling for age, gender, race, and education, Republicans see *liberals* as 2.6 scale points lower on

Table 4. Mean Evaluation, Potency, and Activity Ratings of Social Identities and Behaviors by Political Party.

Term	Evaluation		Potency		Activity	
	Republican	Democrat	Republican	Democrat	Republican	Democrat
to_aid	2.89 (1.32)	3 (0.94)	2.24 (1.21)	2.21 (1.22)	0.78 (1.47)	0.94 (1.44)
to_apologize_to	2.58 (1.04)	2.57 (1.26)	1.64 (1.79)	2.02 (1.42)	-0.7 (1.3)	-0.87 (1.51)
to_apprehend	0.1 (2.09)	-0.42 (1.97)	2.08 (1.38)	2.16 (1.41)	2.31 (1.32)	2.25 (1.3)
to_arrest	-0.8 (1.91)	-0.68 (1.76)	2.29 (1.21)	1.96 (1.76)	1.91 (1.28)	2.03 (1.35)
to_assist	2.94 (1.14)	2.78 (1.17)	2.11 (1.08)	2.16 (1.1)	0.41 (1.65)	0.46 (1.02)
Conservative	1.5 (1.35)	-1.29 (1.5)	0.8 (1.4)	0.3 (1.43)	0.14 (1.36)	0.78 (1.6)
Cop	1.6 (1.61)	-0.58 (1.71)	2.22 (1.52)	2.2 (1.4)	1.28 (1.43)	1.35 (1.27)
to_detain	-1.15 (1.72)	-1.5 (1.36)	2.1 (1.69)	1.96 (1.48)	2.13 (1.18)	1.38 (1.78)
to_discriminate_against	-3.09 (1.3)	-3.41 (1.02)	-0.1 (2.7)	-0.68 (2.72)	0.4 (1.8)	0.78 (2.01)
to_disrespect	-2.74 (1.36)	-2.86 (0.76)	-0.73 (2.24)	-0.05 (2.22)	1.67 (1.19)	1.3 (1.7)
to_escort	1.24 (1.77)	1.59 (1.39)	1.34 (1.58)	1.3 (1.37)	0.18 (1.65)	0.31 (1.52)
Foreigner	1.01 (1.35)	1.64 (1.29)	-0.56 (1.3)	-0.69 (1.33)	0.12 (1.33)	0.03 (1.36)
Guy	1.23 (1.11)	0.89 (1.05)	1 (1.25)	1.22 (1.29)	0.86 (1.2)	0.99 (1.09)
to_handcuff	-1 (2.09)	-1.26 (1.52)	2.44 (1.18)	1.77 (1.59)	2.03 (1.47)	2.03 (1.15)
to_help	2.92 (1.36)	3.21 (0.77)	2.47 (1.32)	2.44 (1.23)	0.35 (1.41)	0.43 (1.46)
hispanic_man	1.39 (1.33)	1.36 (1.37)	0.33 (1.23)	0.02 (1.37)	0.24 (1.24)	0.6 (1.38)
Immigrant	0.8 (1.53)	1.5 (1.38)	-1.08 (1.21)	-1.09 (1.53)	0.04 (1.35)	0.33 (1.23)
Jerk	-2.7 (1.33)	-2.81 (0.97)	-0.56 (1.98)	-0.55 (2.18)	1.75 (1.74)	1.98 (1.59)
Kid	1.06 (1.56)	1.11 (1.36)	-1.38 (1.71)	-1.86 (1.19)	1.67 (1.67)	2.25 (1.26)
to_lead	1.64 (1.62)	1.14 (1.3)	2.29 (0.95)	2 (1.19)	0.83 (1.39)	1.1 (1.45)
Liberal	-0.84 (1.87)	1.74 (1.21)	0.53 (1.51)	0.63 (1.34)	1.42 (1.78)	0.89 (1.19)
to_obey	0.75 (1.6)	0.44 (1.45)	-0.59 (1.7)	-1.29 (1.63)	-0.89 (1.48)	-0.98 (1.78)
Person	0.98 (1.31)	0.97 (1)	0.03 (1.22)	-0.74 (1.14)	0.33 (1.13)	0.17 (1.04)
police_officer	1.54 (1.39)	0.07 (1.73)	2.39 (1.03)	2.29 (1.3)	1.23 (1.39)	1.65 (1.22)
Racist	-2.79 (1.06)	-3.42 (0.73)	-1.08 (2.05)	-1.29 (2.08)	1.06 (1.79)	1.75 (1.76)
to_speak_to	1.95 (1.31)	1.82 (1.41)	1.34 (1.45)	0.91 (1.13)	0.53 (1.48)	1.06 (1.08)
Suspect	-1.48 (1.07)	-1.31 (1.31)	-0.55 (1.53)	-0.36 (1.58)	0.3 (1.6)	-0.03 (1.76)
Victim	0.52 (1.88)	0.9 (1.63)	-2.24 (1.43)	-1.99 (1.21)	-1.31 (1.56)	-1.39 (1.44)

Note: Standard deviations are provided in parentheses.

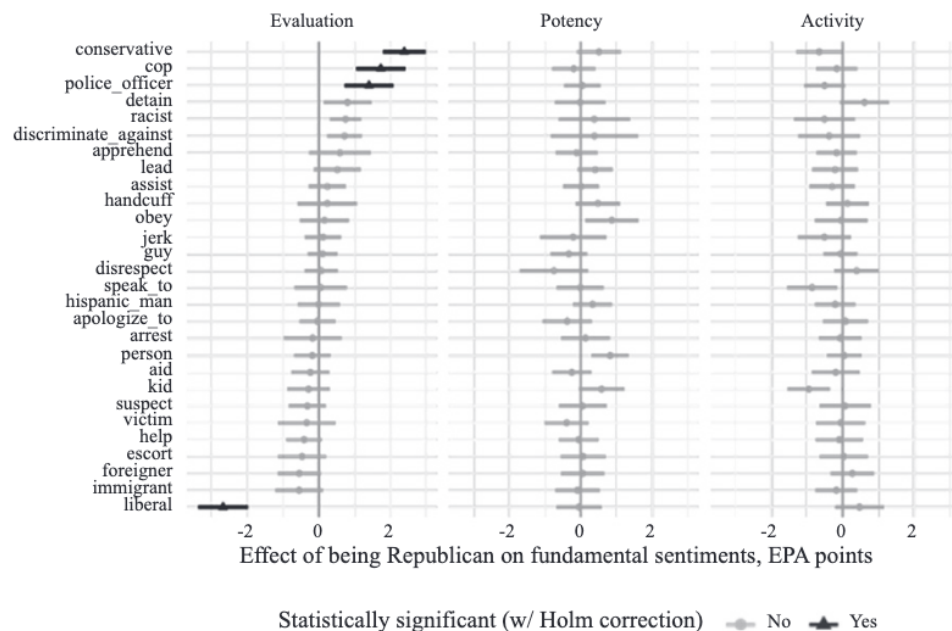


Fig. 4. Partisan Effects in Models Predicting Fundamental Ratings. Models Control for Respondent Gender, Race, Age, and Education. Uncorrected 95% Confidence Intervals for Each Coefficient Are Shown. Darker Lines Marked With Triangles Are Those Effects Which Are Statistically Significant at the $p < 0.05$ Level After a Holm Correction (84 Models).

evaluation and *conservatives*, *cops*, and *police officers* as, respectively, 2.4, 1.7, and 1.4 scale points higher on evaluation than Democrats.

Overall, this evidence shows that partisan differences in fundamental meanings are remarkably limited. That *liberal* and *conservative* show partisan differences on evaluation is unsurprising because of their connection to respondents' political identities and so the evocation of ingroup dynamics (Mason, 2018). That *police officer* and *cop* show partisan differences in evaluation seems to us a likely consequence of social movement activity and discourse about police misconduct that has polarized Republicans' and Democrats' opinions of police (Dunivin et al., 2022; Reny & Newman, 2021). Notably, *immigrant* and *foreigner*, despite also being strongly connected to contemporary polarized partisan debates (Baker & Edmonds, 2021), do not show significant partisan differences, further underscoring the limited nature of these partisan meaning differences.

That differences exist to a much greater extent on evaluation than on potency or activity seems to us a reflection of the fact that political debates frequently center on goodness or badness of particular groups. This is tacitly reflected in affective polarization measures, which ask, essentially, to what extent respondents believe opposing partisans are bad (Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019). There is little comparably polarized discourse about potency or activity.

It is likely we would have identified more terms as having statistically significant partisan differences in a higher-powered survey. However, we note that our per-term sample size – an average of 50 Democrats and 53 Republicans – is relatively high compared to other affect control theory data collections. In addition, the four terms that were identified as statistically significant have effects substantially larger than all other terms, making us more confident that they are in fact distinct. They are the only terms which have estimated partisan differences larger than 1 point on the 9-point meaning scale on any affective dimension. On 43 of our 84 term-dimension combinations, the estimated effect of being a Republican is less than 0.25 of a scale point.

Overall, our findings suggest that while there are some partisan differences in affective meaning, they are very limited, existing only in the most expected places: for some highly politicized identities on the evaluation dimension. This pattern suggests that Democrats and Republicans do not live in wholly different sub-cultures, with interpretations that differ across a variety of terms. Instead, our results suggest differences that are limited only to those terms that are particularly politically salient, and so are consistent with previous work showing that issue polarization is largely confined to small numbers of take-off issues (DiMaggio et al., 1996; Evans, 2003; Fiorina et al., 2005).

Partisan Differences in Labeling

We now move to *RQ2a* and *RQ2b*, about party differences in event understanding and their dependence on event. For this, we use data from our Study 2, where participants watched short, animated videos of police interactions with civilians and labeled and provided their transient impression ratings of the event components. We compare the distributions of forced-choice labels that Republicans and Democrats selected for each of the event components (actor, behavior, and object) in the two videos (political, nonpolitical). These label choices are shown in Fig. 5.

We ran Fisher tests for each video and event element to check for differences in label distributions between parties. The label distributions provided by Democrats and Republicans are statistically significantly different at the $p < 0.05$ level in all cases except the label of the object in the nonpolitical video. Fig. 5 shows the character of these differences.

In the political video, the most common event labeling Republicans provided was a *police officer arresting a Hispanic man*. By contrast, the most common event labeling provided by Democrats was a *racist discriminating against a victim*. These events differ substantially in their affective meanings. *Racists* are rated much lower on both evaluation and potency than *police officers*, *discriminating against* someone is rated lower on evaluation, potency, and activity than *arresting* them, and *victims* are rated lower on evaluation, potency, and activity than *Hispanic men*. In sum, Democrats most commonly choose labels that are rated lower on all three affective dimensions than Republicans.

Police officer is the second most common actor label in the political video among Democrats (23%), but a substantially smaller proportion of them choose

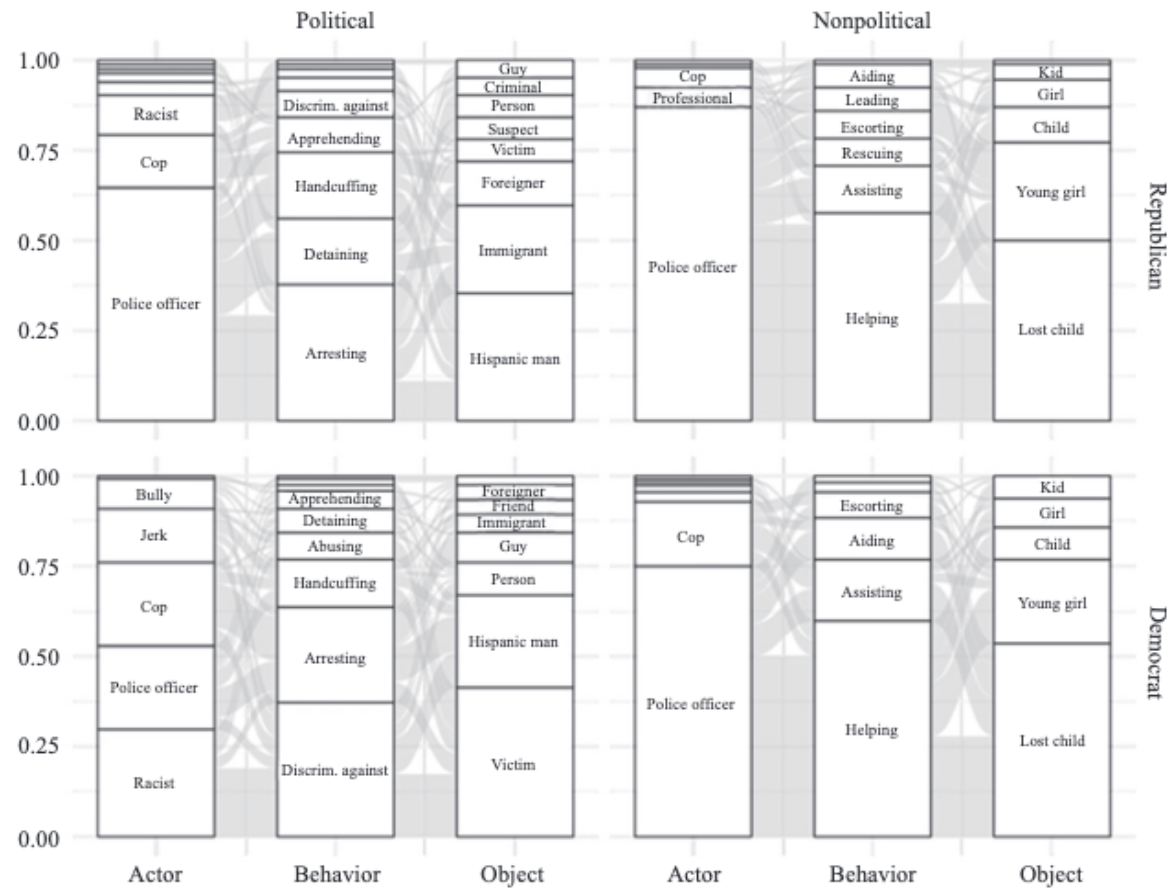


Fig. 5. Labeling of Events by Party and Experimental Condition. According to a Fisher Test, Differences Between Parties Are Statistically Significant at the $p < 0.05$ Level for All Event Elements Except the Object in the Nonpolitical Video.

it than do Republicans (65%). Democrats also frequently select *bully* and *jerk* (23% combined), neither of which are chosen in significant numbers by Republicans (6% combined). After *discriminate against*, Democrats' rank ordering of behavior labels looks similar to that of Republicans. *Arresting*, the most common behavior label among Republicans (38%), is second for Democrats (26%). Republicans are somewhat more likely to select *detaining* (18%) than Democrats (7%). The largest partisan object labeling difference in the political video is in the use of *victim*, which is the most common label among Democrats (41%), but fourth among Republicans (6%). Republicans are more likely to call attention to the object's immigration status by using *foreigner* or *immigrant* (36% combined) than Democrats (9% combined). Republicans are also more likely to imply criminality by using *criminal* or *suspect* for the object (11% combined) than Democrats (2.5% combined).

Although Republicans and Democrats do label the actor and behavior significantly differently in the nonpolitical video, the differences are smaller and less substantively meaningful. In general, there is less variability in labels and more consensus between groups. For both groups, the most common event labeling is a *police officer helping a lost child*. Democrats are somewhat more likely to label the actor as a *cop* (18%) as compared to Republicans (5%) and less likely to label him a *police officer* (75%) as compared to Republicans (87%). *Helping* was as prominent a behavior label for Democrats (60%) as Republicans (58%); the behavior labeling difference identified by the Fisher test comes instead from the greater variety of labels used by the remaining 42% of Republicans than the remaining 40% of Democrats. No respondents in either party referred to the object as a *grouch*, *troublemaker*, or *person*, instead using the high-evaluation labels that denote her age.

In all, we find substantial differences in Republicans' and Democrats' labeling of the people and behavior shown in the political event. While we also find some statistically significant partisan differences in the nonpolitical video, they are much smaller and more limited. Notably, Republicans and Democrats report the same consensus labeling of the nonpolitical event. We conclude that Republicans' and Democrats' differing perceptions of political events likely manifests at least in part through different choices of labels for the elements of those events. However, the extent to which these labeling differences appear depends on the event. While it is impossible to draw strong conclusions about the event characteristics that provoke partisan discrepancies from this study of just two events, it seems plausible that the presence of such labeling discrepancies is a function of the extent to which events relate to political, and polarized, discourses, and schemas.

Partisan Differences in Transient Impressions

Here we address *RQ3a* and *RQ3b*: whether there are partisan differences in transient impressions of events, and whether any such differences are attenuated by partisan differences in situation definition. To detect partisan differences, we fit linear regressions predicting our measure of transient impressions: respondents' evaluation, potency, and activity ratings of the actor, behavior, and object

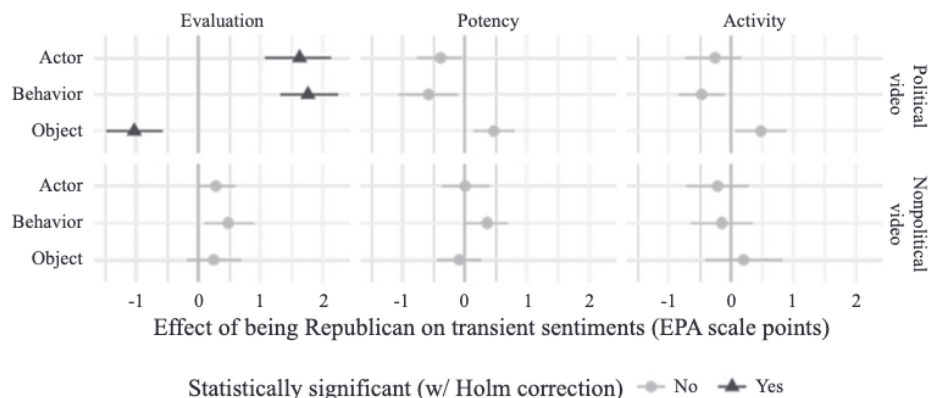


Fig. 6. Partisan Effects in Models Predicting Transient Sentiments. Models Control for Respondent Gender, Race, Age, Education, Recent Experience With Police, and Experience With the US Immigration System. Uncorrected 95% Confidence Intervals for Each Coefficient Are Shown. Darker Lines Marked With Triangles Are Those Effects Which Are Statistically Significant at the $p < 0.05$ Level After a Holm Correction (18 Models).

depicted in the Study 2 videos, made after viewing the event. We fit separate models for each combination of event element (actor/behavior/object), affective dimension (evaluation/potency/activity), and video (political/nonpolitical), resulting in 18 models with N s of 203 for the political video and 204 for the nonpolitical video. As in our models predicting fundamental sentiments, we use partisan identity as the independent variable and control for respondent race (White/not White), gender (man/not man), and education (4-year degree/no 4-year degree). We also control for recent experience with police (yes/no), and experience with the US immigration system (yes/no). Fig. 6 shows the effects of being Republican (reference: Democrat) in these models. Significance at the $p < 0.05$ level after a Holm correction to account for the number of comparisons is indicated by color.

The effect of being Republican in these models can be thought of as the cumulative effect of partisan differences in labeling, fundamental sentiments, and event processing on transient impressions. The pattern we see here echoes that in our analysis of partisan differences in fundamental sentiments and labeling: partisan differences are largest by a substantial margin in the political video on the evaluation dimension. This is the only place we find statistically significant effects. Republicans see the actor (police officer, by our labeling) and behavior (arresting) as higher in evaluation and the object (immigrant) as lower in evaluation than do Democrats. These differences are all larger than 1 scale point in magnitude, and as such, they stand out in comparison to partisan effects on other affective dimension and in the nonpolitical video. The next-largest partisan effect – on impressions of the potency of the behavior in the political video – is just 0.58 scale points in magnitude, and all other effects are estimated at under 0.5 scale points in magnitude.

To what extent are these partisan differences in transient impressions explained by partisan differences in situation definition? To answer this question, we run a mediation analysis. To operationalize situation definition, we calculate respondents' predicted transient impressions using the fundamental sentiments appropriate to their label choices. We use this as the mediating variable. This allows us to efficiently net out the effects of both partisan differences in labeling and partisan differences in fundamental sentiments, meaning any remaining effect of partisanship is due to factors apart from situation definition.

We obtain predicted transient impressions by applying the US 2010 ACT equations ([Morgan et al., 2016](#)) to the fundamental sentiments for the identities and behaviors chosen by the respondent to label the event they watched. To do this we used the *R* package *actsims* ([Castro Araújo, 2024](#)). This approach accomplishes a similar purpose as controlling for each of the nine fundamental sentiment terms (one per event component/affective dimension combination), as the ACT transient equations take each of these terms into account. However, the predicted transient approach sets the relative contribution of each fundamental sentiment term as fixed to the ratios shown to best predict event impressions in impression formation studies ([Morgan et al., 2016](#); [Rogers, 2018](#)). As our samples are relatively small, we prefer the predicted transient approach because it is less prone to overfitting.

We use the fundamental sentiment values we measured in Study 1, appropriate to the respondent's party when possible (22 of 40 label options), to calculate predicted transient impressions. There are 18 label options which respondents used but for which we did not collect fundamental sentiment values in Study 1. They are *abuse*, *befriend*, *bother*, *bully*, *child*, *confront*, *criminal*, *friend*, *girl*, *hero*, *humiliate*, *lost child*, *man*, *patriot*, *professional*, *rescue*, *young girl*, and *youngster*. For these, we instead used the corresponding values from the 2015 US Amazon Mechanical Turk ACT dictionary ([Smith-Lovin et al., 2015](#)). For the compound labels *young girl* and *lost child*, we applied the US 2010 modifier equations to the appropriate modifier-identity combinations to obtain modified fundamental sentiment values. The 2015 Amazon Mechanical Turk dictionary does not provide fundamental sentiment values separately for Republicans and Democrats, so for values taken from this dictionary we used the same general population mean for respondents of both parties. Given that our Study 1 results showed minimal partisan differences for all but the most clearly political of terms, and that most of the terms which we sourced from this dictionary were chosen as labels only occasionally (with *lost child* and *young girl* the exceptions), we do not anticipate that this limitation meaningfully affects our results.

Applying the 2010 ACT transient impression equations to the appropriate fundamental sentiments for a respondent's chosen event labels yields a nine-element predicted transient impression vector with one entry for each event component/affective dimension combination. In our models, we use the element of this vector that corresponds to the event component and affective dimension of the measured transient impression serving as the dependent variable. For instance, in the model predicting a respondent's transient impression of the

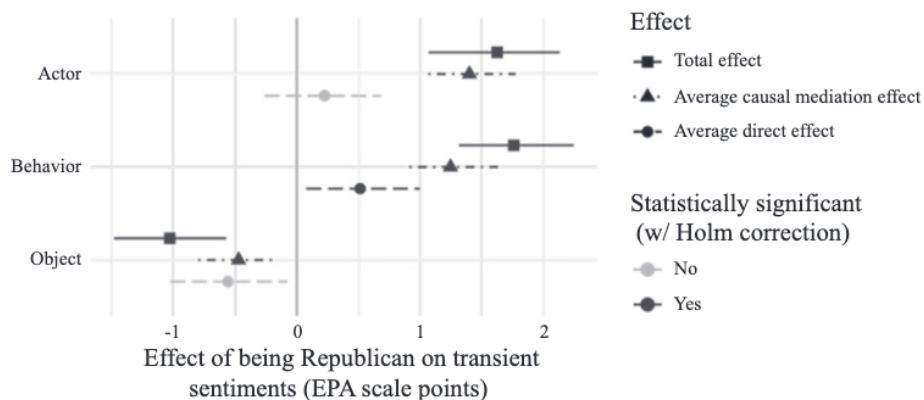


Fig. 7. Mediation Effects for Evaluation Transient Sentiments in the Political Video. The Independent Variable is Political Party and the Mediator is the Predicted Evaluation Transient Sentiment for the Given Entity (Actor, Behavior, Object). Uncorrected 95% Confidence Intervals for Each Coefficient Are Shown. Darker Lines Indicate Effects Which Are Statistically Significant at the $p < 0.05$ Level After a Holm Correction (3 Models).

actor's evaluation, we used the predicted transient for actor evaluation as the mediating variable.

Fig. 7 shows the total, average causal mediation, and average direct effects of political party as estimated by our models. This analysis shows that the effects of party on evaluation transient sentiments are indeed to a large extent attributable to party differences in upstream situation definition. In each case, previously large party effects are substantially reduced and nonsignificant when situation definition is added as a mediator. Situation definition mediates 86% of the total party effect for the evaluation of the actor (police officer), 71% of the total party effect for the evaluation of the behavior (arrest), and 46% of the total party effect for the evaluation of the object (immigrant). This result strengthens previous findings that the processes by which people determine event impressions based on labels and their associated fundamental sentiments are consistent within cultures (Rogers, 2018) by demonstrating this is true even between political parties on politically charged events.

CONCLUSION

Our work shows what parts of the situation definition process are – and, just as importantly, are not – affected by political party. Study 1 shows that partisan differences in the fundamental sentiments held for identity and behavior labels outside of particular event contexts are quite limited, appearing only for terms in our sample that denote ingroups and outgroups (*liberal*, *conservative*) and some “take-off issue” terms heavily entwined in contemporary political debates (*cop*, *police officer*). Even for these terms, party differences in fundamental sentiments

are limited to just the evaluation dimension, suggesting that while Democrats and Republicans disagree about how good or bad these actors are, they largely agree on how much power they have and how active they are. Our results suggest that despite political polarization and substantial spatial segregation between Democrats and Republicans (Brown & Enos, 2021), they still to a large extent share one culture, showing the patterns of meaning consensus one would expect within a culture. This result contributes to literatures on the extent of cultural consensus, adding political party to the list of dimensions on which variation in affective meanings has been explored (Rogers, 2019).

If there are not widespread partisan differences in fundamental meanings, then how can partisans come to such different interpretations of politically relevant events (Claassen & Ensley, 2016; Collett & Pierce, 2023; Kahan et al., 2012; Seron et al., 2004)? Our study 2 results show there are substantial partisan differences in the way Republicans and Democrats label the characters and behavior they see in a short video of a police officer arresting an immigrant designed to evoke partisan discourses and schemas about policing and immigration. Democrats' modal labeling – "racist discriminates against victim" – evokes very different affective sentiments than Republicans' "police officer arrests Hispanic man." Our results are consistent with those of Collett and Pierce (2023), who show systematic partisan differences in explanations of ambiguous headlines involving police officers, and extend this finding to completely unlabeled events experienced visually.

Like fundamental meanings, respondents' transient impressions of the actor, behavior and object of the political event only differ meaningfully by party on the evaluation dimension, where Republicans see the actor and behavior as more good and the object as less good than Democrats – differences consistent with their more negative views of immigrants and immigration and more positive views of police more generally (Baker & Edmonds, 2021; Reny & Newman, 2021). The centrality of the evaluation dimension is also consistent with the findings of Collett and Pierce (2023). These differences are mediated to a large extent by the way in which the respondents define the situation – the labels they choose and so the fundamental sentiments they invoke. This suggests that if we wish to understand partisan differences in reactions to events, we may want to focus on the differences in how they label such events.

Finally, our results show that the extent of partisan differences in labeling and event impressions is strongly dependent on the event. Partisan differences are much less apparent in the labels applied to the nonpolitical video of the police officer helping a girl. Although Democrats use the more casual, slightly more pejorative label "cop" in place of "police officer" somewhat more often than Republicans, consistent with their more negative feelings toward such people, the modal event labeling – "police officer helps lost child" – is the same for both parties. There are also no partisan differences in transient impressions of any of the elements of this video.

In all, our work supports previous work in affect control theory, culture, and polarization showing that partisan differences in affective meanings and situation definition are present, but remarkably limited. They are limited to specific kinds

of people and behaviors and specific kinds of events, and they are limited to the evaluative dimension of affective meaning. Even so, there can be in specific contexts substantial partisan effects on the labeling of events. Because of the central role labels have in communicating meaning (Hunzaker, 2016; Jacobs & Quinn, 2022), such partisan differences in labeling are worthy of more attention from researchers interested in broader processes of polarization.

Our work is limited in some important ways. First, with a comparison of just two events, we cannot pinpoint what features of events lead to partisan differences in situation definition. We show, simply, that event features *do* matter, and we leave it to future work to determine how and why. Our events used the same actor but varied in (at least) political salience and in the affective profiles of the behavior and the object. While we put forward the hypothesis that the degree to which an event invokes schemas that differ between parties may impact labeling, more work involving more events that vary in quantifiable ways on these and other dimensions is needed to adjudicate this.

Our conclusions about (lack of) partisan differences in fundamental sentiments are limited by the small number of terms for which we were able to collect fundamental meanings. Though we strove to select terms that adequately represented all areas of affective space, measuring the meanings of more terms would provide more insight as to where and how partisan identities shape meanings. We encourage researchers who collect such affective meaning data in future to include partisan identity in their participant demographic questions so that party differences can be more thoroughly mapped.

NOTES

1. This study was fielded after the survey experiment, but we refer to it as Study 1 in order to align with our presentation of results.
2. While we would have also liked to include noncitizens who had resided in the United States for a prolonged period, Prolific did not provide a way to filter for these respondents.

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