

Beyond Extremity: Underestimating the Ideological Complexity of Outgroup Members' Opinions Drives Affective Polarization

Max Spohn*, Charles Dorison** & Julia Minson*

*Harvard Kennedy School, ** Georgetown McDonough School of Business

hspohn@g.harvard.edu

Abstract

We document a novel misperception across the ideological divide: partisans on both sides consistently underestimate each other's *ideological complexity* – the extent to which an individual's views vary across different issues and different policies withing the same issue.

In five pre-registered experiments (N = 1,945), we show that partisans perceive out-group members as less ideologically complex than themselves (Studies 1, 2 & 3a/3b) and that such misperceptions are associated with negative evaluations of out-partisans (Study 4). We discuss implications of this novel misperception for partisan polarization.

Study 1: Underestimation of complexity I

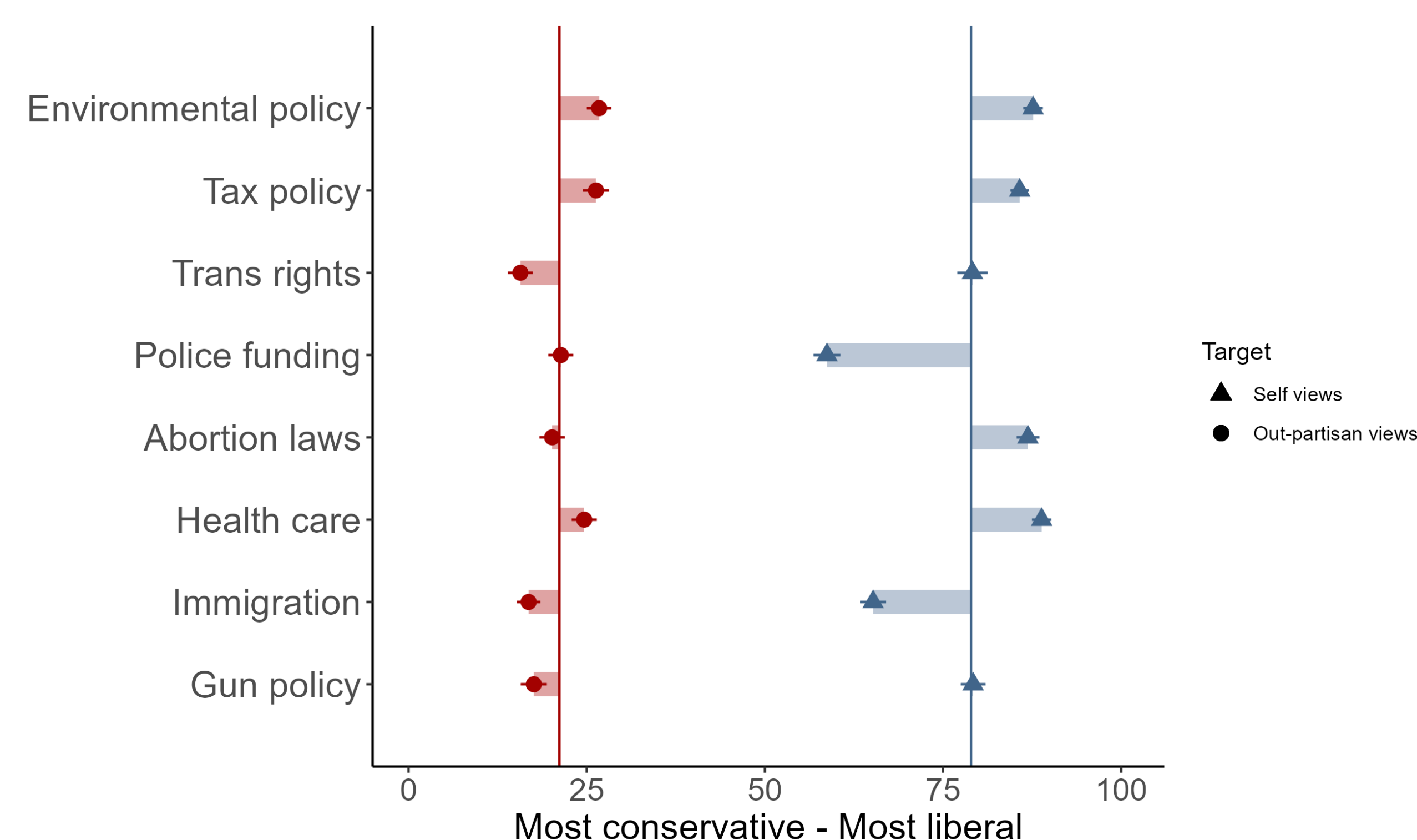
Method

Participants (N = 275) reported their own and a typical out-partisan's views on eight policies, using 100-point scales anchored at extremely liberal or extremely conservative policy positions. We calculated the variance of the eight responses to operationalize ideological complexity.

Results

Participants perceived out-group members as less ideologically complex than themselves ($d = 0.6$; $p < 0.001$).

Average response - Democrat



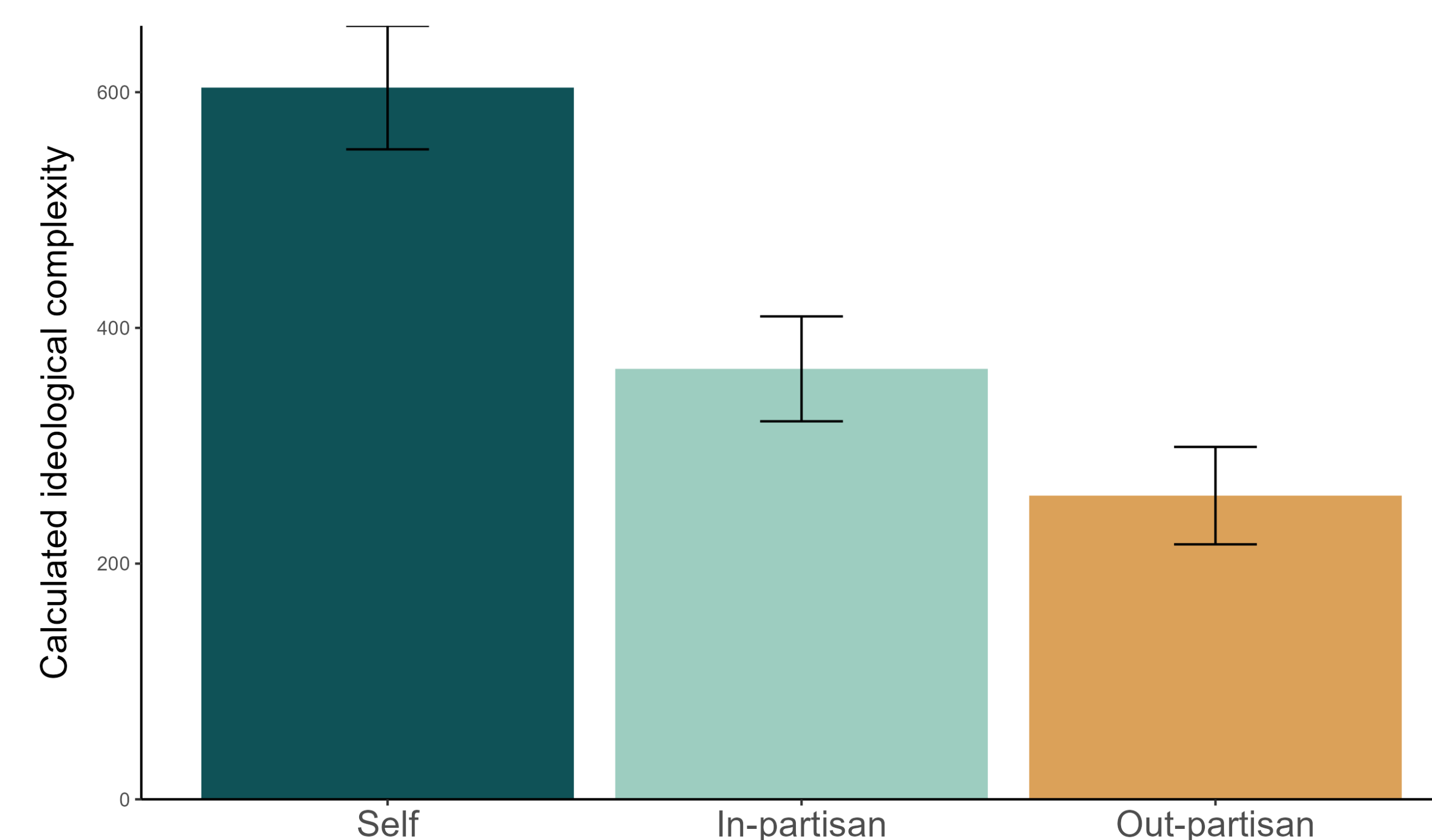
Study 2: Underestimation of complexity II

Method

Participants (N = 874) reported their own ideological complexity, or an in-group/out-group member's ideological complexity (3 conditions, between-subjects).

Results

Participants perceived both ingroup members ($d = 0.55$; $p < 0.001$) and outgroup members ($d = 0.8$; $p < 0.001$) as less ideologically complex than themselves, even when controlling for misperceptions of ideological extremity. In-group members were also seen as more complex than outgroup members ($d = 0.25$; $p < 0.001$).



Studies 3a & 3b: Underestimation of complexity III

Method

Participants (3a: N = 253; 3b: N = 267) reported their own and a typical out partisan's views on eight policies all related to a single policy issue (3a: transgender rights; 3b: gun policy; both within-subjects).

Results

Out-partisans were seen as less ideologically complex, even within multiple policies related to the same issue and when controlling for ideological extremity (3a: $d = 0.86$; $p < 0.001$; 3b: $d = 0.44$; $p < 0.001$).

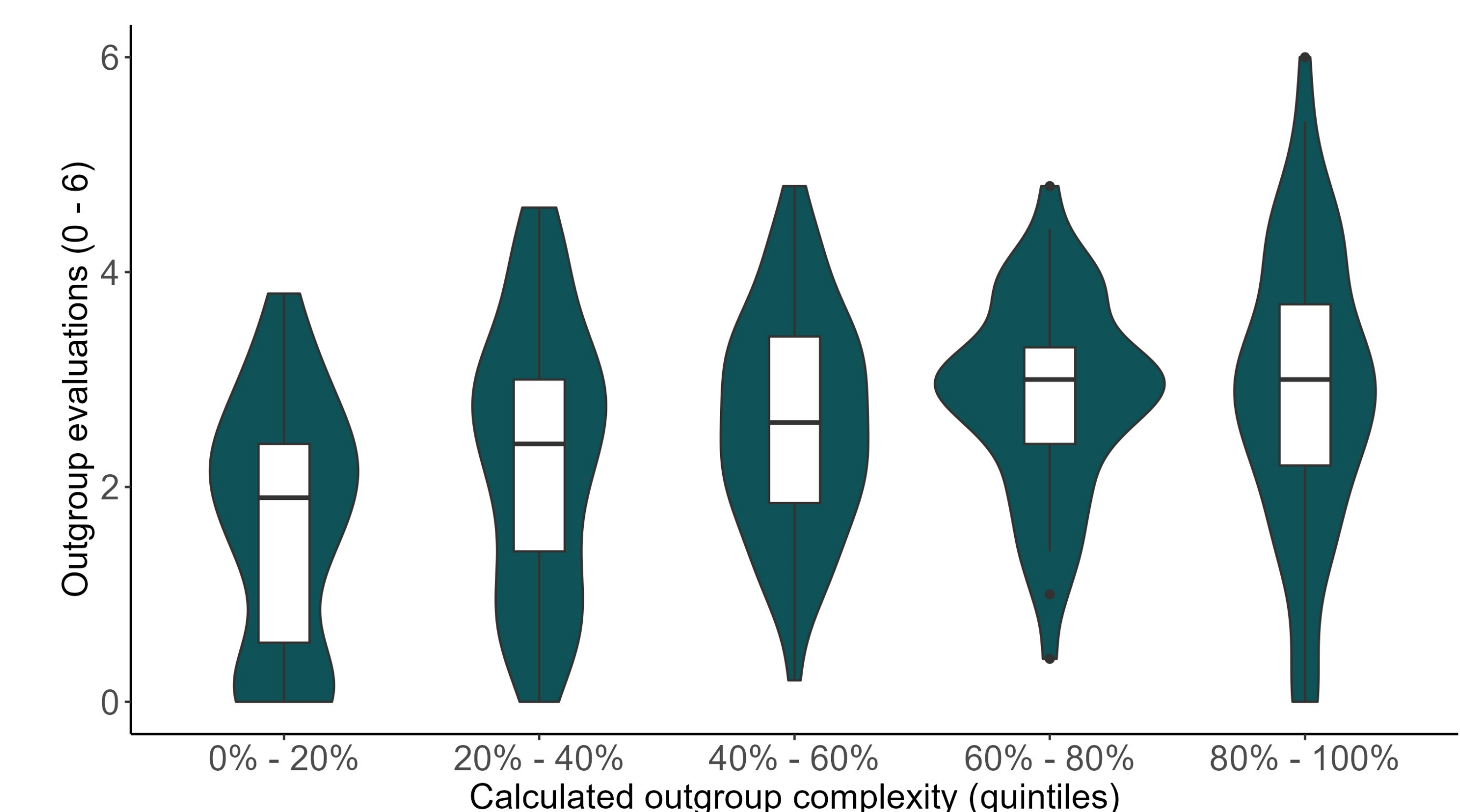
Study 4: Perceived complexity and evaluations

Method

Participants (N = 276) reported outgroup members' ideological complexity. They then evaluated the morality, objectivity, likeability, trustworthiness, and intelligence ($\alpha = 0.9$) of a hypothetical out partisan.

Results

Greater perceived complexity was associated with more favorable evaluations of an out partisan ($d = 0.2$; $p < 0.001$), even when controlling for perceptions of extremity. Lower perceived extremity was associated with more favorable evaluations of an out-partisan ($d = 0.43$; $p < 0.001$).



Conclusion

Participants in our studies consistently saw the views of ideological opponents as less complex and nuanced than their own, both across and within policy areas.

Importantly, perceptions of complexity predicted beliefs about outgroup characteristics, above and beyond perceptions of belief extremity.

Our work adds to the growing literature examining the psychological dynamics driving ideological discord, offering promising avenues for future research.