

Beyond Extremity: Underestimating the Ideological Complexity of Outgroup Members' Opinions Drives Partisan Animosity

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Introduction: Ideological Complexity

Ideological Complexity

The variability and nuances of an individual's political views across different issues or policies within an issue area.

Across 4 pre-registered studies ($N = 2,710$) we demonstrate:

- **Misperceptions:** Partisans consistently underestimate out-partisans' ideological complexity (Studies 1, 2 & 3)
- **Consequences:** Perceptions of low ideological complexity causally drive partisan animosity (Study 4)

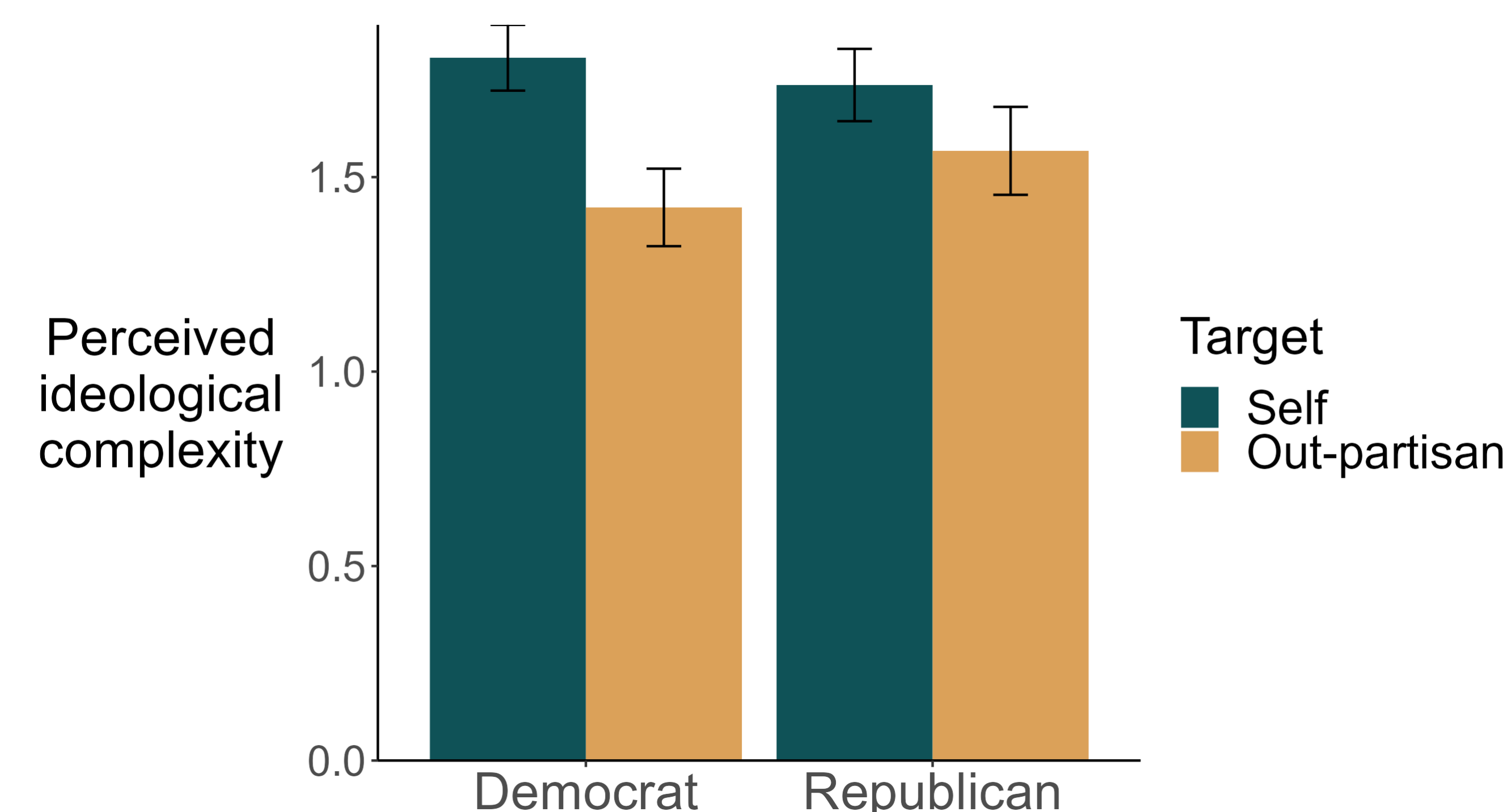
Study 1: Misperception of ideological complexity

Method

Participants ($N = 1,310$) from a nationally representative sample reported how complex they perceived their own policy views and a typical out-partisan's policy views to be on 5-item scales ("Not at all complex" to "Very complex"). Participants also reported their feelings towards a typical out-partisan on a feeling thermometer (0 – 100).

Results

Participants perceived out-group members as less ideologically complex than themselves ($d = 0.23$; $p < 0.001$). Perceptions of out-partisans' ideological complexity also predicted warmth towards them ($d = 0.11$; $p < 0.001$).



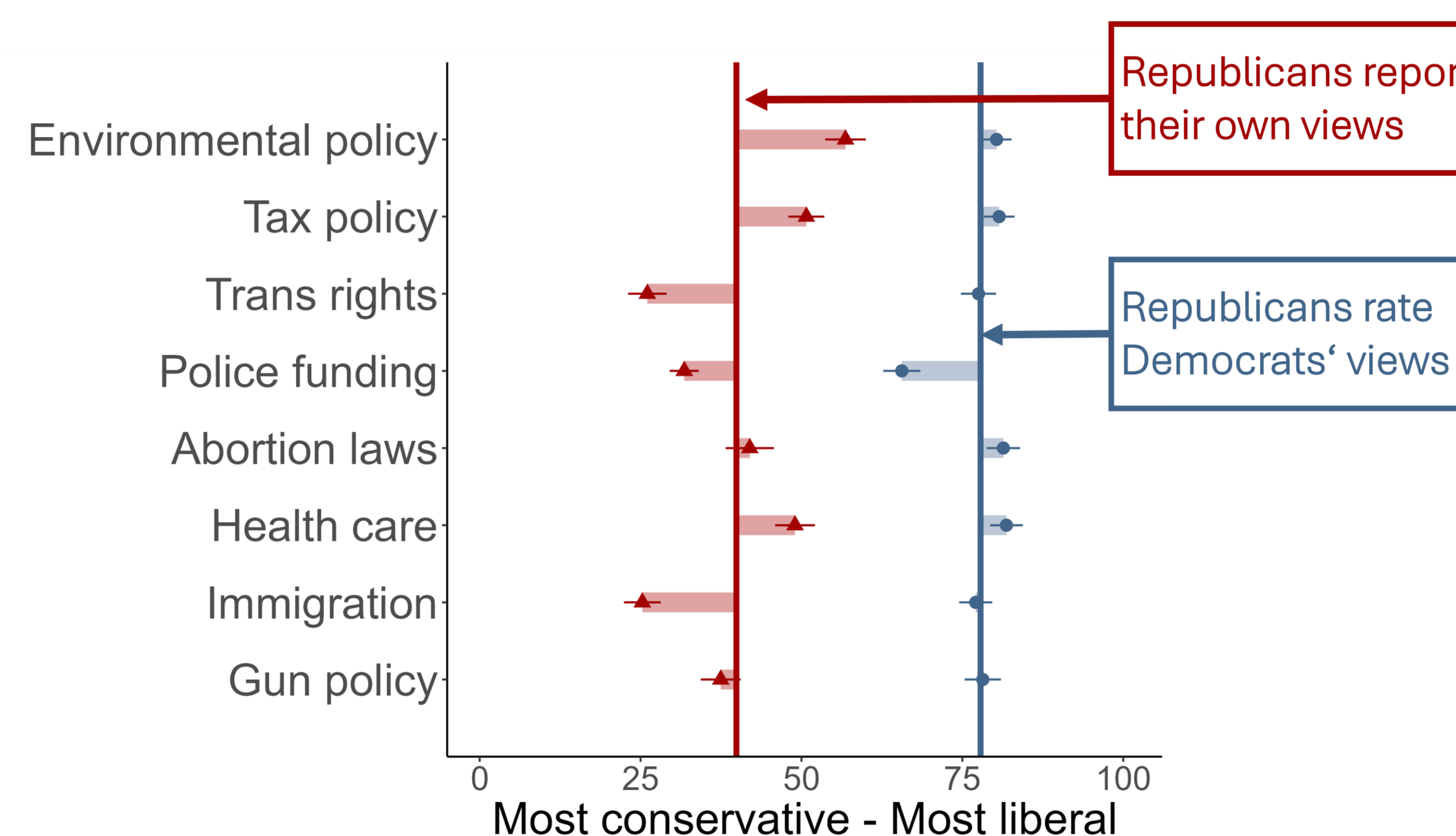
Study 2: Misperception of item-by-item complexity

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 ($d = 0.60$; $p < 0.001$), even after controlling for perceptions of extremity.



Study 3: Misperception of in- and out-group members

Method

Participants ($N = 527$) reported how many of eight policy statements they agreed with and guessed how many a typical in-partisan and a typical out-partisan would agree with.

Results

Participants perceived out-group members as less ideologically complex than themselves ($d = 0.37$; $p < 0.001$) or in-group members ($d = 0.24$; $p < 0.001$). They also saw in-group members as less complex than themselves ($p = 0.003$).

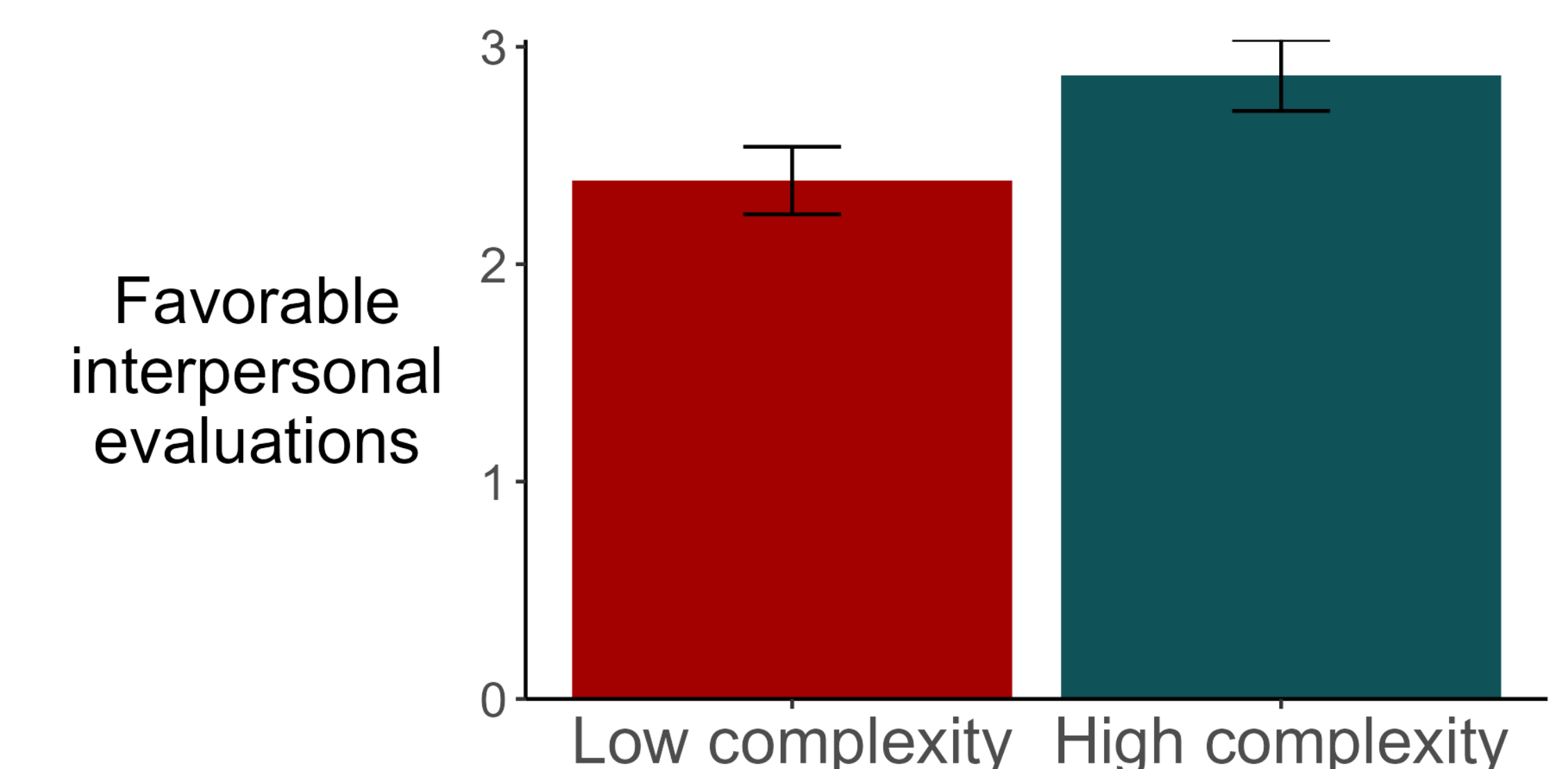
Study 4: Causal effects of complexity misperceptions

Method

Participants ($N = 598$) read a statement by a hypothetical out-partisan target describing their policy views. They were randomly assigned to read about a highly complex or non-complex target. Participants then rated the target's ideological complexity and extremity and evaluated their morality, objectivity, likeability, trustworthiness, and intelligence ($\alpha = 0.92$; combined into an interpersonal evaluation scale).

Results

Participants in the high complexity condition evaluated the target more positively than participants in the low complexity condition ($d = 0.34$; $p < 0.001$). 40.9% of the effect are mediated by perceptions of complexity in a parallel mediation model, above and beyond effects of extremity perceptions.



Conclusion

Key contribution

Our findings highlight the theoretical and practical importance of considering a thus far underappreciated dimension of political ideology: *ideological complexity*.

Future Directions

- Testing scalable interventions that leverage misperceptions of ideological complexity to reduce partisan animosity
- Exploring how the complexity of opinions affects disagreements in other domains