"They Just Don't Get Us": Perceived (Mis)Understanding as a Driver of Affective Polarization and Avoidance Behavior*

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Abstract

Prior research identifies partisan meta-perceptions as a potential source of partisan animosity. Building on this work, we introduce a concept extending beyond perceived like and dislike: perceived understanding. Perceived understanding refers to how well out-partisans are perceived to understand in-party voters' values, motives and intentions, and way of life. We expect the more people perceive their co-partisans to be misunderstood by out-party supporters, the more they will be affectively polarized, hostile, and avoidant toward out-partisans.

This paper uses two data sources. First, original cross-sectional survey data from 11 countries is used to examine the prevalence of perceived (mis)understanding and its correlation with key outcomes. Second, an experimental cognitive interview study in the US explores respondents' top-of-the-head considerations when answering key survey questions to asses the distinctiveness of perceived understanding and meta-perceptions. A future version of this paper will additionally include an experiment that assesses the causal effect of perceived (mis)understanding on affective evaluations and action tendencies. The results indicate strong associations between perceived (mis)understanding, affective polarization, and avoidance tendency. Moreover, evidence is provided that perceived understanding and meta-perceptions are not only conceptually but also empirically distinct.

This project contributes to ongoing research on partisan conflict by highlighting the role of perceived (mis)understanding in shaping inter-group dynamics. The findings inform targeted countermeasures to mitigate affective polarization and prevent further escalation of partisan animosity.

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Main

Conflicts in our social life are ubiquitous: We all know people whose values or behaviors we find off-putting, and we often choose to distance ourselves from them. Yet some disagreements have more profound consequences than others. One particularly consequential form of division emerges between supporters of different political parties. Across many liberal democracies, citizens (increasingly) harbor animosity toward their partisan opponents (Boxell et al., 2024; Garzia et al., 2023; Wagner, 2021) – a trend widely known as affective polarization (Druckman and Levendusky, 2019; Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019).

Most existing explanations for affective polarization emphasize how voters view their political outgroup. So, the perceptions about the outgroup matter, for instance their views, values and goals. These perceptions are generated and solidified through mechanisms such as partisan sorting (Harteveld, 2021; Mason, 2015, 2018), identity-based ingroup favoritism (Dias and Lelkes, 2022; Iyengar et al., 2012; Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2025) and exposure to partisan media (Kim and Kim, 2024; Lelkes et al., 2017; Lu and Lee, 2019; Motyl et al., 2020). Recent work has also emphasized that perceptions about political opponents are often inaccurate, examining to what extents citizens overestimate the differences between them and the outgroup and how this relates to outgroup dislike (Ahler and Sood, 2018; Pasek et al., 2022; Rothschild et al., 2019).

While valuable, these approaches overlook how individuals believe that they are themselves perceived by the political outgroup, i.e. meta-perceptions. However, such meta-perceptions are likely to be consequential for intergroup evaluations. Recent research has therefore examined whether individuals feel liked or disliked by opposing groups, showing that voters tend to overestimate how negatively the opposing side perceives their own group (Lees and Cikara, 2020; Moore-Berg et al., 2020a; Pasek et al., 2022; Ruggeri et al., 2021). That is, they not merely misjudge the other side – they also expect to be misjudged

themselves. These meta-perceptions, in other words the perceived dislike from opposing partisans, are often overly pessimistic and are associated with animosity between groups (Moore-Berg et al., 2020a; Ruggeri et al., 2021).

However, perceived (dis)like may only be one aspect of how people believe the outgroup sees them and thinks about them. In this paper, we propose that partisanship-based animosity is particularly related to the *perception of being misunderstood* – a perception that one's motives, intentions, values, and way of life are misunderstood or not recognized by political opponents. Perceived misunderstanding, as conceptualized here, refers to the belief that opposing partisans fail to recognize or acknowledge the in-group's values, intentions, and way of life (Livingstone et al., 2020). Crucially, this does not imply an expectation of agreement – only a desire for accurate recognition (Rogers, 1995).

When reflecting on the voters and supporters of the party one disdains, it might be easy to think of ways in which the outgroup misunderstands one's values and motives. For example, Republicans may perceive their emphasis on individual responsibility to be misinterpreted as selfishness and a lack of compassion. Or European Green Party supporters might believe their ecological concerns are caricatured by conservatives as economically naive. In both cases, the grievance is not that others are perceived to disagree, but that they misunderstand and do not recognize deeply held values, motives and ways of life.

Indeed, the notion of not feeling understood was echoed in open-ended survey responses collected in the U.S.:

> *They HATE Republicans with a fiery passion because they don't know what we believe or who we are. The media is constantly lying and mischaracterize us and our views. They spend a lot of energy on hate.*
>
> —Republican respondent from Prolific, October 2024

I think if they did understand Democratic voters' way of life and why, there would be less hatred and divide. So I think there's a misunderstanding somewhere.

—Democratic respondent from Prolific, October 2024

The distinction between whether others like us and whether they *get* us. aligns with insights from inter-group research, which shows that when group identity becomes more salient, people become more likely to interpret others' evaluations through the lens of group stereotypes (Frey and Tropp, 2006; Krueger, 1996; Hornsey et al., 2004; Kramer and Messick, 1998). Strong partisans, in particular, are prone to assume that others view them only as partisan types, not as individuals. In our cognitive interviews in the U.S., many participants reported precisely this experience.[1] Figure 1 shows that around half of Republicans (46.4%) and Democrats (51.2%) report feeling perceived as partisans rather than as individuals by voters of the opposing party.[2] This social dynamic is reinforced by motivated reasoning – the tendency to process information in a way that confirms existing beliefs (Kunda, 1990; Lodge and Taber, 2013). Strong partisans are especially vulnerable to such bias, which can entrench misperceptions and reinforce the belief that others fail to understand the ingroup. As partisanship becomes increasingly central to personal identity (Huddy, 2001; Huddy and Bankert, 2017), the perception of being misunderstood becomes both more likely and more consequential.

Perceived understanding is partially related to other concepts that have been studied recently. Meta-dehumanization (Bustillos et al., 2023; Kteily et al., 2016; Moore-Berg et al., 2020a; Petsko and Kteily, 2024), felt respect (Rothers and Cohrs, 2023) and per-

[1]The survey question was worded as follows: "Sometimes, we meet people who are [in-partisans] or [out-partisans]. When meeting these people, we might feel they see us simply as partisans of our political party, rather than as unique individuals. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? When I meet a [out-partisan], I feel that they see me more as a [in-partisan] than as an individual."

[2]The remaining Democrats either feel perceived more as individuals than as partisans by opposing voters (31.4%) or are uncertain (17.4%). Among Republicans, 37.5% feel perceived more as individuals, while 16.1% are uncertain.

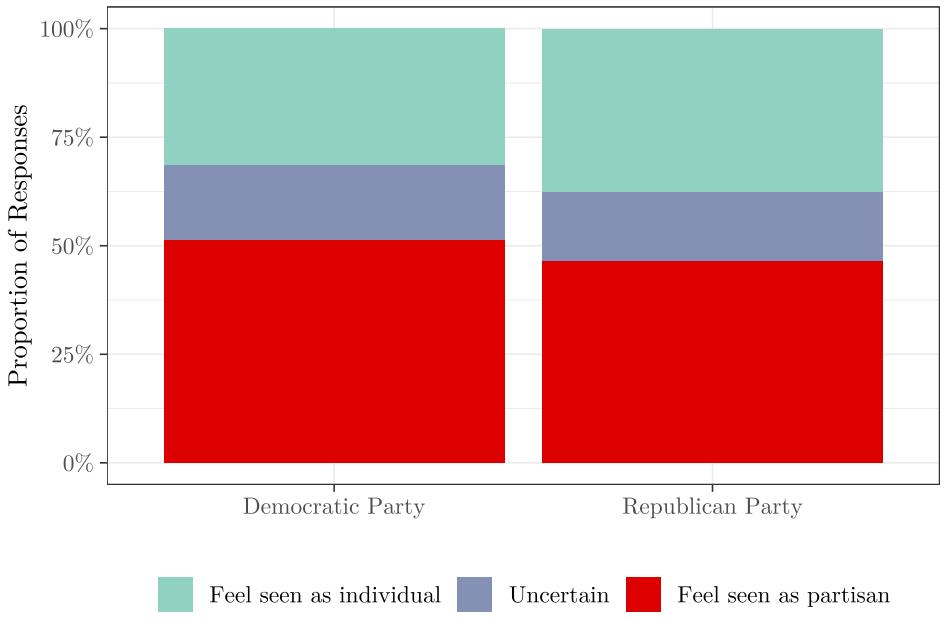

Figure 1: Partisan versus individual perception
Proportion of Democrats (left) and Republicans (right) who feel they are perceived more as partisans than as individuals (red), more as individuals than as partisans (green), or neither (blue).

ceived cross-partisan empathy (Allamong and Peterson, 2021; Santos et al., 2024; Simas et al., 2020) also point to the broader relevance of perceived intergroup appraisals.

Perceived misunderstanding is important because it likely plays a crucial role in partisan animosity and subsequent social avoidance. One key mechanism is affective reciprocity: people who feel misunderstood are more likely to react with animosity. Neuroscientific evidence suggests that being misunderstood activates brain regions associated with negative affect (Morelli et al., 2014). This leads to Hypothesis 1: the more misunderstood voters feel by the opposing partisans, the more they are affectively polarized.

Next, the perception of being misunderstood may heighten inter-group anxiety (Devine et al., 1996; Stephan and Stephan, 1985), perceived threat, and discomfort in interpersonal encounters (Blascovich et al., 2000; Stephan and Stephan, 1985), which can reduce willingness to engage across partisan lines (Dovidio et al., 2003; Fiske and Ruscher, 1993; Goffman, 1963; Plant and Devine, 2003; Stephan et al., 1991). This leads to Hypothesis

2: the more misunderstood voters feel by the opposing partisans, the less they want to engage with them.

To test these hypotheses, this paper presents findings from two studies. Study 1 consists of pre-registered cross-sectional surveys conducted in 11 countries (Austria, Canada, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States)[3]. These data allow us to assess whether citizens often feel misunderstood by opposing partisans and to evaluate whether these perceptions are associated with inter-partisan animosity and avoidance. Study 2, a pre-registered cognitive survey experiment conducted in the United States, offers deeper insight into the top-of-the-head associations (Zaller, 1992) that respondents draw upon when answering questions about whether outpartisans understand them.[4] By embedding open-ended questions within a simple question-order experiment, we demonstrate that perceived understanding constitutes a distinct construct, conceptually and empirically distinguishable from meta-perceptions.

We show that perceived misunderstanding is a strong component of partisan animosity and political interactions. This has important political implications. Partisan animosity is seen as a serious threat to the quality and stability of democracy (McCoy and Somer, 2019; McCoy et al., 2018). Voters who intensely dislike out-partisan groups are less inclined to hold their own political leaders accountable for undemocratic behavior (Orhan, 2022; Ward and Tavits, 2019; Graham and Svolik, 2020; Kalmoe and Mason, 2022; Ridge, 2022).[5] It can undermine trust in institutions and in fellow citizens (e.g., Torcal and Thomson, 2023; Reiljan and Ryan, 2021), creating fertile ground for populist and radical forces. Beyond politics, deepening partisan divides threaten social cohesion, fostering discrimination based on party affiliation (e.g., Amira et al., 2021; Berntzen et al., 2023; Engelhardt and Utych, 2020; Iyengar and Westwood, 2015; Lelkes and Westwood, 2017;

[3]Preregistration of Study 1 can be found here: https://osf.io/e4uzy/?view_only=d2232ef4868c4ff786949600ab119ca7

[4]Pre-registration of Study 2 can be found here:

[5]See also Broockman et al. (2023) for a more cautious view on the consequences of affective polarization.

McConnell et al., 2018; Nicholson et al., 2016; Shafranek, 2021) and political homophily – the formation of socially insulated, like-minded networks (e.g., Goldenberg et al., 2022; Mummolo and Nall, 2017; Motyl et al., 2020; Huber and Malhotra, 2017; Blanchar and Norris, 2021).

This means that there is also an urgent need to understand how partisan animosity can be reduced. There have been many attempts to lower affective polarization through intervention, with varying levels of short- and long-term success (e.g., Huddy and Yair, 2021; Levendusky and Stecula, 2021; Santoro and Broockman, 2022; Voelkel et al., 2024, 2022). Before we can design effective interventions, we need to know what generates partisan animosity. In this paper, we document the prevalence of feeling misunderstood and explore its associations with affective polarization and avoidance. While we do not examine whether the perceptions of being misunderstood are accurate, levels of mutual understanding are likely higher than many people think, as has already been shown for perceptions of outpartisan ideologies and democratic commitment. If this is the case, then increasing feelings of being understand creates the clear potential for rapprochement and a route to designing successful interventions. Our paper provides the key foundation for the development of such potential interventions.

Results

Study 1: Cross-sectional survey

We conducted a cross-sectional online survey with approximately 2,000 respondents across 11 European and non-European countries (Austria, Canada, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States). Our primary independent variable, perceived misunderstanding, was adapted from Livingstone et al. (2020) to the context of partisan conflict. Respondents indicated the extent to which they felt vot-

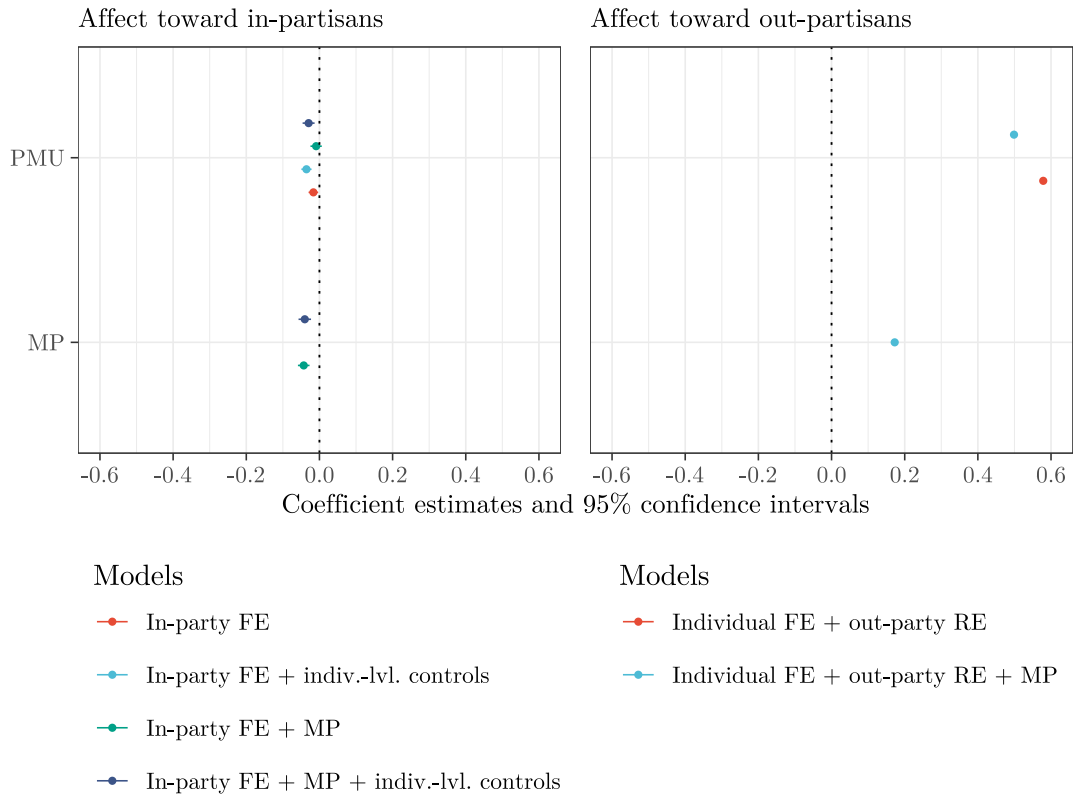

Figure 2: Perceived (mis)understanding and affective polarization
Standardized coefficients from regression models predicting affect toward inpartisans (left) and outpartisans (right) as a function of perceived (mis)understanding. Inpartisan models include inparty fixed effects (Model 1), add individual covariates (Model 2), and replicate both with meta-perceptions as an additional predictor (Models 3–4). Outpartisan models use stacked data with individual fixed effects and outparty random intercepts; the second model adds meta-perceptions. All coefficients are standardized for comparability.

ers of a country-specific set of outparties[6] understood their values, motives/intentions, and way of life. Responses were collected on a 7-point scale and reverse-coded so that higher values reflect greater perceived misunderstanding. We also measured meta-perceptions – how much respondents believed out-party voters like or dislike in-party voters – on an 11-point feeling thermometer, also reverse-coded.

To test our first hypothesis, that the more partisans feel misunderstood the more they are affectively polarized, we estimated four linear regression models with increasing

[6]Outparties are defined as all political parties other than the respondent's inparty, that is, the party they feel closest to.

complexity to assess the robustness of the association. Model 1 includes only in-party fixed effects. Model 2 adds individual-level covariates, such as age, gender, education, income, residential context, and political interest, attention and involvement. Models 3 and 4 replicate Models 1 and 2 but include meta-perceptions as an additional predictor. All coefficients are standardized to allow direct comparison across models.

The left panel in Figure 2 presents these standardized coefficients predicting affect toward in-partisans. The association between perceived misunderstanding and in-partisan affect is negative in all models, and statistically significant in three out of four (b range: -0.035 to $\breve{}0.009$; P range: < 0.05 to < 0.001). When including meta-perceptions as an additional predictor, the effect of misunderstanding attenuates slightly. Meta-perceptions themselves are also negatively associated with in-party affect (b range: -0.0433 to $\breve{}0.039$; $P < 0.001$), suggesting a potentially stronger role in shaping favoritism toward inpartisans. Full regression results are reported in Appendix A.

While the association between perceived (mis)understanding and affect toward in-partisans is relatively modest, the correlation with affect toward out-partisans is substantially stronger. For this and the subsequent analyses in Study 1, we use stacked data: each respondent contributes one observation per out-party. Using linear mixed-effects models with individual fixed effects and out-party random intercepts allows us to isolate within-individual variation in affective evaluations by controlling for all stable respondent-level characteristics.

We present results from two model specifications – one including meta-perceptions and one without. The standardized coefficients in the right panel of Figure 2 indicate a strong and statistically significant association between perceived (mis)understanding and affect toward out-party voters ($b = 0.579$ and $b = 0.499$; $P < .001$). These results suggest that the more partisans feel misunderstood by opposing partisans, the more they tend to dislike them. While meta-perceptions are also significantly associated with affect toward

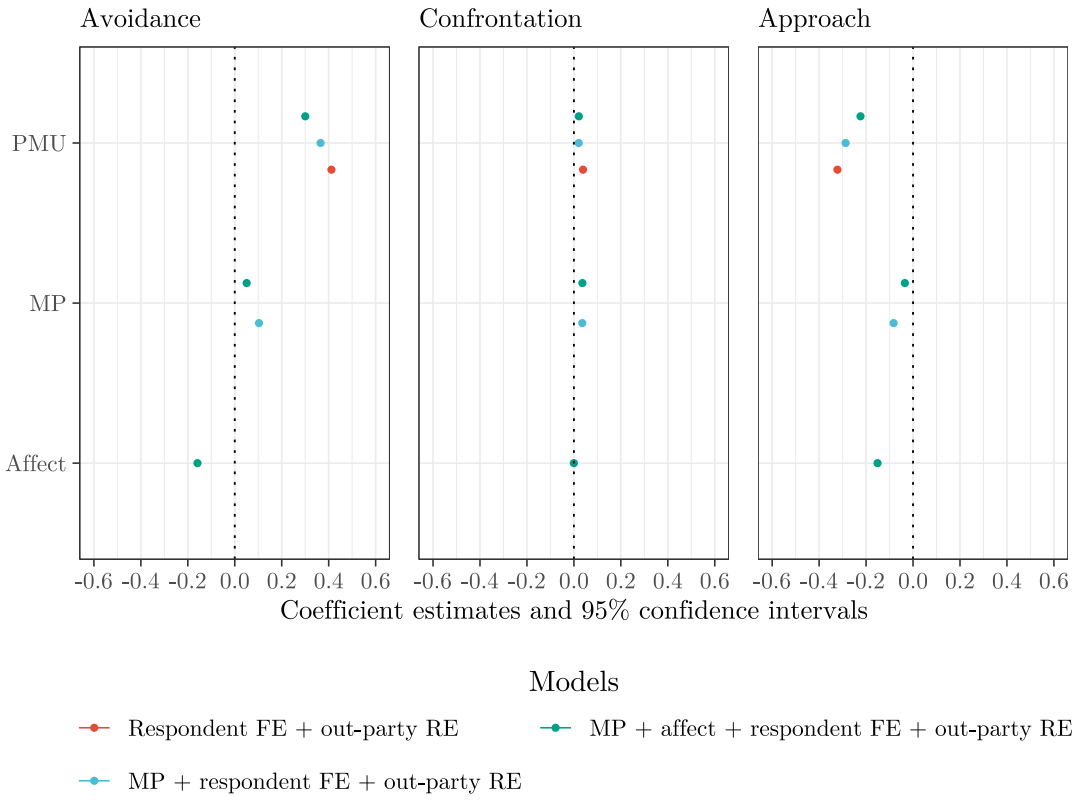

Figure 3: Perceived misunderstanding and action tendencies
Standardized coefficients from three linear mixed-effects models predicting action tendencies toward out-partisans: avoidance (left panel), confrontation (middle panel), and approach (right panel). The models use stacked data with one observation per respondent-outparty pair and include individual fixed effects and outparty random intercepts. Model 1 includes only perceived (mis)understanding; Model 2 adds meta-perceptions; Model 3 additionally controls for affect toward the respective group of outpartisans. All coefficients are standardized to allow for direct comparison across outcomes and model specifications.

out-partisans ($b = 0.173$; $P < .001$), the effect size is less than half that of perceived (mis)understanding.

So far, the results suggest that perceived misunderstanding is associated with affective polarization – primarily by increasing animosity toward out-partisans. We now examine behavioral outcomes, beginning with the avoidance tendency. While the modeling approach remains the same, we add a third model specification that also controls for affect toward the respective outparty.

The first panel of Figure 3 presents the standardized coefficients, which indicate that

the more people feel misunderstood, the more they tend to avoid outpartisans (b range: 0.300 to 0.412; $P < .001$). Notably, even when controlling for meta-perceptions and affect, the coefficient remains substantial and statistically significant ($b = 0.300$; $P < .001$). Moreover, both meta-perceptions ($b = 0.103$ and $b = 0.051$; $P < .001$) and affect ($b = 0.159$; $P < .001$) are positively and significantly associated with the tendency to avoid outpartisans, though to a much lower extent than perceived (mis)understanding.

The middle panel of Figure 3 shows weaker but consistent positive associations between perceived (mis)understanding and the tendency to confront outpartisans. Specifically, the more partisans feel misunderstood, the more likely they are to argue with outpartisans (b range: 0.021 to 0.039; $P < .001$). While affect does not appear to be associated with confrontational tendencies, meta-perceptions show a similar predictive strength to perceived misunderstanding ($b = 0.036$ and $b = 0.036$; $P < .001$).

The negative associations shown in the third panel of Figure 3 suggest that the more partisans feel misunderstood, the less likely they are to express positive approach tendencies toward outpartisans (b range: -0.322 to -0.224; $P < .001$). Notably, this relationship remains robust even when controlling for meta-perceptions and affect ($b = -0.224$; $P < .001$). Meta-perceptions ($b = -0.083$ and $b = -0.035$; $P < .001$) and affect ($b = -0.151$; $P < .001$) are also negatively associated with approach tendencies, but their effects are weaker compared to perceived (mis)understanding.

Study 2: Cognitive interview experiment

Study 1 provides strong correlational evidence that the more partisans feel misunderstood by opposing party voters, the more they express in-group favoritism and out-group hostility and tend to avoid or confront rather than approach opposing party voters. However, an important follow-up question arises: are the concepts of perceived understanding and meta-perception distinct?

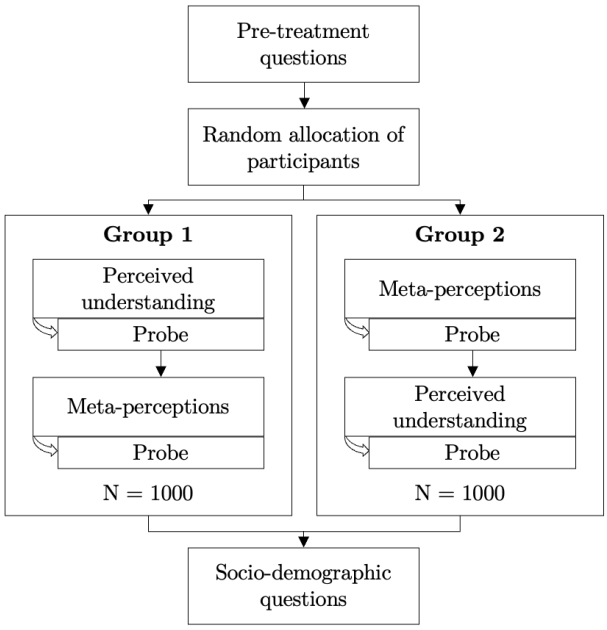

Figure 4: Design of cognitive interview experiment.

In most cases, we find that meta-perceptions (i.e., the belief about how much out-partisans like or dislike one's fellow partisans) are similarly associated with these outcomes. However, the strength of these associations is consistently weaker compared to perceived understanding. Nevertheless, this raises the possibility of conceptual overlap. In particular, the simpler nature of meta-perceptions might lead respondents to conflate the two concepts – thinking not in terms of understanding but merely liking – thereby introducing measurement error that could bias our inferences.

To investigate this, we conducted a pre-registered cognitive interview study to examine respondents' spontaneous mental associations – what Zaller (1992) referred to as "top-of-the-head" considerations – when answering survey questions about perceived understanding and meta-perceptions. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: in Group 1, the perceived understanding question preceded the meta-perception question; in Group 2, the order was reversed. After each closed-ended question, an open-ended probe asked participants to explain their response. We manually coded these explanations into three mutually exclusive categories: perceived understanding content, meta-perception

content, or other content.

Below, we report group comparisons using two-proportion z-tests. All comparisons are based on differences in the proportion of responses falling into each content category. Figure 4 illustrates the experimental design and helps interpret the comparisons.

We first compare the initial probes across groups to assess whether the two concepts elicit different associations when asked first. The first probe in Group 1 (perceived understanding question first) contained a significantly higher proportion of perceived understanding content than the first probe in Group 2 (meta-perception question first; Group 1: 0.658; Group 2: 0.142; $P < 0.001$). Conversely, the first probe in Group 2 elicited a significantly higher proportion of meta-perception content than the first probe in Group 1 (Group 1: 0.108; Group 2: 0.633; $P < 0.001$). These initial findings support the claim that perceived understanding and meta-perceptions are empirically distinct and trigger different spontaneous associations.

We next examine potential priming effects, i.e. whether the content of responses to the second question is influenced by the first. If no such effects are observed, this further supports the distinctiveness of the two concepts. Comparing the perceived understanding probe across both groups reveals no significant difference in the proportion of perceived understanding content (Group 1: 0.658; Group 2: 0.673; $P > 0.05$), and no difference in meta-perception content within the perceived understanding probes (Group 1: 0.108; Group 2: 0.087; $P > 0.05$). These results suggest that answering the meta-perception question first does not alter how respondents interpret the subsequent perceived understanding question.

However, we find some evidence of priming in when considering the meta-perception probes. Specifically, the proportion of perceived understanding content in the meta-perception probe is significantly higher in Group 1, where the perceived understanding question came first (Group 1: 0.205; Group 2: 0.142; $P < 0.05$). This priming may

suggest that perceived understanding may play a more central cognitive role than meta-perceptions – an interpretation that aligns with our findings from Study 1. At the same time, however, the proportion of meta-perception content in the meta-perception probe does not differ significantly across groups (Group 1: 0.625; Group 2: 0.633; $P > 0.05$), indicating that the core interpretation of the meta-perception item remains stable.

Study 3: Experimental study

Although we have presented correlational evidence and experimental results suggesting that perceived understanding is conceptually distinct from meta-perceptions, a key question remains: Is perceived understanding causally linked to affective polarization and avoidance behavior? To address this, we plan to include a third study in which we experimentally manipulate perceptions of being understood.

Our initial idea is to inform participants that out-party voters understand them better than they might assume, thereby aiming to correct potential misperceptions. However, this approach poses a significant challenge, as there is no clear benchmark or "true" value for the level of understanding among opposing partisans. We would greatly welcome any suggestions or ideas on potential manipulation strategies or relevant literature.

Discussion and conclusion

TBA

Methods

Study 1: Cross-sectional survey

Sample

The cross-sectional survey has been designed and carried out by the PARTISAN Project that is funded by European Research Council (Grant number: FA497024). The data includes 11 countries (Austria, Canada, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States). We selected these countries to cover a broad spectrum of political contexts including the effective number of electoral parties, left-right, economic and social ideological polarization, electoral and party-systems, and the presence or absence of a radical party. While we focused on European countries we also included non-European countries such as the US and Canada which increases the generalizability of our findings.

Invitations to participate were distributed by professional online-panel providers. Survey respondents received information about the survey length, incentives, and a secure link to the web questionnaire. Samples in all 13 countries were drawn from quota-based online panels that were calibrated to the most recent national benchmarks for age, gender, education, and geographic region. Panel partners handled recruitment and delivery of fieldwork, while the PARTISAN team jointly oversaw fieldwork progress, conducted real-time quality checks, and monitored quota attainment to ensure that each sample remained nationally representative as much as possible. Please note that due to the online mode of the survey, only citizens with internet access were able to participate in the study and that some demographics remain hard to-reach online. The concrete survey companies and exact field dates can be found in Appendix A.2.

Data quality

Several procedures were implemented to ensure data integrity and respondent attention.

Bot Prevention: Right after the consent form, a Captcha challenge was presented at survey entry to block automated submissions. Eligibility Screening: In the first block of questions, respondents were asked to indicate whether they are citizen and what their place of residence is. Respondents were filtered out if they were not a citizen of the country or if they did not live in the country. Two Attention Checks. The concrete attention checks as well rate of passing them per country can be found in Appendix A.2. Note that the no respondent is excluded based on a failure in the attention check for the main analysis. Robustness models are runned with only those respondents passing the attention checks.

Operationalization of in- and outparty

The inparty is identified through asking respondents if they think of themselves as close to any particular party. A follow-up question asking if they feel a little closer to one of the parties is asked when no party was chosen. If still no party has been chosed, vote preference is used. Robustness models test if the exclusion of those for which the follow-up or vote preference question were used made a difference.

In countries with multi-party systems we asked party-specific variables such as perceived (mis)understanding, action tendencies, meta-perceptions or feeling thermometers for a set of five parties. Each of these parties that are different to the inparty are treated as outparties. The parties we asked the questions for can be found in Appendix A.2.

Operationalization of key variables

Perceived (mis)understanding is measured using three items adapted from Livingstone et al. (2020). Respondents indicated the extent to which they felt voters of opposing

parties understood their values, motives and intentions, and way of life on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Items were reverse-coded so that higher values indicated greater perceived misunderstanding. Full item wordings are provided in Appendix A.3.

Meta-perceptions have been operationalized similarly than (Lees and Cikara, 2020) and Moore-Berg et al. (2020b). We simply asked respondents what they think to what extent voters of a party like or dislike voters of the in-party on a 11-point scale (0 = strongly dislike, 10 = strongly like). Items were reverse-coded so that higher values indicated greater perceived dislike.

Similarly, *affect* is operationalized. The same 11-point scale is used for the question to extent someone likes or dislikes voters of certain parties. Items were reverse-coded so that higher values indicated greater dislike.

The action tendencies (avoidance, confrontation and approach) as based on the work of Mackie et al. (2000) and Livingstone et al. (2020). We asked respondents to report to what extent voters of different parties in general make them want to (1) avoid them (2) argue with them and (3) talk to them.

For testing the hypothesis about inparty favoritism we applied a set of control variables which included: age, gender, education, income, residential context, and political interest, attention and involvement.

Statistical analysis

To test our hypotheses, we estimated a series of linear and linear mixed-effects regression models. Analyses were conducted separately for different outcome variables: affect toward inpartisans, affect toward outpartisans, and action tendencies (avoidance, confrontation, and approach).

For analyses predicting inpartisan affect, we estimated four ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models. The first model included only inparty fixed effects to account for

systematic differences between partisan groups. The second model added individual-level covariates, including age, gender, education, income, residential context (urban vs. rural), political interest, attention, and involvement. Models 3 and 4 replicated the previous two while adding meta-perceptions as an additional predictor. All continuous predictors were standardized (z-scores) to enable direct comparison of effect sizes.

Analyses predicting affect toward outpartisans and behavioral tendencies used a stacked data format, in which each respondent contributed one observation per outparty. We employed linear mixed-effects models with respondent fixed effects and outparty random intercepts. For each outcome, we estimated three models: Model 1 included only perceived misunderstanding; Model 2 added meta-perceptions; and Model 3 additionally controlled for affect toward the respective outparty. This sequential model specification allowed us to assess the robustness of the association between perceived misunderstanding and the outcomes of interest.

Statistical significance was assessed at conventional thresholds (two-sided tests, $P < .05$, $P < .01$ and $P < .001$). Visualizations display standardized coefficients with 95% confidence intervals. Full regression tables are reported in the Appendix A.

Ethics

The study was reviewed and approved by the institutional review board (IRB) of the University of Vienna. All participants provided informed consent before beginning the survey. The consent form outlined the study's purpose, procedures, data protection measures, and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were explicitly informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or consequences. All data were collected and analyzed in accordance with ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects.

Data and code availability and pre-registration

The data and analysis code used in this study will be made publicly available on AUSSDA upon publication. The study design, hypotheses, and analysis plan were pre-registered prior to data collection and are accessible at OSF. All analyses adhered to the pre-registered plan unless explicitly stated otherwise.

Study 2: Cognitive Interview experiment

Study design

To assess whether perceived understanding and meta-perceptions elicit empirically distinct cognitive responses, we conducted a preregistered cognitive interview experiment using a between-subjects design. After providing informed consent, participants completed a battery of socio-demographic items as well as questions on political attitudes and social networks. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of two experimental groups. In Group 1, they first answered the perceived understanding question, followed by the meta-perception question; in Group 2, the order was reversed. Each closed-ended question was immediately followed by an open-ended probe asking participants to elaborate on their response. This question-order design allows us to examine whether the two concepts trigger distinct cognitive associations.

The perceived understanding item asked participants to evaluate how well they believe voters of an opposing party understand people who vote for their own party. Unlike Study1, we combined three related items into a single question (see AppendixB for wording). The meta-perception item was identical to that used in Study 1. After each item, participants were prompted with an open-ended question: "Can you explain why you chose this answer?"

Sample

A total of 2,000 participants were recruited through Prolific and completed the survey online. Eligibility was restricted to U.S. citizens aged 18 years or older. To ensure diversity and comparability, we implemented national quotas based on age, gender, partisanship, and geographic region. Descriptive statistics for the final sample are reported in Appendix B.

Open-ended response coding

Open-ended responses were independently coded for the presence or absence of two conceptually distinct elements: (1) perceived understanding content and (2) meta-perception content. Because responses could include elements of both categories, the codes were not mutually exclusive. Any remaining content that did not clearly fit either category was labeled as (3) other content. Coding was performed by the corresponding author and a trained research assistant, both blind to experimental condition. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Inter-coder reliability was [INSERT Cohen's κ], indicating [INSERT interpretation, e.g., substantial agreement].

Statistical analysis

To assess the empirical distinctiveness of perceived understanding and meta-perceptions, as well as potential question-order effects, we conducted two-proportion z-tests comparing the prevalence of each coded content category across experimental conditions. All analyses are based on differences in proportions. Statistical significance was evaluated using two-sided tests with conventional thresholds ($P < 0.05$).

Ethics statement

This study was reviewed and approved by the departmental ethics committee of the Department of Government at the University of Vienna. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation and were debriefed following completion of the study.

Data and code availability

All data and analysis code used in this study will be made publicly available via the Austrian Social Science Data Archive (AUSSDA) upon publication. The study was preregistered on the Open Science Framework and can be accessed at [INSERT OSF URL].

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Appendix

(*Preliminary and incomplete*)

Table of Contents

A: Additional Information on Cross-Sectional Study

Regression Outputs

	In-party FE	In-party FE + indiv.-lvl. controls	In-party FE + MP	In-party FE + MP + indiv.-lvl. controls
Average PMU	−0.017*	−0.035***	−0.009	−0.029***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.008)
Average meta-perception			−0.043***	−0.039***
			(0.008)	(0.009)
Positive partisanship		0.203***		0.185***
		(0.006)		(0.006)
Ideology		0.024***		0.024***
		(0.003)		(0.004)
Pol. interest/attention		0.026**		0.014
		(0.010)		(0.011)
Pol. involvement		0.049***		0.048***
		(0.006)		(0.007)
Age		0.003***		0.003***
		(0.000)		(0.000)
Education (ISCED 1)		0.176		0.093
		(0.135)		(0.139)
Education (ISCED 2)		0.234+		0.166
		(0.129)		(0.133)
Education (ISCED 3)		0.240+		0.168
		(0.128)		(0.132)
Education (ISCED 4)		0.161		0.109
		(0.129)		(0.134)
Education (ISCED 5)		0.195		0.131
		(0.128)		(0.132)
Education (ISCED 6)		0.161		0.126
		(0.131)		(0.137)
Upper middle class		0.110+		0.157*
		(0.061)		(0.069)
Middle class		0.099+		0.130+
		(0.059)		(0.067)
Lower middle class		0.091		0.141*
		(0.060)		(0.068)
Working class		0.166**		0.203**
		(0.061)		(0.069)
Lower class		0.182**		0.217**
		(0.065)		(0.073)
Income		0.011***		0.012***
		(0.003)		(0.003)
Num.Obs.	14 716	11 537	12 682	9741
R2	0.378	0.474	0.408	0.502
R2 Adj.	0.374	0.469	0.404	0.496
AIC	34 815.7	25 340.2	29 218.0	20 781.2
BIC	35 529.8	26 097.6	29 910.6	21 514.0
Log.Lik.	−17 313.855	−12 567.114	−14 515.989	−10 288.593
RMSE	0.78	0.72	0.76	0.70

+ p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

Table A1: Associations with in-party affect
TEST.

	Individual FE + out-party RE	Individual FE + out-party RE + MP
PMU	0.579***	0.499***
	(0.003)	(0.004)
Meta-perception		0.173***
		(0.003)
Num.Obs.	54 692	50 944
R2 Marg.	0.634	0.653
R2 Cond.	0.659	0.671
AIC	91 945.7	83 619.9
BIC	91 999.1	83 681.8
ICC	0.1	0.1
RMSE	0.56	0.55

+ p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

Table A2: Associations with out-party affect
TEST.

	Individual FE + out-party RE	Individual FE + out-party RE + MP	Individual FE + out-party RE + MP + affect
PMU	0.412***	0.365***	0.300***
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Meta-perception		0.103***	0.051***
		(0.004)	(0.004)
Affect			0.159***
			(0.004)
Num.Obs.	56 294	51 876	50 856
R2 Marg.	0.635	0.632	0.645
R2 Cond.	0.641	0.638	0.649
AIC	104 169.8	96 385.7	92 880.3
BIC	104 223.5	96 447.7	92 951.0
ICC	0.0	0.0	0.0
RMSE	0.61	0.61	0.60

+ p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

Table A3: Associations with avoidance
TEST.

	Respondent FE + out-party RE	MP + respondent FE + out-party RE	MP + affect + respondent FE + out-party RE
PMU	0.039***	0.021***	0.021***
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.005)
Meta-perception		0.036***	0.036***
		(0.004)	(0.004)
Affect			0.000
			(0.004)
Num.Obs.	56 302	51 885	50 864
R2 Marg.	0.624	0.613	0.610
R2 Cond.	0.627	0.616	0.613
AIC	106 931.3	100 361.3	98 854.4
BIC	106 985.0	100 423.3	98 925.1
ICC	0.0	0.0	0.0
RMSE	0.62	0.64	0.64

+ p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

Table A4: Associations with confrontation
TEST.

	Respondent FE + out-party RE	MP + respondent FE + out-party RE	MP + affect + respondent FE + out-party RE
PMU	−0.322***	−0.287***	−0.224***
	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Meta-perception		−0.083***	−0.035***
		(0.003)	(0.004)
Affect			−0.151***
			(0.004)
Num.Obs.	56 290	51 873	50 853
R2 Marg.	0.627	0.620	0.631
R2 Cond.	0.636	0.628	0.637
AIC	101 168.3	94 150.7	90 848.8
BIC	101 222.0	94 212.7	90 919.5
ICC	0.0	0.0	0.0
RMSE	0.59	0.60	0.59

+ p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

Table A5: Associations with approach
TEST.

Data Collection and Quality

Data Collection

Table A6: Data collection details by country and survey company

Country	Survey Company	Start Date	End Date	Days in Field
Austria	Dynata	11.04.2024	23.04.2024	13
Canada	Léger	11.04.2024	23.04.2024	12
Czechia		27.9.2024	11.10.2024	15
Denmark	Norstat	16.10.2024	04.11.2024	20
Germany	Bilendi	10.04.2024	23.04.2024	14
Hungary	Polski	03.10.2024	22.10.2024	20
Italy	Norstat	23.9.2024	08.10.2024	16
Netherlands	Norstat	07.10.2024	30.10.2024	23
Poland	Norstat	16.10.2024	12.11.2024	28
Spain	Netquest	23.09.2024	04.10.2024	13
Turkey	Dynata	08.05.2024	03.06.2024	27
United Kingdom	Bilendi	13.06.2024	23.06.2024	11
United States	Dynata	02.04.2024	19.04.2024	18
United Kingdom pilot		12.12.2023	27.12.2023	15

Attention Checks

An initial attention check appeared in the first block of questions: “To make sure that the questionnaire was completed by a human respondent and not a “bot”, please click 5 (five) below." If they selected anything else, the respondents were filtered out. [information on how much this happened?]

A second check (“Please select 9”) was placed in the latter half of the survey. This attention check appeared in the question block asking about the perceptions of ideological positions of different party voters. A “For quality purposes, please select 9" option was integrated among the party names into the question(“And where would you place the supporters of the following political parties on the same scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?"). Respondents were not filtered out if they failed this attention check. However, users of this data can use this additional attention measure to exclude inattentive respondents. Table A7 shows the rate of passing this attention check by country.

Table A7: Attention Check by Country

Country	Failed	Passed	Total
Austria	272	1893	2165
Canada	465	1576	2041
Czech Republic	563	1456	2019
Germany	392	1685	2077
Hungary	651	1376	2027
Italy	433	1998	2431
Netherlands	363	1648	2011
Poland	663	1368	2031
Spain	321	1702	2023
Turkey	542	1458	2000
United Kingdom	549	1543	2092
United States	373	1633	2006
Total	**6636**	**22402**	**29038**

Set of Parties

Below, is a list of parties which we asked respondents to answer questions about perceived (mis)understanding, meta-perceptions, action tendencies or feeling thermometers about:

Austria: ÖVP, SPÖ, NEOS, Grüne, FPÖ

Canada: Conservative Party, New Democratic Party (NDP), Liberal Party, Bloc Québécois

Czechia: Akce nespokojených občanů (ANO), Občanská demokratická strana (ODS), Starostové a nezávislí (STAN), Pirátská strana, Svoboda a přímá demokracie (SPD)

Germany: CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, Grüne, AfD

Hungary: Fidesz, TISZA, DK–MSZP–Párbeszéd pártszövetség, Mi Hazánk Mozgalom

Italy: Fratelli d'Italia, Partito Democratico, Forza Italia, Movimento 5 Stelle, Lega

Netherlands: Christen-Democratisch Appèl (CDA), GroenLinks-PvdA, Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD), Democraten 66 (D66), Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)

Poland: Zjednoczona Prawica (ZP), Koalicja Obywatelska (KO), Trzecia Droga (TD), Lewica, Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość

Spain: Partido Popular (PP), Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), Podemos, Sumar, Vox

Turkey: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AK Parti), Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP), İYİ Parti, DEM Parti, Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP)

UK: Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Green Party, Reform UK (formerly Brexit Party)

US: Republican Party, Democratic Party

Measures

Perceived (mis)understanding:

The following questions are about what you believe supporters of different parties think about typical supporters of [in-party]. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

In general, typical supporters of [out-party]...

- understand [in-party] supporters' values.
- understand [in-party] supporters' motives and intentions.
- understand [in-party] supporters' way of life.

Answer scale:

1. Strongly disagree
2. Moderately disagree
3. Slightly disagree
4. Neither agree nor disagree
5. Slightly agree
6. Moderately agree
7. Strongly agree

Meta-perceptions

Please tell us to what extent you think typical voters of the following parties like or dislike typical voters of [in-party].

- How much voters of the [party 1] like or dislike [in-party].
- How much voters of the [party 2] like or dislike [in-party].
- How much voters of the [party 3] like or dislike [in-party].

- How much voters of the [party 4] like or dislike [in-party].
- How much voters of the [party 5] like or dislike [in-party].

Answer scale:

0. = Strongly dislike
1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10. = Strongly like
98. Don't know

Affect

Now, we'd like to know what you think about supporters of different political parties. How much do you like or dislike the supporters of each political party?

- Party 1
- Party 2
- Party 3
- Party 4
- Party 5

Answer scale (11-point scale):

0. Strongly dislike
   ⋮

10. Strongly like

Action tendencies

In your daily life, you sometimes meet people who are supporters of different parties. On the following pages, we will ask you how you would interact with these supporters.

Please indicate the extent to which supporters of [PARTY] in general make you want to...

Items:

- avoid them?
- talk to them?
- argue with them?

Answer scale (7-point scale):

1. Not at all
   ⋮
7. Completely

B: Additional Information on Cognitive Interview Study