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Political Partisan Prejudice: Selective Distortion and Weighting of Evaluative Categories in College Admissions Applications

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Two methods by which people make prejudicial yet justifiable judgments were assessed in a simulated college admissions paradigm in which participants evaluated 2 applications. In the preference condition, the stronger applicant was described as a member of a different political party than the participant. In the control condition, no political party was indicated. Supporting a political partisan prejudice effect, among strong partisans, the stronger applicant was favored in the control condition, but the weaker applicant was favored in the preference condition. No effect was found for weak partisans. Additionally, participants supported their biases by altering the importance of (Study 1) and distorting the strength of (Study 2) different types of application information.

In recent years, the media have generated much speculation about the politically divided nature of the United States electorate. Von Drehle (2004) stated, "from Congress to the airwaves to the bestseller lists, American politics appears to be hardening into uncompromising camps, increasingly identified with the two parties" (p. A01). Some headlines even contain phrases such as "mean season of politics" (Fournier, 2004) and "contentious and divided electorate" (Turner, 2004), which suggest a political discourse that is more heated and hostile than good-natured and respectful.

Journalists are not alone in claiming that an increased sociopolitical polarization has developed in the United States in recent years. Using data from the General Social Survey and the National Election Studies, Evans (2003) updated a previous investigation (DiMaggio, Evans, & Bryson, 1996) into the sociopolitical polarization hypothesis. The update supported the original findings by suggesting that while there does not appear to be a general polarization of sociopolitical attitudes, there does appear to be a polarization of politically relevant attitudes among those who identify with one of the two major political parties (or with the terms *liberal* and *conservative*).

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The increase in political partisanship (also see Hetherington, 2001) has been found in the voting records of Congressional representatives (Poole & Rosenthal, 2001) and the general public (Bartels, 2002). So, it seems that accumulating evidence supports the notion that those who self-identify as conservative/Republican or liberal/Democrat have become quite polarized in their sociopolitical attitudes and voting behaviors. What is less clear is whether the polarization is a result of a crystallization of attitudes based on sincere and rational analyses or strict adherence to the in-group norms prescribed by the political party to which one self-identifies.

One very general goal of the current research is to investigate whether or not political party identification is a group designation that leads to the kind of in-group/out-group prejudice and discrimination that has been the subject of so much research attention when applied to other group designations (e.g., ethnicity, gender, sexual preference). The current research will investigate the possibility of a political partisan prejudice that is based on the assignment of members of political parties to the in-group and the out-group and operates according to key theoretical principles of intergroup prejudice and discrimination.

Social Identity Theory

The importance of political party membership to political attitudes and behavior is certainly nothing new, but scholarly research has tended to focus on issues like the stability of partisanship over time (Niemi & Weisberg, 1993), rather than its psychological functions. However, Greene (1999, 2004) examined political party identification through the theoretical lens of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social identity theory proposes that people naturally categorize themselves and others into in-groups and out-groups based on salient social categories. The categorization process provides people with both a definition of group characteristics and a prescription for appropriate beliefs and behaviors of group members that serves to accentuate differences between the in-group and the out-group. Categorization coupled with self-enhancement motives produce in-group favoritism in evaluations of and behavior toward group members. It follows logically that political party identification might be one such group membership distinction that operates according to the principles of social identity theory. Greene (2004) supported this hypothesis by showing that partisan identity significantly predicted a variety of political attitudes and behaviors (also see Hulsizer, Munro, Fagerlin, & Taylor, 2004).

The social identity approach to political partisanship suggests that political party identification guides evaluations of political information and

perceptions of political events. That is, new political information is assimilated to the existing party commitment. Some have suggested, however, that the sequence is reversed. This more rational view of partisan bias states that political party orientation is simply the result of a running tally of evaluations of political information. Gerber and Green (1998), for example, proposed a Bayesian model of political learning. This distinction between "rational" models of political partisanship, like Gerber and Green's model and "rationalizing" models of political partisanship like social identity theory mirror the longstanding social psychological debates between purely cognitive and motivational explanations of such phenomena as perceptual defense (Howes & Soloman, 1950), self-serving attributions (Miller & Ross, 1975), and biased assimilation (Berkowitz & Devine, 1989; Lord, 1989).

Like the cognition-motivation debate, in which an accumulation of evidence eventually made the case for motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990), the case for a motivational model of political partisanship is accumulating. Evidence indicating that political categorization defines and prescribes opinions (Cohen, 2003; Rahm, Krosnick, & Breuning, 1994), that partisan biases exist in the perceptions of actual political events (Bartels, 2002), and that in-group favoritism is driven by self-enhancement biases that involve emotion (Lodge & Taber, 2005; Morris, Squires, Taber, & Lodge, 2003; Munro et al., 2002; Redlawsk, 2002) is inconsistent with a purely cognitive, rational model of political processing.

The aforementioned studies are consistent with the social identity analysis of political information processing that explains partisan bias as being caused, at least partly, by emotions and self-enhancing motivations. In these studies, the typical paradigm involves measuring political partisans' responses to political information in a way that reveals bias in judgments about that information. While these studies provide important evidence that the perceptions of political partisans are biased, social identity theory suggests that group identification extends beyond simple perceptual biases into discriminatory behaviors.

One of the important findings that led to the creation of social identity theory is the discriminatory behavior of participants in the minimal group paradigm. In this paradigm, the simple assignment of participants to groups based on trivial distinctions led to a competitive accrual of rewards favoring the in-group (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). The discriminatory behavior was based on no history of intergroup conflict; it was based solely on the categorization process and in-group identification. This aspect of social identity theory has not received research attention when applied to political partisans. That is, while research is accumulating that suggests partisan bias in the perception of politicians, political events, or political information, little research has addressed specific prejudicial or discrimina-

tory practices between members of different political parties. Furnham (1996) showed that political party (among a host of other factors) affected decisions about who should receive organ transplants. However, this was just one small component of a study with broader goals. The current research will test the social identity theory prediction that prejudice and discrimination exist between members of political parties by directly investigating the possibility of discriminatory practices against members of a political party out-group on a decision task that is irrelevant to politics.

Expression of Prejudice and Discrimination

A common theme in recent models of prejudice, most often applied to racial prejudice, is that the decline of blatant bigotry has been replaced by a more subtle form of prejudice that can be justified as egalitarian (Crandall & Eshelman, 2003; Crosby, Bromley, & Saxe, 1980; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Katz & Hass, 1988; McConahay, 1986; Sears, 1988). For example, a recent meta-analysis showed that Blacks were generally just as likely to be helped as Whites, unless the situation contained race-unrelated reasons for not helping (e.g., the helping behavior would be riskier or more time-consuming; Saucier, Miller, & Doucet, 2005). The authors suggested that these results are consistent with theories like aversive racism (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986) and the justification-suppression model of the expression of prejudice (Crandall & Eshelman, 2003), which contend that the prevailing norm of egalitarianism prevents the expression of discrimination among Whites against Blacks, but that such discrimination is allowed in situations in which the discriminatory behavior could be attributed to justifiable and nonprejudiced rationales.

The notion that prejudice is expressed only in ways that are socially acceptable is consistent with research on motivated reasoning and self-enhancement. Pyszczynski and Greenberg (1987) suggested that in order to accept a preferred, self-enhancing conclusion, one must maintain an "illusion of objectivity" (p. 333) about how it was derived (e.g., Cohen, 2003). For example, if the conclusion was logically acceptable to a dispassionate observer, then the person could feel justified that the conclusion was made in a fair, objective manner. Pyszczynski and Greenberg's illusion of objectivity is supported by research on the bias blind spot (Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002). People perceive themselves, when asked, to be less susceptible than others to self-enhancement biases. Pronin et al., for example, showed that in a group of people who made self-serving judgments, participants denied the presence of bias in their own judgments, while reporting that the judgments of others were likely biased. In other words, people maintain a sense of fairness about their own judgments, even when those judgments can be shown to be

self-serving. In the realm of political attitudes, partisans believe that they and their political groups are less influenced by media campaign information than are their political adversaries (Duck, Hogg, & Terry, 1995) and that their own political views are based on a rational analysis of objective reality, while their adversaries' views are based on an irrational adherence to political ideology (Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995).

It is not surprising that a closer examination of research on motivational biases reveals that while people often arrive at preferred conclusions, there are usually caveats based on the constraints of reality. Rather than simply believing what one wants to believe, people seem to nudge their judgments toward what they want to believe if such judgments can be supported by the evidence. For example, Sanitioso, Kunda, and Fong (1990) showed that both introverts and extraverts rated themselves as being more introverted or extraverted, depending on which trait participants had been led to believe was more desirable. At the same time, however, extraverts rated themselves as being more extraverted than the introverts, regardless of which trait was deemed more desirable. In other words, people realistically assessed their positions on the trait dimension, while also shading their self-judgments in the desired direction. A similar effect was found among members of two natural groups in their evaluations of group-linked traits (Ellemers, Van Rijswijk, Roefs, & Simons, 1997). While in-group biases were found on certain traits, participants acknowledged well known trait differences between the groups (as measured by the judgments of participants in neither group), even when such acknowledgements did not favor the in-group.

Given the strong social norm of egalitarianism, as well as the negative connotation of phrases like "playing partisan politics" that are sometimes used by political elites to criticize the opposition, it seems likely that political partisan prejudice would be expressed only in situations in which it could be disguised as being an objective judgment unbiased by political leanings. Thus, in addition to testing whether political partisan prejudice exists, the current research will assess whether or not such prejudice conforms to the idea that its expression will be somewhat covert. Additionally, specific techniques by which partisans justify their prejudicial judgments will be investigated.

Biased Weighting

The studies discussed in the previous section all support the notion that people can be adept at making preference-consistent conclusions, including ones that are consistent with existing prejudices, that are within the boundaries of what an objective observer might consider reasonable. How are

people able to manage this feat? What techniques do people use to make judgments that support existing attitudes and beliefs, but also appear to be fair and unbiased? One possible solution is for the motivated judge to weight the importance of different judgment-relevant criteria in a way that favors the preferred outcome. Uhlmann and Cohen (2005) showed that participants altered the importance of hiring criteria to favor a man for a traditionally male job and a woman for a traditionally female job. For example, for the job of police chief, streetwise credentials were deemed as more important criteria than were educational credentials when the male applicant was streetwise and the female applicant was educated. However, more importance was placed on educational credentials when the male applicant had a stronger educational background and the female applicant was streetwise. In a similar set of studies, Norton, Vandello, and Darley (2004) used the term *casuistry* to explain how people manipulate the value of qualification criteria to justify the selection of their preferred candidates in employment and college admissions decisions (also see Norton, Sommers, Vandello, & Darley, 2006).

Another strategy that would allow people to make preference-consistent conclusions while not appearing to be biased would be to target ambiguous information. The range of justifiable evaluations of ambiguous information is much greater, so motivated distortions should be more likely to occur in response to ambiguous information (Hsee, 1996). Supporting this reasoning, Dunning, Meyerowitz, and Holzberg (1989; also see Hayes & Dunning, 1997) conducted an investigation of people's self-assessments of their relative standing on several traits varying in the degree of ambiguity. For ambiguous traits, traits that could be defined in multiple ways (e.g., sensitive, neurotic), people, on average, rated themselves as being somewhat better than average (e.g., more sensitive, less neurotic). However, for less ambiguous traits (e.g., mathematical, gossipy), people, on average, rated themselves as being about average. The tendency for ambiguous information to be the target of bias is not limited to self-judgments. In a college admissions paradigm, Hodson, Dovidio, and Gaertner (2002) found that participants high in prejudice toward Blacks discriminated against a Black applicant when the scholastic achievement and college board scores were mixed, but not when they were uniformly strong or weak (also see Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000).

In the current research, a preference was implanted based on prejudice against members of another political party. Study 1 combines the idea that people justify their preferred decisions by altering the importance of credentials (Norton et al., 2004; Uhlmann & Cohen, 2005) with the idea that ambiguous credentials are especially targeted for distortion (Hodson et al., 2002). So, unlike the Norton et al. and Uhlmann and Cohen studies, in which one type of credential unambiguously favored the preferred applicant and one type of credential unambiguously favored the nonpreferred applicant,

the current studies include one type of credential that unambiguously favors the nonpreferred applicant and one credential that is ambiguous as to who it favors. We believe that despite its ambiguity, the ambiguous credential will be rated as being more important because it is more amenable to the kind of distortion that would justify selection of the preferred applicant. In other words, the current design will test, in a way that is stronger than any previous study, the degree to which credentials, even ones that do not clearly favor the preferred choice, are manipulated to support a preferred decision. Additionally, of course, it is the first study to test whether or not political party identification can serve as the motivating force for these discriminatory decisions.

Study 1

The biased weighting hypothesis was tested in a college admissions decision paradigm (for other research using college admissions paradigms, see Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Hodson et al., 2002; Norton et al., 2004) in which participants were asked to play the role of a college admissions director. They reviewed the application materials of two prospective students and chose one of the students to invite for an "on-campus interview." The applications included information varying on the degree of ambiguity. The educational achievement histories of the applicants (e.g., SAT scores, class rank) were used as information that rather unambiguously supported one applicant over the other. The recommendation statements written by high school teachers of the applicants were used as information that was more ambiguous with regard to which applicant was superior.[2]

The political party affiliation of one of the applicants was manipulated to implant a preference against that applicant in half of the participants (the applicant was presented as being a member of a political party opposing the participant's preferred political party). It was expected that, when a political party preference was implanted, political partisan prejudice would be found whereby the applicant in question would be chosen for the interview less frequently than when no political party preference was implanted. Additionally, when a political preference was implanted, participants would support their decisions by placing more relative importance on the ambiguous recommendation information than on the educational achievement information, which unambiguously supported the nonpreferred applicant.

[2]A questionnaire that was given to 46 participants who did not participate in Studies 1 or 2 showed that they judged the letters of recommendation to be more ambiguous (a dictionary definition of *ambiguous* was provided) than the achievement histories, $t(45) = 3.49$, $p < .01$.

Method

Participants

At the beginning of the semester, a mass testing session for students who were enrolled in introductory psychology courses included two questions assessing participants' political preferences and their commitment levels. In a forced-choice format, participants were asked to indicate their preferred political party (Democrat or Republican). On a 9-point scale, participants rated "How strongly committed are you to the party you chose?" The commitment measure was used to measure partisanship.

Starting 9 weeks later in the semester, 61 participants (36 women, 25 men) volunteered to participate in the "College Admissions Study." Of the 61 participants, 35 preferred the Democratic party, while 24 preferred the Republican party (2 participants failed to identify either party). Most participants were European American ($n = 48$), and most were first-year students ($n = 50$).

Materials and Procedure

Participants were tested in small groups of 3 to 10 people. In addition to the consent form and an instruction sheet that participants read, the experimenter verbally stated that the goal of the study was to investigate the types of information that people use to make important decisions. Furthermore, participants were asked to imagine that they were college admissions officers with the goal of selecting the strongest, most qualified applicant for acceptance at the college. They would first review the actual written applications of two students who were currently attending the college at which the study was conducted and were waiting in another room. However, the task was to imagine that only one of the two applicants would be invited for an on-campus interview and potential acceptance, and the participant would have to select the superior applicant. After selecting the superior applicant, the experimenter informed participants that the selected applicant would then meet with those participants who chose him for a simulated group interview.

Applications. The experimenter then presented the participant with two admissions applications. Though they were fake, the applications were modeled after the actual application form used by the college's admissions office. To reduce the likelihood of the presence of any prejudices unrelated to political preferences, both applicants were 18-year-old White males from small cities within the state. The applications were constructed to be fairly

similar in all areas except the educational achievement history of the two applicants. For example, the same number of Advanced Placement classes were listed among high school classes that each applicant had taken. Also, for both applicants, the recommendation section consisted of a favorable recommendation (e.g., "enjoys participating in class discussions and always comes to class prepared") that contained one weakness (e.g., "has a hard time in one-on-one situations with other students, with his shyer side getting the better of him"). For the educational achievement history, the weaker applicant had slightly but consistently weaker numbers than the stronger applicant (class ranking, top 18% vs. top 12%; SAT score, 1230 vs. 1260; GPA, 3.58 vs. 3.79).

Preference manipulation. Participants were randomly assigned to either the preference or the control condition. In the preference condition, a political preference against the stronger applicant was implanted in his application by suggesting that he was an enthusiastic and active member of the political party opposing the participant's preference (as reported in the mass testing questionnaire). Specifically, Young Democrats or Young Republicans was listed as one extracurricular activity and one of the activities the applicant planned to continue in college. Also, one strength indicated by the recommendation writer stated that the stronger applicant "is passionate about his involvement in the Young [Democrats/Republicans] and has shown a great deal of maturity assisting in the presidential campaign of [Al Gore/George W. Bush]."

In the control condition, the application of the stronger applicant was identical to that of the preference condition, except that it contained no information regarding political party affiliation. In the place of Young Democrats/Young Republicans, Yearbook Staff was listed as an extracurricular activity. Also, the recommendation writer indicated that the stronger applicant "was passionate about his involvement in the Yearbook staff and has shown a great deal of maturity by assisting in the creation of the Yearbook in his senior year." For both the preference and control conditions, the application of the weaker applicant contained no information regarding political party affiliation.

Application evaluation. To assess evaluations of the applicants, participants completed a five-item application evaluation. They indicated which applicant they would invite for the interview. Then, participants rated the specific and general relative importance of the two types of information, the recommendations, and the achievement histories. For the specific relative importance questions, participants indicated, on 9-point scales ranging from 1 (*not at all important*) to 9 (*extremely important*), the importance of each type of information for the actual decision they made (e.g., "Relative to other kinds of information, how important were the recommendations in helping

you to evaluate the applicants?"). For the general relative importance questions, participants indicated, on 9-point scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*), the importance of each type of information for college admissions decisions in general (e.g., "Relative to other kinds of information, recommendations should play a very large role in college admissions decisions").

Debriefing. After completion of the application evaluation, the experimenter fully debriefed participants by informing them of the true purpose of the research. The debriefing included explaining that there would not be a simulated interview, stating how the two applications were actually fake, and informing participants that their data would be matched to their political party preferences and commitment levels provided during the mass testing session.

Results

The hypothesized effects were expected to occur only among participants with strong partisan attachment to their political party preferences. Therefore, before testing the hypotheses, the commitment variable from the mass testing session was used to divide participants into two groups. The commitment ratings were normally distributed ($Mdn = 6.00$, $SD = 2.52$). Thus, a median split was used to divide the sample into strong ($n = 32$) and weak partisans ($n = 29$). Because a 9-point scale was used to assess commitment, participants who circled the median (which was above the midpoint) were included in the strong partisan group.

Applicant Chosen

To test the hypothesis that the presence of a political preference would bias participants' college admissions judgments, we conducted a 2 (Partisan: strong vs. weak) × 2 (Preference vs. Control) × 2 (Applicant Chosen: weaker vs. stronger) chi-square test of independence.[3] The results support the political partisan prejudice hypothesis. For weak partisans, there was not a significant effect, $\chi^2(1, N = 29) = 0.11$, $p = .74$. In the control condition, 73% of

[3]Initially, political party preference (Democrat vs. Republican) was included as an independent variable in all statistical analyses for both Studies 1 and 2. However, there were no significant main effects or interactions involving the political party preference variable. This indicates that, in the current research, Democrats and Republicans did not differ in the degree to which they displayed the political partisan prejudice effect and associated biases. Therefore, this variable was not used in the reported analyses.

the participants selected the stronger applicant, while in the preference condition, 79% of the participants selected the stronger applicant. For strong partisans, on the other hand, the test reveals a significant effect, $\chi^2(1, N = 32) = 3.80$, $p = .05$. In the control condition, 79% of participants selected the stronger applicant, while in the preference condition, only 44% of the participants selected the stronger applicant.

Relative Importance of Categories

The specific and general relative importance questions were analyzed using 2 (Partisan Level: strong vs. weak) × 2 (Condition: preference vs. control) × 2 (Evaluative Category: achievement history vs. recommendation) ANOVAs with evaluative category as a repeated measure. Supporting the biased weighting hypothesis, the ANOVA on the specific relative importance questions reveals only a significant Partisan Level × Condition × Evaluative Category interaction, $F(1, 57) = 4.02$, $p < .05$. To interpret the three-way interaction, we conducted 2 (Condition) × 2 (Evaluative Category) ANOVAs within each partisan level. For weak partisans, the 2 × 2 ANOVA reveals no significant effects (see the left half of Figure 1). For strong partisans, the Condition × Evaluative Category interaction was significant, $F(1, 30) = 7.49$, $p < .02$. Strong partisans in the control condition judged the achievement history ($M = 6.93$) to have no more relative importance than the letters of recommendation ($M = 6.29$), $t(13) = 1.42$, $p = .18$, while strong partisans in the preference condition judged the letters of recommendation ($M = 7.44$) to have significantly more relative importance than the achievement history ($M = 6.33$), $t(17) = -2.51$, $p < .03$ (see the right half of Figure 1).

Although suggestive of the pattern of findings found on the specific relative importance questions, the ANOVA on the general relative importance questions reveals no significant effects. The Commitment Level × Condition × Evaluative Category interaction did not reach statistical significance, $F(1, 57) = 1.98$, $p = .17$.

Discussion

Study 1 reveals evidence supporting a political partisan prejudice effect in the college admissions paradigm. Strong partisans evaluated two college admissions applicants in a biased manner. Specifically, the same two applicants were judged differently when one of them supported a presidential candidate of a political party opposing the participants' preferred party than when he did not. Additionally, the two Study 1 measures assessing the

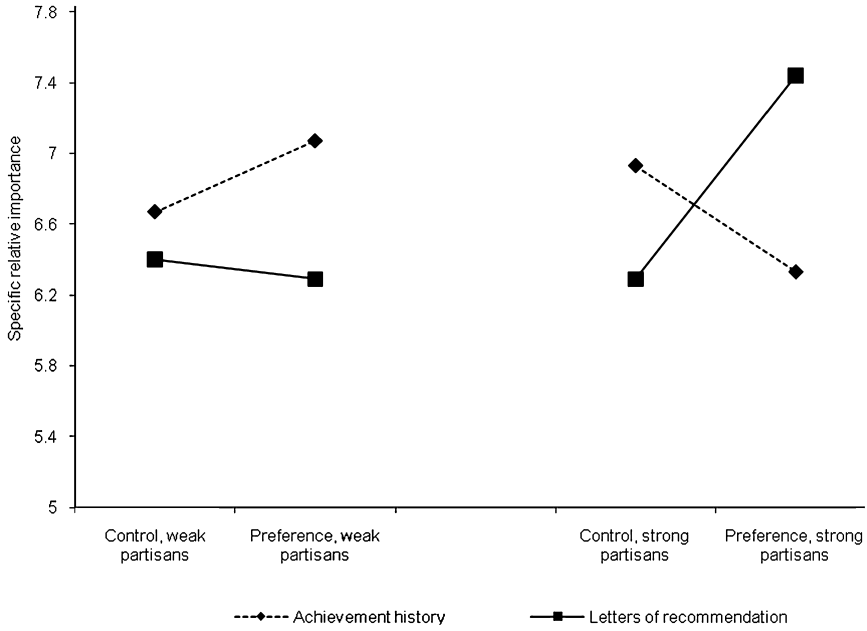

Figure 1. Perceived specific relative importance of application categories as a function of partisan level and political preference condition (Study 1).

biased weighting hypothesis reveal a consistent pattern of findings for strong partisans, though only the specific relative importance measure reveals statistically significant support for the hypothesis. In the control condition, participants rated neither the achievement history nor the recommendation as being more important than the other. In the preference condition, in contrast, the recommendation was rated as being more important.

This differential weighting of the importance of the application categories supports the biased selections of the applicant. So, strong partisans in the preference condition could acknowledge the superiority of the stronger applicant on the achievement history, but by weighting achievement history as being less important than the recommendation, they could still manage to justify not selecting the stronger applicant. In fact, strong partisans in the preference condition were the only group (including not only strong partisans in the control group, but also weak partisans in both the control and preference groups) to rate the recommendation as being more important than the achievement history.

Study 2

There are two goals for Study 2. The first goal is to determine whether the political partisan prejudice effect could be replicated using a different sample. The second goal is to test a second hypothesis derived from the research suggesting that ambiguous information is more amenable to motivated distortion, the selectivity hypothesis.

Instead of assessing participants' weighting of the importance of individual pieces of information, Study 2 assessed participants' evaluations of the strength of information that was either ambiguous with regard to which option was superior, or unambiguously supportive of the nonpreferred option. Thus, the extent to which the strength of ambiguous information is targeted for distortion was tested directly. The selectivity hypothesis states that when a preference for a certain outcome exists, people will selectively distort evaluations of ambiguous, rather than unambiguous information in order to arrive at a conclusion that is preferred by the judge, but also easily justified as being fairly derived. The selectivity hypothesis was tested using the college admissions decision paradigm used in Study 1.

Method

Participants

As in Study 1, students who were enrolled in introductory psychology courses completed a set of questionnaires during a mass testing session. Because the study was conducted during the Fall 2000 semester, the first question was different from the one that was used in Study 1. Participants were asked to identify, in a forced—choice format, which presidential candidate they preferred, George Bush or Al Gore. They also rated on a 9-point scale how strongly committed they were to the candidate they preferred.

At least 8 weeks later in the semester, 64 participants volunteered to participate in the "College Admissions Study," 61 of whom had completed the mass testing questionnaire. Of those 61 participants (42 women, 19 men), 29 preferred Bush, while 30 preferred Gore (2 participants failed to identify either candidate).[4] Most of the participants were European American ($n = 55$), and most were first-year students ($n = 45$).

[4]The 2 participants who failed to identify their preferred candidates on the mass testing questionnaire were assigned to the control condition. Deletion of these 2 participants from all reported analyses did not change the results in terms of statistical significance.

Procedure

The procedure and materials for Study 2 were identical to Study 1, with the following exceptions. First, instead of being tested in small groups, participants were tested individually and were informed that they would be having an individual mock interview with the applicant they selected as superior. Second, the dependent measures in Study 2 were modified in order to test the selectivity hypothesis. Participants assessed the overall strength of each applicant (e.g., "Overall, how strong was the application of Applicant 1?") on 9-point scales ranging from 1 (*very weak*) to 9 (*very strong*). This was followed by an assessment of the strength of each applicant on the specific categories (e.g., "How strong was the recommendation of Applicant 1?") using the same rating scales as the overall strength items.

Results

As in Study 1, the commitment ratings were normally distributed (Mdn = 6.00, SD = 2.44). A median split was used to divide participants into the strong partisan group (n = 35, M = 6.94, SD = 0.94) and the weak partisan group (n = 26, M = 2.77, SD = 1.63).

Applicant Chosen

To test the political partisan prejudice hypothesis, that the presence of a political preference would bias the college admissions choices of strong partisans, a 2 (Partisan: strong vs. weak) × 2 (Preference vs. Control) × 2 (Applicant Chosen: weaker vs. stronger) chi-square test of independence was conducted. The results support those of Study 1. No significant effect was found for weak partisans, $\chi^2(1, n = 25) = 0.24$, $p = .88$; 76% of the participants selected the stronger applicant (78% of those in the control condition and 75% of those in the preference condition). For strong partisans, on the other hand, the test reveals a significant effect, $\chi^2(1, n = 34) = 5.25$, $p < .03$. Similar to the weak partisans, 75% of strong partisans in the control condition selected the stronger applicant. However, only 36% of strong partisans in the preference condition selected the stronger applicant.

Overall Strength of Applicants

The analysis of the questions assessing the overall strength of the two applicants provided further support for the hypothesized political partisan

prejudice effect. A 2 (Partisan Level: strong vs. weak) × 2 (Condition: preference vs. control) × 2 (Applicant: weaker vs. stronger) ANOVA with applicant as a repeated measure reveals an applicant main effect, $F(1, 57) = 25.50$, $p < .001$. Overall, participants rated the stronger applicant ($M = 7.71$) as having a stronger application than the weaker applicant ($M = 7.04$). The main effect, however, was qualified by a significant Partisan Level × Condition × Applicant interaction, $F(1, 57) = 4.27$, $p < .05$.

To clarify this interaction, we conducted 2 (Condition) × 2 (Applicant) ANOVAs with the goal of identifying any two-way interactions within each partisan level. For weak partisans, the Condition × Applicant interaction was not significant ($F < 1$; see the left half of Figure 2). For strong partisans, the Condition × Applicant interaction was significant, $F(1, 33) = 6.52$, $p < .02$. Strong partisans in the control condition judged the weaker applicant ($M = 6.85$) to be significantly weaker than the stronger applicant ($M = 7.70$), $t(19) = -5.67$, $p < .001$; while strong partisans in the preference condition rated the weaker applicant ($M = 7.47$) no differently than the stronger applicant ($M = 7.60$), $t(14) = -0.52$, $p = .61$ (see the right half of Figure 2). Clearly, strong partisans in the preference condition evaluated the applicants differently than those in the other conditions.

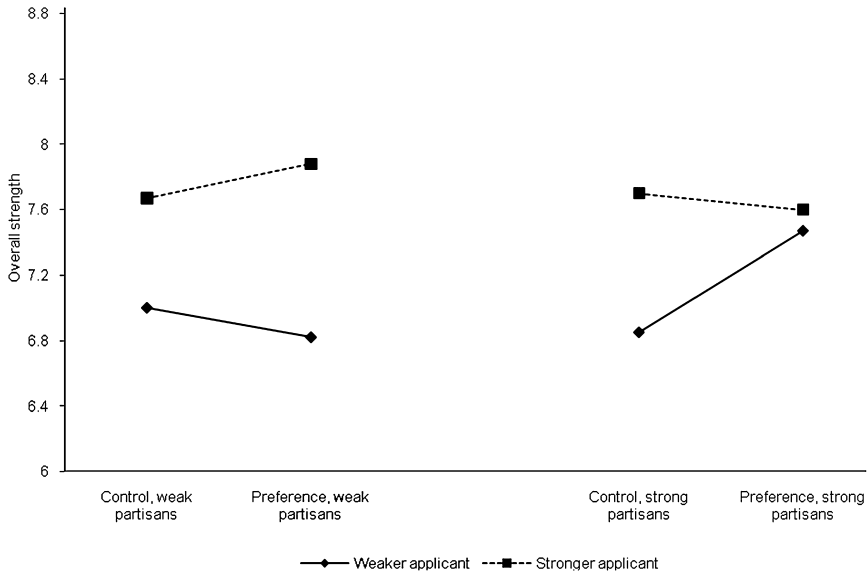

Figure 2. Perceived overall strength of applicants as a function of partisan level and political preference condition (Study 2).

Given the intention to construct materials in which the stronger applicant did, indeed, have a stronger application, participants in the other conditions—who evaluated the stronger applicant as being significantly stronger than the weaker applicant—appear to be evaluating the applications in an unbiased manner. Strong partisans in the preference condition, however, appear to be evaluating the applications in a biased manner by judging the weaker applicant as being equal to the stronger applicant, on average.

Strength of Specific Categories of Applicants

The next set of analyses was conducted to test the selectivity hypothesis; the hypothesis stating that evidence of the bias would be found on evaluations of the ambiguous letter of recommendation category, but not on the achievement history category that unambiguously favored the stronger applicant. The 2 (Partisan Level: strong vs. weak) × 2 (Condition: preference vs. control) × 2 (Applicant: weaker vs. stronger) ANOVA on the item assessing the strength of the achievement histories of the two applicants reveals only an applicant main effect, $F(1, 57) = 133.00$, $p < .001$. The stronger applicant ($M = 7.81$) was judged to have a stronger achievement history than the weaker applicant ($M = 6.92$). As expected, no other main effects or interactions approached significance (all p values > .25; for a graphic depiction of all means, see Figure 3). This suggests that participants acknowledged the unambiguous superiority of the achievement history of the stronger applicant.

The ANOVA on the item assessing the strength of the recommendations reveals significant main effects for condition, $F(1, 57) = 7.34$, $p < .01$, and applicant, $F(1, 57) = 6.38$, $p < .02$. Participants in the preference condition ($M = 7.47$) rated the recommendations as being stronger than did those in the control condition ($M = 6.87$). Also, the stronger applicant ($M = 7.38$) was judged to have a stronger recommendation than the weaker applicant ($M = 6.96$). While this finding was not expected because the recommendations were designed to be approximately equal in quality, it is consistent with research on the halo effect in which positive qualities on one characteristic (achievement history) would influence evaluations of other characteristics (recommendations; Cooper, 1981; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Importantly, these effects were qualified by the significant Partisan Level × Condition × Applicant interaction, $F(1, 57) = 4.08$, $p < .05$.

As with the overall strength measure, 2 (Condition) × 2 (Applicant) ANOVAs were conducted within each partisan level. These analyses are consistent with the analyses on the overall strength measure. For weak partisans, the Condition × Applicant interaction was not significant ($F < 1$; see

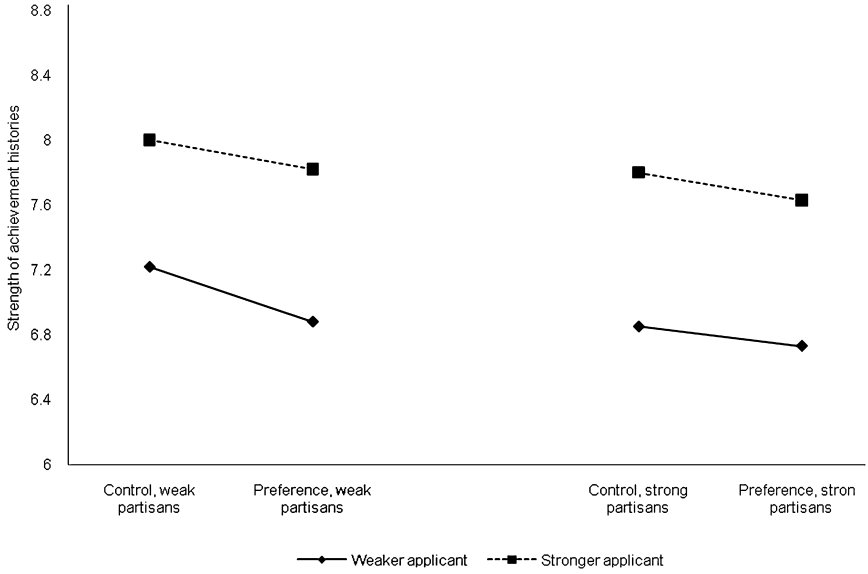

Figure 3. Perceived strength of applicants' achievement histories as a function of partisan level and political preference condition (Study 2).

the left half of Figure 4). For strong partisans, the Condition × Applicant interaction was significant, $F(1, 33) = 4.84$, $p < .04$. Strong partisans in the control condition judged the weaker applicant ($M = 6.60$) to have a significantly weaker recommendation than the stronger applicant ($M = 7.45$), $t(19) = -2.82$, $p < .02$; while strong partisans in the preference condition judged the recommendation of the weaker applicant ($M = 7.63$) no differently than the recommendation of the stronger applicant ($M = 7.47$), $t(14) = 0.48$, $p = .64$ (see the right half of Figure 4). Thus, it appears that the political bias on the part of the strong partisans counteracted the halo effect found among those in the other conditions.

Regression Analyses Assessing Mediation

In order to test a model whereby strong partisans in the preference condition distorted their evaluations of the ambiguous letter of recommendation category (relative to strong partisans in the control condition) as a way to justify their more favorable overall evaluations of the preferred applicant, we conducted a set of regression analyses using the guidelines for mediation

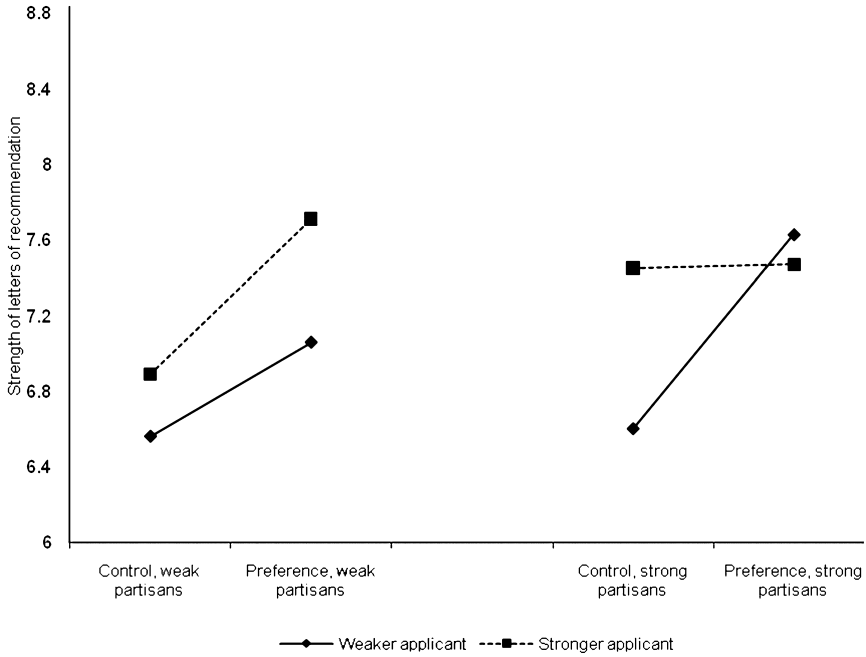

Figure 4. Perceived strength of applicants' recommendations as a function of partisan level and political preference condition (Study 2).

suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). The preference variable was dummy-coded (1 = control, 2 = preference). For the letter of recommendation, the achievement history, and the overall strength evaluations, difference scores were created in which the evaluations of the stronger applicant were subtracted from the evaluations of the weaker applicant.

To establish mediation, three criteria must be met. First, the independent variable (preference condition) must significantly predict the dependent variable (overall strength difference scores). This criterion was met ($\beta = .41$), $F(1, 33) = 6.52$, $p < .02$. Second, the independent variable must significantly predict the proposed mediator variable (achievement history or letter of recommendation difference scores). Separate analyses reveal that preference did not significantly predict achievement history ($\beta = .04$, $F < 1$), but did significantly predict letter of recommendation ($\beta = .36$), $F(1, 33) = 4.84$, $p < .04$. Because the criterion was not met for achievement history, achievement history did not mediate the link between preference and overall strength, and it was not included in the third step. Third, the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable must be significantly

reduced when the dependent variable is simultaneously regressed on the independent and mediator variables. This analysis reveals that the combination of preference condition and letter of recommendation was significantly associated with overall strength, $F(2, 32) = 6.64$, $p < .01$; but only letter of recommendation ($\beta = .38$) was a significant predictor.

A Sobel (1982) test using the bootstrapping approach recommended for small samples (Preacher & Hayes, 2004) further establishes the criteria for letter of recommendation as a mediator between preference condition and overall strength (the indirect effect is significantly different from 0, as revealed by the 95% confidence interval limits of .02 and .56, which do not contain 0). Thus, the selectivity hypothesis model was supported: Only through letters of recommendation was preference associated with overall strength.[5]

Discussion

The results of Study 2 provide additional evidence for the hypothesized political partisan prejudice effect. Indeed, the percentages of participants choosing each applicant in the preference and control conditions are almost identical to those found in Study 1. In addition to the political partisan prejudice effect, Study 2 found support for the selectivity hypothesis. The key Partisan Level × Condition × Applicant interaction was found to be significant in evaluations of the strength of the ambiguous letters of recommendation, but it was not significant for the assessment of the less ambiguous achievement histories. While strong partisans in the preference condition seemed to justify their political partisan prejudice by altering their evaluations on an ambiguous application category (compared to those in the other conditions), their prejudice did not prevent them from acknowledging that the stronger applicant was, indeed, the stronger applicant in terms of the educational achievement measurements.

The mediational analyses conducted on strong partisans show that the judgments of the strength of the letters of recommendation, but not the

[5]Three other mediational models were also tested. First, when the participants' dummy-coded choice of which applicant was superior was substituted for the overall strength difference scores, the results were identical with regard to meeting the criteria for mediation. In other words, the letters of recommendation difference scores are also true mediators of the association between the preference variable and participants' choices of the superior applicant. Second, the analyses were repeated on weak partisans, instead of strong partisans. The first regression analysis, however, reveals that preference condition did not significantly predict overall strength (or choice of superior applicant; $F < 1$ in both cases). Third, an alternative model in which the overall strength difference scores were entered as the mediator and the letters of recommendation difference scores as the outcome variable was tested. This model also reveals true mediation.

judgments of the strength of the achievement histories, mediated the effect of preference on judgments of the overall strength of the applicants (and on which applicant was chosen as being superior). In other words, the results are consistent with a model in which the motivated distortion of ambiguous information mediates the political prejudice bias. It should be pointed out, however, that participants made their judgments about the strength of the specific categories following their selections of the superior applicant and their judgments about the overall strength of the two applicants. Therefore, it is also possible that the overall strength judgments and the applicant chosen variable mediate judgments about the strength of the letters of recommendation. That is, the temporal sequence is unclear. Although the current research was not designed to investigate the processing sequence, the mediational analyses do clearly support the notion that ambiguous information is targeted for distortion as a means of supporting, either a priori or a posteriori, the prejudicial decision.

One aspect of the Study 2 data that warrants further discussion is the finding that the bias appeared to be located in the evaluations of the weaker applicant (i.e., the politically neutral applicant), rather than in the evaluations of the stronger applicant, the applicant whose political preferences were manipulated. Looking only at strong partisans on the strength of recommendation measure, the difference between the means in the preference and control conditions was 1.03 scale units for the weaker applicant, and 0.02 scale units for the stronger applicant. This finding might seem somewhat odd, considering that the actual recommendations of the weaker applicant were exactly the same in the preference and control conditions. However, given the comparative nature of the task, participants would not necessarily be expected to provide the same judgments of the weaker applicant because their judgments, even if most of the judgments were not specifically comparative judgments, would likely be altered by the key political party manipulation of the application of the stronger applicant.

The finding that strong partisans in the preference condition judged the politically neutral applicant more positively (rather than judging the political out-group applicant more negatively) supports the idea that the motivated judge uses techniques that can be easily rationalized as being nonbiased. Rather than being overly critical of the stronger applicant and risking the possibility of being identified as a biased judge, participants instead may have taken the less risky path of giving the benefit of the doubt to the politically neutral applicant (for more discussion of this type of effect, see Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). Potentially, this finding has relevance for social identity theory.

Research on social identity theory leans toward the notion that intergroup bias results mainly from in-group favoritism, rather than out-group

derogation (Brewer, 1979). The results of Study 2 are consistent with past research in that there was no depreciation in the ratings of the out-group applicant. Somewhat different from past research, however, participants favored an applicant who was not explicitly an in-group member. Rather than being a member of participants' own political party, the weaker applicant was politically neutral; the materials contained no information regarding his political affiliation. This suggests the possibility that in forced-choice comparisons involving an out-group member and an unspecified neutral target, there may be a tendency to treat the neutral target like an in-group member. Furthermore, the tendency to expand the concept of in-group inclusion might be especially likely when the out-group member threatens a valued social identity, like political identification, at the same time that the cost of being perceived as unfair if one were to derogate the out-group remains high (Branscombe & Wann, 1994).

General Discussion

In two studies, the current research supported the hypothesis that political party preferences can influence decisions in a mock college admissions paradigm. Furthermore, two hypotheses derived from research suggesting that bias is more likely to be evidenced in the evaluation of ambiguous information were supported. Biases were revealed in the weights assigned to the importance of information and to the evaluations of the strength of information that was more or less supportive of the conclusion that supported the political partisan prejudice. Regression analyses for Study 2 reveal that the biased evaluations of the ambiguous information mediated the link between the preference manipulation and the evaluations of the overall strength of the applicants.

These results represent one of the few examples in the research literature of political partisan prejudice. It is important to note that the decision-making task used in the current research was deliberately designed to be apolitical. Participants were instructed to imagine that they were college admissions officers, and the purpose of the study was presented to them as an assessment of important decision-making processes. In other words, the instructions were designed to make salient the importance of making a considered decision for such an important judgment process. Even so, participants' political preferences affected their decisions.

However, one alternative explanation for our interpretation of the findings is that political party is, indeed, a piece of information that has importance for college admissions judgments. For example, students may hold stereotypes about members of opposing political parties that they used in

evaluating the two applicants. Liberal democrats have been accused of being intellectual elitists. If so, they might perceive Republicans as intellectually inferior and incorporate that information into their evaluations of the applicant. Also, the college at which the study was conducted is a small, public liberal arts college that, like many similar colleges and universities, has a reputation of having somewhat liberal leanings. This might lead participants to believe that Democrats would have an easier social adjustment to the school or that Republicans would provide a counterbalancing political ideology that would benefit diversity concerns.

While the influence of stereotypes and best-fit concerns should be explored in future research, the possibility that they provided a rational explanation for the partisan effects found in the current research seems unlikely for three reasons. First, the achievement histories of the two applicants (which included both achievement in high school as well as SAT scores) were carefully manipulated, and, indeed, participants acknowledged the unambiguous superiority of the stronger applicant, even when he was the nonpreferred applicant. Thus, any stereotypes about intellectual ability clearly did not affect ratings of the academic achievement history. Second, the samples were fairly equally divided in support of the two political parties (or their 2000 presidential candidates), and no political party preference effects were found (see Footnote 3). Thus, if there was a general belief among the samples that either Democratic or Republican students would best fit the college, the belief was not evidenced in their evaluations of the two applicants, unless the beliefs differed by political party preference whereby Democrats perceived Republicans as a poor fit, while Republicans perceived Democrats as a poor fit. While this explanation is possible and should be explored further, we would also point out that such perceptions (e.g., that Democrats would fare better in an atmosphere that is socially accepting of them or that Republicans would provide needed diversity) could themselves be justifications, allowing partisans to support their prejudices in a seemingly unbiased manner. Third, for weak partisans, there was no difference between their judgments of the two applicants when a preference was implanted and when no preference was implanted. If stereotypes about members of the two political parties or beliefs about the college situation existed among our sample, they would seemingly influence weak partisans also. Clearly, they did not.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The results of the current research are consistent with several social psychological theories. First and foremost, the findings are consistent with social

identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and research suggesting that political partisanship is one important social identity (Greene, 1999, 2004). Specifically, political identities can produce prejudicial judgments against members of the political out-group, even on judgments for which political preference has no relevance. The findings extend research on political partisanship by showing that political identities influence not only perceptions of politicians or political information, but also politically irrelevant judgments about other political partisans.

The findings provide continued support for theories such as aversive racism (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986) and the justification-suppression model of the expression of prejudice (Crandall & Eshelman, 2003), which have shown that the expression of prejudice is reserved for situations in which the judgment or behavior can be justified as being free of prejudicial biases. As noted in the introduction, the idea that biased judgments occur mainly when they can appear to be derived in a fair and objective manner is also an important facet of research investigating motivated reasoning about the self (e.g., Dunning et al., 1989; Sanitioso et al., 1990).

In the current research, care was taken to create two applications that were strong and similar enough to allow the political partisan prejudice effect to be revealed. Alterations in the decision-making task would certainly eliminate the effects found with the materials and procedure used in the current research. For example, if the nonpreferred applicant was far superior to the other applicant, then participants would likely refrain from discriminating against him. Doing so would destroy the illusion of objectivity that is necessary to convince the judge as well as observers that the judgment was made in an egalitarian manner that is not influenced by partisan concerns. In fact, a healthy percentage of strong partisans in the preference condition (44% and 36% in Studies 1 and 2, respectively) did end up selecting the stronger applicant and judging the applicants in ways similar to strong partisans in the control condition and weak partisans. However, the bias among strong partisans in the preference condition was clearly revealed by the significance tests indicating that they differed from the other conditions.

One question that remains unanswered is the extent to which real-world judgments involve biased weighting or selectivity. The dependent measures used in the current research were not necessarily measures of spontaneous reasoning processes. That is, participants may have used the justification strategies that they used because the dependent measures provided them with the opportunity to do so. In the absence of the prompting of the dependent measures, participants may have used biased weighting of the application categories, selective distortion of the strength of certain application categories, or some other unknown justification strategy. It is quite possible that people would use any strategy that is effective (i.e., that allows

them to make the preferred, prejudicial judgment in a seemingly objectively justifiable way).

In the research area of self-protective mechanisms, some have used the analogy of a self-zoo (Tesser, Crepaz, Beach, Cornell, & Collins, 2000; Tesser, Martin, & Cornell, 1996). People have at their disposal a variety of mechanisms (e.g., cognitive consistency, social comparison) that allow them to maintain a positive sense of self and are flexible in their use of those strategies. Thus, the choice of strategy is likely determined by factors such as salience (e.g., experimental prompting) and past experience. Future research might attempt to use measures that assess spontaneous processing like those used in research on spontaneous causal attributions (Clary & Tesser, 1983; Ditto, Munro, Apanovitch, Scepansky, & Lockhart, 2003; Wong & Weiner, 1981) in order to identify the variety and prevalence of techniques used by people to support their political partisan prejudices.

A potential practical implication of the current findings is that if an objective judgment situation is sought (e.g., college admissions, search committees, court cases) and the situation is ripe for preferred conclusions (e.g., assessments involving members of stigmatized groups), then certain aspects of the situation could be manipulated to avoid, or at least reduce, the likelihood of bias. Most directly, as the current research shows, when no political party information was presented, strong partisans evaluated the applicants similarly to weak partisans. Thus, censoring political party information should prevent discriminatory selections.

Of course, techniques like restricting the kinds of questions that can be asked of applicants are used by equal opportunity employers to reduce the likelihood that gender, ethnicity, disability, or sexual preference would bias hiring decisions. Uhlmann and Cohen (2005) found support for this reasoning by showing that gender bias in evaluations of applicants for the stereotypically male job of police chief was eliminated when gender was not revealed until after merit evaluations had already occurred. The current findings suggest that such actions might be considered for certain other demographic-type variables like political party that have become culturally provocative. Additionally, to avoid bias in the weighting and strength evaluations of objective and subjective information, a priori templates could be created for weighting and evaluating various kinds of information (much like the formulas created by the admissions offices of many colleges and universities). These tactics follow logically from the current research, but further research testing both hypotheses would be beneficial.

The results suggest that strong partisanship can lead one to evaluate college application information, a decision task that is seemingly irrelevant to political preference, in a way that is biased against an applicant with an opposing political preference. This political prejudice seems to be justified by

manipulating the importance of and the strength evaluations of more ambiguous information like recommendations, even while evaluations of less ambiguous information like SAT scores remain unbiased.

In addition to strengthening our understanding of political partisanship as social identity, the current research has important implications for the role of political affiliations in influencing politically irrelevant decision making. To what degree does political partisanship influence other kinds of social judgments and behaviors like those found in employment offices, college classrooms, and courtrooms? Does political partisan prejudice negatively impact political discourse in this country by trumping sincere, thoughtful analysis and debate about important social policies? These questions linger in a country divided by political ideology and often characterized by caustic debate.

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