

# DRAFT: How Group Meta-Perceptions Shape Political Party Evolution\*

Stone Neilon<sup>†</sup>

April 19, 2026

## Abstract

Political science has documented the extent of (mis)perceptions among partisans, and the subsequent effect of these (mis)perceptions on political behavior. However, relatively little work has examined the extent of group meta-perceptions (GMP)—defined as beliefs about how others perceive one’s group— and their role in shaping partisan behavior. In this paper, I argue partisans hold various GMPs and internalize characterizations from out-partisans (and Independents), altering the perceptions of their own party and influencing their strategic preferences and affective orientations, providing a novel explanation to issue evolution within the parties. To investigate these dynamics, I field an exploratory student survey asking respondents what they believe are the three most important problems (MIP) and how they believe out-partisans would characterize them on those same questions. I use this to inform a future experimental survey, where I expose partisans to how out-partisans (and Independents) perceive and characterize their own party. Respondents are then assessed on levels of affect, willingness to engage in cross-partisan discussion, and beliefs about party strategy.

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\*Draft prepared for the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois April 23-26, 2026. I thank Anand Sokhey, Alexandra Siegel, Josh Strayhorn, and members of the American Politics Research Lab for early feedback.

<sup>†</sup>Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Political Science, University of Colorado at Boulder. E: [stone.neilon@colorado.edu](mailto:stone.neilon@colorado.edu)

# 1 Introduction

The Trump campaign used the issue to present Vice President Kamala Harris as out of touch, in an ad with the tagline: “Kamala Harris is for they/them. Donald Trump is for you.”

Although there is no evidence that transgender rights was a top issue for most voters in 2024, Democratic strategists believe that these attacks did have an impact. Blueprint, a post-election Democratic polling project, found that among swing voters who broke for Mr. Trump in the final weeks of the campaign, 67 percent believed Democrats were “too focused on identity politics.” (Homans, 2025)

In the wake of the 2024 election, many of the Democratic commentators raced to find a culprit responsible for Vice President Harris’s loss to Donald Trump. Emblematic of the quote above, one prominent narrative pointed towards the over emphasis of social identity, particularly DEI and transgender policy. Despite scant attention on these issues from the Harris campaign, many Democrats felt the party was too focused on these issues. In fact, a 2025 YouGov poll found 53% of Democrats thought the party focused too much on transgender issues (YouGov and Economist, 2025). While these specific social issues are certainly important for the Democratic party, evidence indicates these issue are not a top priority among Democratic lawmakers. This raises an important question: Did Democrats genuinely overemphasize identity-related issues, or did Republican characterizations of the party become so salient that even Democratic elites and voters internalized them? The latter question I take up in this paper – to what extent do voters internalize characterizations about their own party from non-member individuals, and how does this influence their feelings and actions toward their own party and non-members?

Parties seek to cultivate issue ownership and articulate a coherent “image”, highlighting the important policy positions and what they stand for (Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik, Benoit and Hansen, 2003). In response to electoral pressures, a party’s image is always evolving and while a party would seek to define itself on its own terms, out-partisans actively engage in defining the other party for their own benefit. For instance, this practice is explicitly described in the 2012 Republican autopsy report; the report dedicates a section describing how Republicans need to “...define Democrats early in election cycles.” (Barbour et al., 2013). While this practice is certainly not new within electoral politics, we know relatively little about how these external portrayals feed back into partisans’ own self-perceptions of their party. Identifying and testing this mechanism advances our understanding for how parties evolve strategically and represent their members.

Previous political science work has tended to focus on the extent of (mis)perceptions of the other side; finding that (mis)perceptions of the other side are extensive and generally result in greater affective attitudes (Ahler, 2014; Ahler and Sood, 2018; Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016; Druckman, 2023). However, the extent to which partisans hold meta-perceptions—beliefs about how others perceive them (Carlson, 2016)—has received relatively less attention. Given the growing social identity of partisanship within the U.S., how individual’s form meta-perceptions and act in relation to their party is a critical consideration that can explain how parties evolve. In this paper, I argue a party’s image is formed through a dialectical process involving both partisans and, critically, *out-partisans*. These dynamics become especially consequential after elections, when parties attempt to explain their performance and define narratives about what went wrong or right. I theorize these narratives are informed not only by internal party debates but also the portrayals advanced from out-partisans. Partisans, to varying degrees, internalize these external characterizations and influence their strategic beliefs and affective orientations toward both their own and the out party.

To better understand these dynamics, I field an exploratory student survey asking respondents how they perceive the other party and how they believe the other party perceives themselves. I operationalize these perceptions about the party brands through the use of the popular survey question, the Most Important Problem (MIP). While the sample is exploratory and non-representative, the results provide intriguing descriptive information for how partisans believe they are perceived versus how they actually are. I use these results to inform a planned survey with a representative sample for additional descriptive insights and a survey experiment to test how these various perceptions shape a partisan’s relationship with their own party. The planned survey experiment will use a stratified sample of Democrats and Republicans. Respondents are randomly assigned to one of four treatment conditions that vary both the **content** of out-party characterizations of their party and the **messenger** conveying the characterization. By varying the content and the messenger, I isolate whether, and under what conditions, partisans internalize external portrayals of their party. Further, I capture how these internalization might affect strategic decisions, affective outcomes, and willingness to engage in cross-partisan dialogue. In the sections that follow, I build upon the theoretical foundations of my argument, outlining and defining group

meta-perceptions within the social psychology literature; then connecting it's importance to political parties; before providing descriptive results of these perceptions from a student survey; and then finally outlining the experimental design testing how these GMPs can influence political behavior.

## 2 What are Meta-Perceptions?

Meta-perceptions—also referred to as second order perceptions<sup>1</sup>—are beliefs an individual holds about how others perceive them (Carlson, 2016), that is, “what does [individual A] think about me?” Garnering considerable attention within the field of social psychology, individuals not only routinely engage in meta-perceiving, but are also shown to be a powerful force in how an individual acts (Frey and Tropp, 2006). The rationale for individuals to engage in meta-perceptions is theorized as a cognitive tool to a provide a frame of reference to guide interpretation and reactions to events to help individuals navigate their social world; individuals gain information about their own standing and reputation.

The importance and popularity of social identity theory, and further, intergroup dynamics (see (Tajfel et al., 2001; Tajfel and Turner, 2004), have pushed many social psychologist to extend the study of meta-perceptions from interpersonal to intergroup contexts. Extending the logic from interpersonal meta-perceptions, group meta-perceptions (GMPs) are perceptions about how one believes their group is stereotyped by others, and become especially important as the level of group salience increases (Frey and Tropp, 2006; Vorauer, Main and O’Connell, 1998). Individuals construct their identities not only by differentiating their group from others but also by cognitively evaluating how others perceive their group (Klein and Azzi, 2001). Then, GMPs function as a cognitive strategy for individuals to infer the reputation of their group based on external evaluations. Accuracy of these GMPs, that is, do these GMPs match what outgroup individuals actually believe, is subjective and difficult for members to fully assess. Further, they vary based upon the relevant out-group in question (Vorauer, Main and O’Connell, 1998). For example, Sigelman and Tuch (1997) find Black Americans believed White Americans to hold negative stereotypes about them, influencing their own attitudes towards certain public policies. While the authors do not test for it, it seems plausible those Black Americans’ meta-perceptions may be different if the out-group was Hispanic rather than White. Thus, evaluations of these GMPs can motivate specific reactions to both the in and out-groups involved, dependent on whether that external evaluation is perceived to be positive or negative.

While positive evaluations exist, a common finding within intergroup relations literature shows individuals generally expect out-group individuals to evaluate them negatively (Krueger, 1996; Frey and Tropp, 2006; Vorauer, Main and O’Connell, 1998). As such, people will be more inclined to attend to negative stereotypes of their group as negative GMPs may foster a sense of anxiety, insecurity, or lowered self-esteem (Klein and Azzi, 2001; Vorauer, Main and O’Connell, 1998; Frey and Tropp, 2006). Further, the existence of meta-perceptions can shape interactions with both in and out-group members. Evidence points to negative GMPs from out-group members can lead to increased affective attitudes and dislike for those *out-group* members (Frey and Tropp, 2006; Sigelman and Tuch, 1997; Harvey, Kelley and Shapiro, 1957; Lees and Cikara, 2020). While less scholarly attention is given to how these negative GMPs shape interactions and relations with members of the *in-group*, there is some evidence to indicate that individuals may seek to tailor or modify their group’s image to minimize the negative GMP. Klein and Azzi (2001) provides support for this, finding individuals holding a negative GMP will attempt to modify and tailor perceptions of their group in a more positive light depending on the involved out-group. Another mechanism in which negative GMPs can shape behavior among in-group members is through stricter norm-enforcement of “deviant” in-group members. This logic closely mirrors the “black-sheep” phenomenon (Marques and Paez, 1994; Marques, Yzerbyt and Leyens, 1988); for example, a negative GMP may induce concern over how the group is perceived by others, leading to a stricter norm-enforcement and punishment of in-group members responsible for the negative GMP. Thus, the extent to which individuals hold negative GMPs can produce behaviors that may motivate members to change how their group is perceived by others.

What emerges from the social psychological literature on group meta-perceptions (GMPs) is that they: (1) exist, (2) are widely used by individuals, (3) vary across social groups, and (4) can powerfully shape how individuals identify with their own group and behave toward both in-group and out-group members. However, research on GMPs has typically focused on racial and ethnic groups or other identities that exist outside explicitly competitive environments. Given that political parties operate within highly competitive contexts, and that group identification with parties has increased in recent decades (Mason

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<sup>1</sup>Meta-stereotypes is also used interchangeably

and Wronski, 2018; Mason, 2018; Sides, Tesler and Vavreck, 2019), understanding how GMPs function in this domain may yield new insights into party evolution and representation. Although the topic has received relatively limited attention in political science, Lees and Cikara (2020) provides a notable exception, demonstrating that negative political GMPs exist and can drive hostility and other affective reactions. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that political GMPs may be more dynamic than this initial work suggests, particularly with respect to the issue agendas of parties.

### 3 The Role of Group Meta-Perceptions in Shaping Party Evolution

While political science has extensively documented the existence and consequences of party stereotypes and reputational images (Ahler, 2014; Ahler and Sood, 2018; Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016; Druckman, 2023), comparatively little research has examined how political group meta-perceptions (GMPs)—beliefs about how others evaluate one’s party—shape strategic political behavior. Within a political context, GMPs capture how Democrats and Republicans believe they are viewed by members of opposing parties, Independents, and the broader electorate. These perceptions are consequential because modern political parties operate in highly competitive electoral environments in which success increasingly depends on the collective reputational characteristics, the party’s public “image” (Cox and McCubbins, 2007; Stimson, 2015; Lee, 2016; Hopkins, 2022). These reputations communicate information that voters can use to evaluate their options (Lau et al., 1999; Kiewiet and McCubbins, 1991; Downs, 1957; Cox and McCubbins, 2007). As parties attempt to mobilize supporters and attract new voters, perceptions of how the party is viewed by others can meaningfully shape how party actors interpret electoral fortunes and decide how to adjust their strategy.

Party evolution in this case refers to changes in the issues a party emphasizes. The focus on issues rather than explicit policy solutions is motivated by a general finding that voters tend to possess little knowledge of specific policy solutions (Zaller, 1992; Lenz, 2012; Carpini and Keeter, 1996). Despite a general shortcoming, voters frequently associate parties with particular problem domains—an endogenous relationship with political elites (Lenz, 2012). Petrocik (1996) makes a similar point, “the key fact for this voter is not what *policies* candidates promise to pursue, but what *problems* (medical care needs, high taxes) will be resolved.” Thus, party reputation is defined less by the technical policy solutions and more so by the issues voters believe are important to the party’s agenda. The process of issue evolution emerges from party actors attempting to interpret and diagnose the causes of electoral success or failure. Because elections provide imperfect information about public preferences, political actors face substantial uncertainty when determining why an electoral outcome occurred. The process and insight from that self-reflection, will be bench-marked and compared to the other party’s success as a type of social comparison to inform a narrative about why the loss occurred and motivate next steps (Tausch, Schmid and Hewstone, 2011). As a result, party leaders and activists must infer how their party is perceived by relevant audiences and decide whether those perceptions require strategic adjustment.

The period after an election is particularly important as both winners and losers construct narratives about their electoral fortunes. However, electoral loss galvanizes a much stronger self-reflection as it creates uncertainty about the party’s standing with voters and raises questions about whether the party’s current message, coalition, or priorities are misaligned with voters (Miller, Farhart and Saunders, 2025). Following defeat, party actors engage in retrospective evaluation to identify the factors responsible for the outcome. Data are collected, post-election analyses are conducted, and party strategists debate competing explanations for the loss (Masket, 2020). These explanations often take the form of claims such as “we failed to appeal to a key demographic,” “we emphasized the wrong issues,” or “our message alienated voters.” These explanations eventually culminate into electoral autopsies that serve as narratives to guide future strategy, even when they are based on incomplete or inaccurate information. For instance, following the 2012 presidential election, the 2012 Republican Autopsy Report argued that the party needed to broaden its appeal to minority voters and adopt a more inclusive message. Yet the subsequent success of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign pursued a markedly different strategy, emphasizing the inherent tension and lack of perfect information in these narratives. This divergence illustrates how competing interpretations of electoral outcomes can produce different visions of party evolution. Thus, party members may agree that change is necessary, they frequently disagree about which aspects of the party’s image or agenda require adjustment. In response, party actors engage in a process of social comparison, benchmarking their performance against the opposing party’s success to identify potential sources of weakness (Tausch, Schmid and Hewstone, 2011). This comparison encourages party

members to ask not only what went wrong, but also how others interpreted the party’s behavior during the campaign.

Within these debates that emerge, the role of group meta-perceptions (GMPs) becomes apparent. Lacking perfect information about voter attitudes, party actors and activists rely on their beliefs about how others perceive their party to interpret electoral outcomes and guide strategic decisions. For example, party members who believe that the opposing party or Independents view their party as extreme, ineffective, or out of touch may advocate for changes designed to improve the party’s public image. This could take the form of attempting to change issue emphasis within the party; presumed 2028 presidential candidate Gavin Newsom provides one recent illustrative example of this occurring when he chastised the Democratic party for focusing too much time and effort on identity and pronoun issues and should instead focus on “table-top issues, things that really matter.”<sup>2</sup> The perceptions elites hold about the political landscape have major ramifications for how they might govern (Fenno, 1978; Broockman and Skovron, 2018). Conversely, actors who believe the party is perceived positively may resist calls for reform. In this way, GMPs function as a cognitive mechanism that translates electoral outcomes into strategic responses.

However, The formation of these perceptions is inherently subjective. While they are largely influenced by their party’s own actions, they are also shaped by information from the broader political environment. Campaign messaging, media coverage, public opinion polls, and elite discourse all provide signals that individuals use to infer how their party is viewed by others (Lau et al., 1999). Negative campaigning, in particular, can communicate information about how opponents evaluate and highlight differences between the parties, while news coverage and political commentary can amplify those evaluations (Geer, 2024; Mattes and Redlawsk, 2020; Lee, 2016). Through repeated exposure to these signals, party actors construct an understanding of their party’s reputation and use that understanding to inform strategic decisions about their own party.

These dynamics suggest that party evolution is not driven solely by objective electoral signals, but by subjective interpretations of those signals filtered through GMPs. Party actors seek to improve their party’s standing by emphasizing issues, policies, and messages they believe will reshape how others evaluate the party. In some cases, this may involve moderating positions or expanding outreach to new constituencies. In others, it may involve distancing the party from internal factions or enforcing stricter norms among party members who are perceived as damaging the party’s reputation. Regardless of the specific strategy adopted, the common objective is to alter the party’s public image in ways that are believed to enhance electoral competitiveness. But as described here, these decisions are guided by how one perceives their own party, which may be influenced by outside actors.

Importantly, the influence of GMPs on political behavior may depend on the source of the perceived evaluation (Klein and Azzi, 2001). Party elites and activists may respond differently to negative evaluations from opposing partisans, Independents, or key demographic groups. For example, a politically interested Democrat who believes an Independent holds a negative view of the party may advocate for policy moderation, while a Democrat who believes Republicans hold a negative view may instead double down on partisan messaging. These differences suggest that the political consequences of GMPs are conditional on the perceived audience whose evaluation is most relevant to electoral success.

Taken together, group meta-perceptions play a central role in linking electoral outcomes to party change. Electoral loss generates uncertainty about the party’s reputation, prompting actors to infer how others perceive the party and to construct narratives about how the party should adapt. Those narratives, in turn, shape strategic decisions about issue emphasis, messaging, and coalition-building, ultimately producing observable changes in the party’s trajectory. While the logic of GMPs’ influence in electoral and party politics is theoretically justifiable, we empirically know little about their existence and function, motivating three questions within this paper:

1. What group meta-perceptions do partisans hold about their own party? (Descriptive)
2. Can these group meta-perceptions influence intra-party relations? (Internal Reactions)
3. Can these group meta-perceptions influence relations with non-party members? (External Reactions)

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<sup>2</sup><https://x.com/LeadingReport/status/2026003529878356049?s=42>

## 4 Operationalizing Group Meta-Perceptions

*Group meta-perceptions about what?* Since we are broadly interested in how group meta-perceptions shape issue evolution, our focus will be on meta-perceptions of the major policy issues of each party. I operationalize policy issues using the popular survey question, the Most Important Problem (MIP). The MIP asks individuals to name what they view as the most important problem facing the United States currently. Rather than restricting selection to just one issue<sup>3</sup>, I allow respondents to select three. Since voters assign varying importance to issues, the ability to select three problems better captures the multidimensionality of how voters confer reputation to each party.

Using the MIP therefore captures the issue domains that voters perceive as central to a party's identity, rather than asking which party is best suited to "fix" a given problem. Because voters assign varying importance to different issues, party elites strategically emphasize certain problems over others to shape public perceptions and influence voter decision-making (Petrocik, Benoit and Hansen, 2003). Issue salience, in this way, becomes a central component of party brand. Since parties are entrepreneurial and seek to attract potential voters, the problems they make salient and central to their identity can influence a voter's calculus. Given the electoral importance for what slate of issues are associated with a party, how partisans believe their party is being perceived by potential voters might influence how these partisans intend to steer the future direction of their party. One issue that arises with using the MIP is that both a Democrat and Republican can confer importance to the problem of "immigration"; however, the directionality is almost certainly different between the partisans. A second conceptual issue with this choice of measure is that it captures the most important problem and not the most important *issue* (MII). This subtle difference between the MIP and MII creates a slippage between my theory and operationalization, as the MII refers to something people care about while the MIP refers something that people care about *and* is a problem (Jennings and Wlezien, 2011). While the difference is subtle and evidence points to little empirical difference in responses between the two, it is worth recognizing the distinction for future iterations. Thus, this operationalization in this draft suffers from using the MIP in this manner. A second operationalization that uses the MIP but adds directionality to the questions is currently being fielded in another student survey<sup>4</sup>. Nonetheless, the meta-perceptions of the MIP I provide in this version still provides some purchase on the extent and dynamics of GMPs among partisans.

## 5 Descriptive Data from a Student Sample

*What group meta-perceptions do partisans hold about their own party?* To gain insight to this descriptive question, I placed a module on the Fall 2025 Time-Sharing Survey<sup>5</sup>. If respondents identified with neither of the parties, they were forced to pick a side to which they lean. I then coded which way they leaned as their party identification. Respondents were asked to pick what they thought the three most important problems (MIP) facing the United States were (simple MIP). Respondents were then asked about what they perceived to be the three MIPs of the other party (misperception MIP). That is, if a respondent was a Democrat, they were asked what they thought were the three MIPs to a Republican. Finally, the "meta-perception" asked respondents what they believed the other party thought the MIPs were for their party (GMP MIP). Unfortunately, while they were asked to identify three MIPs, the coding of the survey gave respondents the ability to only name one. While not fatal, this gives considerably less variation in the responses. This issue exists only for the misperception and meta-perception questions. The first question which asked to simply name the three MIPs was correctly coded. Figure 1 reports the descriptive results from the survey by party identification.

Given the sample size and issues within the survey instrument, these descriptive results should be approached cautiously<sup>6</sup>. However, they do provide some noteworthy results. For Democrats, the three most important problems facing the United States are: civil rights and civil liberties (16%), immigration (13%), and climate change and the environment (11%). When asked what they thought Republican's most important problems were, Democrats ranked immigration (55%), jobs and the economy (10%), and abortion(7%). For the meta-perceptions, Democrats were asked what they thought a Republican would say a Democrat's three most important problems were; they listed: gay rights(23%), civil rights and

<sup>3</sup>Both YouGov and Gallup only ask respondents to list one issue

<sup>4</sup>This version can be found in the appendix

<sup>5</sup>The survey consists only of students from University of Colorado Boulder; University of Texas, El Paso, University of Oregon; and Colorado State University.

<sup>6</sup>A corrected survey module is currently being fielded

# Student Sample Survey Results by Party

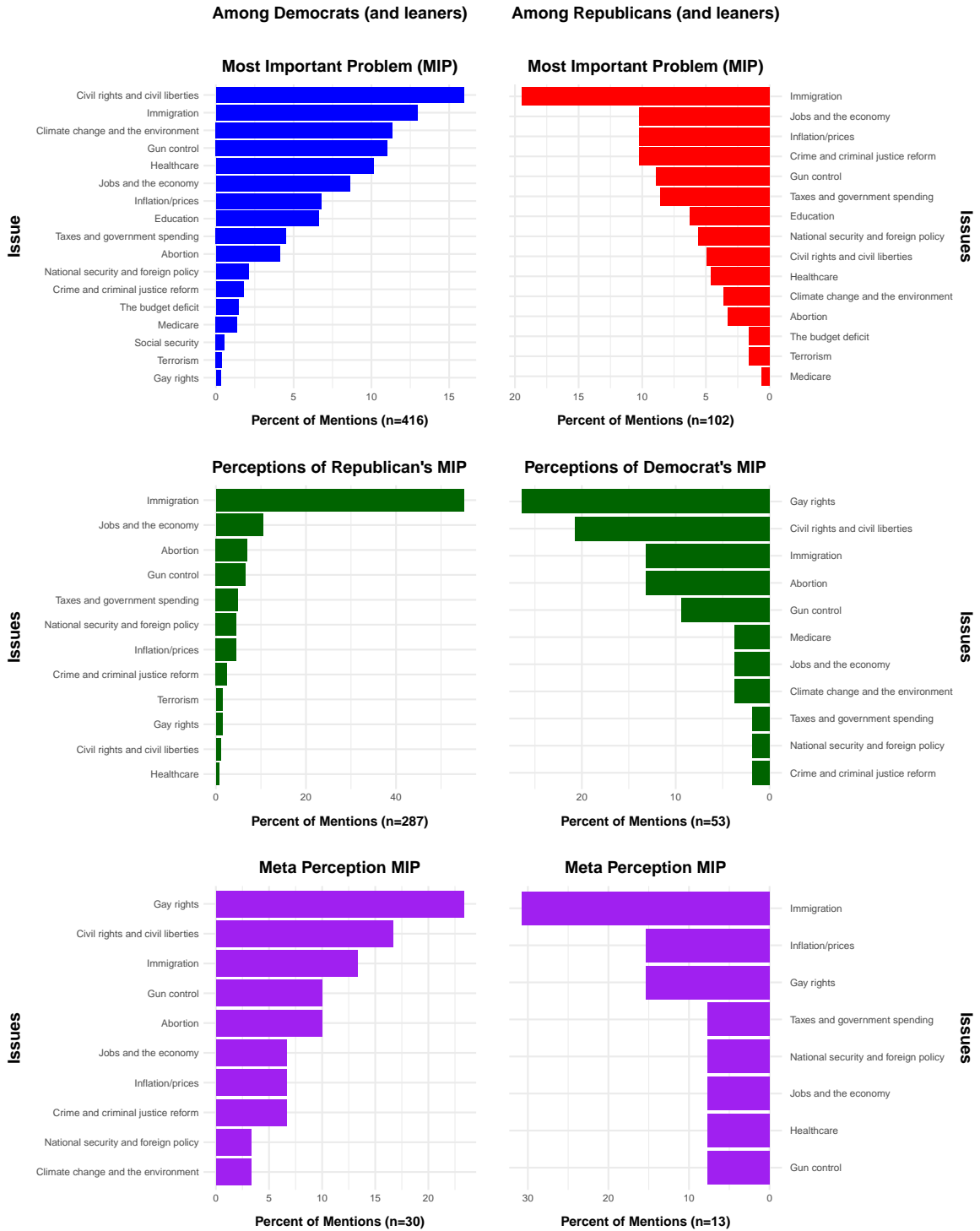


Figure 1: Time-Sharing Survey Descriptive Results

civil liberties (17%), and immigration(13%). Comparing the Democrat’s MIP (top left) to their meta-perception (bottom left), we can see the issues emphasized differ immensely. Gay rights is at the very bottom of the MIPs for Democrats, yet Democrats believe Republicans perceive them to have gay rights be their MIP. If we compare the meta-perception of the Democrats (bottom left) to the (mis)perception of Democrats (middle right), the similarity in the top three is identical. Meaning how Democrats believe Republicans perceive them is accurate to how Republicans actually perceive Democrats. Yet both of these are rather different from Democrats’ actual three MIPs are. There is a mismatch between what is actually important to Democrats versus how others, and how Democrat’s believe others, to view themselves. The listing of the “gay rights” problem is dead last in what is most important to Democrats, yet perceptions about Democrats believe it to be the most important problem.

Among Republican identifying respondents, their three most important problems facing the United States are: immigration (19%), jobs and the economy (10%), inflation/prices (10%), crime and criminal justice reform (10%). When asked what they thought Democrats MIP was, they listed: gay rights(26%), civil rights and civil liberties(21%), immigration (13%), and abortion (13%). For the meta-perception, Republicans were asked what they thought a Democrat would say a Republican’s three MIPs were; they listed: immigration (31%), inflation/prices (15%), and gay rights (15%). Comparing the Republican meta-perception (bottom right) to the Democrat’s misperception (middle left), Republicans correctly infer that immigration is deeply important to the their party’s policy slate. However, the second and third meta-perceptions do not align. Given the small sample size of the meta-perception and survey issues, there is not much we can take away from this.

I am unable to provide support for my claim; however, it seems the issues listed here are driven largely by media coverage and issue salience. I suspect the nature of these perceptions is likely influenced by political interest. Unfortunately, my sample of college students is underpowered to test these conditional relationships<sup>7</sup>.

While the descriptive results are intriguing, why should we expect these perceptual differences to matter electorally? Given these perceptions matter because parties need to attract and motivate new and old voters to win; parties are fundamentally entrepreneurial. If a party elite/activist believes their party’s issue slate to be toxic or problematic, they may wish to change what issues to focus on. For example, to what extent does Democrats’ belief that Republicans view their most important issue as gay rights influence their attachment to and strategic orientation toward their own party? How might this influence affective attitudes toward Republicans? Further, how might their behavior change if they believed that Independents characterized their party in the same way?

## 6 Planned Survey Experiment: Strategic Reactions to Group Meta-Perceptions

To address the second and third questions—whether group meta-perceptions influence intra-party strategic decisions (internal reactions) and affective responses toward out-party members (external reactions)—I plan a survey experiment to isolate these mechanisms. The planned experiment exposes partisans to varying perceptions of their party expressed from either out-party members or Independents. Using a nationally representative sample of partisans, respondents are randomly assigned to one of four treatment conditions. Each treatment presents a short vignette describing the issues that non-party members believe are the most important problems (MIPs) associated with the respondent’s party. These characterizations expose respondents to external evaluations of their party’s issue priorities, thus operationalizing group meta-perceptions in a controlled experimental setting.

I classify the MIPs into two categories: *alarm bell issues* and *regular issues*. Alarm bell issues refer to issue domains that are perceived as electorally or reputationally risky to the party. Regular issues are associated with less threatening issue domains<sup>8</sup>. Separating these characterizations in this manner allows me to isolate whether the reactions to external evaluations are driven by the issue content. For example, if a Republican believes that the Democratic party’s most important issues are abortion, gay rights, and criminal justice reform, how might a Democrat respond to this characterization? Do they accept or reject this evaluation? How might this influence their relationship to both Democrats and Republicans? Further, would reactions to these same characterizations differ if it came from an Independent instead of an out-party member? By varying both messenger and issue content, I can isolate whether effects are

<sup>7</sup>Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of students indicated they are very interested in politics!

<sup>8</sup>I likely need to theorize these distinctions a bit more

**Table 1:** Treatment Table Overview

Name	Issue Type	Messenger	Stimulus
Treatment 1	Alarm Bell	Partisans (Republican/Democrat)	See Appendix
Treatment 2	Alarm Bell	Independents	See Appendix
Treatment 3	Regular	Partisans (Republican/Democrat)	See Appendix
Treatment 4	Regular	Independents	See Appendix

attributable to either the content of the characterization, the messenger of the characterization, or the interaction between both.

Table 1 provides an overview of the four treatment arms within the experiment. Because I am interested in the effect of out-partisan characterizations, respondents will never be exposed to a characterization from a member of the same party. That is, a Democrat will not receive a characterization about their party from another Democrat.

## 6.1 Experiment Procedure

Once recruited, individuals that do not identify with either the Democrat or Republican party will be filtered out of the study. Once identified, respondents will be randomly assigned to one of the four treatment arms. To ensure compliance, respondents will be given three manipulation checks to ensure they correctly understood what the vignette they were given. Finally, all respondents will then be asked to report how they feel about their party’s direction, their affective attitudes toward their own and the out-party, and how interested they might be in engaging in a casual conversation with a non-party member, out-partisan or Independent. Figure 2 provides a visual flowchart to better illustrate the planned procedure of the experiment.

## 6.3 Outcome Variables

I examine three dependent variables: party strategy, affective attitudes, and cross-partisan engagement. Each of these variables is well founded and have a rich literature. In line with my theoretical argument, my use of these outcome variables is to test how partisans respond to various characterizations of their party. Given the relative simplicity of these DVs, I intend to ask respondents pre and post treatment to improve power requirements (Clifford, Sheagley and Piston, 2021). This provides an additional baseline to estimate within person change attributable to the treatment.

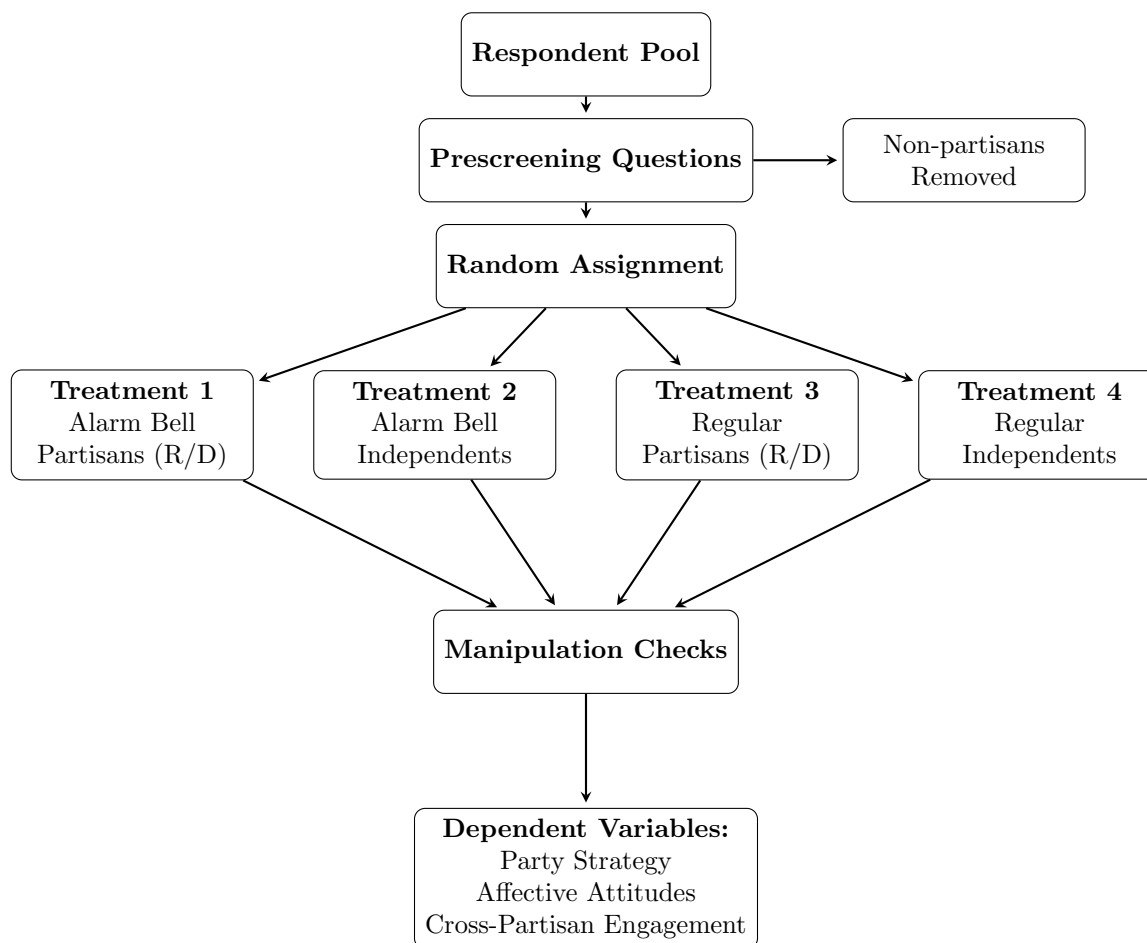
### 6.3.1 Party Strategy

When exposed to out-partisan characterizations of their party, how might that partisan seek to change the strategic direction of their party? To test the effect of this, I construct and index of four Likert style questions asking the respondent about their opinions of their associated party’s direction. These Likert questions will range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The strategic questions are provided as follows:

1. The [Democratic/Republican] Party is currently moving in the right direction.
2. The [Democratic/Republican] Party should move in a more [reformist/moderate] direction.
3. My party should stay true to its core values and principles, even if that means losing elections.
4. Winning elections is more important than sticking to core values and principles. (reverse coded)

The purpose of this outcome variable is to understand how out-partisan characterizations influence strategic choices within the party and provide support to my theory that intra-party debates are endogenous to out-partisan characterizations of their own party.

## 6.2 Experimental Design Flowchart



**Figure 2:** Planned experimental flowchart design

### 6.3.2 Affective Attitudes

The purpose of this outcome variable is to understand how exposure to out-partisan characterizations influence affective attitudes. Political affect constitutes a well-founded and deep literature within political science (Iyengar et al., 2019). Exposure to out-partisan characterizations may elicit an affective response, especially if the characterization is not welcomed. This could lead to greater in-party homophily and lower ratings of the out-party. However, if the perception furnished by the out-partisan is less “alarmist”, it may improve feelings toward the out-party. There is support for these claims within perception literature, as corrections to (mis)perceptions can reduce affective attitudes.

To measure affective attitudes, I use the standard feeling thermometer that asks individuals to rate their feelings toward various political organizations on a sliding scale from 0 (dislike greatly) to 100 (like greatly). The feeling thermometers will be structured as such:

1. How would you rate your feelings towards the Democratic party? [0-100]
2. How would you rate your feelings towards the Republican party? [0-100]
3. How would you rate your feelings towards Independents? [0-100]

### 6.3.3 Cross-Partisan Engagement

What is the effect of out-partisan characterizations on interest in cross-partisan engagement? Cross-cutting relationships have been theorized to reduce affective polarization between partisans (Mutz, 2006). Previous work shows Americans, to varying degrees, are interested in structured political deliberation (Neblo et al., 2010). However, with growing affective polarization, partisans struggle to engage in meaningful conversation and are increasingly sorting into different lifestyles and areas (Bishop and Cushing,

2009) (Brown and Enos, 2021) (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). As polarization grows and cross-cutting relationships deteriorate, perceptions of the out-party becomes warped (Ahler, 2014). Ahler (2014) goes on to further show that (mis)perceptions of the political attitudes of the other side can lead individuals to adopt views that are more extreme. However, since our focus is on GMPs, I ask whether this out-partisan characterization influences a desire among partisans to engage with out-partisans? Do they seek to engage with the out-partisans to “correct” the characterization or do they respond affectively and withdraw from engaging in cross-cutting interactions? To test this I use two questions with a Likert scale from 1 (extremely interested) to 5 (Not at all interested) to measure interest in cross-partisan dialogue

1. If you had the chance to participate with a Republican [Democrat] voter about various political matters in a casual conversation, how interested do you think you would be in doing so?
2. If you had the chance to participate with an Independent voter about various political matters in a casual conversation, how interested do you think you would be in doing so?

## 6.4 Hypothesis

There are three core theoretical claims I make regarding GMPs: (1) they influence political behavior, (2) the source (messenger) of the evaluation matters, and (3) the content of the evaluation matters. These three overarching claims structure the following central hypothesis:

**Table 2:** Hypothesis and estimand summary table

Hypothesis	Estimand Calculation
<b>H1:</b> Exposure to group meta-perceptions from Independents will produce greater support for changes in party strategy than exposure to similar characterizations from out-party members.	$\frac{T2+T4}{2} - \frac{T1+T3}{2}$
<b>H2:</b> Exposure to group meta-perceptions from out-party members will produce more negative affect toward the opposing party than exposure to similar characterizations from Independents.	$\frac{T1+T3}{2} - \frac{T2+T4}{2}$
<b>H3:</b> Exposure to group meta-perceptions from out-party members will reduce willingness to engage with members of the opposing party more than exposure to similar characterizations from Independents.	$\frac{T1+T3}{2} - \frac{T2+T4}{2}$
<b>H4:</b> Characterizations involving alarm bell issues will produce stronger reactions than characterizations involving regular issues.	$\frac{T1+T2}{2} - \frac{T3+T4}{2}$
<b>H5:</b> The effect of Independent characterizations on support for changes in party strategy will be strongest when the characterization involves alarm bell issues.	$(T2-T4)-(T1-T3)$

## 6.5 Power Analysis

*Note: DeclareDesign was giving me some trouble setting this up and thus this section requires some more TLC.* Since I am particularly interested in the interaction (H5), I calculate power requirements for this MDE with an estimand of  $\tau = .1$ . Each arm will have equal assignment. I estimate power requirements for just one party and then multiply it twice. While there is a strong possibility that this effect may be asymmetrical between the parties (Grossmann and Hopkins, 2016), for simplicity I assume symmetrical effects between both subgroups. Further, and as mentioned earlier, I plan to provide the DVs both pre and post to improve power requirements. Using some napkin math, roughly 800 Democrats are needed per arm, for a total requirement of 3200 Democrats needed. Given I am interested in these effects on Republicans as well, the total number of observations needed is roughly 6400.

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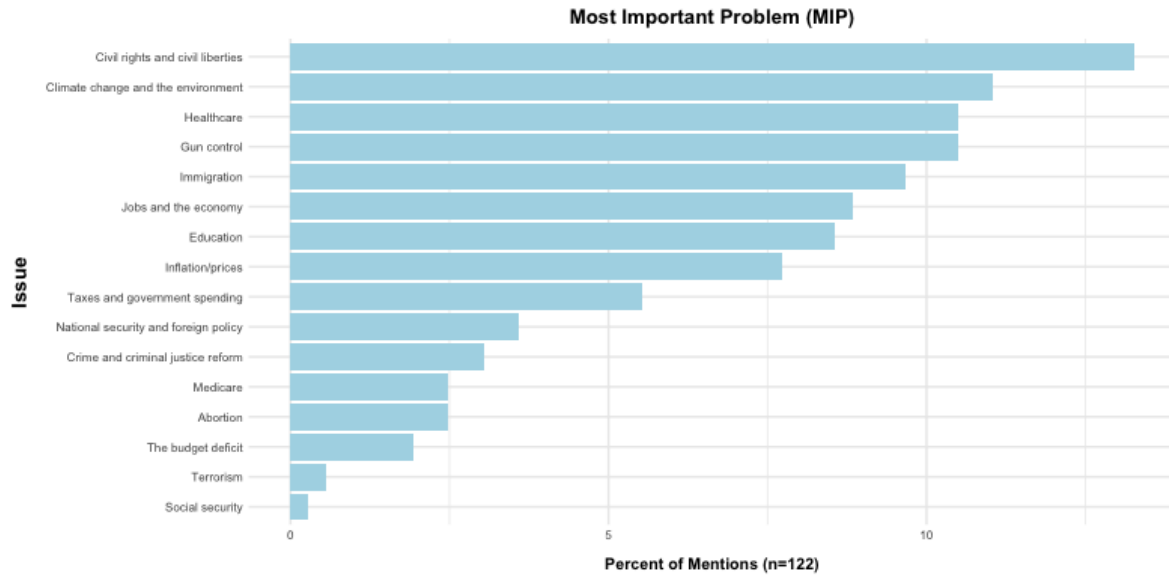
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## 7 Appendix

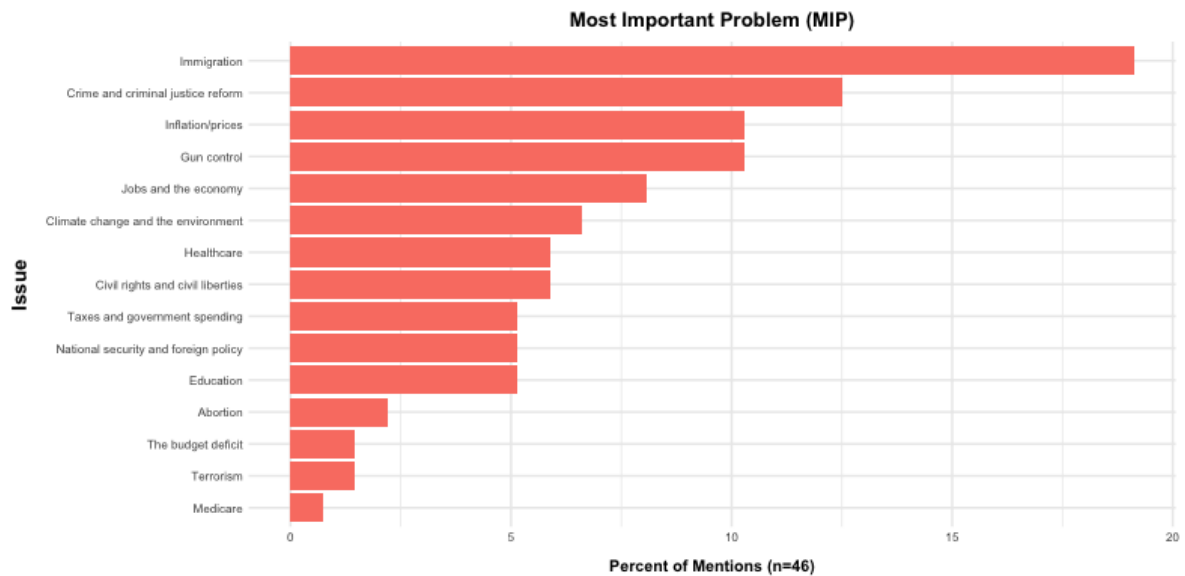
### 7.1 Additional Descriptive Statistics from Time Sharing Survey

#### 7.1.1 Democratic Leaner's Most Important Problem (MIP)



**Figure 3:** MIP among those that did not identify with Democratic party but indicated they lean towards the Democratic party

#### 7.1.2 Republican Leaner's Most Important Problem (MIP)



**Figure 4:** MIP among those that did not identify with Republican party but indicated they lean towards the Republican party

## 7.2 Treatment Conditions

### 7.2.1 Treatment 1 - Alarm Bell Issues - out-Partisan

**For a Democratic Respondent:** In a recent survey, Republicans were asked what they thought Democrats would say were the most important problems facing the United States today. Despite Democrats saying their three most important issues were Civil Rights/Civil Liberties, Inflation/Prices, and Climate Change and the Environment; Republicans said Democrats three most important issues were:

- Abortion
- Gay Rights
- Crime and Criminal Justice Reform

**For a Republican Respondent:** In a recent survey, Democrats were asked what they thought Republicans would say were the most important problems facing the United States today. Despite Republicans saying their three most important issues were Immigration, Inflation, and Taxes and Government Spending; Democrats said Republicans three most important issues were:

- Immigration
- Terrorism
- Gun Rights

### 7.2.2 Treatment 2 - Alarm Bell Issues - Independent

**For a Democratic Respondent:** In a recent survey, Independents were asked what they thought Democrats would say were the most important problems facing the United States today. Despite Democrats saying their three most important issues were Civil Rights/Civil Liberties, Inflation/Prices, and Climate Change and the Environment; Independents said Democrats three most important issues were:

- Abortion
- Gay Rights
- Crime and Criminal Justice Reform

**For a Republican Respondent:** In a recent survey, Independents were asked what they thought Republicans would say were the most important problems facing the United States today. Despite Republicans saying their three most important issues were Immigration, Inflation, and Taxes and Government Spending; Independents said Republicans three most important issues were:

- Immigration
- Terrorism
- Gun Rights

### 7.2.3 Treatment 3 - Regular Issues - out-partisan

**For a Democratic Respondent:** In a recent survey, Republicans were asked what they thought Democrats would say were the most important problems facing the United States today. Despite Democrats saying their three most important issues were Civil Rights/Civil Liberties, Inflation/Prices, and Climate Change and the Environment; Republicans said Democrats three most important issues were:

- Medicare
- Social Security
- Jobs in the economy

**For a Republican Respondent:** In a recent survey, Democrats were asked what they thought Republican would say were the most important problems facing the United States today. Despite Republicans saying their three most important issues were Immigration, Inflation, and Taxes and Government Spending; Democrats said Republicans three most important issues were:

- Inflation/Prices
- Health care
- Taxes and government spending

#### 7.2.4 Treatment 4 - Regular Issues - Independent

**For a Democratic respondent:** In a recent survey, Independents were asked what they thought Democrats would say were the most important problems facing the United States today. Despite Democrats saying their three most important issues were Civil Rights/Civil Liberties, Inflation/Prices, and Climate Change and the Environment; Independents said Democrats three most important issues were:

- Medicare
- Social Security
- Jobs in the economy

**For a Republican respondent:** In a recent survey, Independents were asked what they thought Republican would say were the most important problems facing the United States today. Despite Republicans saying their three most important issues were Immigration, Inflation, and Taxes and Government Spending; Independents said Republicans three most important issues were:

- Inflation/Prices
- Health care
- Taxes and government spending

### 7.3 Manipulation Checks

#### 7.3.1 Manipulation Check 1

According to the passage you were give, which group provided the list of issues about your party?

- Republican
- Democrat
- Independent

#### 7.3.2 Manipulation Check 2

According to the passage you were given, can you name two of the three issues [Republicans/Democrats/Independents] named as important issues for [Republicans/Democrats]?

#### 7.3.3 Manipulation Check 3

Do you believe the [Republican/Democrat]'s characterization of your party's policy stances is positive or negative?

- positive
- negative

#### **7.3.4 Manipulation Check 4**

To what extent do you agree with the characterization you just read?

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

### **7.4 Other Relevant Survey Questions**

#### **7.4.1 Question 1: Party ID (prescreening question)**

Do you consider yourself a member of one of these political parties?

- Democrat
- Republican
- Independent
- Not political
- None of the above

#### **7.4.2 Question 2: Ideology**

In general, how would you describe your own political views?

- Very Conservative
- Conservative
- Moderate
- Liberal
- Very Liberal
- Not sure

#### **7.4.3 Question 3: Political Interest**

Generally speaking, how interested are you in political and social issues?

- Very interested
- Somewhat interested
- Not very interested
- Not interested at all
- Neutral

#### **7.4.4 Question 4: Strategic or Principled**

Some people think their party should stay true to its core values and principles, even if that means losing elections. Others think their party should focus on winning elections, even if that means changing policies or priorities. Where would you place yourself?

(likert 1 - 5 scale here)

#### 7.4.5 Question 5: Network

Thinking about your friends, would you say they are mostly Republicans, mostly Democrats, or a fairly even mix of both?3. Thinking about your friends, would you say they are mostly Republicans, mostly Democrats, or a fairly even mix of both?

- Entirely/Almost entirely Republican
- Mostly Republican
- A fairly even mix of both
- Mostly Democrat
- Entirely/Almost entirely Democrat
- Neither / My friends aren't very political
- Don't know / Prefer not to say

#### 7.5 Second Operationalization of MIP

As discussed in the operationalization section, the Most Important Problem (MIP) used in this version lacks directionality and thus only captures issue salience. That is, a Democrat and Republican may both emphasize immigration as the most important issues for the party, but of course they are for wildly different reasons. To address this shortcoming, I have fielded an additional exploratory student survey that provides policy choices with directionality attached. Unfortunately, results from this exploratory survey can not be presented as the survey is currently out in the field. Respondents are asked to pick three MIIs for each question. These three questions include: (1) what their three MIIs are, (2) what they believe are the three MIIs for their own party, and (3) what they believe a member of the opposing party would say are their party's three MIIs are. The list of options presented is as follows:

- Protecting abortion rights
- Restricting abortion
- Expanding immigration
- Restricting immigration
- Strengthening gun control laws
- Protecting gun ownership rights
- Expanding government healthcare programs
- Reducing government involvement in healthcare
- Increasing taxes
- Cutting taxes
- Expanding LGBTQ rights
- Limiting LGBTQ rights
- Expanding social welfare programs
- Limiting social welfare programs
- Increasing police funding
- Decrease police funding
- Increase military spending
- Decrease military spending