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The Politics of Beauty: The Effects of Partisan Bias on Physical Attractiveness

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Abstract Does politics cause people to be perceived as more or less attractive? As a type of social identity, party identifiers often exhibit in-group bias, positively evaluating members of their own party and, especially under conditions of competition, negatively evaluating out-party members. The current experiment tests whether political in-party and out-party status affects perceptions of the physical attractiveness of target persons. In a nationally representative internet sample of U.S. adults during the 2012 presidential election, we presented participants with photos of individuals and varied information about their presidential candidate preference. Results indicate that partisans, regardless of gender, rate target individuals as less attractive if they hold a dissimilar candidate preference. Female partisans, however, were more likely to rate target persons as more physically attractive when they held a similar candidate preference whereas no such effect was found for male partisans.

Keywords Physical attractiveness · Party identification · Party cues · Social judgment · Partisan polarization · Social distance · Mate selection

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Politics has always been a part of the social fabric of the United States.[1] However, a growing body of research suggests a dramatic shift in the importance of politics in explaining social interaction and judgment (Iyengar et al. 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015). At the heart of this growing politicization of social judgment is partisanship. Over the last 40 or so years, political parties in Congress have become increasingly polarized, moving further away from each other in ideological space (Hetherington 2001; McCarty et al. 2006). Although scholars disagree over whether the public has similarly polarized over policy preferences (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Fiorina et al. 2005), scholars have found evidence of emotion-based or affective polarization, an identity-based polarization characterized by in-party favoritism and a strong dislike of out-partisans (Hetherington 2015; Iyengar et al. 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Mason 2015; Miller and Conover 2015). Building on theories of partisan bias and motivated reasoning (Bartels 2002; Taber and Lodge 2006), affective polarization is far reaching, increasing the salience of politics in everyday life.

We advance research on affective theories of partisanship by exploring whether the reach of partisanship extends to a nonpolitical, and likely involuntary judgment made in people's everyday lives: the physical attractiveness of others. In other words, we investigate whether, and how, party cues affect judgments about the attractiveness of others. Although commonly believed a trivial matter, who is perceived as physically attractive makes a difference. Physically attractive people are more likely to be perceived by others to possess an abundance of positive social attributes. This effect, dubbed the "what is beautiful is good" bias, holds that physically attractive persons are assumed to hold many other positive attributes (e.g. kindness, intelligence) (Langlois et al. 2000). Physical attractiveness also appears to shape life outcomes. For example, physically attractive people are more likely to earn higher wages (Hamermesh 2011), experience greater mating success (Rhodes et al. 2005), and even receive greater leniency in criminal sentencing (Mazzella and Feingold 1994). In short, beauty matters.

Using an internet survey from the 2012 presidential election, we investigate whether target persons are rated as more or less attractive depending on the presidential candidate (Obama or Romney) they supported. In our experiments conducted over the internet, we presented participants with photos of target individuals and varied information about their presidential candidate preference. Our results suggest that partisans, regardless of gender, judge target individuals to be less attractive if they hold dissimilar candidate preferences. However, female partisans, but not male partisans, also take into account in-party cues, finding target persons more attractive if they share the same candidate preference.

Affective Partisanship

Affective or expressive partisanship is rooted in theories of social identity, an approach to intergroup relations premised on the view that social groups shape how people view themselves and others (Huddy 2001; Tajfel 1982). In social identity

[1] Data and code for replication of our analysis can be accessed at the Political Behavior dataverse: http://dx.doi.org/10.7910/DVN/XIPZQT.

theory and related approaches, people categorize themselves and others who share a relevant characteristic or attribute as in-group members and those who do not as out-group members. Those in the in-group are favored and viewed positively, while those in the out-group are disfavored and perceived negatively. Social group categorization is common in every day life and easily invoked, sometimes by something as trivial as whether a person under- or over-estimated the number of dots on a screen (Tajfel 1970). Even under a minimal group paradigm such as the under or over-estimation of dots, individuals often exhibit in-group bias, positively evaluating members of their own group and, especially under conditions of intergroup competition, negatively evaluating or discriminating against out-group members.

Political parties constitute a potent form of identity in the American political system (e.g., Huddy et al. 2015; Campbell et al. 1960). Whereas the public is often characterized as largely ill-informed about politics (Converse 1964), parties appear to be the exception. The American public demonstrates a strong understanding of party stereotypes or brands (Campbell et al. 1960; Nicholson and Segura 2012; Rahn 1993; Sniderman and Stiglitz 2012) perceiving the parties to be ideologically distinct (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008) and categorical opposites (Heit and Nicholson 2010). Identification with parties invokes in-group/out-group related processes that lead to partisanship and partisan biases. For example, party identification powerfully shapes how individuals perceive the political world, shaping policy attitudes (Jacoby 1988), evaluations of elected leaders (Bartels 2002), and vote choice (Campbell et al. 1960). Although party often guides people to informed political decisions, it can also motivate them to view politics in ways that are favorable to their party and unfavorable to the out-party (Bartels 2002; Bolsen et al. 2014; Groenendyk 2013; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010; Taber and Lodge 2006). Rather than trying to get the "right answer," partisan motivated reasoning is an exercise in confirming pre-existing biases and rejecting uncongenial information.

Partisan bias has no doubt been around since the first political parties. Yet, the magnitude of partisan bias is likely to ebb and flow as political circumstances change. With the rise of polarized parties among elites (Hetherington 2001; McCarty et al. 2006), contemporary politics has heightened and expanded the reach of mass partisan bias. Although there is scholarly disagreement about the role that policy differences play in explaining mass partisan polarization (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Fiorina et al. 2005), there is a good deal of evidence in favor of affective polarization, an identity based explanation rooted in in-group favoritism and out-group derogation (Hetherington 2015; Iyengar et al. 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Mason 2015; Miller and Conover 2015).

A central piece of evidence supporting the rise of affective polarization is that over the last 40 years, partisans have increasingly expressed greater dislike of the opposing party (Hetherington 2015; Hetherington and Rudolph 2015, chap. 4; Iyengar et al. 2012; Levendusky 2009). Comparing ANES feeling thermometer scores in which partisans rated their own party and the out-party, Iyengar et al. (2012) found that over time "it is the standing of the out-group that has changed; partisans like their opponents less and less." Furthermore, Hetherington (2015, p. 446) notes that there are about the same percentage of strong partisans as

compared to the 1980s and 1990s and *fewer* strong partisans today compared to the 1950s further suggesting that in-party favoritism is not motivating the process. Taken together, the roots of affective polarization stem more from antipathy for the out-group than in-group favoritism.

The potency of out-group antipathy also informs how partisans respond to party cues. Whereas the results for in-party cues are generally mixed (see Bullock 2011), out-party cues significantly move partisan opinion in the opposite direction, producing opinion polarization (Nicholson 2011, 2012; also see Goren et al. 2009). Nicholson (2012), for example, found that in-party cues did not produce any discernable opinion change on opinion toward immigration and housing foreclosure policy whereas out-party cues moved partisans to hold opinions contrary to the out-party.

Party cues have also significantly entered social life. Iyengar et al. (2012), for example, show that attitudes toward interparty marriage have changed substantially. Whereas partisans 50 years ago in the United States expressed little dissatisfaction with the idea of their children marrying someone outside their own party (only about 4 or 5 % of respondents), in 2008 dissatisfaction with interparty marriage had witnessed about a five-fold increase (Iyengar et al. 2012, p. 417). The degree to which party has invaded social life appears to even exceed the effects of racial divisions (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). In an experiment asking participants to make decisions about applicants for academic scholarships, Iyengar and Westwood (2015) found that party cues not only dampened the effect of academic qualifications but the effect size of party exceeded that of race. Iyengar and Westwood also explored whether affective polarization was driven more by in-group favoritism or out-group prejudice. Employing dictator and trust games that disentangled these mechanisms, Iyengar and Westwood (2015, p. 703) conclude that, "out-group animosity is more consequential than favoritism for the in-group." In sum, affective party identity elicits strong responses in nonpolitical arenas and much of it is the result of out-party prejudice.

Why is negative affect toward the out-party the driving force behind affective polarization? Americans have a "complicated" relationship with parties. Despite the American voter's heavy reliance on parties for understanding politics and voting, parties (and partisanship) are widely disdained (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Kernell et al. 2012, chap. 12; Klar and Krupnikov 2016). Many Americans, therefore, half-heartedly identify with parties. In this way, as we elaborate below, party identity deviates from the emphasis that theories of social identity put on in-group love.

Although Americans have a complicated relationship with the party they identify with, they are much less conflicted about the negative feelings they hold toward the out-party. Despite the primacy of in-group favoritism to theories of social identity, identity can be primarily negational, motivated by out-groups (Zhong et al. 2008). Negational identity appears to be especially relevant to understanding the effects of party in the United States. Indeed, Zhong et al. (2008) found that political parties were the most common type of negational identity (e.g., "I am not a member of the

Republican party"). Fueling this process is intergroup competition, a defining characteristic of the American party system. Feelings of antipathy for the out-party is heightened by intergroup competition, a primary ingredient of out-group derogation in social identity theory approaches (Brewer 1991).

The Politics of Physical Attractiveness

We bring this inquiry to the domain of physical attractiveness, a judgment strongly rooted in physical and cultural ideals (Swami and Furnham 2008). Although a good deal of research on physical attractiveness focuses on physical traits, nonphysical characteristics such as respect (Kniffin and Wilson 2004) or social status (Townsend and Levy 1990) have also been found to affect judgments of physical attractiveness. Politics is also likely to play a role. Recently, Klar and Krupnikov (2016, chap. 4) found that Democrats and Republicans were rated by participants in their experiment as less attractive when reminded that political parties are disagreeable. Furthermore, studies of *interpersonal attraction* (e.g., how much a person likes or dislikes another person) have found that political party has a significant effect but that the effect of dissimilarity (out-party) is greater than similarity (in-party) (Chen and Kenrick 2002).

Studies of the politics of mate selection suggest that similar or dissimilar party preferences shape judgments of physical attractiveness. A particularly relevant finding from research on mate selection is that the high correlation between the political attitudes of spouses occurs at the selection stage (where attractiveness is likely to matter), making political congruence less about persuasion or accommodation between couples and more about initial attraction (Alford et al. 2011). Yet, it is unclear how the selection mechanism works. Although spouses appear to match on the basis of politics prior to marriage (Alford et al. 2011), most people do not advertise their political preferences on dating websites suggesting that the high correlation between the political attitudes of spouses may be the unintended byproduct of selection on nonpolitical factors related to political attitudes (Klofstad et al. 2012). Yet, other research on online dating suggests that shared political characteristics such as party identification have direct effects on interactions (increased rates of messaging) between men and women (Huber and Malhotra 2013).

In sum, theories of social identity and research on expressive partisanship, partisan motivated reasoning, and affective polarization suggest that party similarity or difference plays a prominent role in explaining judgments about the physical attractiveness of others.

Hypotheses

We expect to find a variety of differences between partisans driven by in-group favoritism and out-group derogation. First, we expect partisans to be more likely to judge target persons who support their party's candidate as more attractive and

supporters of the out-party candidate as less attractive (H1). To investigate how interparty differences arise, we look at how partisans of the same identity judge the physical attractiveness of target persons from the perspective of in- and out-groups by varying the types of party cues made available to them. For example, compared to the baseline condition, we expect a Democrat to find an Obama supporter more attractive and a Romney supporter less attractive. Likewise, relative to the control, we expect a Republican to find a Romney supporter more attractive and an Obama supporter less attractive. Accordingly, we anticipate Republicans and Democrats to differ from each other in their evaluations of a target person's physical attractiveness, but only if presented with party information (whether the target person supports Obama or Romney). In the control or baseline condition, where no political information is given, we expect to find no between party differences. If given candidate information, however, we expect partisans to perceive the target persons differently, with Democrats and Republicans judgments significantly diverging from each other.

Lastly, we explore the possibility that the effect of in- and out-party cues are asymmetric, producing larger out-party effects. Accordingly, we expect out-party cues to produce larger (absolute) effects on perceptions of physical attractiveness than in-party cues (H2). For example, among Democratic respondents we expect the size of the (negative) effect produced by Romney support to be significantly larger than the size of the (positive) effect elicited by Obama support.

Method

A nationally representative sample of U.S. adults during the presidential election completed an online questionnaire in October 2012 ($N = 1000$). The study was conducted over the internet as part of the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), a national survey administered by YouGov/Polimetrix. The methodology makes use of sample matching, a process wherein representative samples are constructed from opt-in pools of respondents. The matching methodology involves two-stages. In the first stage, a random sample is drawn from the target population and in the second stage a matching member is taken from the pool of opt-in respondents (see Vavreck and Rivers 2008). All analyses were weighted for representativeness using the weight variable provided by YouGov/Polimetrix. However, we also analyze all the results using unweighted data and find no substantive differences (see the Online Appendix).

The larger study of which our experiment was a part consisted of questions about the 2012 presidential election, political issues, and demographics. We use a standard branching question from the larger survey to measure party identification, which first asks participants whether they identify as Republican, Democratic, or Independent. If participants answer "Independent," a follow up question is asked, "Do you think of yourself as closer to the Democratic or the Republican Party?" We combine responses from the original and follow-up questions to identify partisans since scholars have found that Independents who express a partisan preference in the follow-up question are attitudinally similar to partisans (Keith et al. 1992). In the

sample, 94 respondents did not report a partisan preference, 32 reported being unsure, and 15 did not respond. Analyses were conducted on the remaining 859 respondents reporting a partisan preference. We largely reproduce our results using the CCES party registration variable. (see the Online Appendix).[2]

Participants were presented with a picture of a target person along with "About Me" information that included "Friendly," "Smart," and "Runner" and asked to rate the attractiveness of the person using a seven-point scale that ranged from "Extremely attractive" to "Extremely unattractive." Male and female participants were in different but parallel experiments since they rated different pictures. Male participants rated a picture of a target female and female participants rated a picture of a target male. All male participants rated the same female target and all female participants rated the same male target. The target female and male pictures were selected for moderate attractiveness so as to avoid ceiling and floor effects in attractiveness ratings.[3] We did not ask participants about sexual orientation. For the participants in our sample who are not attracted to the opposite sex, it is possible that we might find differences in attractiveness ratings.

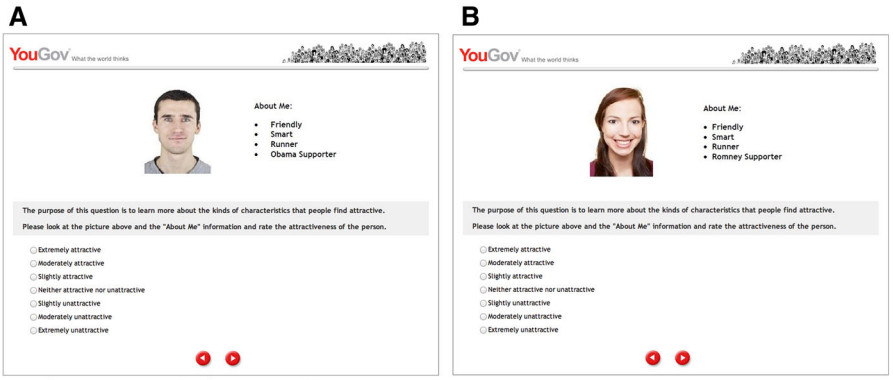
In a between-subjects design, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions or a control group (see Fig. 1). In the Obama condition, participants were told the target person was an Obama supporter and in the Romney condition participants were told the target person was a Romney supporter. The baseline or control condition did not include any information about presidential candidate preference. After rating the target person, a manipulation check on the following webpage asked participants, "Which political party do you think the person in the picture identifies with?" Participants were not able to click back to the previous page to check their answer. For the purpose of data analysis, we analyzed the results by party identification and gender.

Results

Our experimental design affords casual leverage to the claim that the candidate preference of target persons can affect how attractive others find them. We expect no party differences in the control or baseline condition since there are no candidate cues given about the target. However, as mentioned, we expect differences between Democrats and Republicans to emerge when candidate information is included. Furthermore, we expect participants in the in-party condition to rate the target person as more attractive since the target person supports a candidate in the same party as the participant. Conversely, we expect those in the out-party condition, where the target person is said to support a candidate from the opposite party, to find the target person less attractive relative to the baseline condition. Lastly, we examine whether the out-party effect is greater than the in-party effect.

[2] *Party Registration* and *Party Identification* are highly correlated ($\alpha = 0.91$).

[3] The pictures are stock photos obtained from shutterstock.com.



Note Pictures are examples from two conditions. Female participants only received the male picture and male participants only received the female picture

Fig. 1 Experimental conditions for female and male participants

As mentioned, males and females were in different but parallel experiments since participants received a picture of a target person of the opposite gender. In looking at the baseline condition where there are no party cues, we find that males ($M = 5.51$, $SD = 0.14$) are more likely to rate the target female as more attractive than females are likely to rate the target male ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 0.09$), $t(322) = 3.06$, $p < 0.01$. Despite the small difference between the mean ratings of males and females, we analyzed the data for male and female participants separately because the difference is statistically significant.

After participants rated the attractiveness of the target person, we included a manipulation check on the following screen asking them to identify the party of the target person. The survey was programmed so that participants could not click back to see the previous screen to check their answer. Females in the baseline condition largely responded "don't know" (60 %). Among the other response options, 16 % chose Democrat, 12 % chose Republican, and 12 % chose Independent. In the Obama condition, 70 % answered correctly and approximately 2 % chose Republican. In the Romney condition, 64 % of female participants answered correctly while only 4 % chose Democrat. The general pattern of responses was similar for male participants, although their recall scores were lower. Males in the baseline condition chose "don't know" 44 % of the time. Almost 30 % chose Democrat while 12 % chose Republican and 15 % chose Independent. The majority of males chose Democrat in the Obama condition (66 %) while only 3 % chose Republican. In the Romney condition, 53 % chose correctly while only 11 % chose Democrat. In the appendix, we examine differences by correct recall and the results do not change substantively.

The following analyses allow us to explore whether, and how, attractiveness ratings vary by party identification. Figure 2a depicts the results for Democratic and Republican female participants and Fig. 2b depicts results for male Democratic and Republican participants. As shown in Fig. 2, the difference between Democrats and Republicans for both women and men in the baseline conditions (no candidate

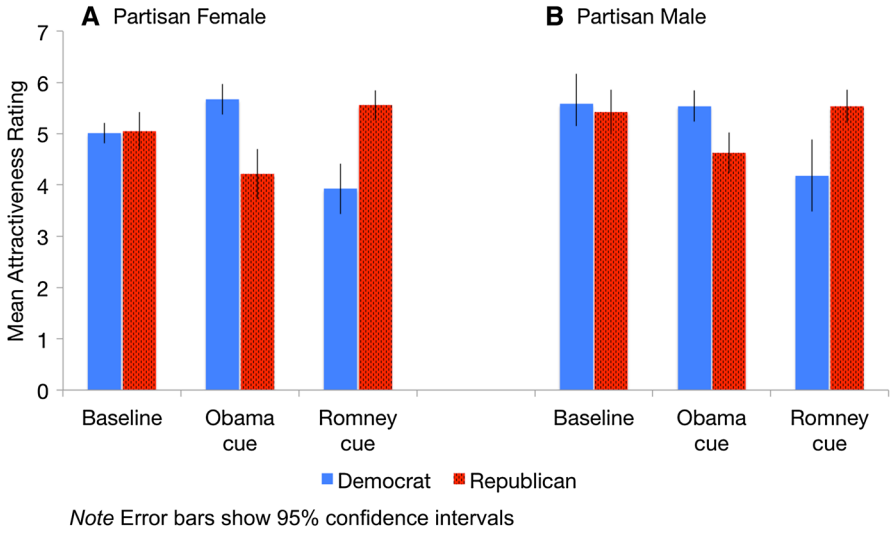


Fig. 2 Mean rating of attractiveness by gender and party identification

information is given) is indistinguishable. For female participants, Democratic and Republican identifiers offered nearly identical ratings of the attractiveness of the target male. The mean attractiveness rating for Democratic and Republican women was 5.01 and 5.05, respectively, $t(150) = -0.19$, $p = ns$. In the baseline condition for Democratic men ($M = 5.58$, $SD = 0.22$) and Republican men ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 0.22$), there was also no statistical difference in their rating of the target female, $t(135) = 0.51$, $p = ns$.

The difference between Democrats and Republicans in the candidate treatments is also apparent in Fig. 2. In Fig. 2a, female partisans exhibit stark differences within treatments. The Obama cue produces a 1.46 point difference between Democratic females ($M = 5.67$, $SD = 0.15$) and Republican females ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.25$), a difference that is statistically significant, $t(151) = 5.03$, $p < 0.001$. There is an even slightly greater difference between females given the Romney cue (1.63 points). Republican females ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 0.15$) rate the target male significantly more attractive than Democrat females ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.25$), a difference that is also statistically significant, $t(152) = -5.61$, $p < 0.001$.

Figure 2b displays the results for partisan men. As with the female participants, we see consistent differences between Democrats and Republicans within treatment groups. In the Obama treatment, Democratic males ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 0.15$) rate the target female, on average, to be almost a whole point more attractive than Republican males ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 0.20$), a difference that is statistically significant, $t(128) = 3.61$, $p < 0.001$. We see a similar but slightly stronger effect in the Romney treatment condition. Republican males given a Romney cue ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 0.16$), on average, rate the target female as 1.35 points more attractive than Democratic males ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.35$), a difference that is statistically significant, $t(135) = -3.45$, $p < 0.001$. Taken together, the results

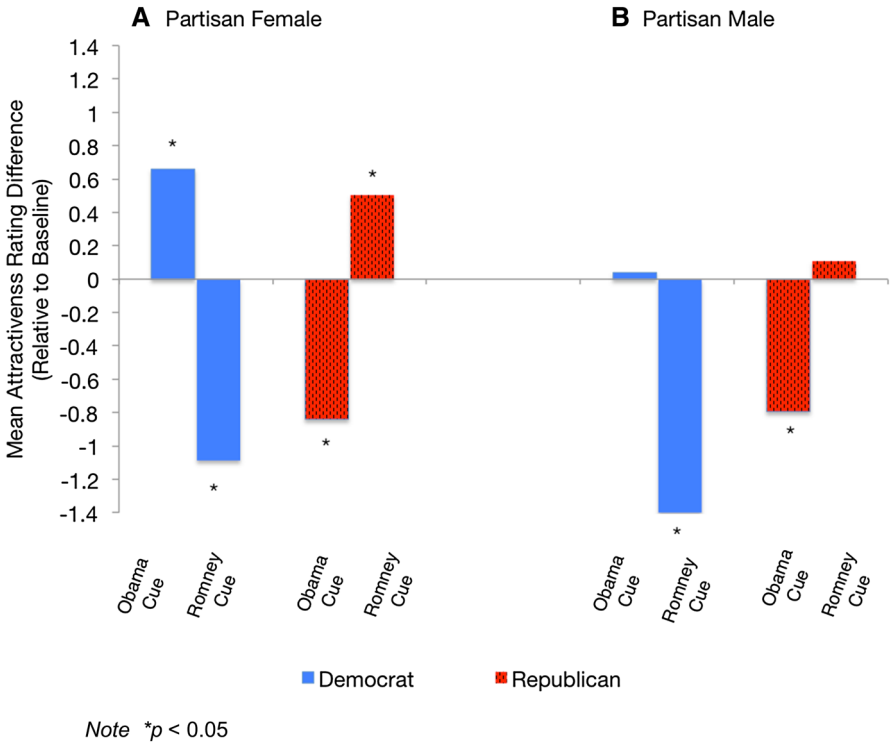


Fig. 3 Differences between treatment and control by gender and party identification

depicted in Fig. 3 provide support for our hypothesis that Democrats and Republicans will rate the same person's physical attractiveness differently when given candidate cues.

Figure 3 depicts the effect of treatment relative to control to illustrate in- and out-party effects. Figure 3a displays the results for female participants. Regardless of party identification, we find that both in-party and out-party attractiveness ratings for females are significantly different from the baseline. Relative to the baseline, Democratic female participants rated the male target as significantly more attractive if he supported Obama ($M = 5.67$, $SD = 0.15$), $t(180) = -3.63$, $p < 0.001$ whereas they rated him less attractive if he supported Romney ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.25$), $t(179) = 4.01$, $p < 0.001$. Similarly, relative to the baseline, Republican female participants rated the male target as significantly more attractive if he supported Romney ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 0.15$), $t(123) = -2.13$, $p < 0.05$ whereas they rated him less attractive if he supported Obama ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.25$), $t(121) = 2.71$, $p < 0.01$.

Figure 3b depicts results for male participants. Compared to the baseline rating, male participants from either party were not significantly more likely to find the target female more attractive if she supported the candidate from the same party as the participant. Democratic males who were told the female target was an Obama

supporter ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 0.15$) were not more likely to find the female target more attractive than Democratic males who did not receive candidate information ($M = 5.58$, $SD = 0.22$), $t(129) = 0.14$, $p = ns$. Similarly, compared to the baseline condition for Republican males ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 0.22$), Republican males did not find the female target significantly more attractive when informed that she supported Romney ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 0.16$), $t(135) = -.39$, $p = ns$.

Although male participants did not find the female target supporting their party's candidate significantly more attractive, male participants did find the female target significantly less attractive if they supported the other party's candidate. In comparison to the baseline of no candidate information, Democratic men were significantly less likely to find the target attractive when told she supported Romney ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.36$), $t(135) = 3.35$, $p < 0.01$. Similarly, Republican men found the female target significantly less attractive if she was an Obama supporter ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 0.20$), $t(134) = 2.66$, $p < 0.01$. This set of results suggests that for male partisans there is no in-group favoritism (at least in physical attractiveness ratings) towards a female that supports the in-party candidate, but there is a negative response if a female target supports the out-party candidate. Taken together with the results for female participants, we found consistent support for out-party effects. Curiously, only for female participants did we see a consistent effect of in-party bias.

Lastly, Fig. 3 also depicts the differences in effect sizes between in-party and out-party cues. Recall that our second hypothesis held that the effect of out-party cues would be significantly larger than the effect of in-party cues. To this end, we analyzed these differences to see if the out-party effect is larger than the in-party effect. The differences in effect sizes can be obtained by the absolute difference of the baseline mean and treatment mean for both the Obama and Romney cue:

$$\left|Baseline - Treatment_{Outparty}\right| \; - \; \left|Baseline - Treatment_{Inparty}\right|$$

As mentioned, female partisans exhibited both in- and out-party effects. However, despite that the effect sizes for the out-party candidate cues appear larger than the in-party candidate cues, the effect sizes were not statistically indistinguishable from each other. Democratic females who received the Obama cue ($M = 0.66$, $SD = 0.18$) were, on average, half a point less likely to find the target male attractive than Democrat females in the out-party who received the Romney cue ($M = 1.09$, $SD = 0.27$) although the difference was not significant, $t(357) = -1.31$, $p = ns$. Similarly, the out-party effect size also appeared larger than the in-party effect size for Republican women but here too, those differences were not statistically significant. Specifically, the effect size for Republican females in the in-party condition ($M = 0.51$, $SD = 0.24$) was smaller than the out-party condition ($M = 0.84$, $SD = 0.31$) but the difference was not statistically significant, $t(242) = -0.86$, $p = ns$.

Partisan males, unlike the partisan females, revealed no significant in-party differences relative to the control. However, the out-party effect was relatively large as depicted in Fig. 3. Democratic males in the in-party condition were statistically indistinguishable from the baseline with an effect size close to zero ($M = 0.04$,

$SD = 0.27$). For Democrat males in the out-party condition ($M = 1.40$, $SD = 0.42$) there was almost a point and half difference from the baseline yielding a reliable difference in effect sizes between in- and out-party cues, $t(262) = -2.71$, $p < 0.001$. The same pattern occurred for the Republican males where those in the in-party condition ($M = 0.11$, $SD = 0.27$) had a smaller effect size than those in the out-party condition ($M = 0.79$, $SD = 0.30$), a difference that was also statistically significant, $t(267) = -1.69$, $p < 0.05$.

Taken together, our results provide mixed support for our second hypothesis. The effect sizes for party cues were not statistically distinguishable from each other across the in- and out-party conditions. Both treatment conditions moved partisan females in the expected direction with the in-party treatment rendering the target male more attractive and the out-party treatment rendering him less attractive. However, the effect sizes were not significantly different from each other. A different pattern occurs with partisan males. Partisan males were not effected by the in-party treatment, but they were effected by the out-party treatment where they were significantly more likely to rate the target female as less attractive for being a supporter of a candidate from the opposite party. Here, the large effect for the out-party treatment on partisan men was a product of the absence of a meaningful in-party effect.

Discussion and Conclusion

Politics affects whom people find attractive. We investigated whether information about a target person's candidate preferences affects whom one finds attractive, and if so whether the effect is driven by an attraction to in-partisans or repulsion to out-partisans. Our results suggest that physical attractiveness encompasses a broader range of characteristics than physical or cultural traits. Whether a person shares our candidate preference affects the extent to which we view that person as physically attractive.

Our results suggest that repulsion toward out-party target persons matters consistently. Compared to the control, Democrats and Republicans, regardless of gender, consistently judged target persons voting for the out-party candidate as less attractive. We also found that the effect of out-party repulsion was significantly larger than in-party attraction among partisan men, primarily due to the near absence of an in-party effect. Partisan males did not find the female target supporting their candidate any more physically attractive than if they did not have information about her candidate preferences.

The effect of in-party candidate support was only significant among partisan women and, at least statistically speaking, was no different from the out-party candidate effect. We did not offer a prediction regarding gender differences but this finding appears consistent with evolutionary psychology research that suggests women are more discriminating than men in both long and short term relationships (see Buss 1998). If physical attractiveness is an initial consideration when making decisions about relationships (a topic we return to shortly), women appear to be more discriminating than men when it comes to political compatibility.

In looking at differences between Democrats and Republicans, we found that when politics is not involved, partisans agree on physical attractiveness. In our control conditions, Democratic and Republican males found the female target equally attractive. Likewise, female Democrats and Republicans found the male target equally attractive. Yet, by injecting politics into the mix of considerations, we found that Democrats and Republicans judged the target persons differently. Democratic women found a male Obama supporter significantly more attractive than Republican women and the opposite was found when the male target was presumed to support the Republican candidate, Mitt Romney. The pattern of results was the same for Democratic and Republican men. Partisan identity, at least as invoked by party leaders during an election campaign, introduces bias into judgments of physical attractiveness suggesting that the perceptual screen induced by party identification travels far beyond political choices.

One limitation of our study is that we only had participants rate a single target individual. Although we made the choice to maintain a between-subjects design with a sufficiently large number of cases for subgroup analyses, we recognize that this means that we do not know if our results hold across target individuals who are more or less attractive than the target individuals featured in our study. Another promising avenue for research using multiple target persons might involve including faces that are stereotypically Democratic or Republican. Research on person perception has found that participants are able to correctly perceive target persons as Democratic or Republican from facial characteristics such as warmth (Democrat) or dominance (Republican) (Rule and Ambady 2010; Samochoweic et al. 2010). We provided our participants with explicit cues about the target person's partisan sympathies (who they were going to vote for in the 2012 election), but future research should explore how implicit partisan facial cues such as warmth and dominance shape in- and out-partisan judgments of physical attractiveness. Furthermore, examining implicit partisan facial cues alongside explicit party cues would illuminate the relative effect of implicit or explicit processes especially if the cues were contradictory (e.g., an Obama supporter with a stereotypically Republican face).

Future research should also explore the extent to which our findings capture mating or social judgments. If mating considerations dominate, our results suggest that politics play a direct role in judgments of physical attractiveness and thus may inform downstream choices such as date or mate selection. No doubt there is more to the story than politics, but political similarity or dissimilarity, operating through how attractive people find others, may nudge a politically compatible pair to go on a second date or a mismatched pair to revisit the dating pool. Yet, if our results better capture a general social judgment apart from mating considerations, they could have implications for a wide variety of outcomes in our social lives. Alas, with our data, we cannot disentangle these considerations since participants only rated the attractiveness of the opposite gender. Although people generally agree on who is and isn't physically attractive (Hamermesh 2011, p. 24–28), future research should have participants rate targets of the same gender to explore the extent to which the candidate cue effects are driven primarily by social or mate related considerations.

Of course, this does not apply to people who are attracted to members of the same sex, yet another promising avenue for future research.

In sum, politics affects how physically attractive we find others. On the one hand, this might be a surprising finding given that judgments of beauty are commonly believed to be deeply rooted in physical and cultural factors. On the other hand, in light of research on affective polarization, politics affects our social judgments, increasing or decreasing the amount of social distance between those who share our strongest political identities and those who do not. From this perspective, it is not unexpected to find that partisans are likely to view their co-partisans as more attractive (at least among female partisans) and out-partisans as less attractive.

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