Original Research Article

Who is To Blame? Partisans' Use of Blame Spreading in Reaction to Unfair or Dishonest Behavior

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Abstract

Blame attribution research suggests partisans acknowledge evidence that portrays copartisans negatively but blame externalities for negative events. This study identifies another blame attribution pattern. When people observe unfair/dishonest behavior by a copartisan, instead of shifting blame entirely to others, they engage in blame-spreading. I conduct two tests: a survey of undergraduate students who watched part of a 2020 Presidential debate and a survey experiment of a random sample of adults that randomizes the party affiliation of the debate participant engaging in unfair/dishonest behavior. When the unfair actor is a copartisan, people blame both participants equally. When the unfair actor is in the out-party, people blame the out-party actor. These findings suggest individuals acknowledge undesirable behavior among copartisans, but seek to justify it by identifying blame-worthy behavior by others, thus providing an additional mechanism in motivated reasoning whereby individuals acknowledge events while finding a way to justify such behavior.

Keywords

motivated reasoning, blame attribution, partisanship, debates

> "Pray that everyone will stop the finger-pointing and realize that both parties bear responsibility for the problems we face today." Franklin Graham, January 7, 2021, in a statement after the January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. (Graham, 2021)

> "I don't want to hear anything about how radical some of you believe republicans (sic) to be when there are lunatics running around New York City setting Fox News Christmas tree on fire." (Skolnik, 2021)

Examples abound of Republicans attempting to justify undesirable behavior among copartisans in the wake of the January 6 insurrection. The statements by Graham and McCain in reaction to the events on January 6, 2021, at the U.S. Capitol are just one example of partisans' attempts to explain undesirable behavior. Motivated reasoning and blame attribution literature suggest that when copartisans break norms, partisans will shift blame away from copartisans entirely (Kunda, 1990). But there are circumstances in which individuals will acknowledge blame among copartisans without shifting blame entirely away from their in-group members. This paper explores the conditions under which partisans acknowledge such aberrant behavior and the strategies they use to mitigate blame.

Prior research has established that partisans engage in motivated reasoning to avoid cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Kinder, 1978; Kunda, 1990; Lord et al., 1979; Sherrod, 1972; Sigel, 1964). Under extreme conditions, partisans will acknowledge information that is unfavorable for their in-group. Bisgaard (2015) has found that when negative stimuli are external to the actors being evaluated, individuals will shift the blame from their in-group to some external actor. Previous studies suggest that blame shifting takes the onus off the in-group actor entirely. In this study, I find that instead of shifting all of the blame to another actor, when partisans observe blame-worthy behavior in a copartisan, the observer will engage in "blame-spreading," which involves acknowledging the undesirable behavior by the in-group member while justifying that behavior by identifying blame-worthy behavior committed by other actors.

I expect to see these blame attribution patterns when partisans viewed clips from the historically contentious first 2020 Presidential debate, which was held on September 29, 2020. Scholars and journalists alike suggest that President

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Trump shattered honesty and fairness norms set by prior presidential candidates (Lynch et al., 2020; MacQuarrie, 2020). Trump interrupted Biden and moderator Chris Wallace 128 times (Stahl, 2020). Wallace asked Trump 25 times to stop interrupting, and Trump was often combative to both Wallace and Biden (Stahl, 2020). For his part, Biden interrupted dozens of times as well – often trying to get in a word edgewise – and called Trump a clown during one particularly tense exchange (CSPAN, 2020).

To test my theory, I conducted two studies, both of which use the debate as a way to test how partisans react to unfair and dishonest behavior by debate participants. In the first study, I administered a survey to 609 undergraduate students in the Government and Politics Experimental Lab at the University of Maryland College Park. Subjects watched clips from the debate and reported the unfair and dishonest behavior they observed.

In the second study, I administered a survey experiment via YouGov to a random sample of 1,200 adults. In this experiment, participants read a fictional debate transcript. To create the transcript, I used language from the September 2020 Presidential debate with several changes. I changed the context of the debate to a fictional Congressional debate between two white male candidates named Smith (a stand-in for Biden) and Miller (a stand-in for Trump). I changed the issue discussed during the debate so that respondents would be unable to guess that the debate was actually the Trump/Biden debate, but I did not change any of the unfair and dishonest language. I also randomized the party affiliations of Smith and Miller to test the effect of partisan perceptions in both Democrats and Republicans when the unfair actor was in the in-party versus the out-party.

I focus on two key findings. First, when the unfair or dishonest debate participant is a copartisan, respondents observe an equal amount of unfair behavior between the two debate participants. When the unfair or dishonest participant is from the out-party, respondents observe more unfair behavior from the out-party debate participant. Second, when the unfair and dishonest debate participant is a copartisan, respondents are likely to spread blame across the two debate participants. When the unfair and dishonest debate participant is from the out-party, respondents are more likely to blame the out-party participant alone for unfair or dishonest behavior. These findings help us understand the way partisans in the U.S. engage in motivated reasoning. When observing undesirable behavior among copartisans that they are unable to ignore, people will acknowledge that behavior, but will find ways to justify the events by spreading blame to other actors.

The Role of Motivated Reasoning and Blame Attribution in Public Opinion

Prior scholars have investigated why individuals have such different perceptions of political events. Prior research suggests that motivated reasoning influences perceptions of such events, especially among partisans (Kunda, 1990; Rico & Liñeira, 2018). Festinger (1957) finds that people seek to hold their attitudes in harmony and avoid disharmony, which the author calls cognitive dissonance. If a person experiences a difference between behaviors and attitudes, they seek to change something to bring their attitudes and behaviors back into harmony (Festinger, 1957).

Festinger (1957) theorizes that people use strategies to avoid or decrease cognitive dissonance. One common method is to avoid situations likely to increase dissonance. Festinger also finds that adding new cognitive elements can reduce the importance of existing dissonance (Festinger, 1957). There is a strong link between motivation and cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Individuals with accuracy motivations are likely to engage in unbiased learning (Kruglanski, 1989). Political scientists predict that these accuracy-motivated individuals will engage in Bayesian rational updating (Gerber & Green, 1999). People with directional motivations – whose goal is to arrive at a particular conclusion – will attempt to arrive at the desired conclusion while appearing to remain objective (Kunda, 1990). In other words, if a person's goal is to support their existing opinion, they will seek out ways to explain away negative information to justify their opinion (Kunda, 1990).

Kunda's observation calls to mind the "perceptual screen" Campbell and his colleagues identify in *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960). Mid-century social psychologists observed this phenomenon as selective perception (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954). In light of high levels of affective polarization in the current U.S. political environment, partisans will be more likely to be directionally motivated and less likely to be motivated by accuracy goals (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2015). High levels of affective polarization can cause an increasing reliance on motivated reasoning when observing political events.

Motivated reasoning influences public opinion among partisans. McAvoy and Enns (2010) find that during economic downturns when their party is in power, motivated reasoning causes partisans to stop incorporating economic information into their evaluations of a President's performance. Rico and Lineira (2018) find that in situations when different parties control national and subnational government, partisanship influences blame attributions for economic problems. By shifting blame attributions, partisans acknowledge economic downturns while maintaining their high opinion of their party's ability to handle political problems.

Put simply, existing research suggests that individuals with accuracy goals will update their beliefs based on new information. Individuals with directional goals will maintain an appearance of rationality, but when they observe negative information that causes cognitive dissonance, they will seek out new information that explains away the negative information and re-establishes harmony. I predict that in the current study, partisans will have directional goals, hoping to arrive at the conclusion that their in-party member will act

fairly and honestly. In light of this prediction, I expect partisans to find ways to explain away bad behavior if they observe their copartisan acting unfairly or dishonestly.

A Theory of Blame Spreading

Blame attribution literature provides a strong foundation for understanding the way motivated reasoning leads people of different parties to interpret undesirable behavior by co-partisans. Previous work on attribution bias suggests that people distinguish between environmental/external causes and internal causes for behavior (Hubbard et al., 2020). For someone in the in-group, individuals will assume that undesirable behavior has an external cause. For out-group members, individuals assume that the causes are due to an individual failing on the part of the person engaging in the undesirable behavior (Heider, 1958; Tetlock & Levi, 1982).

Political science scholars have found that attribution bias leads individuals to place blame for economic failings on different levels of government depending upon party control of the state and local governments (Rico & Liñeira, 2018). Other studies explore the way individuals blame different government actors during times of political crisis. In some cases, individuals can make unbiased blame attributions when given information about a co-partisan's role in a crisis such as Hurricane Katrina (Malhotra & Kuo, 2008).

When negative stimuli are external to the political figures being evaluated, individuals can acknowledge reality while finding another cause of the negative outcomes in order to avoid blaming members of their in-group for the negative events (Bisgaard, 2015). In his study of blame attributions in times of economic distress, Bisgaard (2015) found that, "when an economic bottom line is clear, it is often unclear who is to praise or blame. Given this ambiguity, partisans may easily escape unwanted conclusions from an indisputably clear reality by altering who they think is responsible" (Bisgaard, 2015, p. 858). In his study, Bisgaard found that partisans would acknowledge economic bad news during times of crisis, but instead of blaming the ruling party, they would shift blame to outside forces.

My hypothesis identifies a related mechanism that helps to alleviate cognitive dissonance when blame shifting is unavailable. When a person observes undesirable behavior by a copartisan, I expect them to cast about for reasons to explain the behavior. This process of seeking leads them to observe other actors engaging in undesirable behavior. Instead of shifting blame away from their in-group entirely, individuals will engage in "blame spreading" to explain negative circumstances. I believe this happens when partisans are forced to observe evidence of aberrant behavior. Unlike externalities like disaster response or a bad economy, bad behavior is impossible to separate from the copartisan in question. As a result, one of the core mechanisms of attribution bias – that partisans will seek out external explanations for negative events – is unavailable. In these situations, since the partisan is unable to shift blame entirely, they instead engage in blame spreading.

There are some key situational differences driving individuals to engage in blame shifting versus blame spreading. In prior studies, researchers identifying blame shifting have found such behavior in situations when an external factor (e.g., natural disaster, economic downturn) causes negative perceptions of the environment around them (Bisgaard, 2015; Malhotra & Kuo, 2008). These externalities cause people to shift blame to an outside source to maintain cognitive harmony. In a debate context, results suggest that instead of ignoring such behavior or shifting the blame away from the copartisan entirely, they will find ways to identify other actors who can share blame with their copartisan.

In the current study, the negative information stems directly from the unfair or dishonest behavior of a copartisan. Observing an externality such as natural disaster response is fundamentally different from observing a copartisan lying or repeatedly interrupting someone. Partisans are likely to achieve cognitive harmony by finding an environmental cause for negative information. However, when an individual is forced to observe their own copartisan engaging in the negative behavior, this mechanism is not available. Instead of shifting blame away from the copartisan, the partisan will find other cognitive elements – in this case, other undesirable behavior to balance out the copartisan's bad behavior. This balancing of bad behavior provides another route to cognitive harmony. I expect partisans in the U.S. to engage in blame spreading when blame shifting is not possible due to the observation of undesirable behavior by a copartisan.

I test two related hypotheses based on this theory. The first hypothesis focuses on perceptions of fairness and honesty, while the second tests blame attribution patterns in light of observed unfair or dishonest behavior.

H1. When blame can reasonably be placed on both sides, Democrats and Republicans will perceive differences in unfair or dishonest behavior.

H2. When observing unfair and dishonest behavior by a single individual, copartisans of the unfair and dishonest actor will attribute equal blame to all actors, while out-party members will blame the unfair and dishonest actor alone for unfair and dishonest behavior.

Study 1

Methods and Procedures

I tested these hypotheses by administering a survey to 609 undergraduate students in the Government and Politics Experimental Lab at the University of Maryland College Park during the three-week period spanning October 9, 2020, through October 30, 2020. The survey was broken into three parts. First, respondents answered questions about their

demographics, party affiliation, and their existing perceptions of the 2020 candidates and the debate.

In the second section, participants watched a clip of the first 2020 Presidential debate, which took place on Tuesday, September 29, 2020, in Cleveland, Ohio. The clip was taken from the first debate segment, when the candidates discussed health care. I selected the 6 min and 20 s clip to allow participants to view a continuous segment in which both candidates could be judged to have been treated unfairly or dishonestly.[1] I chose a section focused on health care policy because it was one of the less salient and partisan topics discussed during the debate, which allowed survey respondents to focus on candidate behavior instead of issue content. The survey instrument prevented participants from leaving the page with the debate clip prior to the end of the video to ensure that all participants watched the debate segment in its entirety. After participants watched the clip, they completed the third and final part of the survey, which measured respondents' perceptions of behavior during the debate.

Sample Description and Measures

609 undergraduates at the University of Maryland participated in the study in exchange for class credit for a course in the Department of Government and Politics. Party identification of the participants included 43.2% strong Democrats, 21.7% weak Democrats, 12.2% Democrat-leaning Independents, 6.4% pure Independents, 4.3% Republican-leaning Independents, 7.4% weak Republicans, and 3.6% strong Republicans. 50.9% of participants followed debate coverage closely, 42.7% followed some debate coverage, and 4.1% did not follow debate coverage at all.

During the first part of the survey prior to watching the debate clip, respondents answered questions about their perceptions of fairness and honesty during the debate. Three hundred eighty (62.40%) respondents indicated that behavior during the debate was unfair and dishonest, compared with 20 (3.28%) who thought the debate was fair and honest, 34 (5.58%) who thought the debate was unfair and honest, and 59 (9.69%) who thought the debate was fair and dishonest, 102 (16.75%) weren't sure about fairness and honesty during the debate, and 14 (2.29%) did not answer the question. These responses suggest that a large majority of the respondents understand that at least some of the behavior during the debate was undesirable, while around 20% did not have strong impressions of fairness or dishonesty during the debate.

Unfair Difference. To test hypotheses 1 and 2, I developed a dependent variable for perceptions of unfairness – Unfair Difference – which is based on responses to questions about observed unfair behavior. For each participant, I subtracted the unfair incidents observed against Biden from the unfair incidents observed against Trump[2]. I adapted this measure from Hastorf and Cantril's (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954) classic study which asked college students to watch a tape of their rival football teams' game. The authors in that study compared the unfair incidents observed by the two groups to find differences in their perceptions of the game. A negative number indicates that individuals identified more unfair behavior toward Biden. A positive number indicates that individuals identified more unfair behavior toward Trump. An Unfair Difference of zero indicates that individuals perceived an equivalent amount of unfair behavior conducted against both candidates (range: −4, 3, mean = −1.44, median = −2, sd = 1.51). Given that the scales in this paper are designed to evaluate the difference in respondents' perceptions between the candidates' behavior, the use of a compensatory scale is appropriate in this case (Wuttke et al., 2020).

Blame Attributions. For H2, I developed four dependent variables using responses to specific questions that individuals answered after viewing the debate clip. Individuals answered questions about perceived unfair behavior committed by each debate participant: Trump, Biden, and the moderator Chris Wallace.[3] For the Blame Biden variable, I used responses to questions about Biden's behavior during the debate. I used the mean response for these questions to measure attributions of blame toward Biden (range: 0, 6 with zero = lowest level of blame, 6 = highest level of blame, 3.5 = neutral, mean = 3.04, sd = .21, Cronbach's alpha = .72). For the Blame Trump variable measure, I used responses to questions about Trump's behavior during the debate. I used the mean response for these questions to measure attributions of blame toward Trump (range: 0, 6 with zero = lowest blame, 6 = highest blame, 3.5 = neutral, mean = 5.32, sd = .80, Cronbach's alpha = .74).

For the Blame Moderator – Trump variable I used responses to questions about the moderator's unfair behavior toward Trump during the debate. I used the mean response for these questions to measure attributions of blame toward the Moderator related to Trump (range: 0, 6 with zero = lowest blame, 6 = highest blame, 3.5 = neutral, mean = 3.13, sd = 1.40, Cronbach's alpha = .71). For the Blame Moderator – Biden variable, I used responses to questions about the moderator's unfair behavior toward Biden during the debate. I used the mean response for these questions to measure attributions of blame toward the moderator related to Biden (range: 0, 6 with zero = lowest blame, 6 = highest blame, 3.5 = neutral, mean = 2.23, sd = 1.06, Cronbach's alpha = .58).

Independent variables in the models include party affiliation, prior exposure to media related to the debate, and warmth of feelings towards Trump. A description of control variables is available in Online Appendix A.

Results for H1: Perceiving More Unfair Behavior Committed Against Copartisans

To test H1, I use an OLS regression model. The dependent variable is Unfair Difference. The independent variable in the

model is party affiliation. Baseline predictions are for Independents with indicator variables for Democrats and Republicans. Control variables include feelings toward Trump and the degree to which individuals followed debate coverage. I run two different versions of this model – Model 1 in Table 1 includes party affiliation only and Model 2 in Table 1 with control variables added.

Reviewing Table 1, we can see that without the control variables, there is a statistically significant relationship between Republicans and Democrats when compared to independents in their perceptions of fairness and honesty in the debate ($p < .05$). Once we add the control variables, there is no statistically-significant difference between Republican and independent perceptions of fairness in the debate, but the Democrats have a statistically-significant difference in fairness perceptions compared to independents ($p < .05$). From a statistical perspective, there is evidence for H1, that there are differences in perceptions of fairness when comparing Democrats and Republicans.

Examining how control variables impact the model provides insight about the differences we see between Model 1 and Model 2 in Table 1. There is a statistically significant relationship between feelings about Trump and Unfair Difference ($p < .05$). Since most of the variation in feelings about Trump takes place among Republicans, this relationship will primarily influence the outcome among Republicans. This means that Republicans with the coolest feelings toward Trump will have no difference in perceptions of fairness compared to Independents and will perceive more unfair behavior toward Biden than Trump (estimate = −1.21).

We can observe the predictions in Table 1, Model 2 with Trump Feeling set to zero in Figure 1, which depicts a modest difference between Republican and Democrat perceptions of fairness. As feelings toward Trump warm, however, this difference increases. The model estimates that Republicans with a mean Trump Feeling value of 50.85 will have an estimated Unfair Difference value of −.19, while Republicans with the warmest feelings toward Trump will have an estimated Unfair Difference of .79. When compared to the estimated Unfair Difference for Democrats (estimate = −1.76), these differences are substantively significant. The results of this model support H1, which predicts that Republicans and Democrats will perceive differences in fairness and honesty between the two candidates in the debate.[4]

Results for H2: Differences in Blame Attribution

As established in analysis of H1, Democrats perceived more unfair behavior directed toward Biden, while Republicans perceive comparatively more unfair behavior toward Trump, especially among those with warm feelings for Trump. I find evidence of the factors leading to these differences by investigating perceptions of blame across individuals from the two parties.

Table 1. Effect of Party Affiliation on Perceptions of Fairness in the First 2020 Presidential Debate.

	Model 1	Model 2
Republican	.97[a] (.27)	.06 (.27)
Democrat	−.78[a] (.24)	−.55[a] (.24)
Followed Coverage		−.04 (.11)
Trump Feeling		.02[a] (.00)
Constant	−1.00[a] (.23)	−1.21[a] (.27)
N	609	609
R^2	.18	.31

Note: [a] < .05. Models are OLS. Dependent variable is the difference of unfair perceptions against Trump minus unfair perceptions against Biden (−4, 3). A negative number indicates more unfair behavior toward Biden. A positive number indicates more unfair behavior toward Trump. Baseline model includes predictions for politically unaffiliated people with indicator variables for Republicans and Democrats.

After watching debate footage, participants answered questions about the nature of the behavior they observed, including questions about each candidate interrupting, lying, mischaracterizing the opponent's issue positions, aggression, moderator favoritism, moderator aggression, and moderator interrupting. For each question, individuals indicated their level of agreement on a Likert scale. Figure 2, which plots observed values of blame appraisals among partisans with noise added to better see the information contained in the graphic, elucidates a few patterns. Comparing these blame appraisals across people of both parties can help identify patterns that might explain these blame appraisals.

In some areas, Democrats and Republicans agree on blame appraisals. Respondents agreed that Trump interrupted Biden and acted aggressively toward Biden (Figure 2(e) and 2(f)). Respondents of all party affiliations disagreed with statements about the moderator favoring Trump and were ambivalent about whether the moderator interrupted Biden (Figure 2(m) and 2(j)). In other areas, including moderator favoritism of Biden, Trump lying, and whether the candidates mischaracterized each other's statements, partisans had different perceptions of the candidates' behavior (Figure 2(n), 2(g), 2(d), and 2(h)).

These figures provide some intuition about what may be driving these differences in blame appraisal. Next, I evaluate H2 – that partisans blame different participants in the debate for unfair and dishonest behavior – using OLS regression. The four dependent variables in the models are Blame Trump, Blame Biden, Blame Moderator - Trump, and Blame Moderator - Biden. In each model, I control for feelings about Trump and whether individuals followed debate coverage.

Each OLS model shows differences in perceptions of fairness across party lines. Republicans are more likely to observe higher levels of blame for Biden and the moderator's behavior toward Trump ($p < .05$) compared to Independents. Democrats are statistically less likely to blame Biden and are statistically more likely to blame Trump ($p < .05$) compared to

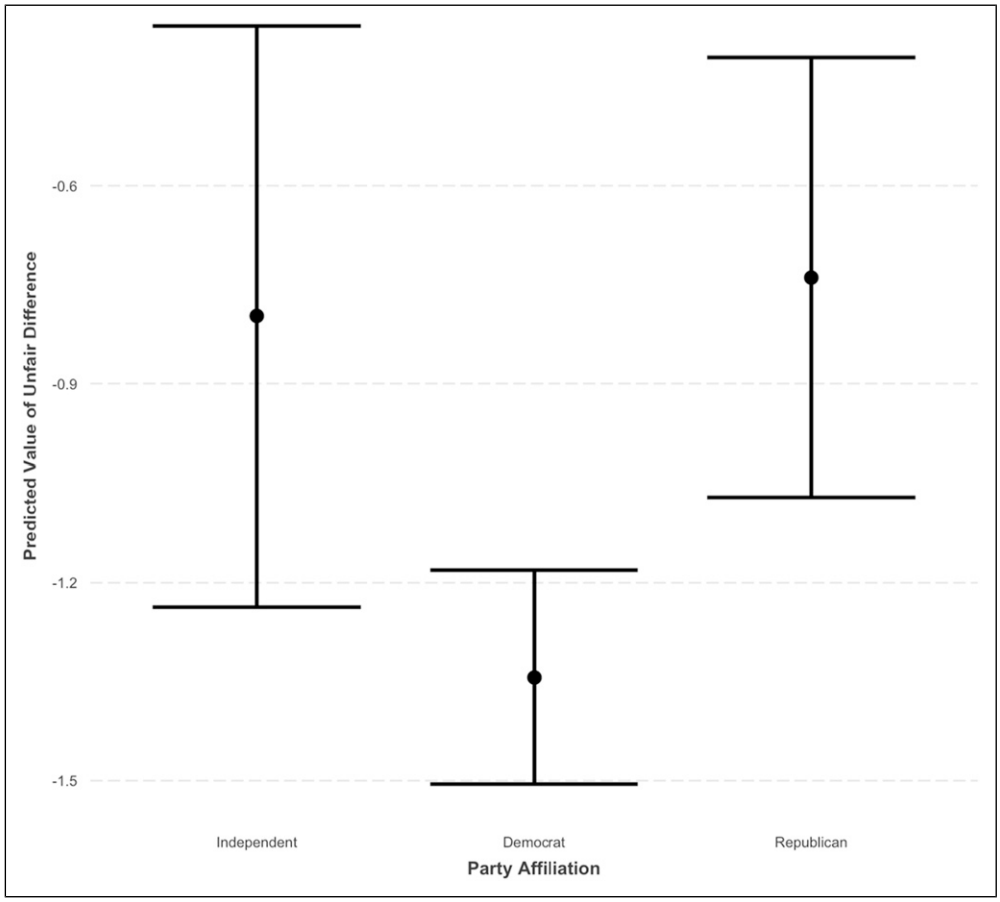

Figure 1. Predicted values of unfair difference in full Model with Value of Trump feeling set to Zero.

Independents. Across all models, feelings for Trump influence perceptions of blame toward Trump, Biden, and the moderator ($p < .05$).

Substantively, the results show different trends for each set of partisans. Possible values of each blame score ranges from 0–6, with 6 representing respondents who blame Biden entirely and zero representing respondents who do not blame Biden at all, and 3 representing respondents who are neutral. The Blame Biden model predicts that Independents with very cold feelings toward Trump will have a close to neutral opinion about whether to blame Biden for unfair behavior during the debate (estimate = 3.27). The model predicts that Democrats will blame Biden less than will Independents (estimate = 2.56). Republicans will blame Biden more than Democrats and Independents (estimate = 3.50). Feelings toward Trump have a strong relationship with the degree to which they are likely to blame Biden. Republicans blame Biden more for bad behavior in the debate, especially if they have warm feelings toward Trump. Independents and Democrats do not assign high levels of blame to Biden.

The Blame Trump model in Table 2 suggests that Independents with cold feelings toward Trump are much more likely to blame Trump than Biden, with a predicted Blame Trump score near the top of the scale (estimate = 5.24). There is no statistically-significant difference in Blame Trump between Independents and Republicans with cold feelings toward Trump. However, as feelings toward Trump grow warmer, a phenomenon that happens primarily in Republicans, blame appraisals for Trump drop. This means that Republicans with a mean Trump Feeling score of 50.01 would have a Blame Trump score of 4.24, which is close to this group's Blame Biden score of 4.01. Democrats are more likely to blame Trump (estimate = 5.48).

According to the Blame Moderator – Biden model in Table 2, individuals are less likely to blame the moderator Chris Wallace for unfair behavior toward Biden. Independents have a Blame Moderator Biden score of 2.40, which is lower than any of the other model scores. There is no statistically-significant relationship between blaming the moderator for unfair behavior against Biden and party affiliation, although individuals who have warmer feelings toward Trump are less likely to blame the moderator for unfair behavior toward Biden ($p < .05$). In the Blame Moderator – Trump model in Table 2, Independents are not likely to blame the moderator for unfair behavior toward Trump, with a blame score slightly below neutral (estimate = 2.52, $p < .05$). There is no statistically-significant difference between Democrats and Independents in these perceptions. Republicans are more likely to blame the moderator, even when

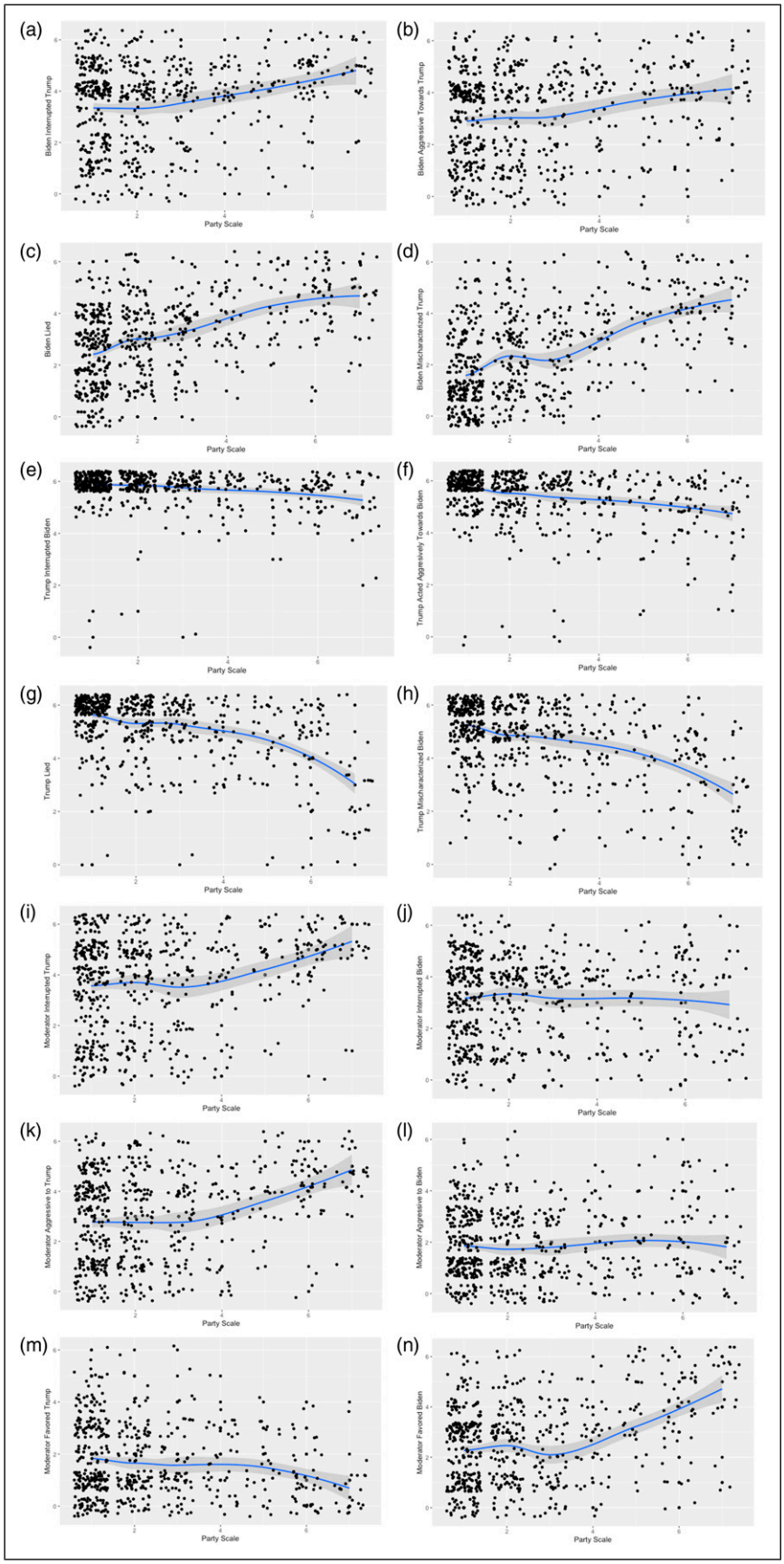

Figure 2. Observed values for blame appraisal questions by party affiliation. (a) Biden Interrupted Trump, (b) Biden Acted Aggressively toward Trump, (c) Biden Lied, (d) Biden Mischaracterized Trump, (e) Trump Interrupted Biden, (f) Trump Acted Aggressively Toward Biden, (g) Trump Lied, (h) Trump Mischaracterized Biden, (i) Moderator Interrupted Trump, (j) Moderator Interupted Biden, (k) Moderator Acted Aggressively to Trump, (l) Moderator Acted Aggressively to Biden, (m) Moderator Favored Trump, (n) Moderator Favored Biden. Note: The X axis represents Party Scale with 0 = Strong Democrat, 1 = Weak Democrat, 2 = Lean Democrat, 3 = Independent, 4 = Lean Republican, 5 = Weak Republican, 6 = Strong Republican

they have cool feelings toward Trump. The model predicts that a Republican with a mean Trump Feeling score of 50.01 will have a Blame Moderator-Trump score of 4.38, which represents a 71.42% of a standard deviation increase compared to those with the coldest feelings towards Trump. When taking into account Blame Biden, Blame Trump, and Blame Moderator Trump, Republicans with lukewarm feelings for Trump are likely to place similar levels of blame on the three actors (Blame Biden = 4.01, Blame Trump = 4.24, Blame Moderator Trump = 4.38).

The results from these models support H2, that Republicans will attribute equal blame to Trump, Biden, and the moderator Chris Wallace, while Democrats will blame Trump alone for unfair and dishonest behavior in the debate. Democrats blame Trump alone (5.48) compared to the moderator (2.52) and Biden (2.56). Independents place higher blame on Trump (5.24) than Biden (3.27) and the moderator (2.52). Republicans' perceptions of blame are dependent upon their feelings toward Trump, but tend to balance blame toward Trump, Biden, and the moderator.[5]

Study 2

Methods and Procedures

Study 1 provides insights into how Republicans and Democrats might react to differences in fairness in a debate between two candidates running for office. However, the findings raise several questions that require additional study. First, there are questions about whether reactions from partisans represent a reaction to Trump's presence in the debate. Second, some may question whether Democrats would engage in the same blame spreading behavior if their in-party candidate were the one engaging in unfair and dishonest behavior. Finally, given the first study was conducted among undergraduate students, it is important to investigate whether a similar study conducted among a random sample of adults would yield the same results.

To address these questions, I conducted a second study using a random sample of adults. In this study, respondents read a fictional debate transcript between two candidates for Congress. Using the the September 2020 Presidential debate transcript between Biden and Trump as a starting point, I changed the issue debated from health care to taxes to avoid respondents linking the transcript to either Presidential candidate. I made minor changes to the language used in the debate so that the transcript would make sense, but I retained the interruptions, moderator involvement, and crosstalk. I also changed the names of the candidates from Biden and Trump to Mark Smith (standing in for Biden) and Andrew Miller (standing in for Trump). Respondents were presented with pictures of the candidates – both white men – along with the debate transcript. After reading the fictional transcript, respondents answered questions about the number of unfair or dishonest instances they observed towards each candidate, the extent to which they blamed each actor in the debate, and answered a series of questions about specific unfair behavior they observed. A copy of the debate transcript used in for this study is available in Online Appendix D.

Experimental Manipulation

Upon taking the survey, each participant was randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions related to the party affiliation of the debate participants provided as part of the debate transcript. In Treatment 1, Miller is a Democrat and Smith is a Republican. In Treatment 2, Miller is a Republican and Smith is a Democrat. In the control condition, the party affiliation for the candidates was not provided to respondents.

Sample Description and Measures

The survey was administered by YouGov to a random sample of 1,200 respondents from June 21, 2022 through June 30, 2022. The sample was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2019 American Community Survey and weighted based on age, gender, race, and education. The survey oversampled Black respondents because it was part of a larger, unrelated study. I tested for heteroskedasticity by plotting residuals and using a White test, which returned a test statistic of 21.5 with three degrees of freedom. These results indicate heteroskedasticity in the model. To address this issue, the results shown here are based on weighted least squares regression. Results of this model are similar to those using standard OLS and OLS with robust errors. Full results of all

Table 2. Effect of Party Affiliation and Media Coverage on Perceptions of Fairness in the 2020 Presidential Debate.

	Blame Biden	Blame Trump	Blame Moderator - Biden	Blame Moderator - Trump
Republican	.23 (.21)	.18 (.14)	−.13 (.23)	.86[a] (.27)
Democrat	−.71[a] (.18)	.24[a] (.12)	−.23 (.20)	−.13 (.24)
Followed Coverage	.10 (.08)	.12[a] (.05)	.08 (.09)	.11 (.11)
Trump Feeling	.01[a] (.00)	−.02[a] (.00)	−.01[a] (.00)	.02[a] (.00)
Constant	3.57[a] (.21)	5.24[a] (.13)	2.40[a] (.23)	2.52[a] (.27)
N	609	609	609	609
R-Square	.35	.49	.01	.24

Note: [a] < .05. Models are OLS estimates. Dependent variables are labeled in column headings.

three models – weighted least squares, OLS and OLS with robust errors models – in addition to similar results from models that control for race and gender, are available in Online Appendix E.

The mean age for the 1,200 respondents is 50.0 with a standard deviation of 17.60 years. The oldest respondent is 91 and the youngest respondent is 19. The sample has 656 female (54.67%) and 544 male respondents (45.33%). 420 (35.00%) of the sample are strong Democrats, 169 (14.08%) are weak Democrats, 106 (8.83%) are Democratic-leaning Independents, 183 (15.25%) are pure independents, 81 (6.75%) are Republican-leaning independents, 79 (6.58%) are weak Republicans, and 133 (11.08%) are strong Republicans. 29 (2.42%) of respondents indicated that they weren't sure of their party affiliation. In the models, I use indicator variables for Republican, Democrat and Independent by grouping Strong Democrats, Weak Democrats, and Democrat-leaning Independents into the Democrat group (695 or 57.91%), pure Independents and people answering "Not sure" as Independents (212 or 17.67%), and Strong Republicans, Weak Republicans, and Republican-leaning Independents as Republicans (293 or 24.42%).

Unfair Difference. To test H1, I developed an independent variable for perceptions of unfair behavior directed towards the candidates. This variable was constructed using the same method I used for Study 1. A negative number indicates individuals identified more unfair behavior directed toward Smith. A positive number indicates individuals identified more unfair behavior toward Miller. The mean, median, and standard deviation for Unfair Difference are −1.61, 0, and 3.73. The range is (−10, 10).[6]

Blame Difference. To test H2, I created an independent variable from a survey question that did not appear in Study 1. In this study, I use a direct measure of blame, which asked respondents to assign responsibility to the two candidates for unfair and dishonest behavior during the debate. To create the variable, I subtracted the individual's assessment of blame towards Miller from their assessment of blame towards Smith. A negative number indicates the individual blames Smith more than Miller. A positive number indicates the individual blames Miller more than Smith (range −5, 5, mean = 1.09, median = 1, sd = 2.59).

Results

To test H1, I use a weighted least squares model with weights to account for the oversample of Black respondents. Independent variables are an indicator variable for party affiliation, the respondent's experimental condition, and an interaction between party affiliation and experimental condition. The dependent variable is Unfair Difference. Individuals in the baseline condition – independents who do not know the party affiliation of the candidates, perceive slightly more unfair behavior towards Smith, who is the Biden stand-in. These results suggest that an unbiased respondent would identify more unfair behavior towards Smith – the Biden stand-in.

Reviewing the unfair difference model in Table 3, Republicans and Democrats perceive statistically-significant differences ($p < .05$) under the Miller Democrat and Miller Republican treatments compared to the baseline of independents. In the Miller Democrat condition, Republicans are likely to perceive more unfair behavior towards Smith compared to the baseline. Republicans who are in in the Miller Democrat condition have an estimated Unfair Difference score of −3.39, which represents a decrease of 69.44% of a standard deviation for this measure. In the Miller Republican condition, Democrats are likely to perceive more unfair behavior towards Smith compared to the baseline condition. Democrats in the Miller Republican condition have an estimated unfair difference score of −2.71, which represents a decrease of 51.21% of a standard deviation for this measure.

Table 3. Experimental Results – The Effect of Party Affiliation on Perceptions of Fairness and Blame Attribution.

	Unfair Difference	Blame Difference
Republican	.27 (.54)	−.02 (.37)
Democrat	−.25 (.47)	.12 (.32)
Miller Democrat Treatment	.07 (.58)	−.32 (.39)
Miller Republican Treatment	.00 (.60)	−.68 (.41)
Miller Democrat × Republican	−2.59[a] (.77)	1.20[a] (.52)
Miller Democrat × Democrat	1.11 (.67)	−1.16[a] (.45)
Miller Republican × Republican	.96 (.78)	−.86 (.52)
Miller Republican × Democrat	−1.91[a] (.68)	1.96[a] (.46)
Constant	−.80 (.41)	1.14[a] (.28)
N	1200	1200
R^2	.10	.15

[a] < .05. Models are Weighted Least Squares.

In Figure 3, we can see the substantive effects of these differences. In the baseline condition where respondents do not know the party affiliations of the candidates, Independents and Democrats see slightly more unfair things happen to Smith, while Republicans see equal numbers of unfair events happening to Miller and Smith. Under the condition in which Miller is a Democrat, Republicans perceive more unfair and dishonest behavior towards Smith. Under the condition in which Miller is a Republican, Democrats perceive more unfair and dishonest behavior towards Smith. Comparatively, Democrats perceive equal amounts of unfair and dishonest behavior when Miller is a Democrat, and Republicans perceive slightly more unfair and dishonest behavior towards Miller when Miller is a Republican.

These results provide evidence to support H1. When the out-party candidate engages in unfair and dishonest behavior, copartisans perceive more unfair and dishonest behavior towards their in-party candidate. When the in-party candidate engages in unfair and dishonest behavior, copartisans perceive equal amounts of unfair and dishonest behavior between the two candidates.

Next, I test H2, which predicts that copartisans of the unfair and dishonest actor will spread blame between the two candidates while out-party members will blame the out-party candidate alone. To account for the oversample of Black respondents, I use weighted least squares to test this hypothesis. Independent variables are an indicator variable for party affiliation, experimental condition, and an interaction between party affiliation and experimental condition. The dependent variable is blame difference.

Individuals in the baseline condition, representing independents who do not know the party affiliations of the debate participants, have a predicted blame difference score of 1.14 ($p < .05$), which means that they blame Miller slightly more than Smith for unfair and dishonest behavior. In the blame difference model in Table 3, there are statistically-significant differences in blame difference scores among Democrats in both experimental conditions and Republicans in the Miller Democrat condition ($p < .05$). Republicans who believe Miller is a Democrat have a predicted blame difference score of 2.34, which represents an increase of 46.33% of a standard deviation compared to the baseline. Democrats who believe that Miller is a Democrat have a predicted blame difference score of −.02, which means they blame the candidates fairly equally for unfair and dishonest behavior during the debate. This represents a decrease of 44.79% of a standard deviation. Democrats who believe that Miller is a Republican have a predicted blame difference score of 3.10, which represents 75.68% standard deviation increase compared to the baseline.

In Figure 4, we can see the effect of these differences. Respondents from all parties place slightly more blame on Miller in the control condition when they do not know the

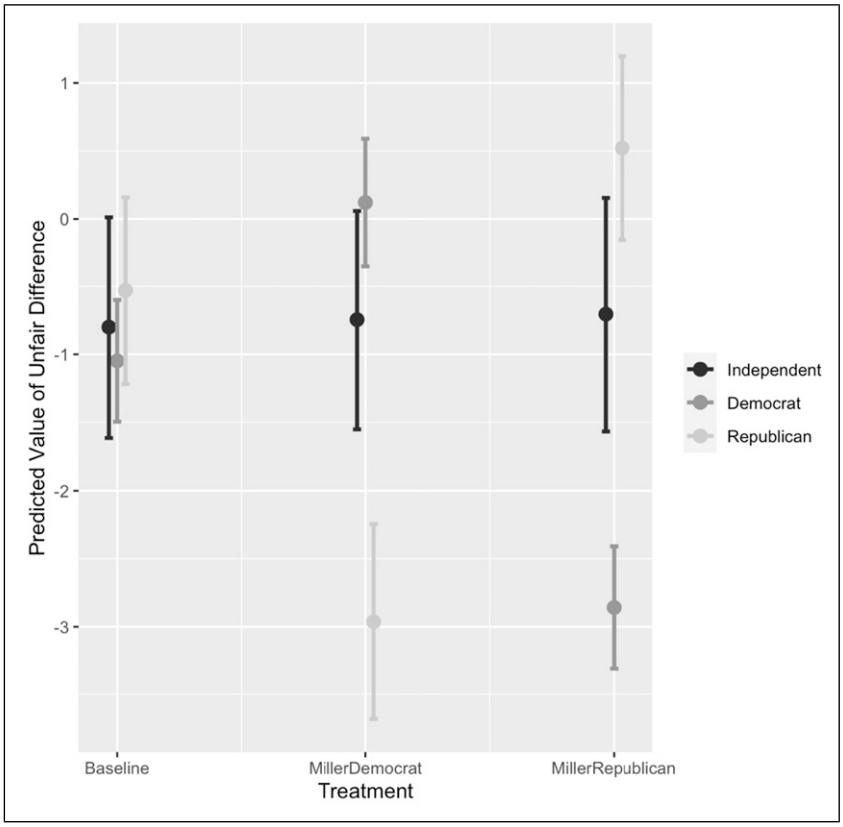

Figure 3. Predicted values of unfair difference by experimental condition and party affiliation.

candidates' party affiliations. When the unfair actor is from the out-party, this model provides evidence that partisans blame the out-party candidate for unfair and dishonest behavior. Under the condition in which Miller is a Democrat, Republicans blame Miller more compared to the baseline condition. Under the condition in which Miller is a Republican, Democrats are more likely to blame Miller compared to the baseline condition. When the unfair and dishonest actor is from the in-party, the model provides evidence that partisans spread blame between the two candidates. When both Republicans are told that Miller is from their own party, they assign equal blame to Miller and Smith. Democrats engage in the same behavior – when they are told that Miller is a Democrat, Democrats assign equal blame to the two candidates as well.

Discussion

The results from these studies provide evidence that people of different party affiliations have different perceptions of political events. When Democrats and Republicans observe a copartisan engaging in unfair or dishonest behavior, instead of ignoring that behavior or shifting blame from their copartisan entirely, they will find ways to assign shared blame across multiple actors. These findings suggest that individuals observing undesirable behavior by a copartisan are likely to spread blame to others, especially if the copartisan is someone the individual likes.

These findings build on existing blame attribution literature that identifies ways in which individuals acknowledge and assign blame when presented with information that could be detrimental to their political party (Bisgaard, 2015). These findings may help us understand the tendency for partisans to make statements that explain away aberrant behavior by copartisans, such as those made in the wake of January 6 from Rev. Graham and Meghan McCain at the outset of this paper. I expect these findings to extend to personal behavior by candidates in a variety of contexts, including debates, press statements, social media posts, public appearances, and media interviews. Further research is needed to test whether blame spreading occurs when non-elites engage in undesirable behavior (whether partisans engage in blame spreading when observing those accused or convicted of attacking the Capitol on January 6, for example).

It is important to note that this study does not address how a partisan would react if the negative stimuli were directly linked to the copartisan, but the copartisan had less control over the negative outcomes. For example, it is possible that we might observe blame spreading in the evaluations of political elites related to economic conditions if the partisan were to observe the copartisan acknowledging their responsibility for a bad economy, even though the copartisan

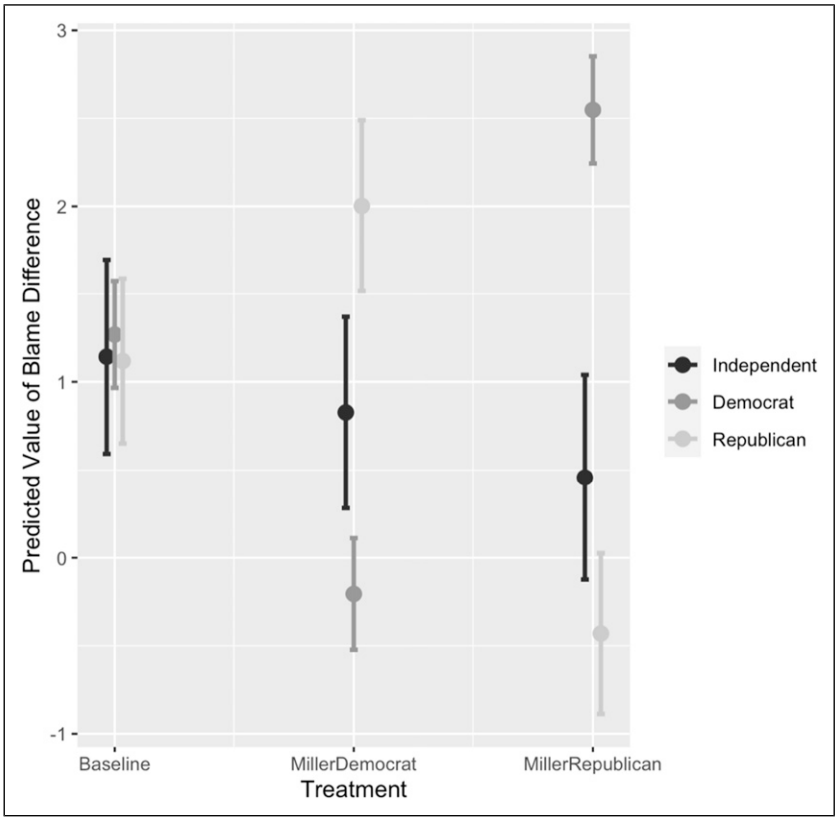

Figure 4. Predicted values of blame difference by experimental condition and party affiliation.

does not fully control the economic system. Further study is needed to understand the extent to which people use blame spreading under these circumstances.

Directional motivation causes Republicans with warm feelings toward Trump to explain away bad behavior by Trump. The experimental findings suggest that Democrats are also directionally motivated. However, given asymmetric polarization and Trump's use of incendiary rhetoric, we may not have an opportunity to observe such behavior in Democrats outside of experimental situations. Independents, by contrast, are less likely to engage in directional motivation since true independents have no party attachments. However, if an independent were to have strong feelings toward a candidate, we could expect them to engage in blame spreading as well.

Unlike in situations when people can avoid information that causes cognitive dissonance or shift blame to external sources, this study shows how people might assign blame when forced to observe norm-breaking behavior from their copartisans. These findings demonstrate that in political contexts, it might be possible to settle on a mutual understanding of the truth. However, given what we now know about blame appraisals, coming to bipartisan agreement on accountability for such behavior is much more difficult to accomplish.

There are limits to interpreting these findings given the research design of the present study. Although results suggest that individuals will acknowledge blame on the part of their copartisan in a survey context, we do not know how this reaction would play out in everyday life. In theory, partisans are directionally motivated and individuals from both parties are therefore equally likely to engage in blame-spreading behavior. However, since U.S. political parties have polarized asymmetrically, I expect that Republicans will engage in this behavior more often in our current political environment (Grossmann & Dominguez, 2009; Mason et al., 2021). More research is needed in this area to determine whether blame spreading will occur in the wild.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. During the clip, Trump spoke for around three minutes, Biden spoke for around 2 min and 40 s, and the moderator spoke for around two minutes. As with the entirety of the debate, there were numerous instances of cross-talk and interruptions. Consequently, there were several times during the clip when more than one person was talking at once.
2. To check whether this scale is compensatory, I calculated correlation between the variables that were used to create Unfair Difference. Results indicate that there is very little correlation between the two variables (Pearson's R = .04).
3. Blame attribution variables do not have high degrees of correlation with each other, which suggests that there is not a high degree of compensatory behavior among respondents – correlation data is available in Online Appendix B.
4. Since the student sample contains relatively few Republicans, I test H1 using Democrats only. Substantive results do not change. Full details of this test are available in online Appendix C.
5. Since the student sample contains relatively few Republicans, I test H2 using a Democrats only sample. Substantive results do not change. Full details of this test are available in online Appendix C.
6. To check whether this scale is compensatory, I calculated correlation between the variables that were used to create Unfair Difference. Results indicate that there is very little correlation between the two variables (Pearson's R = .05).

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