

Love him for the enemies he has made: signaling by inflammatory pro-gun rhetoric

Abstract

American politics is rife with messages designed to anger one's political enemies. In this paper, we propose and test a model suggesting that such inflammatory messages are effective because they signal that the messenger is unwilling to compromise with the groups they have offended. Taking the example of inflammatory pro-gun messaging, we show, in two preregistered experiments with American conservatives, plus an additional preregistered supplementary study (total $n = 1,265$) that conservatives view such messages as offending liberals, and, to the extent that they feel negatively towards Democratic politicians, they view the producers of these inflammatory messages positively, seeing them as the sort of politician who should be trusted by conservatives and as the sort of politician that they would be willing to vote for. However, this is not true across the entire conservative electorate, as conservatives who feel more warmly towards Democratic politicians view politicians posting inflammatory messages (and therefore offending liberals) as less trustworthy and less vote-worthy. As affective polarization is on the rise in the United States, these inflammatory, bridge-burning, messages may become more prevalent with politicians trying to appeal to voters who are increasingly suspicious of anyone who might be tempted to compromise.

Introduction

In April 2022, Mehmet Oz – a former TV doctor who was then running in the Republican primary in Pennsylvania for the Senate – aired a controversial advertisement. The ad included scenes where Oz was talking with a gun in his hand, scenes of men shooting firearms with Oz narrating, and a scene of Oz reloading an AR-15-style rifle. His narration included the statement that the “Second Amendment is not just about hunting. It’s about our constitutional right to protect ourselves from intruders, or an overly intrusive government.” Such ads were relatively commonplace in the 2021-2022 cycle: the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank, noted that there were more than 100 ads displaying weapons, and these ads were often accompanied by threats against political opponents (2022). For example, Mike Collins, then a Republican candidate for a House seat in Georgia, produced an August 2021 ad where he shot a box of papers with “Nancy Pelosi’s plan for America,” and then declared “if you think I’m just going to fight the Democrats, think again. Because in the swamp, it’s RINO season too,” proceeding to shoot a cardboard cutout of a rhino. Why have these ads proliferated in recent years, and why would Oz, a seasoned media professional with notably liberal prior views, air such a controversial ad?

In this paper, we study this puzzle through the lens of inflammatory pro-firearm rhetoric. Such communications do not merely affirm support of the right to own guns; instead, inflammatory pro-firearms communications are messages that are likely to offend their political opponents, such as liberals and gun-control advocates. Inflammatory rhetoric is not merely about the style of language. A speech that makes frequent use of swearing is no doubt offensive; however, it is possible that this speech is found to be equally offensive by most. By contrast, the narration in Oz’s pro-gun advertisement did not include offensive phrases; however, that does not

dilute the underlying inflammatory message suggesting that it might be commendable to mount an armed rebellion against the government.

One potential reason to post inflammatory rhetoric is to seem “authentic.” Several recent studies have suggested that unfettered or politically incorrect speech can be seen by voters as a sign of authenticity, at least in part because it suggests that the speaker is unfiltered or not speaking strategically (Pillow et al., 2016; Rosenblum et al., 2018). By breaking taboos, speakers can show that they’re simply unable to hold their true selves back. When it comes to inflammatory pro-firearms rhetoric, however, authenticity seems like an unlikely full explanation. In the aforementioned ad by Oz, he was holding a rifle with two optics attached to it – effectively rendering them both useless. If his intention was to communicate how much he loves guns, it appears that his attempt was halfhearted at best.

It may be that this sort of unfettered speech suggests not just that speakers are speaking honestly, but instead that they are resistant to outside influence – that they are unaffected by political correctness or other norms imposed by outsiders (Hahl et al., 2018; Pillow et al., 2016; Rosenblum et al., 2018). If someone is resistant to outside meddling, then maybe they can be truly themselves. In one study, for example, unfettered speech was found to be positively associated with perceived resistance to external influence (Pillow et al., 2016). At the same time, it is reasonable to suggest that not all displays of resistance to external influence are perceived positively by potential voters. For example, in the 2024 cycle of Republican presidential primaries, Chris Christie campaigned aggressively against Donald Trump. By campaigning against the dominant figure of the Republican party, Christie certainly showed his resistance to external influence; however, his authenticity was not rewarded by the Republican primary voters – he dropped out well before the first primary due to lack of support. Intuitively, it is probable

that one's resistance to external influence is perceived positively only when they are resisting external influences that their audience does not like. A Republican politician who changes their stance after being criticized by Donald Trump may appear inauthentic, but it is unlikely that this failure to resist external influence (or their lack of general authenticity) would be punished by the voters who strongly support Donald Trump. We suggest, then, that communicating unwillingness to compromise with political opponents specifically may be seen as the key component of resistance to external influence.

In contemporary American politics, it seems as if it is increasingly desirable for politicians to signal their unwillingness to compromise with the members of the opposing party. Partisan Americans distrust those on other side, and this antipathy is motivated not only by their policy positions, but by their social identity (Mason, 2018). Right-leaning American citizens especially tend to disfavor political leaders who compromise, and they are more likely to equate compromise with "selling out" (Davis, 2017). This observation is consistent with the general trend of increasing affective polarization in the United States – political polarization based not just on policy positions but rather motivated by a general sense of antipathy and distrust toward the members of the opposing political party (Iyengar et al., 2019; Yair, 2020). There is evidence from both Europe (Bettarelli & Van Haute, 2022) and the United States (Wolf et al., 2012) that more affectively polarized and ideological voters oppose politicians who are open to compromise, and that politicians who are receptive to the opposing party's viewpoint are perceived negatively (Hussein & Wheeler, 2024).

It is possible that the uses of highly inflammatory rhetoric confer certain electoral benefits to politicians, even when such communication tends to be perceived negatively by the broader audience. In recent years, there has been an increase of incivility and inflammatory

communications in political discourse, especially in political opinion media (Berry & Sobieraj, 2013). Nevertheless, it is reasonable to suggest that politicians have different incentives from personalities on partisan media. Existing studies indicate that politicians who make inflammatory remarks or display incivility tend to be perceived negatively (Frimer & Skitka, 2018; Feinberg & Frimer, 2023). Although angry tweets made by politicians tend to receive more engagement (Webster, 2021; Frimer et al., 2022), it is unclear if increased social media engagement outweighs the cost of being perceived negatively by their voters. In attempting to unpack the puzzle, some researchers suggest that, since voters in general tend to dislike negative partisan rhetoric, politicians who use such rhetoric must be motivated by other incentives (Costa, 2025).

How can inflammatory pro-firearms rhetoric communicate a candidate's unwillingness to compromise with the political (and ideological) opponents? We propose that signaling theory can provide a simple, effective explanation. Signaling theory (Spence, 1978; Grafen, 1990) is a game theoretic framework that focuses on situations with asymmetrical information. In signaling theory, there are two parties with conflicting interests. The sender of a signal possesses a quality which is invisible to the receiver of the signal. The receiver would like to accurately determine this quality of the sender, because the outcome of their interaction with the sender depends on their quality. The sender has the incentive to appear as if they possess high quality, because the sender can benefit from interacting with the receiver. In such a situation, signaling theory suggests that a certain behavior can function as a reliable signal of quality if the cost of producing the signal is lower for those of high quality than for those of low quality.

We argue that a similar signaling dynamic exists between political candidates and their audience. It is plausible that a Republican candidate running in a primary election would want to signal their loyalty toward conservative causes – for example, by communicating that they

support issues positions popular among Republican voters. However, such communications would not make effective signals by themselves because the cost of producing the communications would not be related to how loyal they are to the conservative cause. Any Republican candidates running for a primary would be expected to express support for gun owners – indeed, even Kamala Harris, running as a Democratic presidential candidate, proclaimed that she is a gun owner (Levien, 2024).

Using inflammatory pro-firearms rhetoric, on the other hand, could be seen as costly because doing so is likely to evoke very negative reaction from the Democrats. We suggest that a person who does not wish to maintain a relationship with someone else would lose nothing from ruining their relationship with this person (after Ohtsubo and Watanabe, 2009). Using inflammatory rhetoric, which can potentially burn bridges with the members of the other party, would be very costly for a politician who wishes to maintain a working relationship with them. However, using the same rhetoric would be much less costly for a politician who has no intention to work with the other party to begin with. Therefore, the use of such language would be able to function as a reliable signal of one's unwillingness to work with their political opponents. For example, talking about an armed rebellion against the government would be perceived as deeply offensive to the Democrats and traditional mainstream Republicans. Offending these groups should be less costly for a politician who does not wish to work with these groups, and therefore who does not care about how they are perceived by the members of these groups. For voters who abhor any potential compromises with the Democrats (or with the traditional Republicans), a communication which threatens an (firearms-)armed rebellion against the government – as Oz did in his ad – may be seen as a signal of desirable quality even if they do not endorse the idea of

armed rebellion themselves; the point of the signal is whom the signaler antagonizes, rather than the actual issue position being expressed by the signaler.

In signaling theory, the reliability of a signal can be ensured by the association between higher quality being signaled and lower cost of producing the signal. Therefore, inflammatory rhetoric that offends everyone would not be the effective signal of one's unwillingness to compromise with the political opponents; doing so would be similarly costly regardless of one's willingness to compromise with their opponents. Instead, to function as an effective signal of one's unwillingness to compromise with a certain group, the inflammatory rhetoric needs to specifically antagonize the members of this very group, so that they can signal their unwillingness to cooperate with this group. Opinions related to gun-control may be especially useful, as firearms are increasingly becoming important parts of partisan identities (Lacombe, 2019), where pro-gun-control view is associated with the Democrats and pro-Second Amendment (or anti-gun-control) view is associated with the Republicans. Contemporary pro-gun rhetoric frequently adapts the narrative that the Democrats are trying to infringe the constitutional rights of gun owners (Lacombe, 2021), therefore serving to antagonize the Democrats.

In summary, then, we believe that this rise in pro-firearms inflammatory rhetoric among Republican politicians is explicitly designed to indicate to voters that the politician is unwilling – and after the expression of the rhetoric, unable – to work with or compromise with members of the Democratic party, regardless of whether the voters believe that the politician is serious in their speech. ‘Triggering the libs’ is a bridge-burning exercise, and we expect that Republicans will see bridge-burners as more trustworthy to Republican causes to the extent that they understand their inflammatory rhetoric as antagonizing their enemies in the Democratic party.

To test this framework, we designed two preregistered experiments. We recruited self-identified conservatives from a large online sampling pool, and we showed them a series of social media posts that we had constructed, based on preliminary analyses of social media posts by the Republican congressional candidates in the 2022 cycle, to be either inflammatory or not. By then measuring these participants' opinions about the hypothetical posters of these messages, we can test whether inflammatory rhetoric holds our proposed signaling function. See Figure 1 for a proposed model.

Study 1

In Study 1, we test our proposed model in a preregistered fully within-subjects design by presenting participants with hypothetical social media posts made in the aftermath of a mass shooting by imaginary candidates running in a Republican primary for House of Representatives. A mass shooting event would make the issue of gun control highly salient, and it is plausible that congressional candidates would make social media posts in response to a mass shooting event. We expected that candidates who made an inflammatory pro-firearms tweet would be perceived as less likely to compromise with the Democrats than the candidates who made a tweet expressing thoughts and prayers, and that this relationship would specifically be mediated by the perceived (negative) reaction to the tweet by the liberal audience. We further expected that these perceptions would have consequences for the candidate: that participants would be more willing to vote for the candidates who made an inflammatory pro-firearms tweet than for the candidates who made a thoughts and prayers tweet, and that this relationship would again be mediated by the candidate's perceived willingness to compromise with the Democrats.

Finally, following from the predictions of signaling theory, we suspected that the benefits of inflammatory language would be especially strong for candidates who would otherwise read

as somewhat suspicious to our participants. There may be no need to worry about potential partisan betrayal by stereotypical conservatives, but voters may need to be convinced that non-stereotypical conservatives won't sell them out. We therefore created two sets of candidates, one with stereotypical backgrounds for a Republican primary, and one with less traditional backgrounds. The less traditional backgrounds are designed to imply that the candidates' loyalty toward the conservatives might be suspect; in creating these profiles, we were inspired by recent high-profile political candidates with nontraditional backgrounds who are known for their uses of inflammatory rhetoric, including Oz. We suspected (albeit without making it a confirmatory hypothesis) that the benefits of inflammatory rhetoric for partisan trustworthiness would be especially strong for candidates with otherwise suspicious backgrounds. We did predict, in a confirmatory way, that candidates with more stereotypical backgrounds would be treated as more trustworthy.

In these, and other studies in this manuscript, we focus exclusively on the attitudes of conservatives. While we do not think that this phenomenon of signaling by inflammatory rhetoric is exclusive to the right-wing of American politics, we chose to focus on conservatives alone in order to maximize the power of our statistical tests. Between-subjects interactions require notoriously-large samples to properly power for (see Sommet et al., 2023 for a discussion), and so we chose to drop liberals from our participant sample for the sake of efficiency. Given that it is plausible to assume that liberal voters not the intended audience of inflammatory pro-firearms tweets, we focus our analysis on conservative-leaning participants.

Method

Participants

We recruited 392 self-reported conservatives from Prolific in September 2023. 224 (57.1%) of the participants reported being male. The median age range selected by the participants was between 35 and 45 years old, and 192 (49%) of the participants had bachelor's degree or more. After removing the participants who failed the attention checks and the participants who did not agree to be included in the analysis, we were left with 301 participants. The participants had identified themselves as conservative before participating in the study, therefore the majority of the participants rated themselves as very conservative. The median self-rated ideology was conservative (six in a seven-point scale), and 184 out of 301 participants rated themselves as very conservative (7) or conservative (6). Nevertheless, 81 participants rated themselves as somewhat conservative (5), and 29 participants rated themselves as moderate (4). Because our respondents were already screened based on their self-identification on Prolific, as per our preregistration, we did not remove the 7 participants who identified themselves as liberal during the experiment. Given that they identified themselves as conservatives on one occasion (on Prolific), we do not believe that their inconsistency warrants their exclusion. However, when, in exploratory analyses, we exclude these 7 participants, our conclusions do not change.

Design

The study used a within-subject design. Participants were asked to evaluate four vignettes, each containing a brief profile of a Republican House primary candidate, and their hypothetical social media post in the aftermath of a mass shooting. There were four possible candidate profiles (two with loyal backgrounds and two with suspect backgrounds) and four possible social media posts (two inflammatory and two thoughts and prayers). Each participant evaluated all four combinations of treatment conditions (loyal/inflammatory, loyal/thoughts and prayers, suspect/inflammatory, suspect/thoughts and prayers) in random order, and encountered

all candidate profiles and social media posts. Actual combinations of profile and social media posts were randomized, and all potential combinations of profiles and social media posts had equal likelihood of being shown to the participants. For each profile/social media post combination, a participant was asked to answer six questions. At the end of the survey, the participants answered questions on their demographics, and attention check questions.

In the loyal background condition, a focal candidate had a background that would be seen as typical for a Republican political candidate: one candidate was a successful local businessman who has been a prolific Republican donor and the other was a former Republican political operative. In the suspect background condition, a focal candidate had a background which would be seen as unusual for a Republican political background and their profile implies that they may have switched political affiliation relatively recently: one candidate was a writer who used to be liberal-leaning and the other was a former environmental activist. We conducted an initial pretest with 99 self-identified conservatives recruited from an undergraduate research pool, and found no evidence that the two different loyal candidates, without any tweets, were viewed as differently unwilling to compromise with Democrats ($M_s = 3.5$ and 3.6 , $p = 0.59$) or as people that conservatives could trust ($M_s = 5.6$ and 5.6 , $p = 0.95$); while we similarly found no evidence that the two different suspect candidates were viewed as differently willing to compromise ($M_s = 4.9$ and 4.8 , $p = 0.61$). We did find a suggestion that the two different suspect candidates were viewed as somewhat different in terms of the degree to which they were viewed as someone that conservatives should be wary of ($M_s = 3.0$ and 3.5 , $p = 0.024$). Regardless of this difference, we prioritized having similar perceived willingness to compromise within each condition. In our pretest data, those with the loyal backgrounds were, on the whole, viewed as less likely to compromise with Democrats ($p < .001$) and as people that conservatives could trust ($p < .001$).

We modeled inflammatory pro-gun social media posts from actual messages sent by Republican politicians during the 2022 primaries. They contain strong pro-gun sentiment and are highly antagonistic toward their political opponents. We then constructed messages conveying “thoughts and prayers” expressing condolence for the victims of the hypothetical mass shooting event but otherwise abstaining from discussion of issues related to gun ownership. It is important to note that the thoughts and prayers tweets do not express pro-gun-control views; rather, they tacitly support the status-quo related to firearms in the aftermath of a mass shooting event by refusing to engage in gun-related discussions.

Each social media post was designed to simulate a tweet, and each tweet is accompanied by a computer-generated picture of a middle-aged white male. Specifically, the two inflammatory tweets read: “Yet another mass killing by a crazed criminal, and the Delusional Dems are still obsessing on taking guns away from law-abiding Americans. I’ll fight tooth and nail to protect our Second Amendment rights and ensure American families can defend themselves.” and “The bodies are still warm after the horrific shooting and the Radical Left are already talking about taking away our guns. They are scared that we can fight back against their tyrannical agenda with our guns. I will always fight to stop the Left’s anti-gun agenda!” By contrast, the two thoughts-and-prayers tweets read: “My heart goes out to the victims of this tragic event and their families. This senseless act of violence is devastating, and we must come together as a nation to support each other during this difficult time. We should not widen the political divide by politicizing the tragedy.” and “As we mourn the lives lost in yet another tragic mass shooting, we must examine our society’s cultural challenges. Promoting empathy, respect, and understanding is essential. We can work together to overcome these challenges.” The images used for these tweets are in the Supplemental Material.

A study of tweets made by congressional members in response to Parkland shooting shows that Republican members of Congress were more likely to express support and were less likely to criticize others or comment about policies (Copenhaver et al, 2023). Therefore, we argue that our thoughts and prayers tweets represent a common type of Republican response to a mass shooting event. We avoided using more direct pro-firearms statement because we suspected that making such statement in response to a mass shooting event was likely to be seen as confrontational. Finally, we note that neither the inflammatory pro-gun social media posts nor the thoughts and prayers social media posts include concrete policy suggestions – instead they convey a more general attitude.

We pretested both the backgrounds of the candidates and the content of the tweets with 99 self-reported conservatives. On the whole, the inflammatory tweets were rated as significantly more confrontational ($p < .001$) and significantly less conciliatory ($p < .001$) than the thoughts and prayers tweets. We found no evidence for difference between the two inflammatory tweets when rated on how confrontational ($M_s = 5.5$ and 5.6 , $p = .59$) or conciliatory ($M_s = 2.9$ and 2.7 , $p = .38$) they seemed; nor did we find evidence for difference between the two thoughts and prayers tweets, when rated how confrontational ($M_s = 2.3$ and 2.2 , $p = .58$) or conciliatory ($M_s = 5.3$ and 5.4 , $p = .83$) they seemed.

Measures

For each vignette, the participants were asked to answer the following questions. Questions about perceptions toward candidates were asked with 7-point strongly-disagree to strongly-agree questions. Perceived partisan trustworthiness was measured by: “[Candidate] is the type of politician [conservatives/liberals] can trust to be on their side.” Perceived willingness to compromise with Democrats was measured by: “[Candidate] is willing to make the

compromises with the politicians of the Democratic Party.” Likely reaction by liberals/conservatives was measured by: “[Liberals/Conservatives] will react positively to [candidate]’s tweet.” Voting intention was asked by a 4-point (very likely, somewhat likely, somewhat unlikely, very unlikely) question: “If you were a voter in [candidate]’s district, how likely would you be to vote for him?”

We note that we used the terms “liberals” and “conservatives” to describe partisan audience; these terms are more commonly used than more specific terms such as “supporters of the Democratic Party” or “Republican voters”, and these terms can encompass both the regular supporters and political elites. On the other hand, we used “the politicians of the Democratic Party” to describes the Democratic politicians because politicians in the Unites States are more often described as being Republicans or Democrats, rather than being liberal or conservative (see e.g. Kalmoe, 2020; Neiheisel, 2016 for discussions of partisanship vs ideology).

Analytic Plan

We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions (if any), all inclusion/exclusion criteria, whether inclusion/exclusion criteria were established prior to data analysis, all manipulations, and all measures in the study. The preregistration for this study, along with the preregistered analysis script, can be found at https://osf.io/gpz5f/?view_only=b4fc601bbd604adba1eb69e97a0161e0. A sensitivity analysis showed that a sample size of 400 was able to achieve 80% power to detect a main effect of Cohen’s $f = 0.073$ for a four-condition within-subjects design. This provided a good tradeoff between the cost of sampling and statistical power. We planned to remove participants who

completed the survey in less than 100 seconds, participants who indicated they did not wish their answers to be included in the analysis, and participants who failed the attention check questions¹.

We used mixed-effect, random intercept models (with random intercepts for participants) to test the main effects of the treatment conditions in order to account for the issue of non-independent outcome variables from repeated measures (Brauer and Curtin, 2018). We used a random-intercept model rather than a random-slope model due to the limited number of treatments per treatment condition. Mediation models were tested using the *mediation* package in R (Tingley et al., 2014).

Results

Perceived willingness to compromise

We expected that candidates who made an inflammatory pro-firearms tweet would be perceived as less likely to compromise with the Democrats than the candidates who made a thoughts and prayers tweet, and that this relationship would specifically be mediated by the perceived (negative) reaction to the tweet by the liberal voters.

As predicted, we found that the candidates who made a thoughts and prayers tweet were perceived as more likely to compromise with the Democrats ($M_{\text{inflammatory}} = 2.41$, $SE_{\text{inflammatory}} = 0.0598$, $M_{\text{t\&p}} = 4.89$, $SE_{\text{t\&p}} = 0.053$, $b = 2.47$ [2.32, 2.61], $SE = 0.11$, $t = 24.20$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.93$ [1.79, 2.06]).

As predicted, causal mediation analysis found that the relationship between rhetoric of tweets and perceived willingness to compromise was mediated by the perceived liberal reaction,

¹ In the preregistration for this study, we erroneously-registered a 60-second cutoff (forgetting to update the registration before finalizing it) instead of the 100-second cutoff described here. The different criteria do not affect our results – only one additional participant would have been included with the 60-second cutoff, and since that particular participant also failed an attention-check, the overall analytic sample is identical regardless of the cutoff used.

Average Causal Mediation Effect ($ACME$) = 1.13 [0.98, 1.26], $p < .001$. 45.6% of the direct effect was explained by our mediating variable. See Figure 2 for the result of causal mediation analysis.

In an exploratory model, we tested whether our results were better explained by perceived responses to the tweets by liberals (as we had predicted) or perceived responses to the tweets by conservatives. Our signaling-based explanation of inflammatory pro-firearms rhetoric suggests that a signal's effectiveness (in signaling unwillingness to compromise) is not driven by the issue position expressed in the signal, but by the perception that the signal would antagonize their political opponents – therefore, perceived unwillingness to compromise should be associated with the perceived reaction by liberals. On the other hand, if an inflammatory pro-firearms tweet signals unwillingness to compromise because of its support for the pro-firearms position, perceived unwillingness to compromise should be associated with perceived positive conservative reactions; it is the conservative audience who should appreciate the display of the strong pro-firearms issue position.

When we put both perceived reactions into a model as predictors, we find that the effect of perceived reaction by liberals is statistically significant ($b = 0.69$ [0.65, 0.73], $SE = 0.021$, $t = 32.98$, $p < .001$), but the effect of perceived reaction by conservatives is not ($b = -0.005$ [-0.058, 0.049], $SE = 0.027$, $t = -0.17$, $p = .87$). The absolute values of two 95% CIs do not overlap, indicating that the effect of perceived liberal reaction is significantly larger than the effect of perceived conservative reaction. This result indicates that the effect of rhetoric on perceived willingness to compromise is driven by perceived response by liberals as we had predicted, with no evidence for the effect of the perceived response by conservatives. This result supports our

arguments that inflammatory pro-firearms post signal unwillingness to compromise through antagonizing the opposing side, rather than through showcasing the pro-firearms issue position.

In another exploratory model, we tested how candidate background affected perceived willingness to compromise. The candidates with suspect backgrounds were perceived as more likely to compromise with the Democrats ($M_{\text{suspect}} = 3.82$, $SE_{\text{suspect}} = 0.077$, $M_{\text{loyal}} = 3.49$, $SE_{\text{loyal}} = 0.073$, $b = 0.33$ [0.12, 0.54], $SE = 0.11$, $t = 3.12$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.26$ [0.15, 0.37]). In a model which includes both treatment conditions (rhetoric and background), the interaction effect was not statistically significant ($b = -0.126$ [-0.416, 0.16], $\text{Eta-squared} = .0008$ [.00, .01], $SE = 0.15$, $t = -0.85$, $p = .39$). In the same model, we found that candidate background had main-effect partial eta-squared of .02 [.01, .04]. On the other hand, we found the tweet rhetoric had a main-effect partial eta-squared of .55 [.45, .59], indicating that tweet rhetoric had a substantially larger effect on perceived willingness to compromise than did candidate background.

Voting intentions and perceived partisan trustworthiness

We further expected that participants would be more willing to vote for the candidates who made an inflammatory pro-firearms tweet than for the candidates who made a thoughts and prayers tweet, and that this relationship would again be mediated by the candidate's perceived willingness to compromise with the Democrats. Additionally, we predicted that the candidates with the suspect backgrounds – the backgrounds which are unusual for Republican candidates – would be perceived as less trustworthy toward conservatives and participants would be less willing to vote for such candidates.

As predicted, the participants were less willing to vote for more suspect-background candidates ($M_{\text{suspect}} = 2.58$, $SE_{\text{suspect}} = 0.039$, $M_{\text{loyal}} = 3.49$, $SE_{\text{loyal}} = 0.036$, $b = -0.37$ [-0.47, -0.27], $SE = 0.50$, $t = 7.39$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.43$ [-0.54, -0.31]), but unexpectedly, we found that the

participants were not significantly more willing to vote for the candidates with inflammatory rhetoric ($M_{\text{inflammatory}} = 2.75$, $SE_{\text{inflammatory}} = 0.042$, $M_{\text{t\&p}} = 2.77$, $SE_{\text{t\&p}} = 0.035$, $b = 0.023$ [-0.078, 0.12], $SE = 0.051$, $t = 0.45$, $p = 0.65$, $d = 0.027$ [-0.086, 0.14]). We found no evidence for a significant interaction effect of two treatment conditions ($b = -0.17$ [-0.37, 0.022], $SE = 0.10$, $t = -1.73$, $p = .084$, Eta-squared = .00333 [.00, .01]).

As predicted, participants found the candidates with thoughts and prayers tweets to be less trustworthy toward conservatives ($M_{\text{inflammatory}} = 5.34$, $SE_{\text{inflammatory}} = 0.063$, $M_{\text{t\&p}} = 4.64$, $SE_{\text{t\&p}} = 0.063$, $b = -0.701$ [-0.865, -0.537], $SE = 0.0837$, $t = -8.371$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.510$ [-0.625, -0.395]). As predicted, the candidates with suspect backgrounds were perceived as less trustworthy toward conservatives ($M_{\text{suspect}} = 4.58$, $SE_{\text{suspect}} = 0.069$, $M_{\text{loyal}} = 5.39$, $SE_{\text{loyal}} = 0.055$, $b = -0.81$ [-0.97, -0.65], $SE = 0.083$, $t = -9.81$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.59$ [-0.71, -0.47]). Background and rhetoric significantly interacted when predicting perceived trustworthiness toward conservatives ($b = -0.31$ [-0.62, -0.002], $SE = 0.16$, $t = -1.97$, $p = .049$, Eta-squared = .0043 [.00, .02]), indicating that candidates with suspect background and thoughts and prayers tweet were perceived as especially untrustworthy toward conservatives.

Interactions by ideology

In exploratory models, we examined whether certain sorts of voters are more or less willing to vote for the more inflammatory candidates. We find that our hypotheses hold for voters that identify themselves as more conservative, but not among more moderate voters. The more conservative participants were, the more willing they were to vote for the candidates with inflammatory tweets ($b = 0.31$ [0.24, 0.39], $SE = 0.039$, $p < .001$; but the less willing they were to vote for the candidates with thoughts and prayers tweets ($b = -0.13$ [-0.20, -0.051], $SE =$

0.039, $p = .0011$); overall interaction: $b = -0.44 [-0.53, -0.35]$, $SE = 0.047$, $t = -9.39$, $p < .001$, $\text{Eta-squared} = .09 [.06, .13]$. See Figure 3.

Similarly, we find evidence that more conservative participants were more likely to rate the candidates with inflammatory tweets as trustworthy toward conservatives ($b = 0.18 [0.053, 0.31]$, $SE = 0.063$, $p = .0053$), but not the candidates with thoughts and prayers tweets ($b = -0.083 [-0.21, 0.041]$, $SE = 0.063$, $p = .19$, overall interaction $b = -0.26$, $95\%CI[-0.41, -0.11]$, $SE = 0.077$, $t = -3.37$, $p < .001$, $\text{Eta-squared} = .01 [.00, .03]$). See Figure 4. All data and analysis scripts can be found at https://osf.io/gpz5f/?view_only=b4fc601bbd604adba1eb69e97a0161e0.

Discussion

In a preregistered within-participants study of the effects of inflammatory pro-firearms rhetoric, we find evidence that the outrage this rhetoric creates among enemies is, in some sense, the point. Consistent with predictions derived from signaling theory, the perceived negative reaction by liberals acts as a signal that a candidate is less likely to compromise with the Democrats. Among more conservative participants, this outrage is regarded positively, as they tended to favor the candidates who made an inflammatory post, whereas the more moderate participants tended to favor the candidates who instead adapted a more conciliatory rhetoric.

Our finding suggests that not all conservatives reject candidates who may be interested in working with Democrats. In retrospect, this is not very surprising. For example, in a recent survey of Republican voters for the 2023 Republican presidential primary election, supporters of Donald Trump tended to prefer candidates who do not compromise with Democrats, whereas the supporters of Nikki Haley tended to prefer the candidates who were more open to compromise with the other side (Pew Research Center, 2023). It is possible that the participants in this

experiment held similarly heterogeneous attitude towards compromises, and the participants' attitudes toward potential compromise with the Democrats are associated with their self-described ideology. In our theoretical model, we suggested that affective polarization would lead the highly partisan to shun politicians who would be willing to work across the aisle. Therefore, it would be desirable for politicians targeting such audience to signal that they are unwilling to compromise with the opposing side. We suggest that it is likely that the participants who described themselves as more conservative tended to feel more negatively toward the Democrats. Therefore, the more conservative participants tended to perceive the possibility of compromises with the Democrats more negatively and preferred the candidates whom they perceived as unwilling to compromise with the Democrats.

Contrary to our initial expectations, it seemed that our participants treated inflammatory candidates as inflammatory, and conciliatory candidates as conciliatory, without reference to their backgrounds. Partially, we speculate that this may be because our manipulation of candidate background was too subtle: 87 (22.2%) of participants completely failed to pick it up in a manipulation check on candidate backgrounds; but it may also be the case that observers simply don't care about background in this case. In models with both candidate background and tweet content, the effect of tweet content ($\eta^2 = 0.55$) in predicting perceived willingness to compromise was far larger than the effect of candidate background ($\eta^2 = .02$). What may matter is what a candidate *does*, not who they are, and that bridge-burning is effective no matter who holds the match.

In our initial theorizing, we had focused more on the message, but it is clear that different audiences will receive the same message in different ways. Inflammatory pro-firearms rhetoric should only appeal to those who feel very negatively toward their political opponents and

therefore regard compromise as a dirty word. We explicitly test this prediction in a follow-up study.

Study 2

In Study 2, we investigate whether affective polarization is a key variable in understanding who will be attracted to candidates that espouse inflammatory pro-firearm rhetoric. Specifically, we look to replicate and extend the findings of Study 1, examining, in a preregistered study, whether their dislike of Democrats, a key variable in operationalizing affective polarization, helps to predict approval of candidates that use inflammatory rhetoric.

In Study 1, we found exploratory evidence that those who described themselves as more strongly conservative were more likely to vote for candidates who used inflammatory language. Existing studies on affective polarization make a distinction between positive attitudes toward one's own side and negative attitudes toward the opposing side (Iyengar et al., 2019). Given that our argument is based on the idea that the highly conservative participants, due to their negative outpartisan attitudes, would abhor candidates who would consider compromise with the Democrats, we infer that it is their negative attitudes toward the Democrats – rather than their positive attitude towards the Republicans – that drove the observed interaction effect between the participants' self-described ideology and rhetoric. Participants who have more negative attitude towards the Democrats are more likely to perceive candidates' willingness to compromise as a sign of partisan disloyalty, and they would be less inclined to vote for such candidates.

Because we found no evidence in Study 1 for a significant interaction effect between contents of social media posts and candidate background for voting intention, and because the

effects of background were relatively minimal, we dropped candidate backgrounds from this study.

As in Study 1, we predicted that candidates who made an inflammatory pro-firearms tweet are perceived as less likely to compromise with the Democrats than the candidates who made a thoughts and prayers tweet, and that this relationship would be mediated by the perceived (negative) reaction to the tweet by the liberal voters. We also expected that candidates who used more inflammatory language would be perceived as someone who conservatives could trust and someone who our participants would be more likely to vote for (again, as mediated through perceived negative reaction by liberals). Critically, we expected that partisan trustworthiness and voting intention would be especially strong for more conservative participants (mirroring Study 1) and for affective partisans. The more a person dislikes Democrats, the more appealing they should find the more inflammatory candidate.

Method

Participants

We recruited 501 self-described conservatives in the United States on Prolific on January 2024. 45.7% of our participants reported being male. The median age category was 35 to 45 years old, and 258 participants (51.5%) had bachelor's degree or more. After removing participants who failed attention checks, participants who did not agree to be included in the analysis, and participants who completed the survey in an unusually short amount of time (below 100 seconds), we were left with 487 participants. Distribution of self-described ideology among the 487 participants was relatively similar to the participants from the first study. The median participant ideology was conservative. 282 (57.9%) participants described themselves as conservative or very conservative, whereas 205 (42.1%) participants described themselves as

somewhat conservative or less.² Participants tended to have negative attitudes towards the Democrats, with a mean feeling thermometer rating of 27.1 (out of 100, with 0 being extremely cool and 100 being extremely warm) and a median rating of 23. These values are in line with the previous research on partisan attitudes toward outpartisan members (Iyengar et al., 2019).

Design

Our study design was quite similar to Study 1 – again, participants completed a fully-within-subjects design in which they were given a tweet by a hypothetical candidate for a Republican primary posted in the aftermath of a mass shooting and asked to evaluate the hypothetical candidates. The simulated social media posts were identical to the ones from Study 1, but unlike in Study 1, participants received no additional information about the candidate beyond their name, photograph, and that the candidate was running for a Republican House primary.

Measures

For each vignette, participants were asked to answer the same perceived partisan trustworthiness toward conservatives, perceived willingness to compromise with the Democrats, likely reaction by liberals/conservatives, and voting intention questions as in Study 1. At the end of the survey, participants answered questions on their demographics, and attention check questions. In addition to the question about participants' self-described ideology, participants were also asked two feeling thermometer questions, one toward politicians from the Republican party and one toward politicians from the Democratic party. The feeling thermometer questions

² 12 participants (11 after applying exclusion criteria) indicated in the survey that their political ideology was liberal. We include them in the main text, to match our registered exclusion criteria, but our conclusions do not change if they are removed from analysis.

asked the participants to move sliders between the values of 0 (coldest) and 100 (warmest) when evaluating their feelings towards the focal group.

Analytic Plan

We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions (if any), all inclusion/exclusion criteria, whether inclusion/exclusion criteria were established prior to data analysis, all manipulations, and all measures in the study. The preregistration, along with the preregistered analysis script, can be found at https://osf.io/uc2rs/?view_only=678a06984bb7432fac8b1eb8f46c2b6e. Sensitivity analyses suggested that a target sample size of 500 would provide 80% power to detect an effect of Cohen's f of .052 in our design – more than enough power to detect effects in line with the $f \sim .10$ found in Study 1. We used the same exclusion criteria as in Study 1.

As in Study 1, we used mixed-effect models with random intercepts for participants to test our hypotheses.

Results

Main Effects

Willingness to Compromise. We predicted that candidates who made an inflammatory pro-firearms tweet would be perceived as less likely to compromise with the Democrats than the candidates who made a thoughts and prayers tweet, and that this relationship would be mediated by the perceived (negative) reaction to the tweet by liberal voters.

As predicted and consistent with the first study, we found that the candidates who made a thoughts and prayers tweet were rated as more likely to compromise with the Democrats than those with more inflammatory posts ($M_{\text{inflammatory}} = 2.20$, $SE_{\text{inflammatory}} = 0.044$, $M_{\text{t\&p}} = 4.94$, $SE_{\text{t\&p}} = 0.039$, $b = 2.74$, $SE = .052$, $t = 52.90$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.40$ [2.28, 2.51]). As predicted, causal

mediation analysis found that the relationship between rhetoric of tweets and perceived willingness to compromise was mediated by the perceived liberal reaction, $ACME = 0.82$, $[0.73, 0.90]$, $p < .001$. 29.7% of the direct effect was explained by our mediator. Figure 5 shows the result of causal mediation analysis.

As in Study 1, we tested whether our results were better explained by perceived responses to the tweets by liberals (as we had predicted) or perceived responses to the tweets by conservatives. When we put both perceptions into a model as the sole predictors, we find that both effect of perceived reaction by liberals ($b = 0.69$ $[0.66, 0.73]$, $SE = 0.017$, $t = 40.91$, $p < .001$) and the effect of perceived reaction by conservatives ($b = -0.05$ $[-0.094, -0.006]$, $SE = 0.022$, $t = -2.24$, $p = .025$) are both statistically significant. However, a direct comparison of the 95% CI of the absolute values of the two effects shows that the two do not overlap, and therefore that perceived responses by liberals has a significantly stronger effect on partisan trustworthiness than perceived response by conservatives. Again, the result indicates that inflammatory pro-firearms post signal unwillingness to compromise through antagonizing the opposing side, rather than through their implied pro-firearms issue position.

Trustworthiness & Voting Intentions. We predicted that candidates who used more inflammatory language would be perceived as someone who conservatives could trust, and someone who our participants would be more likely to vote for, with both effects mediated through perceived negative reaction by liberals. As predicted, we found that the candidates who made thoughts and prayers tweets were perceived as less trustworthy toward conservatives ($M_{\text{inflammatory}} = 5.15$, $SE_{\text{inflammatory}} = 0.048$, $M_{\text{t\&p}} = 4.78$, $SE_{\text{t\&p}} = 0.044$, $b = -0.38$, $SE = 0.061$, $t = -6.13$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.28$ $[-0.37, -0.19]$). Like with Study 1, the pattern for voting intentions was somewhat more complicated. Unexpectedly, we found that participants were, on the whole, more

willing to vote for the thoughts and prayers candidates ($M_{\text{inflammatory}} = 2.69$, $SE_{\text{inflammatory}} = 0.033$, $M_{\text{t\&p}} = 2.95$, $SE_{\text{t\&p}} = 0.026$, $b = 0.25$, $SE = 0.038$, $t = 6.62$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.30$ [0.21, 0.39]).

Moderation by Outpartisan Feelings

We then predicted that the effect of rhetoric on partisan trustworthiness and voting intentions would be moderated by negative attitude toward the Democratic politicians and by partisan ideology. As expected, we found that ideology (seven-point scale, where seven is very conservative) correlated negatively with feeling thermometers towards Democratic politicians ($r = -.43$ [-.50, -.36], $p < .001$); and positively with feeling thermometers towards Republican politicians ($r = .30$ [.22, .38], $p < .001$). Confirming that affective polarization distinguishes between liking ingroups and hating outgroups, we found no evidence for a correlation between feeling thermometers towards Democrats and Republicans ($r = -.036$ [-.13, .053], $p = .42$).

Willingness to Compromise. In our model, using inflammatory pro-firearms rhetoric signals unwillingness to compromise because doing so would burn the bridge with the Democrats. We assume this mechanism would be unaffected by outpartisan feelings of the participants. Therefore, we did not predict that the effect of rhetoric on perceived willingness to compromise would be moderated by outpartisan feelings. Consistent with our intuition, we found no evidence of significant interaction between different rhetoric responding to the mass-shooting and how the participants felt toward the Democratic politicians on perceived willingness to compromise ($b = -0.0009$ [-0.005, 0.003], $SE = 0.0022$, $t = -0.41$, $p = .68$, Eta-squared = .00012 [.00, .00]).

Trustworthiness & Voting Intentions. We predicted that the candidates who made thoughts and prayers tweets would be viewed as less trustworthy towards conservatives by

participants who felt more coldly towards Democratic politicians, and that these participants would be less likely to vote for such candidates.

As predicted, the more warmly the participants felt toward Democratic politicians, the more they rated candidates who made thoughts and prayers tweets as trustworthy ($b = 0.013$ [0.0091, 0.017], $SE = 0.0021$, $p < .001$). On the other hand, the more warmly the participants felt toward the Democratic politicians, the less they rated candidates who made inflammatory tweets as trustworthy ($b = -0.017$ [-0.021, -0.013], $SE = 0.0021$, $p < .001$), overall interaction: $b = 0.030$ [0.025, 0.035], $SE = 0.0025$, $t = 11.79$, $p < .001$, Eta-squared = .09 [.06, .12]. See Figure 6.

Similarly, as predicted, the more warmly the participants felt toward Democratic politicians, the more willing they were to vote for candidates who made thoughts and prayers tweets ($b = 0.0074$ [0.0049, 0.010], $SE = 0.0013$). On the other hand, the more warmly the participants felt toward the Democratic politicians, the less willing they were to vote for candidates who made inflammatory tweets ($b = -0.015$ [-0.018, -0.013], $SE = 0.0013$), overall interaction: $b = 0.023$ [0.020, 0.026], $SE = 0.0016$, $t = 14.59$, $p < .001$, Eta-squared = .13 [.1, .16]. See Figure 7.

Moderation by Political Ideology

Willingness to Compromise. Our model suggests that the effect of different rhetoric on perceived willingness to compromise would be unaffected by ideology of the participants. Consistent with our intuition, we found no evidence of significant interaction between different rhetoric responding to the mass-shooting and how the participants felt toward the Democratic politicians on perceived willingness to compromise ($b = -0.0028$ [-0.13, 0.07], $SE = 0.050$, $t = -0.55$, $p = .58$, Eta-squared = .0002 [.00, .00]).

Trustworthiness & Voting Intentions. We predicted that more conservative participants would rate the candidates who made thoughts and prayers tweet as less trustworthy towards the conservatives, and they would be less willing to vote for such candidates. Consistent with Study 1, we found evidence for an interaction between tweet rhetoric and ideology of the participants on perceived trustworthiness toward conservatives. As predicted, more conservative participants rated candidates who made inflammatory tweets as more trustworthy ($b = 0.37$ [0.28, 0.46], $SE = 0.046$, $p < .001$). This relationship between participants' ideology and perceived trustworthiness did not hold for the candidates who made thoughts and prayers tweet ($b = -0.052$ [-0.14, 0.038], $SE = 0.046$, $p = .26$), overall interaction $b = -0.42$ [-0.54, -0.31], $SE = 0.059$, $t = -7.24$, $p < .001$, Eta-squared = .03 [.02, .06].

We also found evidence for an interaction between tweet rhetoric and ideology of the participants on voting intention. The more conservative participants were, the more willing they were to vote for the candidates who made an inflammatory pro-firearms tweet ($b = 0.40$ [0.34, 0.45], $SE = 0.029$, $p < .001$), but we found no evidence for a relationship between ideology and willingness to vote for candidates making a thoughts and prayers tweet ($b = -0.035$ [-0.092, 0.021], $SE = 0.029$, $p = .22$), overall interaction, $b = -0.43$ [-0.50, -0.36], $SE = 0.036$, $t = -12.11$, $p < .001$, Eta-squared = .09 [.07, .12].

Exploratory Models

In exploratory analyses, we tested whether the effect of tweet rhetoric on perception of partisan trustworthiness was better explained by feeling towards Democratic politicians or by feeling towards Republicans. We used a model which includes both feeling thermometers (toward Democratic politicians and toward Republican politicians), tweet rhetoric, and interaction terms for each thermometer. In line with our theorizing about affective polarization,

we find evidence of interaction between rhetoric and how the participants feel toward Democrats (as detailed above) on perceived trustworthiness toward conservatives, but not how the participants feel toward Republicans. Specifically, we found no evidence for significant interaction between tweet rhetoric and feeling thermometer toward Republican politicians on perceived trustworthiness ($b = -0.001 [-0.0067, 0.0040]$, $SE = 0.0027$, $t = -0.48$, $p = .63$, Eta-squared = .00016 [.00, .00]). Consistent with the model without thermometer toward Republicans, we found evidence for significant interaction between tweet rhetoric and feeling thermometer toward Democrat politicians on perceived trustworthiness ($b = 0.03 [0.025, 0.035]$, $SE = 0.0025$, $t = 11.77$, $p < .001$, Eta-squared = .09 [.06, .12]).

In a final set of exploratory models, we tested whether the mediating effect of perceived willingness to compromise on the relationship between rhetoric and perceived partisan trustworthiness was moderated by affective polarization. We compared the mediation effect at both the first quartile level of the feeling thermometer toward the Democratic politicians (5.5 out of 100) and at third quartile (42 out of 100). Due to limitations in the R package we used, we could not model the random effects in the data, so caution should be used in interpreting the findings. Nevertheless, we find evidence for moderated mediation in line with our hypotheses (test of moderated mediation = $-0.82 [-1.04, -0.56]$, $p < .001$). As discussed above, we found no evidence for moderation of the relationship between rhetoric and perceived willingness to compromise by affective polarization. We did find that for participants who felt very negatively towards the Democrats, willingness to compromise by a politician was viewed as untrustworthy towards conservatives (overall indirect effect = $-0.63 [-0.77, -0.49]$, $p < .001$); whereas for participants who felt more positively, willingness to compromise was viewed as indicating

greater trustworthiness towards conservatives (overall indirect effect = 0.19 [0.08, 0.34], $p < .001$). See Figure 8

We found similar evidence for moderated mediation when we looked at whether the mediating effect of perceived willingness to compromise on the relationship between rhetoric and perceived partisan trustworthiness was moderated by ideology (test of moderated mediation = 0.87 [0.64, 1.10], $p < .001$). As discussed above, we found no evidence for moderation of the relationship between rhetoric and perceived willingness to compromise by ideology. Among the “very conservative” participants, willingness to compromise by a politician was viewed as untrustworthy towards conservatives (overall indirect effect = -0.73 [-0.92, -0.58], $p < .001$), but we found no evidence for an indirect effect among the “somewhat conservative” participants (overall indirect effect = 0.13 [-0.002, 0.25], $p = .06$). See Figure 9.

All data and analysis scripts can be found at

https://osf.io/uc2rs/?view_only=678a06984bb7432fac8b1eb8f46c2b6e.

Discussion

In a preregistered study of American conservatives, we again see the power that inflammatory rhetoric has to attract partisans. We again found that more inflammatory candidates were judged to be less likely to compromise with Democrats, and that this effect was mediated by the sense that such rhetoric would offend Democrats. In line with the exploratory findings from Study 1, more conservative participants were more likely to perceive inflammatory speakers as the sort of people that conservatives could trust and were more likely to vote for them. This relationship seems to be largely about affective polarization, as we find the same pattern of results when we look just at how participants feel towards Democrats – the more they dislike Democrats, the more appealing the inflammatory politician becomes.

Interestingly, we find that there still may be space for comity in American politics. Our self-identified conservative participants are not a homogenous group. As much as extreme partisans may have found more inflammatory candidates appealing, those participants who were more politically moderate and who had less negative view towards Democrats actually preferred the more conciliatory candidate. There are sizeable number of participants who do not negatively perceive those who are willing to compromise with the Democrats, and indeed, our participants on average were more likely to want to vote for the more conciliatory candidates.

Study 3

In Studies 1 & 2, the respondents were asked to interpret two sets of tweets which were different both in their content and in their language. Neither thoughts-and-prayers tweets nor inflammatory tweets in these experiments explicitly endorse concrete firearms-related policy positions; however, thoughts-and-prayers tweets may be seen as extending a rhetorical olive branch to liberal audiences through their conciliatory tone. Therefore, a viewer may interpret our non-inflammatory “thoughts-and-prayers” communicator either as someone prone to compromise or as someone who might potentially harbor liberal-friendly anti-gun positions. Our effects, therefore might exist either, as we theorize above, because the inflammatory communicator is viewed as having cut off ties with the opposing side, or alternately because the thoughts-and-prayers communicator is viewed as not having been on one’s side in the first place.

To disambiguate between these explanations, we conducted an additional study comparing two uncompromisingly pro-gun tweeters – one who is civil (“I am greatly saddened by this tragedy, and I offer sincere condolences to the victim and their families. However, this tragedy should not be used as an excuse to curtail the Second Amendment. I will never turn my

back on the Constitutional right to bear arms”) against one who uses the same inflammatory language as in Studies 1 & 2 (“The bodies are still warm after the horrific shooting and the Radical Left are already talking about taking away our guns. They are scared that we can fight back against their tyrannical agenda with our guns. I will always fight to stop the Left’s anti-gun agenda!”). The two tweets have very similar contents; both communicators indicate that they are unwilling to compromise their values (values presumably shared by their copartisans), and they both accuse their political opponents of politicizing the mass-shooting incident in their attempt to control gun ownership. Indeed, both tweets should be considered as highly inflammatory in term of their contents, especially in the context of a recent mass shooting. However, only one communicator utilizes highly inflammatory language. Whereas the inflammatory rhetoric in the first two study included both confrontational content and inflammatory language, this study aims to distinguish effects of inflammatory language from effects of confrontational content.

Since the two tweets in this experiment share similarly confrontational content, both candidates should be viewed fairly interchangeably if participants focus more on policy position or stated willingness to compromise when evaluating communicators. However, if participants focus more on the language of the tweet itself, then the inflammatory communicator should be viewed as less likely to compromise, because they are more likely to be viewed negatively by liberals.

Method

We recruited 502 self-described conservatives in the Unites States on Prolific on December 2024. 50.4% of our participants were male. The median age category was 35 to 45 years old, and 299 participants (59.6%) had bachelor’s degree or more. Using the similar exclusion criteria as the first two studies, we were left with 477 participants. Participants tended

to be more conservatives than the ones from the first two studies; 353 (74.0%) participants described themselves as conservative or very conservative, whereas 124 (26.0%) participants described themselves as somewhat conservative or less.³ Participants tended to have negative attitudes towards the Democrats, with a mean feeling thermometer rating of 31.9 and a median rating of 26.

As in Studies 1 & 2, we used a within-subject design with two treatment conditions: an inflammatory pro-firearms tweeter – using the same tweet as one of the inflammatory tweets from Study 2 – and a civil pro-firearm tweeter. Both tweets share similar content, being highly antagonistic toward their opponents. However, the civil tweeter does not use inflammatory language. Participants were asked the same set of questions as in Study 2. As in Study 1 and Study 2, we used mixed-effect models with random intercepts for participants to test our hypotheses.

We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions (if any), all inclusion/exclusion criteria, whether inclusion/exclusion criteria were established prior to data analysis, all manipulations, and all measures in the study. The preregistration, along with the preregistered analysis script, can be found at <https://osf.io/rz8be>

Results

For primary question of whether inflammatory rhetoric (separate from inflammatory policy) causes observers to infer a reduced willingness to compromise of a speaker due to beliefs about outgroup reaction, the findings from Study 3 are similar to Study 1 & 2. Using the same analytic approach as in Study 2, we find that participants do distinguish between communicators

³ 25 participants (23 after applying exclusion criteria) indicated in the survey that their political ideology was liberal. We include them in the main text, to match our registered exclusion criteria, but our conclusions do not change if they are removed from analysis.

with similar contents but different rhetorical styles, with the inflammatory tweeter viewed as less likely to compromise than the civil tweeter ($M_{inflammatory} = 2.76$, $SE_{inflammatory} = 0.078$, $M_{civil} = 3.31$, $SE_{civil} = 0.079$, $b = -0.55$ [-0.69, -0.40], $SE = .074$, $t = -7.40$, $p < .001$, $d = .48$ [.35, .61]). We note that the magnitude of the difference between the civil and inflammatory tweeters is somewhat smaller than the effect sizes from Studies 1 & 2. The smaller effect size is not unexpected of course, given that both tweets are highly confrontational even though the civil tweeter refrains from using inflammatory language. This suggests that the form of the rhetoric has an effect on perceived willingness to compromise, even above its contents (which may have their own independent effects that are captured in Studies 1 & 2). As in Studies 1 & 2, that condition main effect is mediated by perceived liberal reaction, $ACME = 0.28$, [0.20, 0.36], $p < .001$, 50.5% of the direct-effect explained by the mediator.

For the perceived trustworthiness toward conservatives and the voting intention, the findings from Study 3 diverges from Study 1 & 2. We find that the civil tweeter was perceived as more trustworthy than the inflammatory tweeter ($M_{inflammatory} = 5.01$, $SE_{inflammatory} = 0.069$, $M_{civil} = 5.48$, $SE_{civil} = 0.063$, $b = -0.47$ [-0.61, -0.33], $SE = .071$, $t = -6.60$, $p < .001$, $d = .43$ [.30, .56]). Similarly participants were more willing to vote for the civil tweeter than for the inflammatory tweeter ($M_{inflammatory} = 2.73$, $SE_{inflammatory} = 0.045$, $M_{civil} = 3.13$, $SE_{civil} = 0.042$, $b = -0.41$ [-0.48, -0.33], $SE = .040$, $t = -10.3$, $p < .001$, $d = .66$ [.53, .80]). These effects were seemingly unaffected by affective partisanship. There was no significant interaction effect between inflammatory language and feeling thermometer toward the Democrats on perceived trustworthiness toward conservatives ($b = .001$ [-0.004, .006], $SE = 0.003$, $p = .69$). There was no significant interaction between inflammatory language and ideology on perceived trustworthiness toward conservatives ($b = -0.03$ [-0.15, 0.09], $SE = .006$, $p = .62$). Similarly, there was no significant interaction effect

between inflammatory language and feeling thermometer toward the Democrats on voting intention ($b = -0.0006$ $[-0.003, .002]$, $SE = 0.014$, $p = .68$), and there was no significant interaction between inflammatory language and ideology on voting intention ($b = 0.035$ $[-0.03, .10]$, $SE = .034$, $p = .30$).

As in Studies 1 & 2, exploratory moderated mediation models suggest that, for those who viewed Democrats negatively, the increased willingness to compromise signaled by the polite communicator indicated that the communicator was less trustworthy towards conservatives (overall indirect effect = -0.12 $[-0.18, -0.06]$, $p < .001$); whereas for participants who felt more positively towards Democrats, the willingness to compromise signaled by the polite communicator did not indicate that the communicator was directionally less trustworthy towards conservatives (overall indirect effect = -0.006 $[-0.04, 0.02]$, $p = 0.28$; test of moderated mediation = -0.125 $[-0.175, -0.055]$, $p < .001$). As in Studies 1 & 2, we find a similar pattern of results when we substitute political ideology for affective partisanship as our moderating variable. See the Online Supplement for full details.

Taken together, the findings from Study 3 suggest that using highly inflammatory language in a pro-firearms tweet can signal candidate's unwillingness to compromise with the opponents even compared against the tweet with similarly inflammatory content. Again, this effect was mediated by the perceived liberal reaction to the tweets. However, unlike with Study 1 and Study 2, the candidate with inflammatory language was otherwise perceived unfavorably. Participants rated the civil tweeter as more trustworthy toward conservatives than the tweeter with inflammatory language, and they were more willing to vote for the civil tweeter – and these effects did not interact with participants' attitude towards the Democrats.

General Discussion

In three preregistered studies, we find consistent evidence that, among American self-identified conservatives, a candidate who makes a social media post using inflammatory rhetoric - rhetoric designed to infuriate and offend liberals - is perceived as less willing to compromise with the Democrats. This perception is mediated by the perceived negative reaction to such posts by the liberals. However, whether or not this is perceived as a good thing depends on your views about Democrats. The more that one detests Democrats, the more appealing an inflammatory candidate becomes, while the less one detests Democrats, the less appealing such a flamethrower seems to be.

Indeed, we argue that our model can potentially provide a relatively simple explanation for the wide range of political discourse involving inflammatory or confrontational rhetoric. We suggest that inflammatory rhetoric does not even need to signal a positive character trait to be beneficial for a politician – what matters is that it is perceived that the other side would react negatively to such rhetoric. “Triggering the libs” is not just effective because it is “fun to drink liberal tears;” it’s an effective way of signaling that a politician is unwilling and unable to betray their conservative constituency by compromising with the Democrats. In this framework, being “cancelled” is actually something to be sought out as long as the cancellation comes from the right people – the groups from which their audience feel negatively toward. Inflammatory rhetoric in and of itself is not beneficial, but offending the right people is; it is likely that being “cancelled” from using inflammatory rhetoric would not be effective if doing so somehow results in offending everyone – for example, boasting about shooting your puppy after it misbehaved, as inflammatory as that is, is not likely to have any sort of positive electoral outcomes.

Theoretically, our model resembles “burning bridges” models in conflict resolution (Schelling, 1960;), such as Fearon’s conceptualization of a tying-hands signal: a class of signal that functions by intentionally making it costly for its signaler to change their course (Fearon, 1997). Both our model and tying-hand signal model assume a divided audience, where antagonizing one group sends a meaningful signal to another group. A hand-typing signal is seen as a credible signal of commitment to a course of action, because it is costly for its speakers to disappoint an ingroup audience. In our inflammatory-communication model, inflammatory rhetoric similarly works to restrict future action, but we instead focus on the message to ingroups sent by communications aimed, at least in part, at outgroups. Speakers are unable to collaborate with outgroups because any potential bridges to those groups (and therefore any possibility of building cross-group trust) has been torched. Ingroup audiences, in turn, would perceive such communication as a credible signal of speakers’ unwillingness to compromise with outgroups.

Previous research on inflammatory communication in the United States has tended to study the general population (though see Rosenblum et al., 2018 on differences in political incorrectness across the political spectrum; and see Forscher & Ktelily, 2016 on the psychological profile of the alt-right). Our studies include large numbers of both strong conservatives and moderate conservatives, and the findings show clear differences between these two groups. More importantly, our data also shows that the observed difference within conservative participants is likely driven by their antipathy toward the Democrats rather than by their positive attitude toward Republicans. Prior research has shown that Americans as a whole tend to shun uncivil elites (Costa, 2021; Druckman et al., 2019) and express support for bipartisan legislators (Harbridge & Malhotra, 2011; Harbridge et al., 2014; Paris, 2017) – indeed our results show that inflammatory rhetoric is only viewed positively by those who detest

Democrats. Averaged across the whole spectrum of conservatives in our sample, inflammatory rhetoric actually lessened participants' willingness to vote for the bomb-throwing candidate. In future research, it may be useful to further disentangle the effects of positive partisanship and negative partisanship.

Affective polarization is on the rise in the United States (Iyengar et al. 2019), and this may explain why there has been such an upsurge in inflammatory political rhetoric (Frimer et al., 2022). As well as being a consequence of polarization, inflammatory rhetoric may also be a driver: Previous research on affective polarization and inflammatory language suggests that exposure to inflammatory language may deepen affective polarization (Skytte, 2021) and polarization among the elites increases affective polarization among partisans (Banda & Cluverious, 2018), whereas warm social relationships between party leaders weaken it (Huddy & Yair, 2020). Together with the findings from our study, it suggests the existence of mutually reinforcing relationship between inflammatory rhetoric and affective polarization; frequent usages of inflammatory language by politicians and other public figures may increase affective polarization, which in turn produces the more polarized audience which tends to reward the politicians who make use of inflammatory rhetoric.

This paper has several limitations. The studies are based on a highly artificial set of online vignette experiments conducted on a non-representative sample of voters. The studies do not reflect the full range of information that primary voters are likely to have to access to when making their voting decisions, and these experiments cannot capture the complex social contexts where inflammatory pro-firearms communications take place. Furthermore, there may be some difference between stated voting intentions in an online study, where participants are explicitly paid for their participation, and real-world-voting behavior. Future work, therefore, should try to

take this model out of the lab into the world, examining the effects of such inflammatory rhetoric in the wild – who sends it, who responds to it (on social media or with campaign donations), and how effective it is in winning elections.

In the first two studies, we focused on inflammatory pro-firearms rhetoric, which contain elements of both inflammatory (or, unfettered) language and inflammatory content. This choice was made to better capture the effects of inflammatory political rhetoric the wild, as it quite rare to observe political communication which is inflammatory in language, but not in content. However, our third study showed that even holding the policy contents of a communication constant, we still see that inflammatory form leads to perceptions of unwillingness to compromise through our theorized mechanism of offending liberals. In Study 3, however, although participants perceived the candidate with inflammatory pro-firearms rhetoric as less willing to compromise with the Democrats (in line with our theorizing), they generally favored the candidate who delivered a similarly confrontational message in a more civil language. It may be that inflammatory language, while it benefits communicators in some ways may hinder them in others. Previous studies have found that the use of highly inflammatory language signals negative personal qualities about the candidate (Frimer & Skitka, 2018; Feinberg & Frimer, 2023), and that affective partisan voters tend to favor more electable candidates to avoid potential electoral losses (Albert and Consta, 2024). Partisans are therefore likely balancing multiple goals in their preference for candidates, and being seen as unwilling to compromise may be less important in some situations than in others. If one suspects that a politician will advance one's policy positions, it may become more useful to have them elected (with some probability of defection) than to have them out of power altogether. Future work may benefit from focusing on the situational effects of inflammatory (or confrontational) content and form.

Furthermore, future work would need to pay attention to the senders of the signals. Signaling theory treats both the senders and the receivers of a signal as the integral parts of a dynamic system. Understanding who is producing the signals in the real world, their motivations, and the actual consequences of the signals will provide a more complete picture of signaling by inflammatory pro-firearms rhetoric.

In this study, we examined one sort of inflammatory rhetoric – pro-firearms messages – but there is reason to think that other inflammatory messages should also be effective. We theorize that any message that antagonizes “the other side” ought to be able to play a similar functional role, and this is a hypothesis that future work should investigate. In our model, it is the offence that matters, not the actual underlying policy positions. It is also not clear how restricted such rhetoric should be to one political party, or even one political system. We argue that inflammatory rhetoric should appeal to affective partisans of any stripe – as long as there are enemies who you are worried that your representatives might be willing to compromise with, and as long as you see that compromise as inherently harmful to your own interests, then inflammatory rhetoric should be appealing. While this set of beliefs is currently more common on the Republican side of American politics (Davis, 2018), it is not an inherently or exclusively Republican phenomenon, and we would expect then, that those who see the political world in zero-sum terms, regardless of their other ideological commitments and regardless of the political system they inhabit, would be drawn to politicians who use more inflammatory rhetoric.

So, why did Mehmet Oz, media professional, think it was a good idea to pose with a misconfigured rifle while threatening insurrection? We argue that he was trying to send a signal – by creating inflammatory messages meant to anger liberals, he was showing the conservative electorate that he was cutting all ties with liberal causes and was therefore only able to be on the

side of conservatives going forward, with no future ability to make compromises or common cause with Democrats. It was a calculated choice, to appeal to the most conservative and most polarized, but it was ultimately an unsuccessful one. Inflammatory rhetoric may appeal to the extremists, but there is still a center in American politics that wants politicians to reach across the aisle and work together. Oz, in the end, got crushed in the 2022 Pennsylvania Senate race, losing by almost 5 percentage points.

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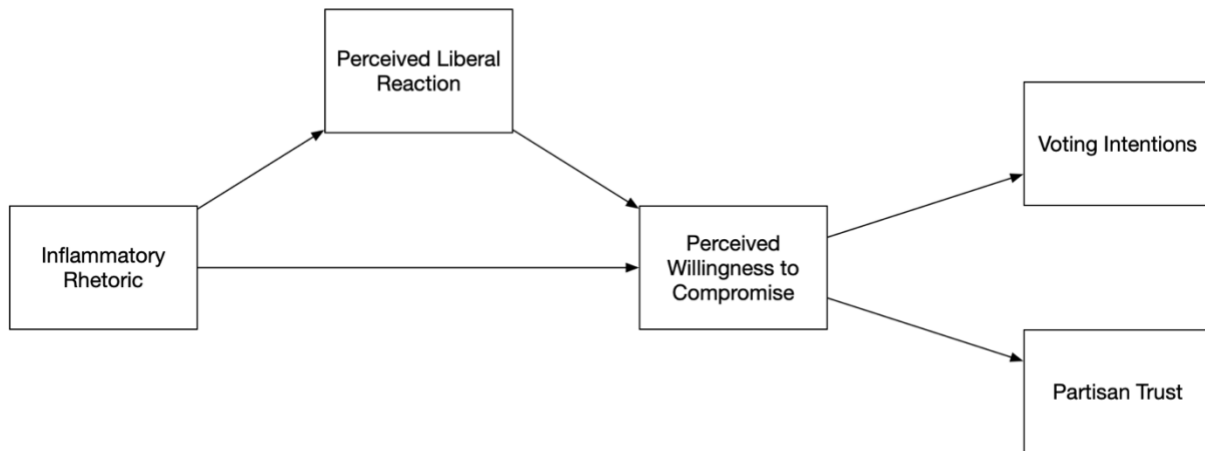
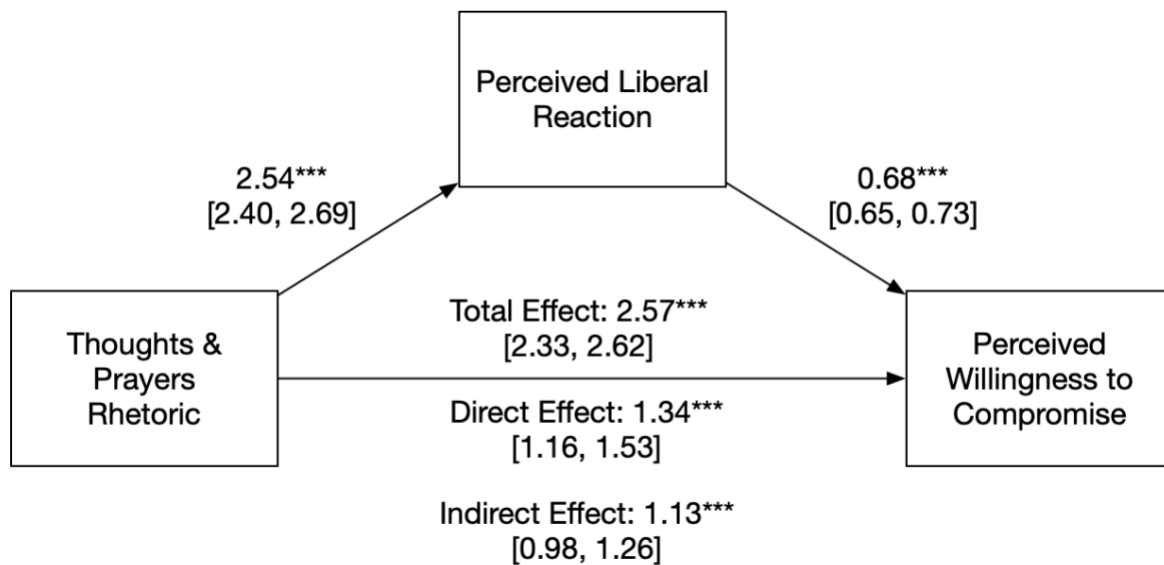
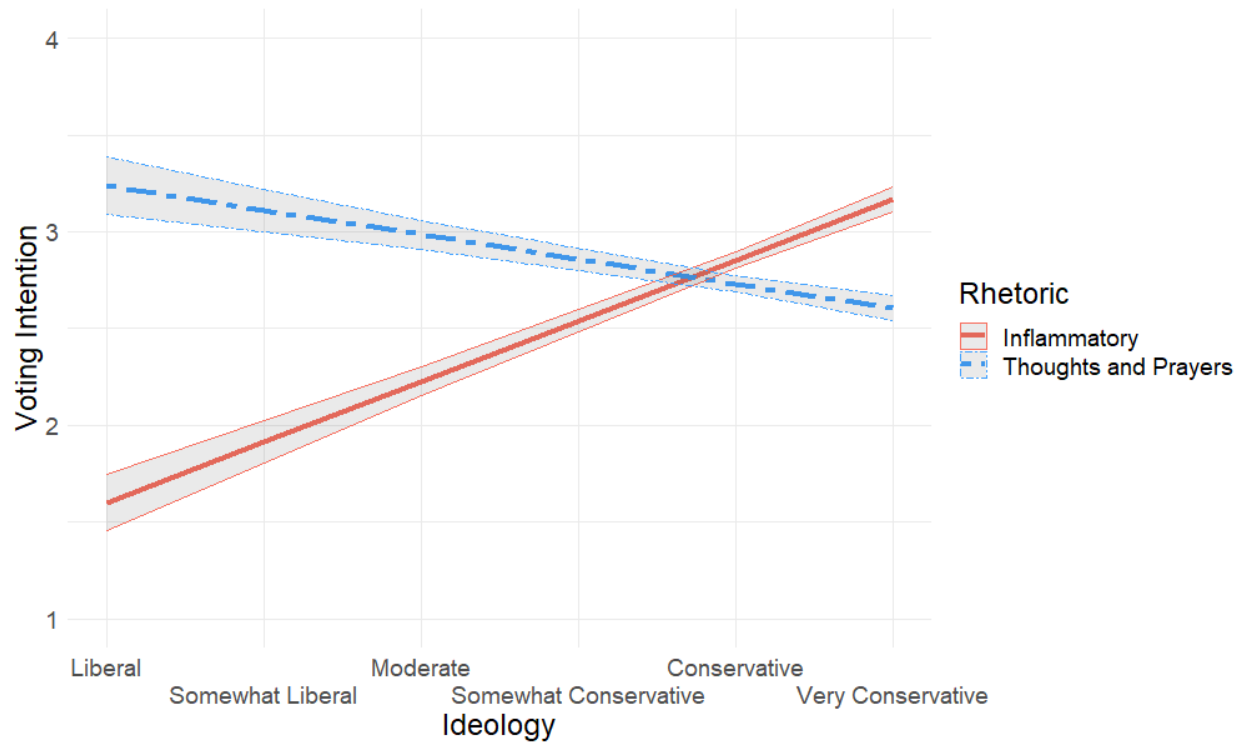
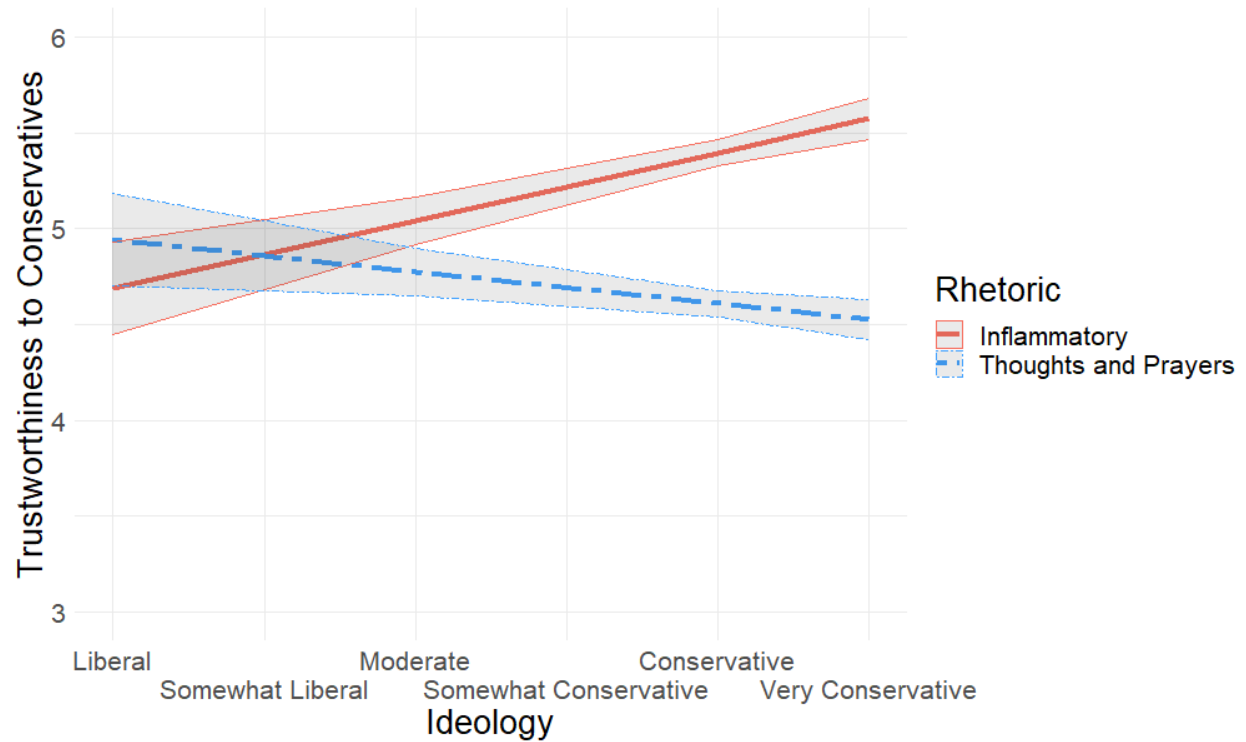
Figures**Figure 1***Proposed Conceptual Model*

Figure 2*Causal Mediation Analysis, Study 1*

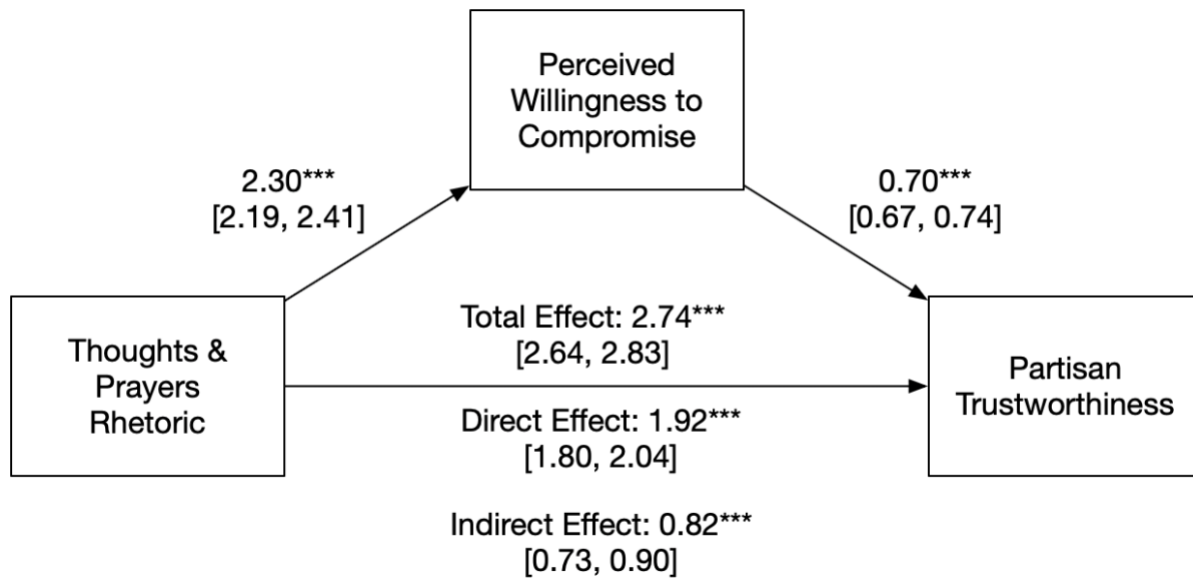
Note: Rhetoric is coded as 0 for inflammatory and 1 for thoughts and prayers. *** $p < .001$.

Figure 3*Voting Intention by Ideology, Study 1*

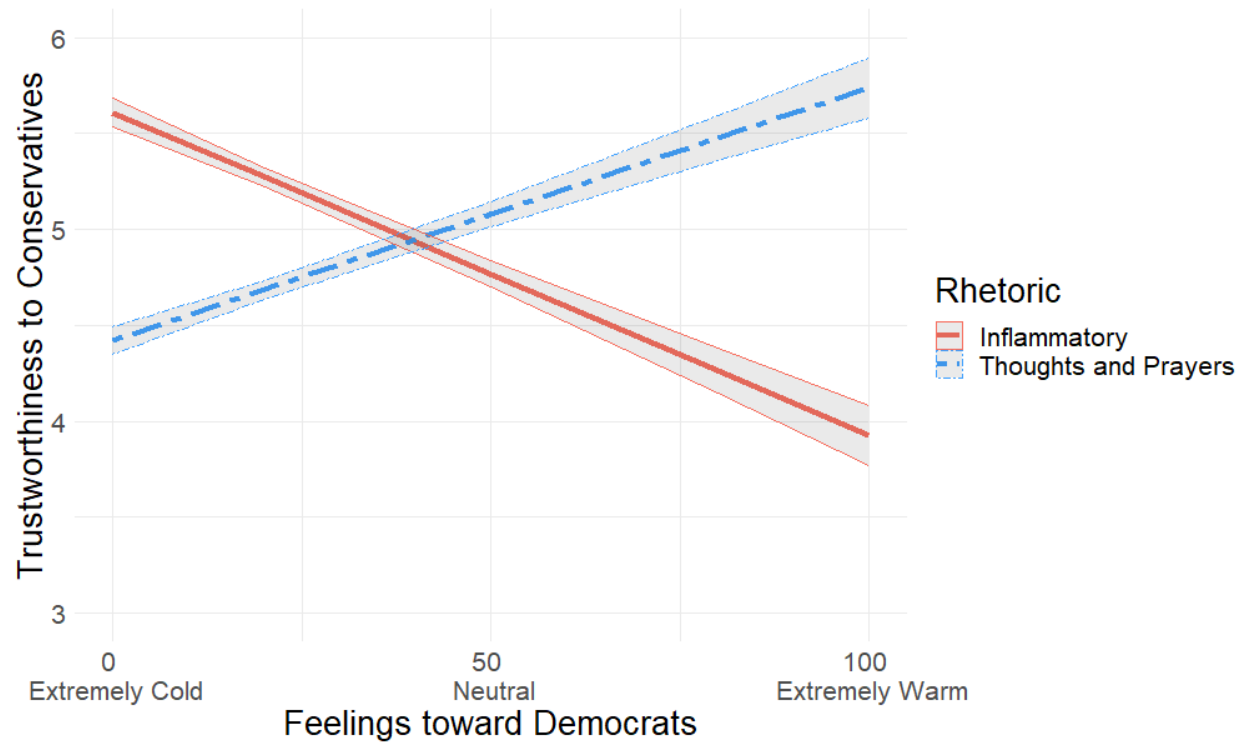
Note: Shaded areas indicate 95% CIs.

Figure 4*Perceived Partisan Trustworthiness by Ideology, Study 1*

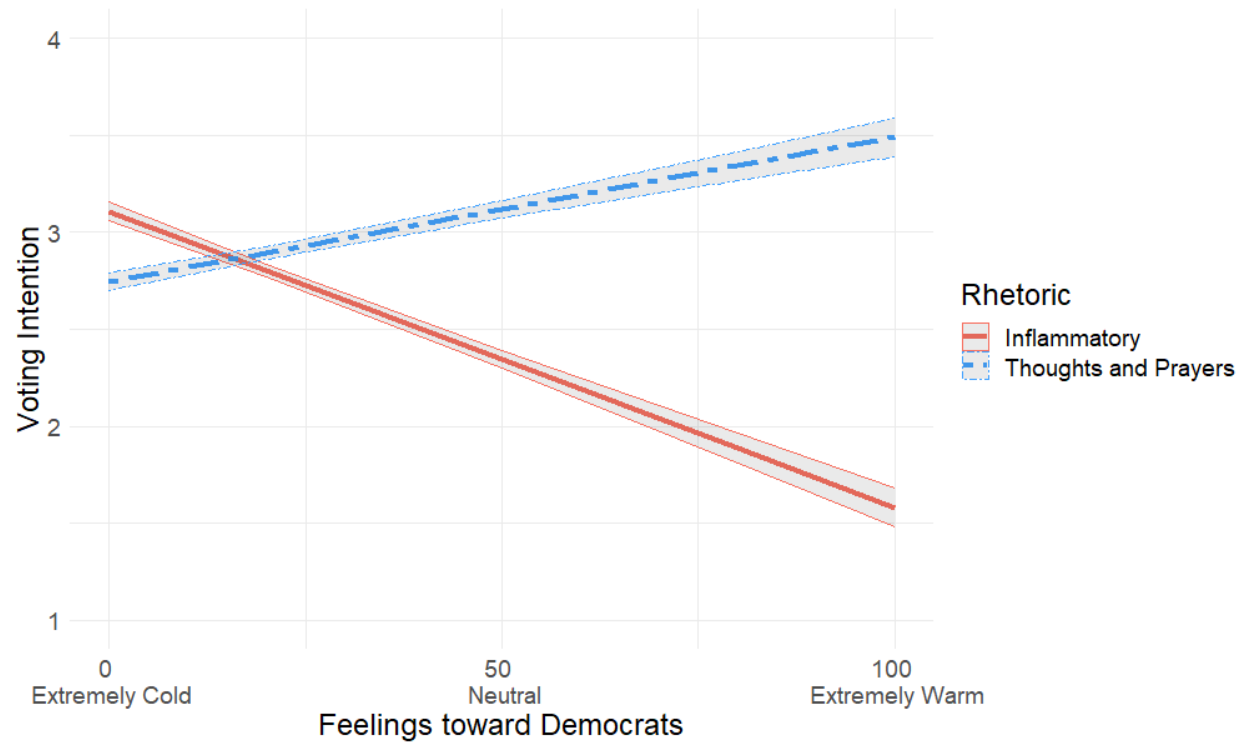
Note: Shaded areas indicate 95% CIs.

Figure 5*Causal Mediation Analysis, Study 2*

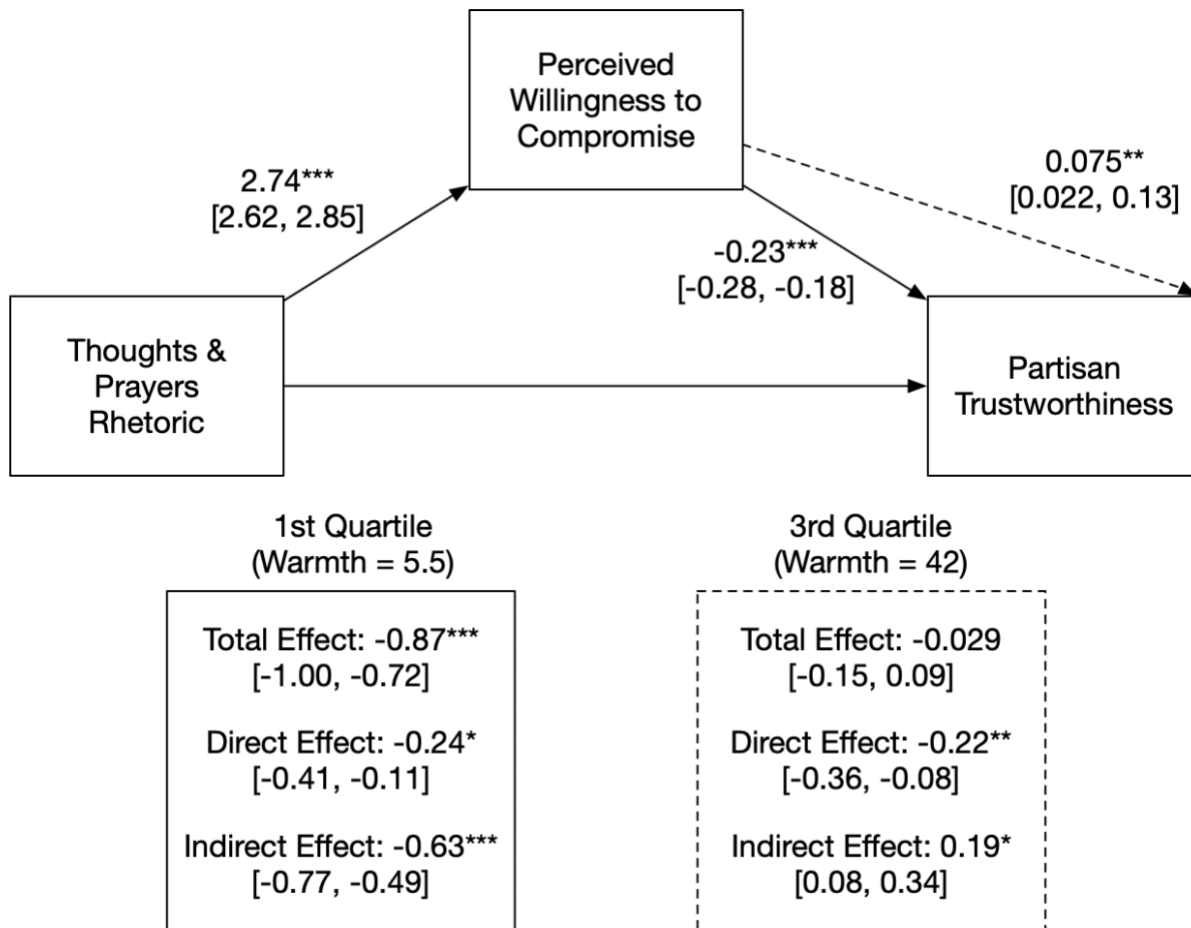
Note: Rhetoric is coded as 0 for inflammatory and 1 for thoughts and prayers. *** $p < .001$.

Figure 6*Perceived Partisan Trustworthiness by Feelings Toward Democrats, Study 2*

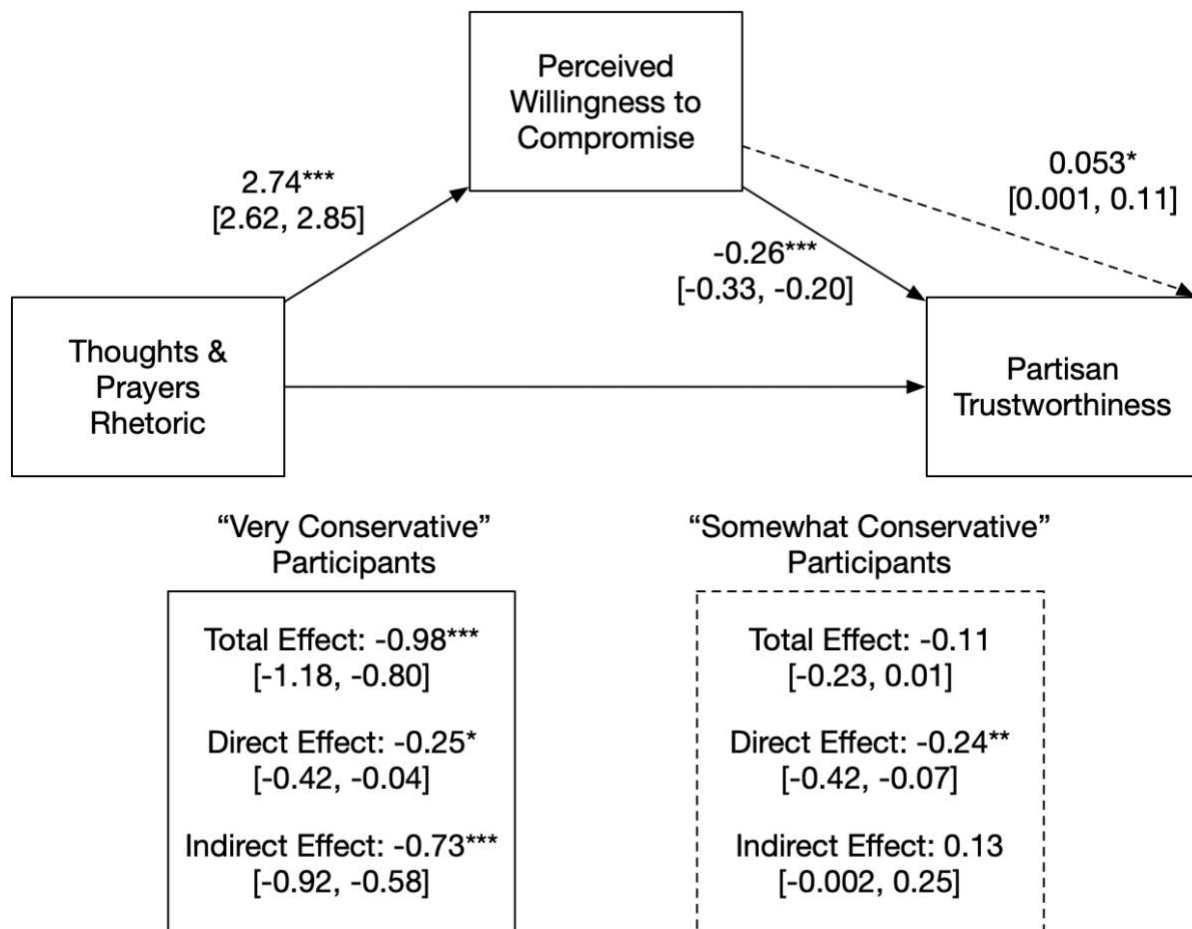
Note: Shaded areas indicate 95% CIs.

Figure 7*Voting Intention by Feelings Toward Democrats, Study 2*

Note: Shaded areas indicate 95% CIs.

Figure 8*Moderated Mediation by Feeling Toward Democrats, Study 2*

Note: Value for the path between Rhetoric and Perceived Willingness to Compromise is constrained across levels of feeling thermometer. Rhetoric is coded as 0 for inflammatory and 1 for thoughts and prayers. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Figure 9*Moderated Mediation by Ideology, Study 2*

Note: Value for the path between Rhetoric and Perceived Willingness to Compromise is constrained across levels of ideology. Inflammatory Rhetoric is coded as 0 for inflammatory and 1 for thoughts and prayers. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.