

# Myths of Censorship: The Realities and Misperceptions of “Cancel Culture”

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## Abstract

Few principles are as central to American democracy as freedom of speech. Yet, some argue “cancel culture”—i.e., censoring offensive speech—undermines this crucial tenet. The authors offer a theory of why people “cancel” others and test it using a conjoint experiment with a representative sample of Americans. They find that when Americans engage in canceling, they do so because of what was said, regardless of the speaker’s identity. Cancellation reflects an attempt to redress speech considered harmful, not punishment borne of partisan or racial animosity. But the researchers also show that the public is significantly misinformed about cancellation: People overestimate the extent to which canceling occurs and they misconstrue why it happens. Even though partisan bias does not cause canceling, (mis-)beliefs about canceling could exacerbate partisan animosity. These findings help to unravel the dynamics of contemporary American free speech.

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1984, Peffley et al. 2001, Chong 2006, Gibson 2008, Armstrong and Wronski 2019). While only a few legal rules exist that regulate hateful or offensive speech in the U.S. given first amendment jurisprudence (Schauer 2010), there is a considerable normative debate about the extent to which the U.S. should regulate such offensive speech (Dworkin 1996, Beerbohm 2012). Many argue that, rather than prohibiting hateful speech, a better response entails counter-arguing offensive speech with more speech (Brettschneider 2012, Howard 2019). This debate captures the essence of contemporary free speech controversies—the question no longer concerns just state regulation, but also how *citizens* should react to, and therefore regulate, speech extra-governmentally.

This shift stems from two key developments.<sup>2</sup> First, with the rise of social media, a large proportion of questionable speech now occurs in forums operating with unparalleled speed and reach. This alters the way speech and counter-speech can, and perhaps even should, work (Guo and Johnson 2020, Waisbord 2020). Second, the polarization of American politics has heightened incivility (Mutz 2015, Sydnor 2019, Druckman et al. 2019) and shifted conversations about how to regulate speech. Concepts of free speech developed in an era of newspapers may be ill-suited to the era of Twitter.

Indeed, the rise of social media is integral to the public debate over cancel culture. The concept of canceling someone originated in Black and queer communities (Clark 2020), with the idea being that those who express offensive ideas should be called out and shunned, or more colloquially, canceled. Social media allowed this idea to spread rapidly and enter mainstream consciousness, making cancel culture functionally symbiotic with social media (Romano 2020, Klein 2021). In recent years, a wide variety of public figures—from Congresswoman Marjorie

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<sup>2</sup> Our focus here is on racist or hate speech. We thus do not consider other types of controversial speech such as leftist or militarist speech (Chong et al. 2021).



conservative outlets (see Romano 2021). The 2020 Republican National Convention featured cancel culture as one of its key themes (Gomez 2020), and in a speech at Mt. Rushmore, President Trump inveighed against cancel culture, calling it a “far left fascism” (Trump 2020). Yet, whether there is actually a partisan dimension to canceling behavior is an important, but unanswered, question.

### **What Drives Canceling?**

Canceling someone involves criticizing or censoring their offensive speech in some way. But what determines whether a given statement offends? We argue this depends on who the speaker is, as well as the content of what they say (Gibson and Anderson 1985, Gibson 2006). First, the speaker’s partisanship likely matters. The past quarter century has seen a dramatic rise in affective polarization, with individuals favoring those from their own party and disparaging those from the other party in a wide variety of circumstances (for reviews of these effects, see Iyengar et al. 2019, Finkel et al. 2020). These feelings spillover into censorship decisions: Lelkes and Westwood (2017) show that partisans support outlets publishing news content critical of the opposition, but not content critical of their own party,<sup>3</sup> and journalist accounts argue that such animus drives cancel culture more generally (Wehner 2021). Thus, our partisan source hypothesis is *individuals will be more likely to cancel out-party speakers than in-party speakers, all else constant*.

The growth of affective polarization stems, in part, from each party becoming demographically more homogeneous (i.e., social sorting), especially with respect to race (Mason

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<sup>3</sup> Also see Westwood et al. (2019). Related work shows that partisans are less sensitive to uncivil speech from co-partisans (Mutz 2015, Muddiman 2017, Druckman et al. 2019, Gervais 2019), which should mean they are less sensitive to offensive content from those same individuals.

2018). Given this social sorting, Westwood and Peterson (2020) show that, when people update their affect toward the parties, they also update their affect toward racial groups and vice versa. Race and partisanship are nearly inseparable, with partisans connecting Democrats with Black Americans and Republicans with White Americans (Valentino and Zhirkov 2018). Our race source hypothesis is *individuals will be more likely to cancel speakers from racial groups linked with the out-party (than linked to their party), all else constant*. That is, Democrats will be more likely to cancel White individuals than Black individuals, and Republicans will be more likely to cancel Black individuals than White individuals, all else constant.

A speaker's positionality may also matter, as behavioral expectations accompany positions of power. For instance, constituents expect their elected officials to act on their behalf. As such, if officials speak or take actions deemed offensive to those constituents, they may be more likely to be canceled (as such actions are not representing their constituents). This also aligns with the idea that political elites should follow norms of civility and avoid offensive speech (Uslaner 1993, Jamieson and Hardy 2012). The same can be said for college professors who hold power over their students and are expected to act as arbiters of debate between different perspectives, not to make offensive statements (Daniels et al. 2021).<sup>4</sup> More generally, we expect any public figure, including celebrities, will be more likely to be canceled. Such canceling carries with it less legal risk since the standards to establish defamation remain much higher for public than private figures. Public figures' speech also has broader reach which could influence many others and set norms of acceptability. Our public figure hypothesis is *individuals*

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<sup>4</sup> The prevalence of cancel culture and safe space discussions on college campuses also may lead people to react more to offensive speech from professors. Isolating the role of faculty is particularly interesting given universities' historic commitment to free speech (Whittington 2018).





by notable public and academic figures, warned that canceling those with offensive views would weaken “our norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity.” A response chastised the authors of the initial statement by arguing that it ignored the difficulties faced by stigmatized minorities, particularly Black and transgender people. Yet, at the same time, it also took issue with the original authors, who they purported to all be in positions of power. *The New York Times* pointed out that many felt “that criticism of the *Harper’s* letter centered as much on who signed it as its content” (Schuessler 2020).

This is not simply an academic debate. Obviously, some speakers’ actions matter more because they have a larger platform and reach a broader audience. But there is a clearer, and more direct, link to harm from the content of speech, especially given the framing of cancel culture as countering speech that harms.<sup>5</sup> If cancel culture debates are about what is being said, it suggests these debates involve legitimate discussions about the boundaries of acceptable speech. If, instead, they focus on who is speaking, then it suggests that they are (relatively) more about silencing figures people dislike, a much less valuable public conversation. Adjudicating the relative importance of speaker’s identity versus what they say is therefore a particularly important task.

### **What Drives *Perceptions* of Canceling?**

Culture refers to a set of shared values or practices among a given group. Whether canceling reflects a set of shared values and hence a culture, is unclear. Many Americans lack familiarity with the term “cancel culture” (Pew Research Center 2021), and those with familiarity may

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<sup>5</sup> That said, we recognize that identical statements from different speakers can connote distinct meanings; our point, all else constant, is that speech content has more harm potential than sources.

vastly misperceive its frequency and nature given the media narrative surrounding the issue. Indeed, individuals tend to misestimate—often grossly—the behaviors of those different from themselves (Robinson et al. 1995). Such patterns are especially likely in a partisan context, given that partisan identity encourages derogation of the out-party (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016). As such, cancel *culture* may be more imagined than concrete.

We suspect most individuals have not actually canceled anyone, as many Americans remain politically unengaged (Krupnikov and Ryan 2022) and averse to political conflict (Klar and Krupnikov 2016). Even on social media, most American partisans remain apolitical (Wojcieszak et al. 2021). They thus likely believe they cancel less than other partisans, even from their own party. Moreover, if most partisans view cancel culture negatively (as we show later), they will assume out-partisans are even more likely to cancel. Our canceling perception hypothesis is *individuals will predict that in-partisans will be somewhat more likely to cancel than themselves, all else constant. Individuals also will perceive out-partisans to be more likely to cancel than in-partisans, all else constant.* That is, when faced with the same (negatively viewed) behavior, individuals think that they themselves will be the least likely to cancel, in-partisans will be somewhat more likely to cancel, and out-partisans will be the most likely to cancel. We expect this to be true both in how people respond to both hypothetical scenarios as well as their actual behaviors. Again, given the partisan asymmetry in cancel culture attitudes, we expect partisanship will moderate these effects. Our Republican perception hypothesis is: *relative to Democrats, Republicans will perceive a wider gap between their party's propensity to cancel and Democrats' propensity to cancel, all else constant.*

In sum, we predict Americans will have substantial misperceptions about how likely others will engage in, and how often others have engaged in, cancel culture. If true, this would



























But the biggest, and most striking, difference is in whether people see cancel culture as having a net-positive or net-negative effect on society, shown in the bottom-right panel of Figure 5. We asked respondents to evaluate cancel culture’s effect on society using a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from “Much more negative of an effect” to “Much more positive of an effect.” We see that both parties’ perceptions are more negative than positive. However, the distribution of Democrats’ perceptions is flatter, with many people clustered in the middle. Republicans, by contrast, see cancel culture almost uniformly as very negative. Indeed, nearly a quarter of Republicans use the lowest scale point! This confirms the second part of the Republican canceling hypothesis.

[Insert Figure 5 about here]

But what stays the same across parties is, in some ways, even more fascinating. In the left panel of Figure 6, we show respondents’ preferences across the conjoint features do not differ substantially by party, using the method developed by Leeper et al. (2020) for making sub-group comparisons. Thus, to the extent that both parties cancel, they do so for the same reasons. Further, in the right two panels of Figure 6, we show that both Democrats and Republicans describe in-partisans’ canceling behavior in positive terms, and the other party’s behavior in negative ones, disconfirming the Republican attribution hypothesis.

That said, there are statistically significant differences in Democrats and Republicans’ preferences about some conjoint features,  $F(12, 1752) = 3.58, p < .001$ . Specifically, Democrats express slightly more willingness to cancel disagreeable statements, though not when they come from in-partisans. Moreover, Democrats are somewhat more likely to describe out-partisans’





## Conclusion

The United States has historically had an exceptional commitment to free speech and has seen the solution to offensive rhetoric as counter-speech rather than censorship. Is that now changing with the rise of cancel culture—is America’s understanding of free speech evolving? Our data suggest so: while rates of canceling remain low, at least some Americans willingly silence those with whom they disagree. While some differences across party lines emerge, with Democrats being more likely to engage in these behaviors, the gaps remain modest, with members of both parties engaging in these behaviors for the same reasons. Importantly, however, we show enormous perceptual gaps: people think that others are many times more likely to cancel than they are, and that when they do so, they do so for ill, rather than good. While affective polarization does not generate canceling, canceling—given these misperceptions—can, and likely does, fuel animus.

The fact that we found almost no partisan effects was surprising, but important in that it highlights the mechanisms at work underlying our effects. We expected the speaker’s identity to substantially matter. Yet, we found that it does not. Instead, when individuals encounter an offensive statement counter to their ideological belief systems, they are more likely to cancel it. This is in line with a theory of naïve realism where people presume their opinions and beliefs to be objectively accurate, with anyone disagreeing being biased (Ross and Ward 1996). Individuals view certain language as harmful, cancel it, and believe those who cancel from the other side have bad intent.

This suggests two new dimensions to debates over free speech. First, as we mentioned, it signals a shift a shift in the response to offensive speech, away from counter-speech and toward



can be—and are being—called out by the masses in a highly visible fashion. Our results highlight that voters do not judge public figures more harshly than anyone else, so why do those cases get so much attention? We imagine it is because these sorts of powerful people otherwise rarely have to account for their actions. Cancel culture makes them as vulnerable as others. For this reason, debates about cancel culture will likely remain heated for years to come, with much for scholars to study moving forward.

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explains why Republicans express more concern about cancel culture as it can be seen as a form of status threat or a challenge to the system (Jost 2020).

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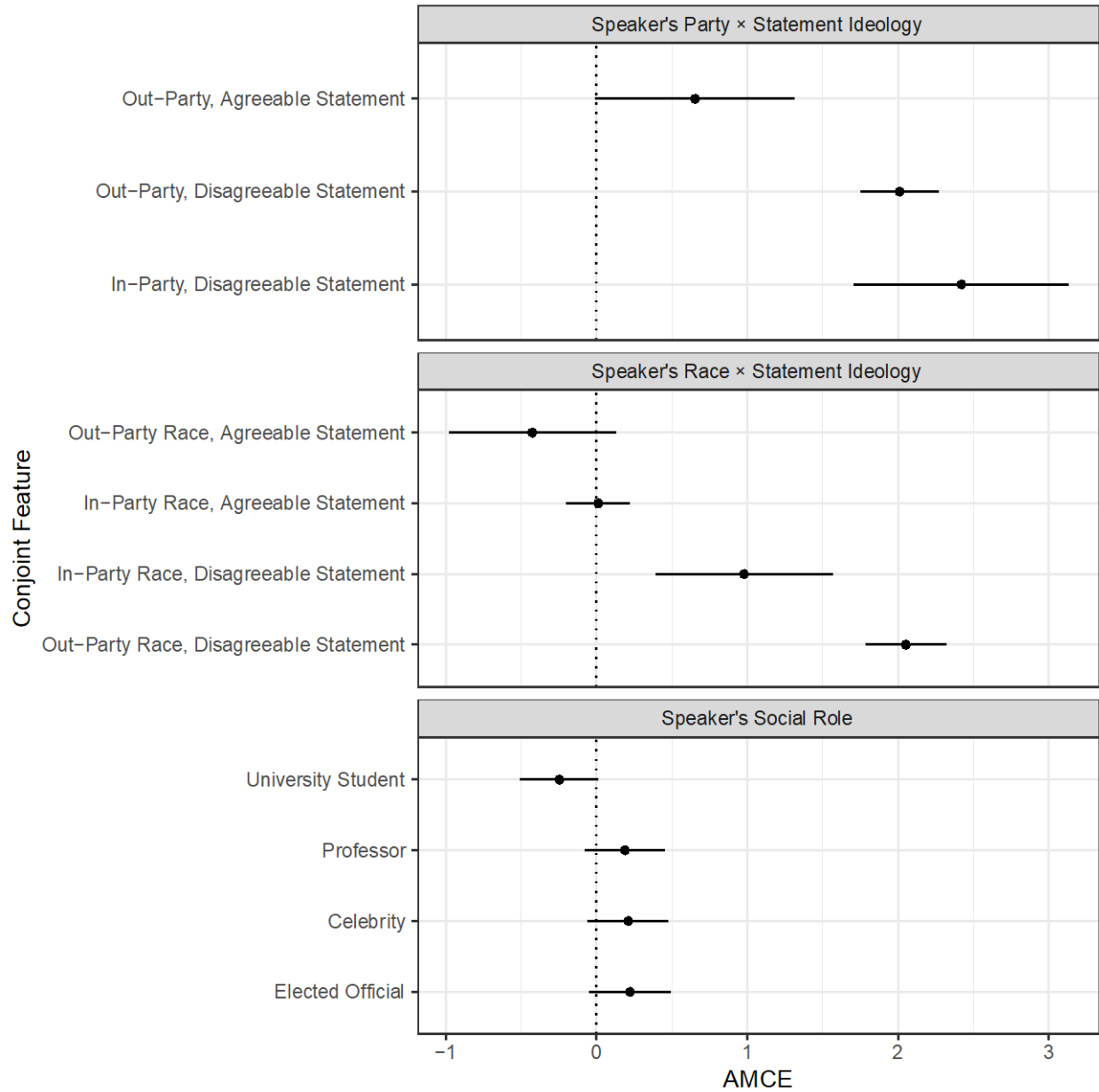


**Table 2: Conjoint Attributes and Levels**

Speaker Partisanship or Race	Democratic, Republican, Black, White
Speaker Occupation or Social Role	Elected Official, Professor, Celebrity, Voter, University Student
Statement	<p>Liberal:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● The Founding Fathers were racist.</li><li>● America is a racist nation.</li><li>● All police are bad.</li><li>● Schools should require students to learn about transgender life and why it is normal.</li></ul> <p>Conservative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Confederate statues are about America's heritage and are not racist.</li><li>● Some races are less intelligent than others.</li><li>● Athletes who kneel during the National Anthem should be kicked off their teams.</li><li>● There is no such thing as transgender, only male and female.</li></ul>



**Figure 1: Americans Cancel Disagreeable Statements, Not Disliked Speakers**



*Note: Points are the AMCEs with bars representing 95 percent confidence intervals. The reference category for the Speaker's Party and Speaker's Race levels is the In-Party, Agreeable Statement condition.*

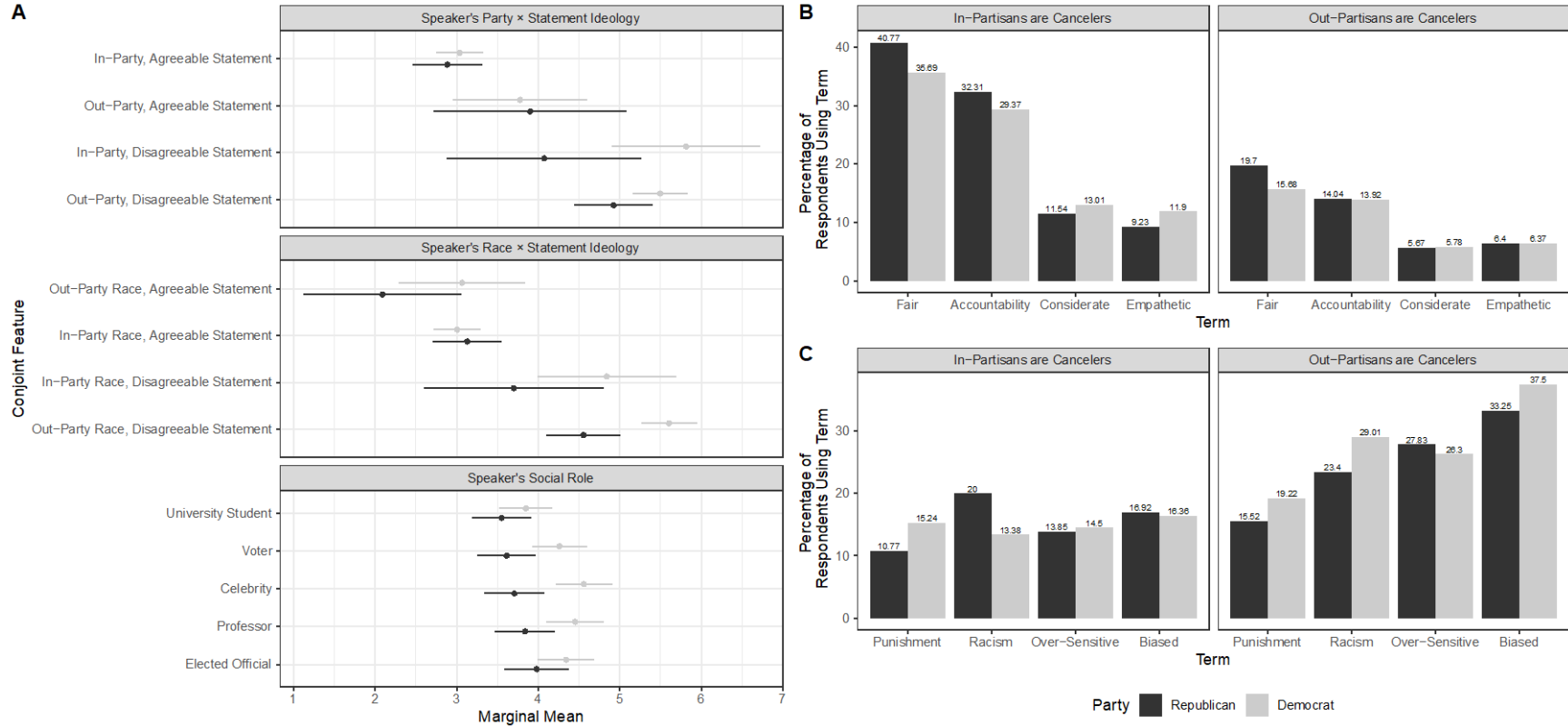








**Figure 6: Cancellations by Democrats and Republicans are Similarly Motivated and Perceived**



Note: The left panel shows the marginal means by party, and the right two panels show how often members of each party use positive (top-right panel) and negative (bottom-right) terms to describe in-partisans' and out-partisans' canceling behaviors. Points are the AMCEs with bars representing 95 percent confidence intervals

## **Supplemental Appendix for: “Myths of Censorship: The Realities and Misperceptions of ‘Cancel Culture’”**

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scale (response options: Not at all likely, Not too likely, Somewhat likely, Very likely). To produce a dependent variable for our regressions, we will recode responses to a 1–4 scale and sum these scores across the canceling behaviors.

To measure motivations for hypothetical canceling behavior, we will ask respondents to pick as many of the following terms to describe the canceling behavior in question:

- Accountability
- Biased
- Cancel culture
- Considerate
- Empathetic
- Fair
- Overly sensitive
- Political correctness
- Punishment
- Racism
- Wokeness

Use of each descriptor will be coded as a dummy variable.

We will analyze scenarios with different hypothetical reactors—the respondent themselves, in-partisans, out-partisans—separately.

#### **4. How many and which conditions will participants be assigned to?**

We will use a conjoint design wherein the speaker’s racial or partisan identity, social role, and statement are randomized (see the table below). Statements will vary in their ideological content, such that half will be conservative and half will be liberal. In 7/8 scenarios, the speaker will make a statement consistent with her racial or partisan identity, according to well-established partisan stereotypes (Ahler and Sood 2018; e.g., Republican and conservative, Black and liberal). In 1/8 scenarios, the speaker will make a statement *inconsistent* with her racial or partisan identity (e.g., Republican and liberal, Black and conservative).

Respondents will be asked how they would themselves react to four scenarios, how in-partisans would react to one scenario, and how out-partisans would react to three scenarios.

Speaker Race or Partisanship	None, White, Black, Democrat, Republican
Speaker Social Role	Elected Official, Professor, Celebrity, Voter, College Student.
Statement	<p>Liberal:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The Founding Fathers were racist.</li> <li>-America is a racist nation.</li> <li>-All police are bad.</li> <li>-Schools should require students to learn about transgender life and why it is normal.</li> </ul> <p>Conservative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Confederate statues are about America’s heritage and are not racist.</li> <li>-Some races are less intelligent than others.</li> <li>-Athletes who kneel during the National Anthem should be kicked off their teams.</li> <li>-There is no such thing as transgender, only male and female.</li> </ul>

We had RAs confirm that these statements reflect actual statements made by various actors. We condensed down those real-world statements here in the interest of simplicity.

**5. Specify exactly which analyses you will conduct to examine the main question/hypothesis.**

For our conjoint analyses, we will calculate average marginal composite effects (AMCE) and examine marginal means, consistent with the recommendation in Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014). To test for differences between conditions, we will concatenate respondents’ responses across scenarios, estimate respondent random effects and statement fixed effects, and run the following model:

$$CancelingBehavior_{i,s} = \beta_1 * SpeakerRaceParty_{i,s} + \beta_2 * SpeakerRole_{i,s} + \beta_3 * StatementIdeology_{i,s}$$

To test for statistically significant differences in how groups react (e.g., in the terms Republicans and Democrats use to label actions) across conditions, we add to the previous model an interaction between the condition in question and the grouping variable (e.g., respondent political party).

For continuous dependent variables (e.g., canceling behavior), we will run linear regressions. For binary dependent variables (e.g., use of a particular term to describe canceling behavior), we will run linear regressions with appropriate corrections to the standard errors.

## **6. Any secondary analyses?**

There has been much more focus on cancel culture on the right than on the left. As such, we expect that Republicans will be less likely than Democrats to engage in or report having engaged in canceling behavior. Republicans will also be more likely than Democrats to think that out-partisans are canceling / would cancel various types of behavior.

We also expect that Republicans will be especially likely to describe out-partisan canceling behavior with politically charged terms like “cancel culture”, “political correctness”, and “wokeness”.

Given the extensive coverage of cancel culture on conservative media outlets, especially Fox News, we expect that Republicans who consume more conservative media will be especially likely to display these trends. Here, we measure conservative media exposure using the approach from Dilliplane, Goldman, and Mutz (2013) and ask them which shows they watch on Fox News from a list of choices.

We will also examine the moderating effect of affective polarization. Given our theory, we expect that those who are more affectively polarized will be more likely to cancel those from the out-party, more likely to think out-partisans will engage in canceling behavior (relative to themselves), and more likely to describe out-partisans’ canceling behavior in negative terms.

## **7. How many observations will be collected or what will determine the sample size? No need to justify decision, but be precise about exactly how the number will be determined.**

To ensure a power level of 80 power on an effect size of 4 percent from a five-level variable on three tasks (i.e., conjoints per respondent), our goal is to collect data from 1,750 respondents. We used Lukac and Stefanelli’s (2020) power calculator for conjoint analyses to estimate power.

## **8. Anything else you would like to pre-register? (e.g., data exclusions, variables collected for exploratory purposes, unusual analyses planned?)**

We conducted a pre-test to determine the feasibility of this approach, and may bring in some of the data from it to the ultimate paper/analysis. When we do so, we will clearly indicate that we are doing so and will flag that the pre-test was not pre-registered.

## **References**

- Ahler, Douglas and Sood, Guarav. 2018. “The Parties in Our Heads: Misperceptions about Party Composition and Their Consequences.” *The Journal of Politics*, 80(3), 964–981.
- Dilliplane, Susanna, Seth Goldman, and Diana Mutz. 2013. “Televised Exposure to Politics: New Measures for a Fragmented Media Environment.” *American Journal of Political Science* 57(1): 236-48.

- Hainmueller, Jens, Daniel Hopkins, and Teppei Yamamoto. 2014. "Causal Inference in Conjoint Analysis: Understanding Multidimensional Choices via Stated Preference Experiments." *Political Analysis* 22(1): 1-30.
- Lukac, Martin and Alberto Stefanelli. 2020. Conjoint Experiments: Power Analysis Tool. Retrieved from <https://mblukac.shinyapps.io/conjoints-power-shiny/>. Accessed August 2021.

## Appendix B: Sample Demographics

	<b>Demographic Category</b>	<b>Percentage of Sample</b>
<i>Age</i>	18–24 years old	12.2%
	25–34 years old	17.2%
	35–44 years old	17.5%
	45–54 years old	17.6%
	55–64 years old	17.4%
	65–74 years old	15.0%
	75 years or older	3.1%
<i>Gender</i>	Male	48.5%
	Female	50.2%
	Other	1.3%
<i>Race &amp; Ethnicity</i>	White	73.5%
	Black	13.8%
	American Indian or Alaska Native	1.1%
	Asian American	5.7%
	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.4%
	Mixed Race	5.5%
	<i>Hispanic</i>	Yes
	No	81.1%
<i>Education</i>	Less than high school degree	3.0%
	High school graduate (diploma or GED)	19.1%
	Some college but no degree	24.3%
	Associate degree or vocational training	18.1%
	Bachelor’s degree	24.2%
	Master’s degree	8.6%
	Professional degree (e.g., JD, MD)	1.3%
	Doctoral degree	1.4%
<i>Census Region</i>	Northeast	17.9%
	Midwest	19.7%
	South	37.7%
	West	24.8%

We compare our sample to 2018 benchmarks from the U.S. Census Bureau, via the American Community Survey (ACS). The relevant ACS numbers are as follows.

Age: 18-24: 12.08%; 25-34: 17.87%; 35-50: 24.54%; 51-65: 24.88%; Over 65: 20.65% (Notice we use slightly different categories.)

Gender: Male: 49.2%; Female: 50.8%; (they do not ask “other” but Flores et al. (2016) estimate less than 1 percent identify as transgender).

Race: White: 72.2%; Black: 12.7%; Hispanic: 18.3%; Asian American: 5.6%; Native American: <1%; Other: 5%

Education: Less than high school: 12%; High school: 27.1%; Some college: 28.9%; 4-year college degree: 19.7%; Advanced Degree: 12.3%

Census Region: Northeast: 17.2%; Midwest: 20.9%; South:38.1%; 23.8%

Across categories, our sample matches the ACS benchmarks fairly well. Our biggest discrepancy is that we under-estimate the least well-educated (and over-estimate those with some college or a bachelor's degree). These are well-known limitations of any survey sampling procedure, not just our own—this is linked in that this population is less likely to be online,

## **Reference**

Flores, Andrew, Jody Herman, Gary Gates, and Taylor Brown. 2016. "How Many Adults Identify as Transgender in the United States?" *The Williams Institute*.  
<https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/How-Many-Adults-Identify-as-Transgender-in-the-United-States.pdf>.

## Appendix C: Examples of Cancellable Statements from Internet Searches

In the experiment, we used four liberal statements and four conservative statements that were designed to be “cancelable”—that is, offensive enough that someone might cancel them. But how to pick those statements? We had a set of research assistants do a Google News search potentially offensive topics and document that these were, in fact, sensitive statements that had appeared in the news.

### **The Founding Fathers Were Racist:**

Only one citizen spoke against adoption of the HB 1775 regulations—Sapphira Lloyd, a public-school student who is black... “Native American voices are not heard, because we’re still on their land,” Lloyd said. “Latinx/Hispanic communities are never cared for. Black voices have never been heard, yet here we are still trying. Are we going to forget the fact that Thomas Jefferson and all of our famous Founding Fathers were slave owners?”  
(<https://www.ocpathink.org/post/teachers-face-loss-of-license-for-racist-instruction>)

Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, wrote in his 1789 book “Notes on the State of Virginia” that Blacks were a “distinct and inferior species” when compared with Whites. One year later, Jefferson joined the other Founding Fathers in supporting the Naturalization Act of 1790, which made citizenship in the United States available only to “free, white persons” (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/06/30/would-founding-fathers-support-critical-race-theory/>).

These restrictions create quite a few concerns for, say, a Florida social studies teacher. Now, such a teacher must figure out how to tell students what the Founding Fathers really meant when they wrote “We the people” in the U.S. Constitution, without saying the Founding Fathers were racist for excluding Black people from the meaning of that phrase  
(<https://theconversation.com/bans-on-critical-race-theory-could-have-a-chilling-effect-on-how-educators-teach-about-racism-163236>).

This was written in pure ignorance. The founding fathers were racist slave owners and there is no sugar coating that, which is what you are trying to do. You can't handle the truth  
(<https://medium.com/truth-in-between/the-alternative-1619-project-reading-challenge-introduction-2021-245e80231ad6>).

Geiss responded by implying the Founding Fathers were racist and sexist, and that Theis shouldn't “get all weepy and nostalgic” about men that wouldn't have allowed women or minorities to serve with them. “There's a whole bunch of us serving right now that the Founding Fathers wouldn't have wanted in this chamber, or any other for that matter,” Geiss said  
(<https://www.mlive.com/public-interest/2021/03/michigan-senate-reaffirms-second-amendment-in-resolution-democrats-call-insurrectionist.html>).

The point is that the founding fathers were racist horrible people and this is the America they created (<https://variety.com/2020/film/reviews/hamilton-review-lin-manuel-miranda-disney-plus-1234694098/>).



## **Confederate Statues Are About America's Heritage and Are Not Racist:**

The document outlines a range of suggested methods for protecting Confederate monuments, flags, school dedications and mascots from what it describes as “heritage attacks” from those seeking to remove them (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jul/04/sons-of-confederate-veterans-manual-statues-symbols>).

“What I do think is clearly a bridge too far is this nonsense that we need to airbrush the Capitol and scrub out everybody from years ago who had any connection to slavery,” McConnell told reporters when asked about an unrelated provision in a defense bill that would change Confederate-named bases (<https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/503045-mcconnell-rejects-push-to-airbrush-the-capitol-of-confederate-statues>).

These statues, however, still retain cultural value as part of the historic fabric of American communities (<https://thefederalist.com/2020/07/01/why-we-should-keep-confederate-statues-standing/>).

In my opinion, removing historical monuments only removes history facts. If we eliminate historical monuments, what is next? History books that mention Confederate soldiers? All facts about how Africans were brought into this country unwilling? No mention of how our country was developed? The book Tom Sawyer is banned because of the N-word, then the Confederate flag, now all statues of the Confederacy... (<https://www.star-telegram.com/opinion/letters-to-the-editor/article169447232.html>).

Defenders of these monuments, though, say they are benign markers of Southern heritage and culture, important historical markers that pay tribute to the hundreds of thousands of Southern men killed in America's bloodiest conflict. Removing these memorials, they say, is an offensive erasure of history (<https://www.kqed.org/lowdown/27855/heritage-or-hate-a-map-of-confederate-monuments-around-the-country>).

## **America Is a Racist Nation:**

As Soledad O'Brien said, “It sounds like a racist country to me,” in response to Scott—but it seemingly applies to comments by Harris as well (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2021/05/04/is-the-united-states-a-racist-country/>).

Since then, conservative lawmakers, commentators and parents have raised alarm that critical race theory is being used to teach children that they are racist, and that the U.S. is a racist country with irredeemable roots (<https://www.texastribune.org/2021/06/22/texas-critical-race-theory-explained/>).

In Iowa and Tennessee, the laws say teachers cannot teach that the United States is “fundamentally racist” (<https://theconversation.com/bans-on-critical-race-theory-could-have-a-chilling-effect-on-how-educators-teach-about-racism-163236>).

Only then can we truly begin to heal from the deep-rooted pain, dehumanization and prejudice that is embedded in the systems of this country

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/18/politics/perspective-american-black-journalist-race/index.html>).

Saying that America is racist is not a radical statement. If that requires a longer explanation or definition, so be it. The fact, in the end, is not altered  
(<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/02/opinion/america-racism.html>).

That early micro-aggression forewarned me that America may be the land of opportunity for many, but it would still reduce me to the colour of my skin and find me unworthy  
(<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52895490>).

That was certainly the message of progressive Democrat and “Squad” member Rep. Cori Bush of Missouri: “When they say that the 4th of July is about American freedom, remember this: the freedom they’re referring to is for White people,” Bush tweeted. “This land is stolen land and Black people still aren’t free.” ([https://wacotrib.com/opinion/columnists/michael-graham-badmouthing-the-flag-a-good-way-to-lose-elections/article\\_1c7bf35a-df48-11eb-9734-4b355f656485.html](https://wacotrib.com/opinion/columnists/michael-graham-badmouthing-the-flag-a-good-way-to-lose-elections/article_1c7bf35a-df48-11eb-9734-4b355f656485.html)).

### **Some Races Are Less Intelligent than Others:**

The idea that certain races are inherently more intelligent than others is being trumpeted by a small group of anthropologists, IQ researchers, psychologists and pundits who portray themselves as noble dissidents, standing up for inconvenient facts  
(<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/02/the-unwelcome-revival-of-race-science>).

Cofnas’s paper “disingenuously argues that the best explanation of differences in IQ scores between racial and ethnic groups is genetics,” reads a petition posted by Mark Alfano, associate professor of philosophy at Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands and associate professor of philosophy at Macquarie University.  
(<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/01/23/intelligent-argument-race>).

In that dissertation Richwine had argued, among other things, that American “Hispanics” are less intelligent than native-born whites as evidenced by their lower average scores on IQ tests. Richwine then attributed Hispanics’ alleged intellectual inferiority at least partly to genetic factors (<https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/05/why-people-keep-misunderstanding-the-connection-between-race-and-iq/275876/>).

Denial of any genetic component in human variation, including between groups, is not only poor science, it is likely to be injurious both to unique individuals and to the complex structure of societies (<https://www1.udel.edu/educ/gottfredson/30years/Rushton-Jensen30years.pdf>).

The reasons for the differences in IQ within any racial-ethnic group appear to be the same for all groups: a mixture of genetic and environmental influences (<https://dana.org/article/pretending-that-intelligence-doesnt-matter/>).

All our social policies are based on the fact that their intelligence is the same as ours - whereas

all the testing says not really (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/fury-dna-pioneer-s-theory-africans-are-less-intelligent-westerners-394898.html>).

That year, the scientist told Britain's Sunday Times that he was "gloomy about the prospect of Africa" because he believed African intelligence was genetically lower than that of Europeans (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/01/14/father-dna-says-he-still-believes-link-between-race-intelligence-his-lab-just-stripped-him-his-titles/>).

### **All Police Are Bad:**

At Cypress College in California, there was a professor who berated a student for saying that "police are heroes" and went on to talk about how "police officers have committed atrocious crimes and have gotten away with it, and have never been convicted of any of it" and goes on to state that she doesn't trust the police and that her life is in more danger in their presence. The professor has been put on a leave of absence (<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-05-03/oc-professor-berates-student-who-says-police-are-heroes>).

### **Athletes Who Kneel During the National Anthem Should Be Kicked Off Their Teams:**

In response to Gwen Berry turning her back on the American flag on the podium, Dan Crenshaw has demanded her removal from the U.S. Olympic team and released statements such as "We don't need any more activist athletes" as a campaign against the "anti-racism industry that is incentivizing victimhood" (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/olympics/2021/06/29/gwen-berry-dan-crenshaw/>).

In response to the NFL's new policy where teams will be subject to a fine if a player does not comply with the rules about kneeling, President Trump stated that they did the right thing, while also stating that taking a knee during the national anthem during a National Football League game should maybe be a deportable offense (<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-says-nfl-players-who-kneel-during-national-anthem-maybe-n876996>).

### **Schools Should Require Students to Learn about Transgender Life and Why It Is Normal:**

School activities and practices should be gender neutral. Transgender students will be allowed to use restrooms, locker rooms, and changing facilities that correspond to their gender identity... Atkinson said the next steps would be to incorporate regular education about transgender students into staff professional development and training and create campaigns about the new policy similar to anti-bullying campaigns (<https://www.wtkr.com/news/portsmouth-public-schools-adopt-policy-supporting-transgender-students>).

Schools must be proactive in creating a culture and practices that respect and value all students and foster understanding of gender identity and expression within the school community. Creating such an inclusive culture will greatly affect what research shows: that transgender and gender expansive students are at higher risk for being marginalized, victimized, or bullied (<https://www.schools.nyc.gov/school-life/school-environment/guidelines-on-gender/guidelines-to-support-transgender-and-gender-expansive-students>).

## **There Is No Such Thing As Transgender, Only Male or Female:**

There is no such thing as transgender

[https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2021/06/28/woman\\_outraged\\_at\\_spa\\_for\\_letting\\_trans\\_in\\_womens\\_room\\_are\\_you\\_ok\\_with\\_a\\_man\\_showing\\_his\\_penis\\_around\\_girls.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2021/06/28/woman_outraged_at_spa_for_letting_trans_in_womens_room_are_you_ok_with_a_man_showing_his_penis_around_girls.html);

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/07/05/transgender-woman-los-angeles-spa/>;

Riot police used tear gas and rubber bullets to disrupt the annual Pride parade, intensifying a crackdown on the march at a time of rising government hostility toward LGBTQ individuals in Turkey, advocacy groups say. At least 20 people were detained, local media reported

(<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/06/26/istanbul-pride/>).

## Appendix D: Question Wording

### Partisanship

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?

- Democrat
- Republican
- Independent
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No preference

*(The question below was only shown to respondents who indicated a party.)*

Would you call yourself a strong [PARTY] or a not very strong [PARTY]?

- Strong [PARTY]
- Not very strong [PARTY]

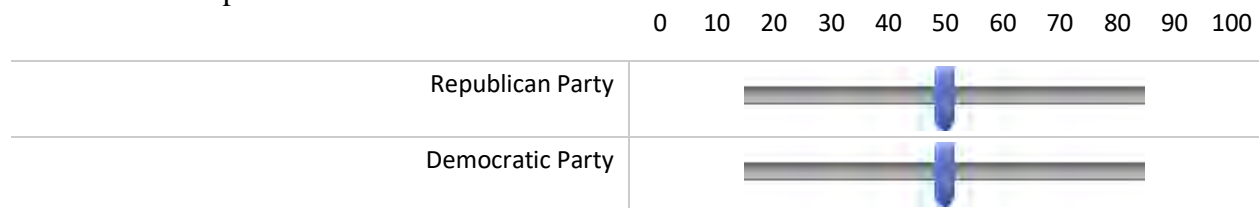
*(The question below was only shown to respondents who did not indicate a party.)*

Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic party?

- Republican Party
- Democratic Party
- Neither

### Affective Polarization

We'd like you to rate how you feel towards the Republican and Democratic parties on a scale from 0 to 100. Ratings between 0 and 49 degrees mean that you feel unfavorable and cold (with 0 being the most unfavorable/coldest). Ratings between 51 and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm (with 100 being the most favorable/warmest). A rating of 50 means you have no feelings one way or the other. How would you rate your feelings toward the Republican and Democratic parties?



### **Partisan News Consumption**

Which of the following programs do you watch regularly on television or online at least once a month? Check all that apply. If none apply, simply skip the question.

- Tucker Carlson Tonight
- The Five
- Hannity
- The Ingraham Angle
- Special Report with Bret Baier
- Fox News Primetime
- Gutfeld!
- America's Newsroom
- Outnumbered
- The Faulkner Focus

Which of the following programs do you watch regularly on television or online at least once a month? Check all that apply. If none apply, simply skip the question.

- The Rachel Maddow Show
- The Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell
- Deadline: White House with Nicolle Wallace
- All In with Chris Hayes
- The Beat With Ari Melber
- The ReidOut
- The 11th Hour with Brian Williams
- The Lead with Jake Tapper
- Cuomo Prime Time
- Anderson Cooper 360

### **Actual Canceling Behavior**

There has recently been a discussion about how people should respond to others who say or do offensive things. Which of the following, if any, have you done in response to someone else's offensive speech or actions? Check all that apply. If none apply, simply skip the question.

- Criticized a person on social media
- Complained to a person's employer
- Boycotted a person's employer, merchandise, or body of work (e.g., books, TV shows)
- Boycotted or protested events where a person is speaking
- Posted a person's personal information online (i.e., doxxed them)
- Reported or tried to ban a person from a social media site
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Which of the following, if any, have you seen others do in response to someone else's offensive speech or actions? Check all that apply. If none apply, simply skip the question.

- Criticized a person on social media
- Complained to a person's employer
- Boycotted a person's employer, merchandise, or body of work (e.g., books, TV shows)
- Boycotted or protested events where a person is speaking
- Posted a person's personal information online (i.e., doxxed them)
- Reported or tried to ban a person from a social media site
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

*(The question below was only shown to respondents who indicated they had seen others engage in at least one canceling behavior.)*

You indicated that you have seen others do the following in response to offensive speech or actions: [CANCELING BEHAVIORS]. How often were the people who engaged in these actions Republicans?

- Never
- Not too often
- Somewhat often
- Very often
- Extremely often
- Don't know

*(The question below was only shown to respondents who indicated they had seen others engage in at least one canceling behavior.)*

You indicated that you have seen others do the following in response to offensive speech or actions: [CANCELING BEHAVIORS]. How often were the people who engaged in these actions Democrats?

- Never
- Not too often
- Somewhat often
- Very often
- Extremely often
- Don't know

**Conjoint Dependent Variable: Canceling Behavior**

(In your opinion,) [h]ow likely would (you/Republican voters/Democratic voters) be to do each of the following in response to the [SPEAKER JOB OR SOCIAL ROLE]’s statement?

	Not at all likely	Not too likely	Somewhat likely	Very likely
Criticize the speaker on social media	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Complain to the speaker’s employer	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Boycott the speaker’s employer, merchandise, or body of work (e.g., books, TV shows)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Boycott or protest events where that person is speaking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Post the speaker’s personal information online (i.e., dox them)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Report or try to ban the speaker from a social media site	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*(The question below was only shown to respondents who indicated the canceler in question would be at least “somewhat” likely to engage in at least one canceling behavior.)*

You indicated that (you/Republican voters/Democratic voters) would be likely to do the following in response to the [SPEAKER JOB OR SOCIAL ROLE]’s statement: [CANCELING BEHAVIORS]. Which of the following words, if any, would you use to describe (your/Republican voters’/ Democratic voters’) response?

- Fair
- Biased
- Empathetic
- Over-sensitive
- Accountability
- Punishment
- Cancel culture
- Considerate
- Political correctness
- Racism
- Wokeness
- Other \_\_\_\_\_



## **General Questions about Cancel Culture**

How much have you heard about the term “cancel culture”?

- Nothing at all
- Not too much
- A fair amount
- A great deal

As you may know, “cancel culture” is the practice of censoring, shaming, or ostracizing (“canceling”) people who say or do things considered to be offensive. In your opinion, does cancel culture have a more positive or a more negative effect on society?

- Much more negative of an effect
- Somewhat more negative of an effect
- Slightly more negative of an effect
- Neither a positive nor negative effect
- Slightly more positive of an effect
- Somewhat more positive of an effect
- Much more positive of an effect

## **Appendix E: Supplemental Analyses**

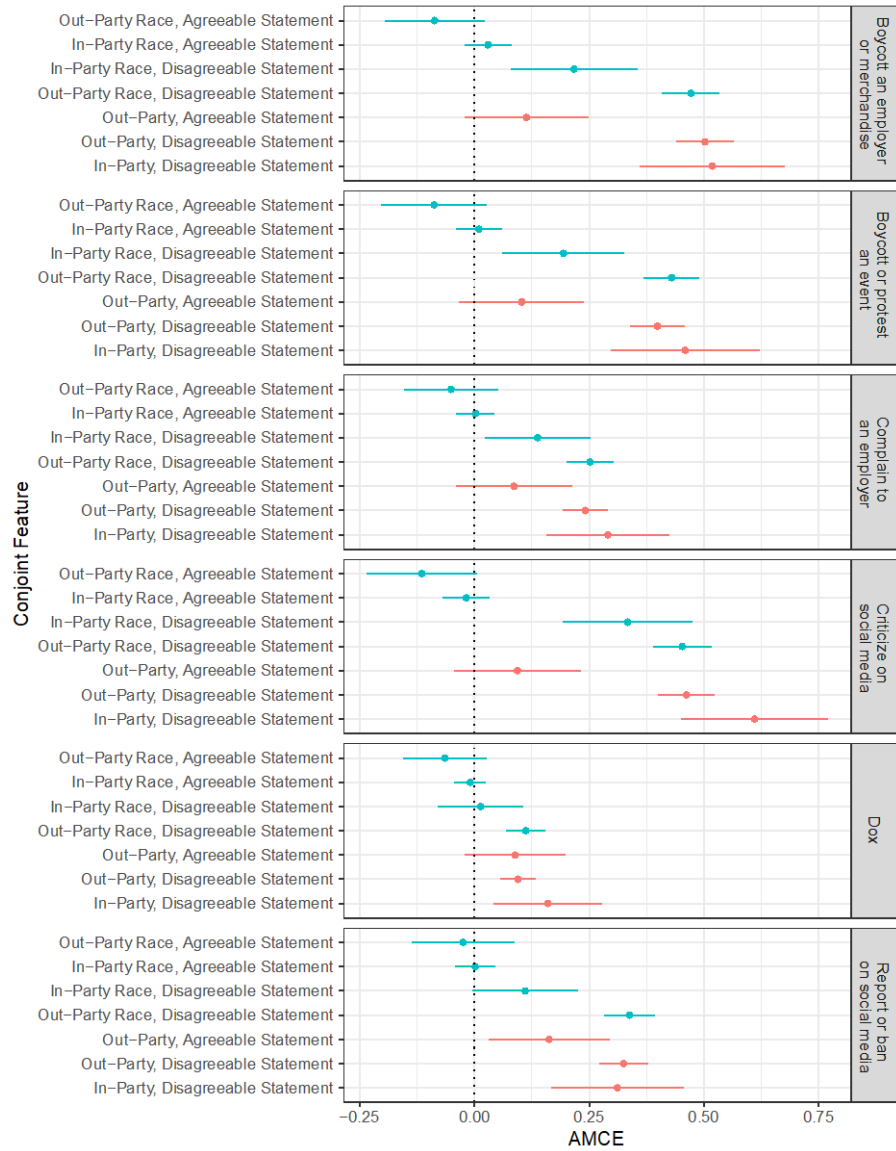
Here, we present several supplemental analyses we could not include in the body of the paper.

### **Analysis of First-Order Conjoint Experiments**

#### Separating Canceling Behaviors

In the body of the paper, we analyzed our first-order conjoint results in terms of the sum of the likelihoods of engaging in our six canceling behaviors, as specified in our pre-analysis plan. Figure E1 replicates our analyses separately for each canceling behavior. These findings are generally consistent with our main results (Figure 1 in the body of the paper). However, conjoint features have weaker effects on more severe canceling behaviors (e.g., doxing).

**Figure E1: Why Do People Engage in Canceling Behaviors?**

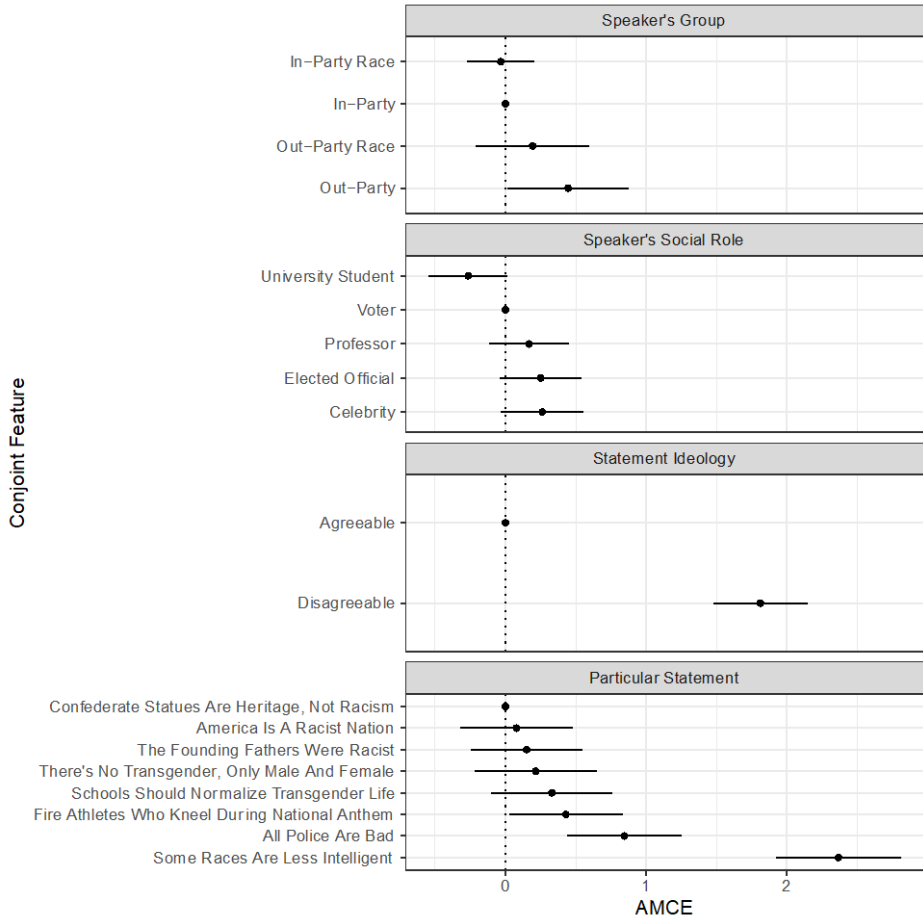


*Note: Points are the AMCEs with bars representing 95 percent confidence intervals. The reference category for the Speaker’s Party and Speaker’s Race levels is the In-Party, Agreeable Statement condition. Blue points represent race source attributes, whereas red points represent partisan source attributes.*

### Separating Speaker Identity and Statement Conjoint Features

For the sake of presentation, in the body of the paper, we crossed our speaker identity and statement ideology factors. However, we randomized these features separately. To show that crossing these factors did not bias our results, we present below the “raw” analysis of our data, as well as the effects of particular statements, in Figure E2. These results are consistent with those in the body of the paper: the ideological thrust of a statement, not the speaker’s identity, drives canceling behavior. Some statements—such as the assertion that some races are less intelligent than others—are particularly cancelable.

**Figure E2: Why Do People Cancel?**

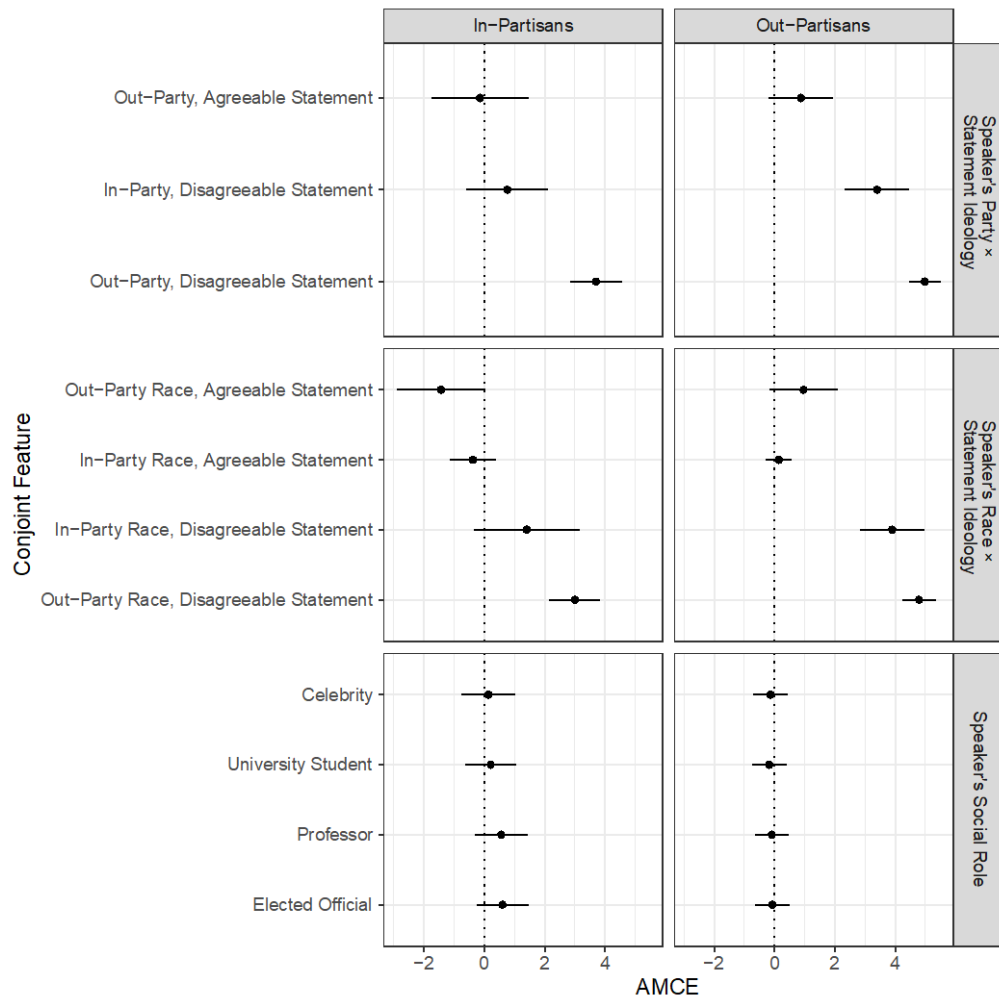


*Note: Points are the AMCEs with bars representing 95 percent confidence intervals. The reference category for the Speaker's Party and Speaker's Race levels is the In-Party, Agreeable Statement condition.*

**Analysis of Second-Order Conjoint Experiments**

In Figure E3, we visualize the effects of each conjoint feature on the perceived likelihood that in-partisans and out-partisans would engage in canceling behavior. Here, conjoint attributes such as “in-party” are defined relative to the supposed canceler. That is, when out-partisans are the cancelers in question, attributes referencing the “in-party” refer to the supposed canceler’s in-party and the respondent’s out-party.

**Figure E3: Why Do Others’ Perceive In-Partisans and Out-Partisans Cancel?**



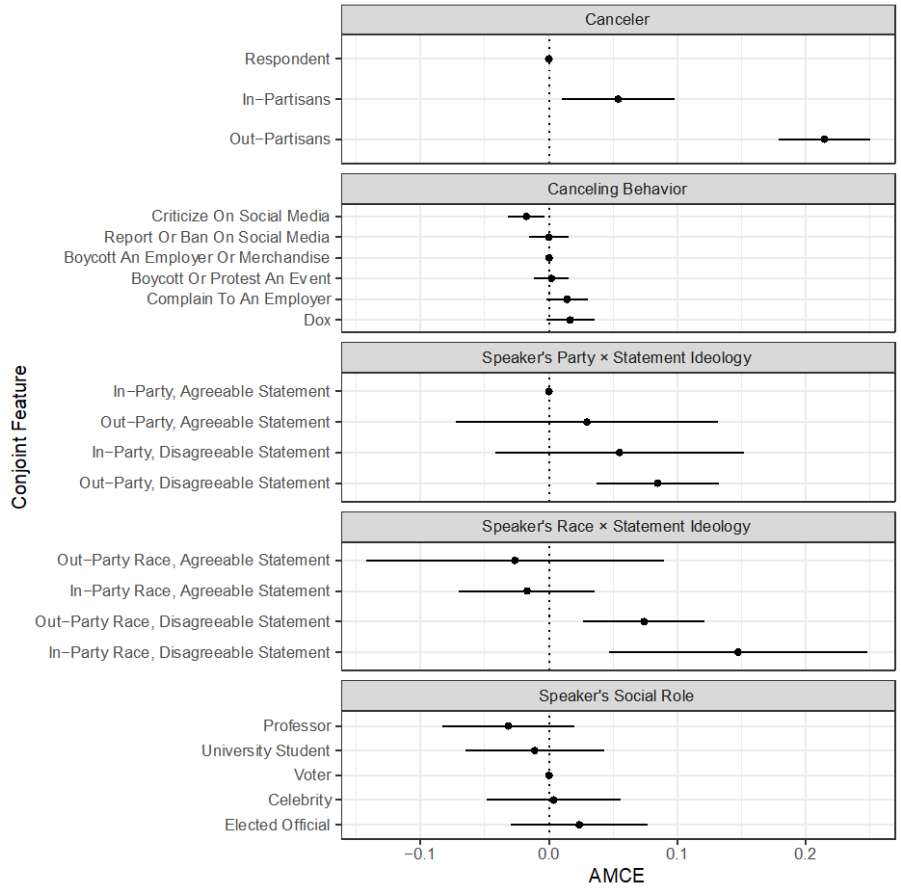
*Note: Points are the AMCEs with bars representing 95 percent confidence intervals. The reference category for the Speaker’s Party and Speaker’s Race levels is the In-Party, Agreeable Statement condition. Conjoint attributes are defined relative to the supposed canceler.*

**What Gets Called “Cancel Culture”?**

In our study, we were careful not to describe any activity as “cancel culture” given concerns about social desirability biases and the term’s negative connotations, especially among Republicans. A fortunate byproduct of this decision is that we can analyze what, precisely, respondents label as cancel culture. Recall that, in our conjoint experiments, respondents could use any of 11 descriptors, including cancel culture, to describe any given canceling behavior performed by any given canceler (themselves, in-partisans, or out-partisans) in response to any given speaker making any given statement. As such, we can examine how use of the term cancel culture varies with (1) what a canceler did, (2) who the canceler is, (3) who the speaker being canceled is, and (4) what the speaker said.

We model whether something is labeled as cancel culture as a function of these four factors and present the results in Figure E4. These results suggest that behavior by others, and especially out-partisans, is more likely to be labeled cancel culture. Moreover, when a canceler is responding to a statement presumably perceived to be disagreeable to the canceler, their actions are more likely to be considered cancel culture. Remarkably, the particular action taken by the canceler has almost no effect of whether their actions are labeled as cancel culture.

**Figure E4: What’s Labeled Cancel Culture? Out-Partisans Responding to Disagreeable Statements**



*Note: Points are the AMCEs with bars representing 95 percent confidence intervals. The reference category for the Speaker’s Party and Speaker’s Race levels is the In-Party, Agreeable Statement condition.*

## Appendix F: Deviations from the Pre-Analysis Plan

### Redesignating Political Correctness, Wokeness, and Cancel Culture as Ambiguous

As noted in the text, our pre-registration designated the terms “political correctness,” “wokeness,” and “cancel culture” as negative. However, given that the significance of these terms varies across the political spectrum, we re-classified them as ambiguous. As a robustness check, we re-compute our tests of the personal attribution, out-party attribution, and Republican out-party attribution hypotheses using our original designations.

Consistent with our personal attribution hypothesis, respondents described their own canceling behavior with at least one positive term 73 percent of the time and at least one negative term 49 percent of the time (this difference is statistically significant,  $p < 0.01$ ). We also still find support for the out-party attribution hypothesis: respondents described in-partisans’ canceling behavior negatively only 64 percent of the time, but described identical behavior by out-partisans negatively 80 percent of the time ( $p < .001$ ).

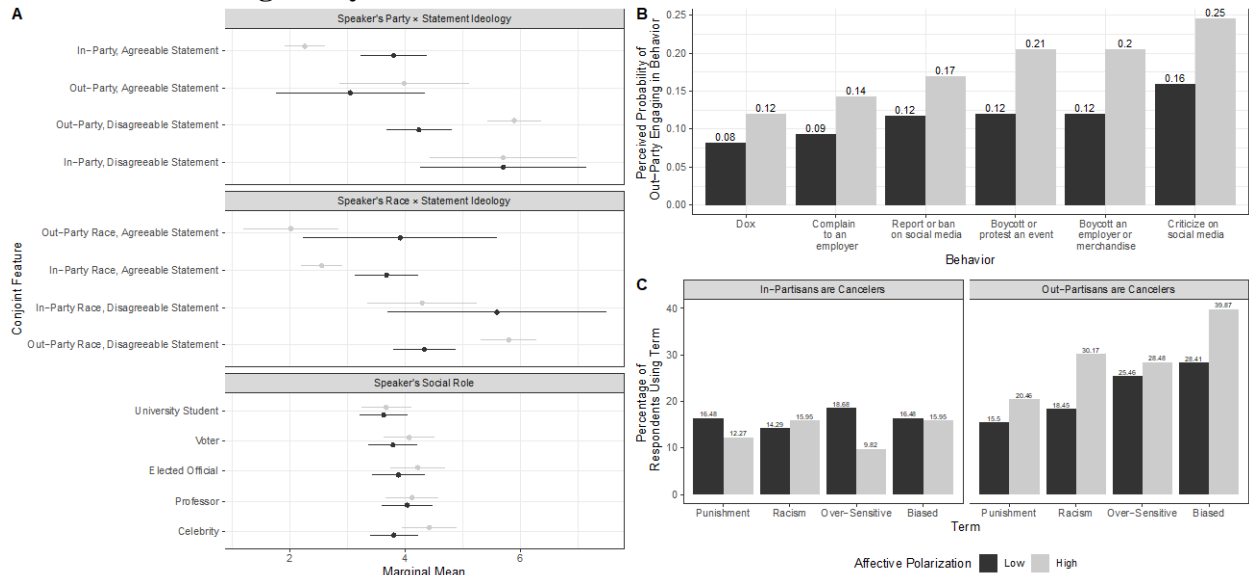
Finally, both Democrats and Republicans are more likely describe the behavior of the other party, as opposed to their own party, in negative terms ( $p < .001$ ). When political correctness, wokeness, and cancel culture count as negative terms, however, *Republicans* are somewhat more likely to describe the out-party in more negative terms ( $p < .01$ ). This finding contrasts with our in-paper results, where Democrats were somewhat more likely to describe out-partisans’ canceling behaviors using other negative terms. However, it is consistent with our Republican attribution hypothesis, which suggests that Republicans would view out-partisans’ canceling behavior more negatively than in-partisans’ canceling behavior. This finding also confirms our expectation that Republicans would be especially likely to describe out-partisan canceling behavior with politically charged terms like “cancel culture,” “political correctness,” and “wokeness.”

### Moderation Analyses

Due to space constraints, we excluded from the body of the paper two analyses from section six of our pre-analysis plan, on the moderating effects of affective polarization and Fox News consumption (among Republicans). We expected the affectively polarized to be especially likely to confirm the partisan source, canceling perception, and out-party attribution hypotheses. Moreover, given the extensive coverage of cancel culture on conservative media outlets—and especially Fox News—we expected that Republican Fox News consumers would be especially likely to confirm these hypotheses.

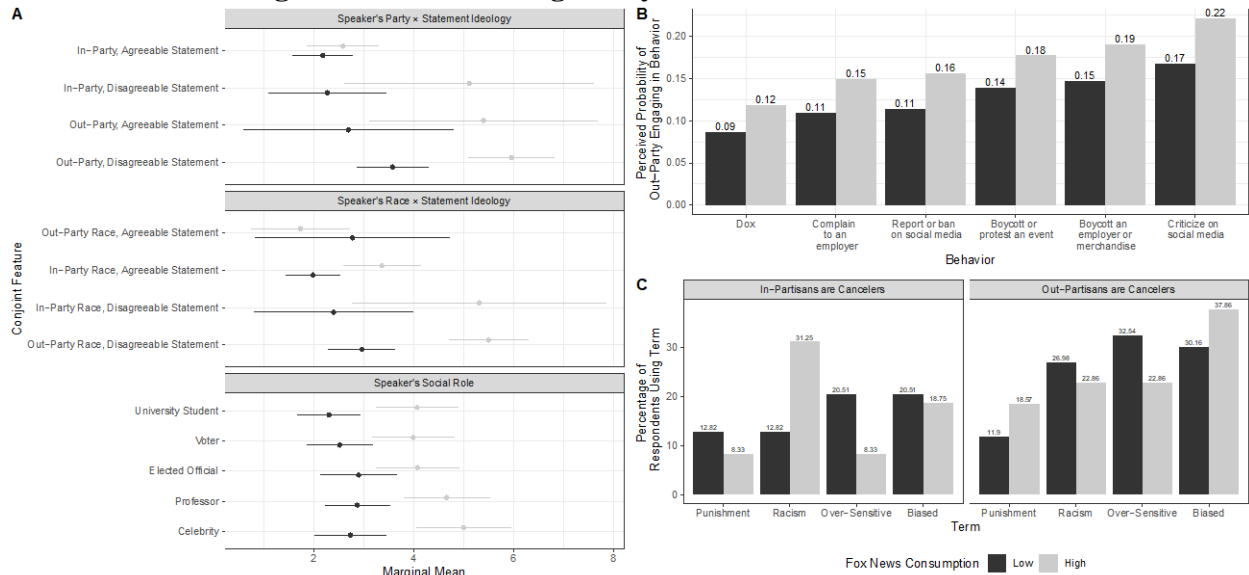
As shown in in Figures F1 and F2, our analyses generally confirm these expectations. The affectively polarized are more likely to cancel those from the out-party, think out-partisans engage in canceling behavior, and describe out-partisans’ canceling behavior in negative terms. Likewise, among Republicans, Fox News consumers are more likely to cancel Democrats, think Democrats engage in canceling behavior, and describe Democrats’ canceling behavior as “punishment” and “biased.” However, Republican Fox News consumers are less likely to describe Democrats’ canceling behavior as “racism” or “over-sensitivity.”

**Figure F1: The Affectively Polarized Cancel More and Perceive Out-Partisans' Canceling Behavior More Negatively**



Note: The affectively polarized are more likely to cancel those from the out-party (Panel A), think out-partisans engage in canceling behavior (Panel B), and describe out-partisans' canceling behavior negatively (Panel C). Data points for low and high affective polarization represent respondents in the bottom and top terciles for affective polarization, respectively.

**Figure F2: Among Republicans, Fox News Consumers Cancel More and Perceive Out-Partisans' Canceling Behavior More Negatively**



Note: Among Republicans, Fox News consumers are more likely to cancel Democrats (Panel A), think Democrats engage in canceling behavior (Panel B), and describe Democrats' canceling behavior as "punishment" and "biased" (Panel C). However, Republican Fox News consumers are less likely to describe Democrats' canceling behavior as "racism" or "over-sensitivity" (Panel C). Data points for low and high Fox News consumption represent Republicans in the bottom and top terciles for Fox News Consumption, respectively. We measured Fox News consumption by having respondents select which Fox News programs they regularly watch, on television or online, from a list of Fox News' ten most popular programs (Dilliplane et al. 2013).



## Reference

Dilliplane, Susanna, Seth Goldman, and Diana Mutz. 2013. "Televised Exposure to Politics: New Measures for a Fragmented Media Environment." *American Journal of Political Science* 57(1): 236-48.

