Overcoming Distrust and Reducing Partisan Animosity

About
More in Common

More in Common is a non-partisan, international initiative aimed at building societies that are **stronger, more united and more resilient** to increasing threats of polarization and social division. We have teams in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Poland.
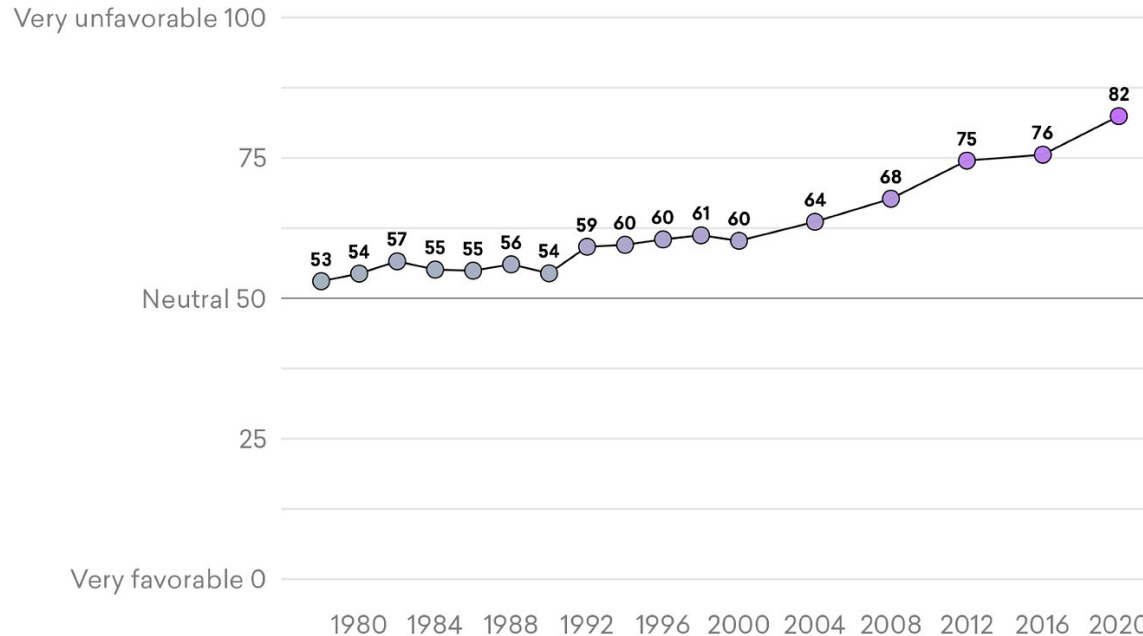
Our studies, including *Hidden Tribes* (2018) and *Perception Gap* (2019), have resulted in hundreds of articles of media coverage including on the front page of the New York Times.

We have worked in partnership with over **160 civil society groups**, philanthropies, businesses, faith, education, media and government partners to connect people across lines of division.

Background

Partisan animosity, or feelings of hostility between political parties, has increased over time

Very unfavorable 100

75

Neutral 50

25

Very favorable 0

53 54 57 55 55 56 54 59 60 60 61 60 64 68 75 76 82

1980 1984 1988 1992 1996 2000 2004 2008 2012 2016 2020

Source: American National Election Studies, 1978-2020.
Survey sample sizes of US adults range from 715 to 5346.

More in Common

Increasing level of partisan animosity contributes to:

- Rising levels of social distrust[1]
- Negative impact on personal relationships[2]
- Challenges to cross-party collaboration[3]
- Lower trust in institutions and support for democratic norms[4]

1. More in Common, Two Stories of Distrust in America, https://www.moreincommon.com/media/yfcbfmmp/mic_two-stories-of-distrust.pdf
2. Shanto Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States," Annual Review of Political Science, Vol. 22, May 2019, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034
3. Zachary P. Neal, "A sign of the times? Weak and strong polarization in the U.S. Congress, 1973–2016," Social Networks, Volume 60, January 2020, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0378873317303039?casa_token=4CoQYFgFdxoAAAAA:MDCtnBrWpnEtSoHKlr__OqzvaUxI7_Z2aAB4KfGLL6BJYErFume0-5jHR4bTeMFlsIJQC8SZ
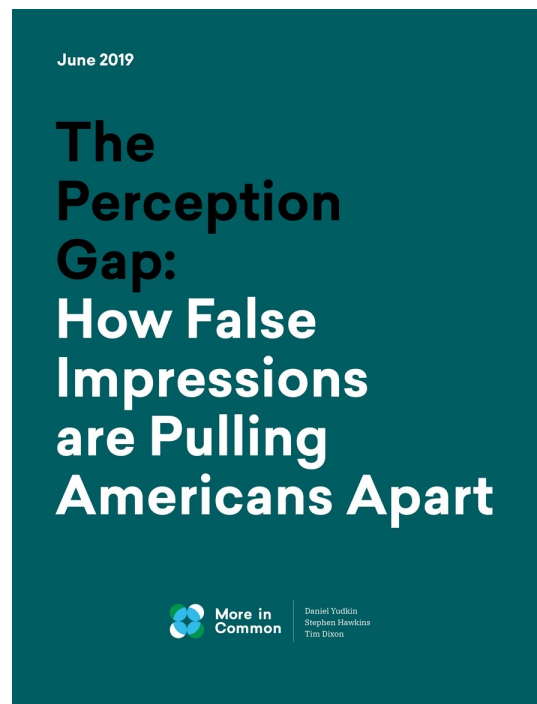4. John Kingzette et al., "How Affective Polarization Undermines Support for Democratic Norms," Public Opinion Quarterly, Volume 85, Issue 2, Summer 2021, https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfab029

High levels of partisan animosity and increasingly homogenous social networks contribute to widening gap between perception of political opponents and reality

Perception Gap

The difference between what one group thinks another group believes and what the other group actually believes.

June 2019

The Perception Gap:
How False Impressions are Pulling Americans Apart

More in Common

Daniel Yudkin
Stephen Hawkins
Tim Dixon

December 2022

Defusing the History Wars:
Finding Common Ground in Teaching America's National Story

More in Common

Since 2019, we've done perception gaps research on broad and specific political subjects

Democrats' Perception Gap

- Republicans' Actual Views
- Independents' Estimates
- Democrats' Estimates

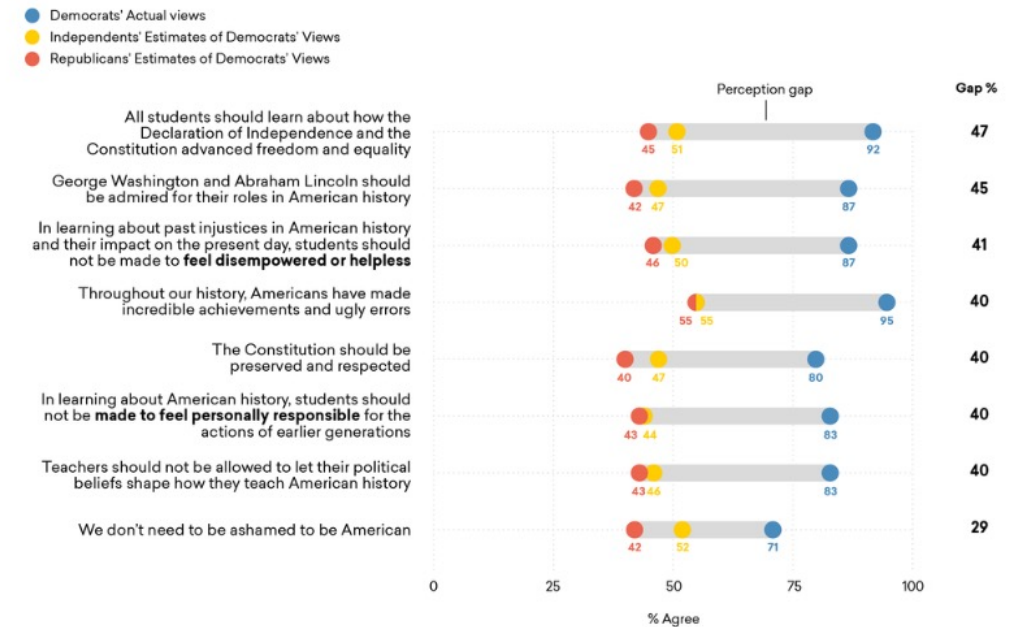| Statement	Perception Gap (%)
Properly controlled immigration can be good for America	33
Racism still exists in America	28
Many Muslims are good Americans	29
Sexism still exists in America	19
The government should do more to stop guns getting into the hands of bad people	18
Donald Trump is a flawed person	-1
People are right to be concerned about how climate change might affect us	-2
Average	19

Source: More in Common (2019)

Republicans Underestimate Democrats' Commitment to Celebrating American Achievements and Overall Story of Progress

- Democrats' Actual views
- Independents' Estimates of Democrats' Views
- Republicans' Estimates of Democrats' Views

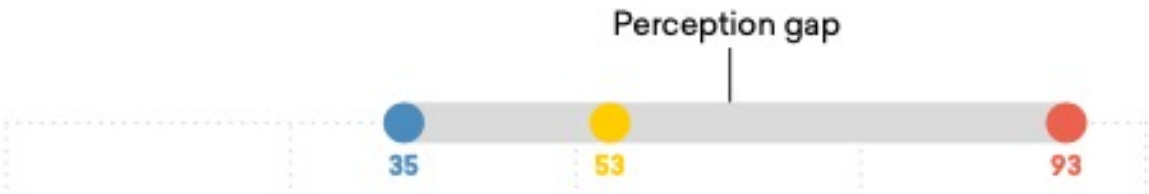| Statement	Gap %
All students should learn about how the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution advanced freedom and equality	47
George Washington and Abraham Lincoln should be admired for their roles in American history	45
In learning about past injustices in American history and their impact on the present day, students should not be made to **feel disempowered or helpless**	41
Throughout our history, Americans have made incredible achievements and ugly errors	40
The Constitution should be preserved and respected	40
In learning about American history, students should not be **made to feel personally responsible** for the actions of earlier generations	40
Teachers should not be allowed to let their political beliefs shape how they teach American history	40
We don't need to be ashamed to be American	29

Question: (Democrats) Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (Republicans/Independents) What percentage of Democrats do you think agree with the following statements? Source: More in Common

6

Example – Democrats' Perception Gap: Democrats think only 35% of Republicans agree that Americans have a responsibility to learn from our past, whereas 93% agree with the statement

● Republicans' Actual Views
● Independents' Estimates of Republicans' Views
● Democrats' Estimates of Republicans' Views

Perception gap

Gap %

Americans have a responsibility to learn from our past and fix our mistakes

35   53   93

58

Question: [Republicans] Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
[Democrats/Independents] What percentage of Republicans do you think agree with the following statements?
Source: More in Common

How is perception gap calculated?

Step 1: 🔴 Republicans' Actual Views

Measure the percentage of Republicans who agreed with the statement

Step 2: 🔵 Democrats' Estimates of Republicans' Views

Measure the average percentage of Republicans that Democrats *estimated* would agree with statement

Perception gap   Gap %

Americans have a responsibility to learn
from our past and fix our mistakes   🔵 🟡   🔴   58
                                                      35 53   93

Step 3:

Calculate the percentage difference between Democrats' *estimate* of Republicans who agreed with the statement and the *actual* percentage of Republicans who agreed with the statement

Research shows that correcting perception gaps is valuable to building healthy democratic norms

- Perception gaps limit willingness to engage with outpartisans[1]

- Correcting inaccurate meta-perceptions reduces Americans' support for partisan violence[2]

- Correcting misperceptions reduces negative intergroup attitudes[3]

1. Sanchez, C., & Dunning, D. (2021). Cognitive and emotional correlates of belief in political misinformation: Who endorses partisan misbeliefs? Emotion, 21(5), 1091–1102. https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000948
2. Mernyk, J. S., Pink, S. L., Druckman, J. N., & Willer, R. (2022). Correcting inaccurate metaperceptions reduces Americans' support for partisan violence. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 119(16), e2116851119. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2116851119
3. Lees, J., Cikara, M. Inaccurate group meta-perceptions drive negative out-group attributions in competitive contexts. Nat Hum Behav 4, 279–286 (2020). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-019-0766-4

However, our research finds that the effectiveness of presenting perception gap data alone is limited by perceptions of believability

How believable do you think the data presented is?

Response	Percentage
Not at all believable	9%
Not so believable	43%
Somewhat believable	42%
Very believable	6%
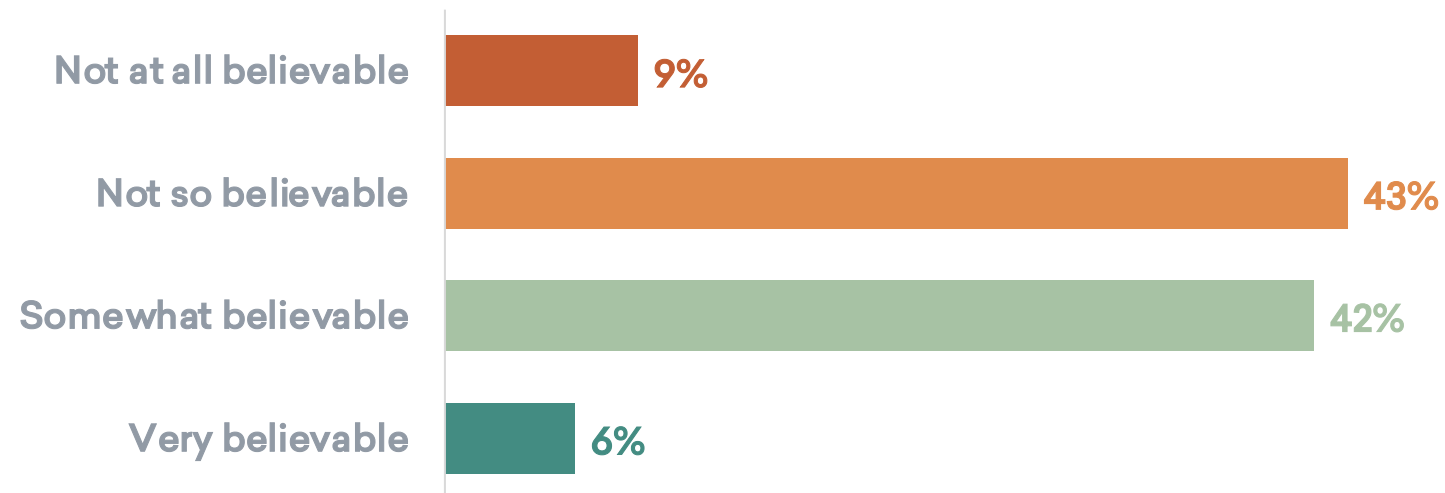
Source: More in Common survey of 121 Southern US adults conducted in September 2021.

10

Why was data perceived as not believable?

Findings contradict personal experience:

*"I feel like there may be some truth in the Republican answers. But **in my own personal experience, I haven't found the responses to be the case**. I think the answers reflect what they'd like the perception to be, but the words I've heard expressed are totally different."*

– Democrat respondent

Findings contradict media narratives:

*"Either Democrats **are not being truthful** in the survey, **or the far-left in the media is painting a different picture of them**."*

– Republican respondent

General distrust of the opposing party

*"**I just can't believe they really answered like that**. There [must be] a lot of **cognitive dissonance** going on with them, which seems par for the course."*

– Democrat respondent

How can we **overcome distrust** in data and **boost credibility** in our environment of increasing polarization?

How can we **correct perception gaps** and **reduce partisan animosity**?

To address problems of distrust in data, we explored existing academic research on mechanisms for increasing credibility

Hearing someone explain their beliefs is more persuasive than text.
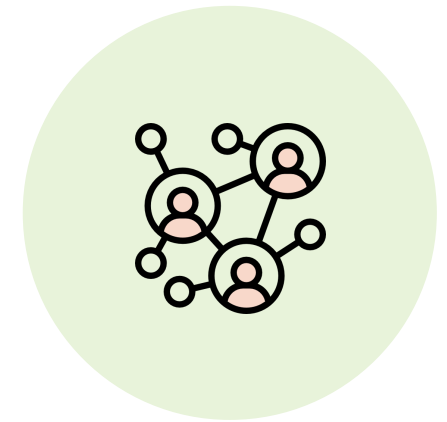
(Schroeder et al., 2017)

Personal stories are persuasive, more so than perspective-taking and facts.

(Bruneau & Saxe, 2012; Kubin et al., 2021)

Exposure to sympathetic outgroup members can decrease animosity.

(Hartman et al., 2022; Voelkel et al., 2023)

Messages from ingroup members have credibility and can persuade.

(e.g., McGarty et al., 1994; van Bavel & Packer, 2021)

13

To reduce partisan animosity, we learned from Stanford University's Strengthening Democracy Challenge (SDC)

- SDC mega study:
  - 25 interventions tested on 32k participants
  - Measured on reducing partisan animosity and others

- We built off SDC's successes by adopting similar:
  - **Experiment design**: randomized controlled experiment
  - **Outcome variable**: partisan animosity
  ...allowing our results to be measured alongside successful interventions tested in the SDC

Research Question

Can perception gap interventions that include **video** with **ingroup member reactions** affect their **credibility** and reduce **partisan animosity**?

Hypotheses

We **hypothesized** that:

1) Compared to a control group (Control A), groups exposed to perception gap interventions (Treatments B, C, D) would express **less partisan animosity**;

2) The group shown the video with **ingroup member reactions** (Treatment D) would experience the **largest effects in reducing partisan animosity**.

Method

Our sample of 4,800 participants were randomly assigned to 1 of 4 conditions.
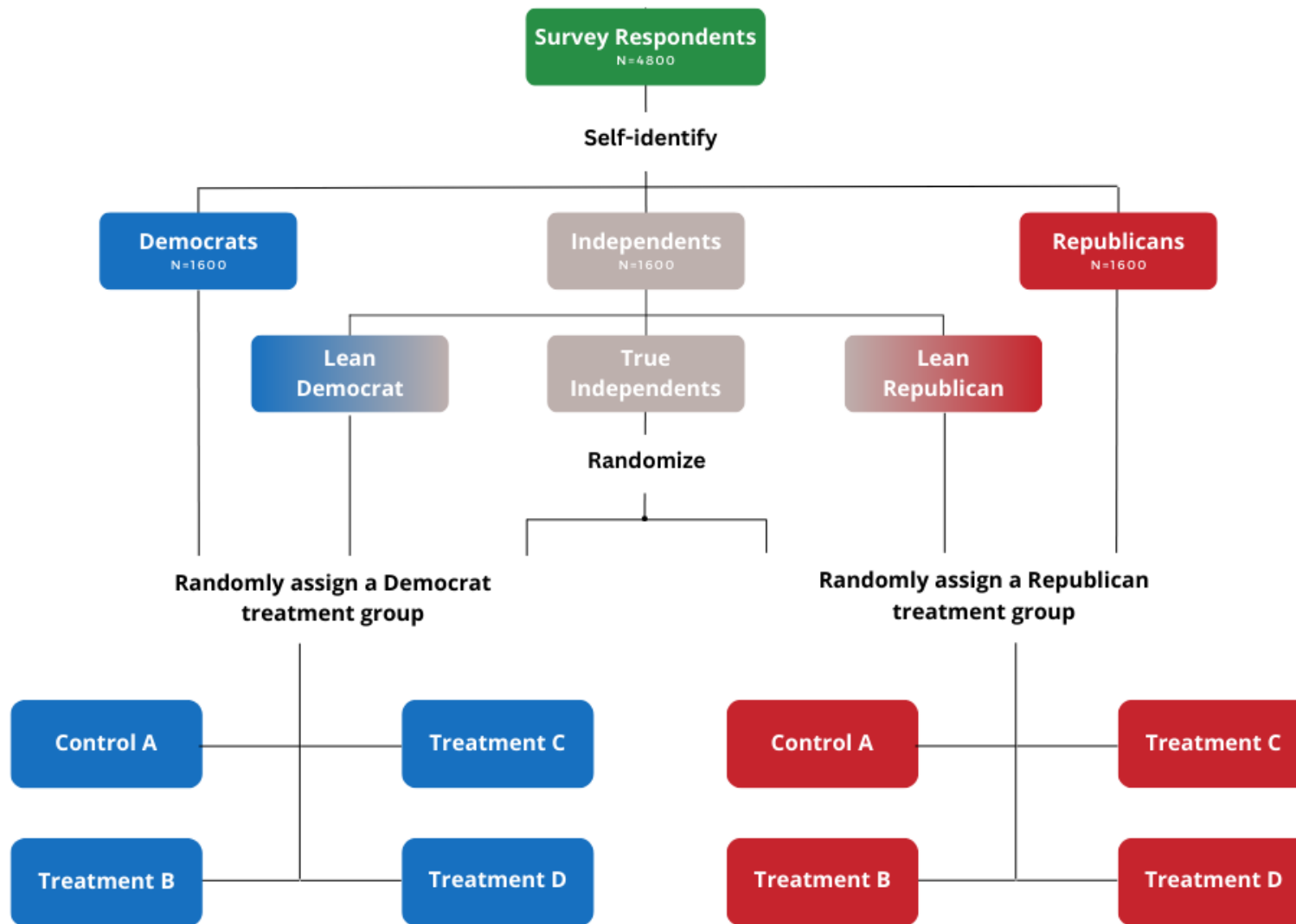
Control A: a **video** advertisement for a standing desk product ad (Control)

Treatment C: a **video** condition featuring **statistics** and **outgroup member interviews**

Treatment B: a **written**, **statistics** only condition

Treatment D: a **video** condition featuring **statistics**, **outgroup member interviews** and **ingroup member reactions**

Results

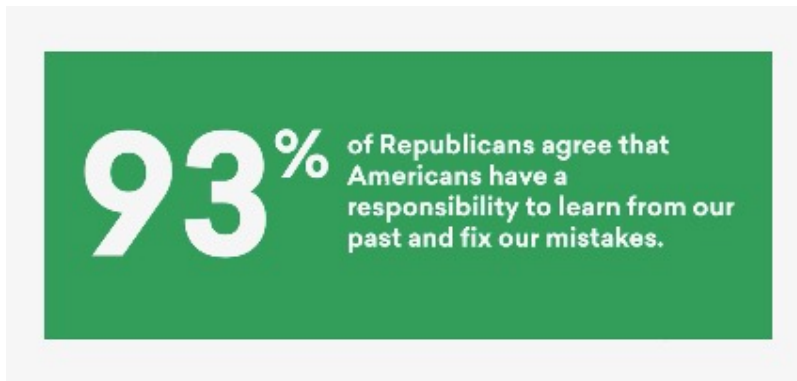# Treatment effects on outgroup warmth were statistically significant relative to the control (p's<0.001). All pairwise comparisons were also statistically significant. Treatment D yielded the highest outgroup warmth.
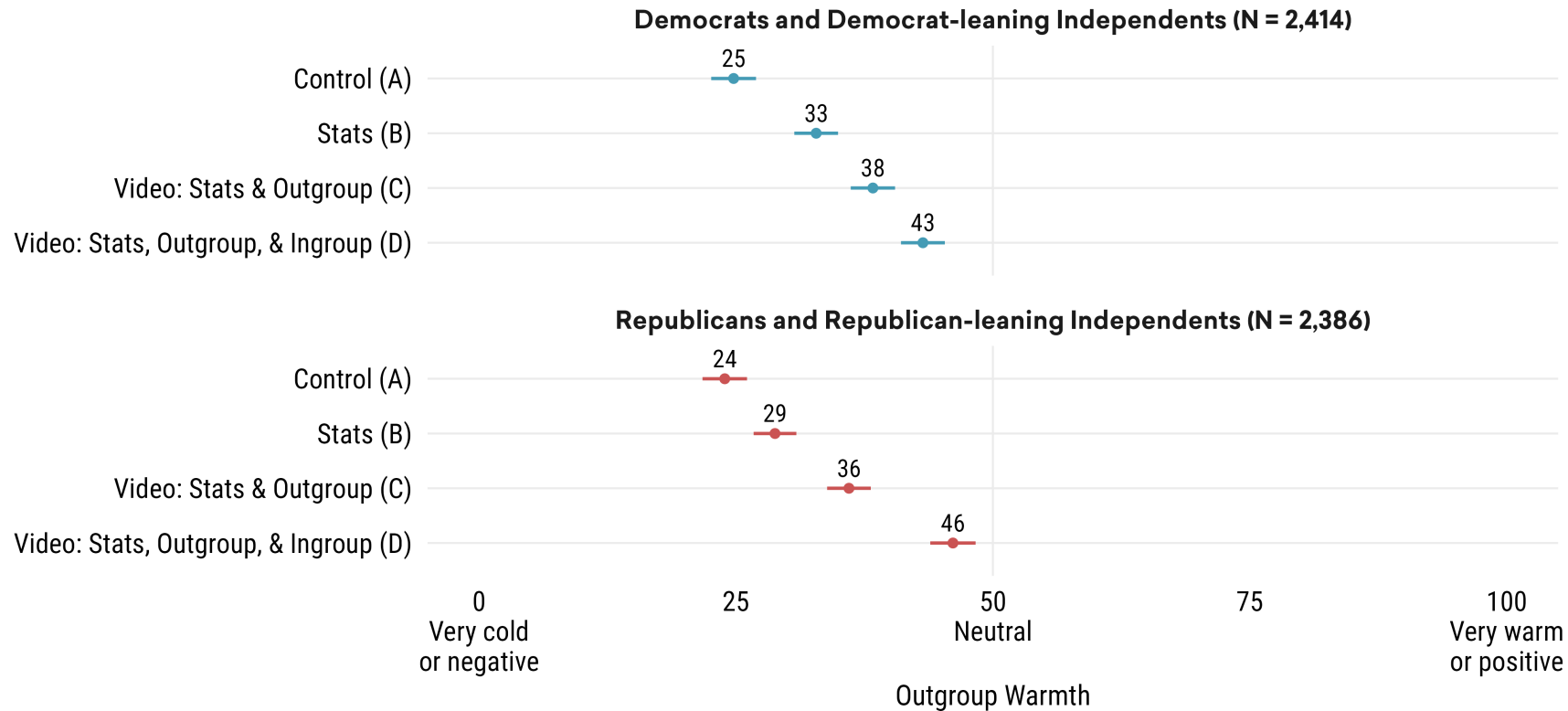
Democrats and Democrat-leaning Independents (N = 2,414)

Control (A)	25
Stats (B)	33
Video: Stats & Outgroup (C)	38
Video: Stats, Outgroup, & Ingroup (D)	43

Republicans and Republican-leaning Independents (N = 2,386)

Control (A)	24
Stats (B)	29
Video: Stats & Outgroup (C)	36
Video: Stats, Outgroup, & Ingroup (D)	46

0	25	50	75	100
Very cold or negative		Neutral		Very warm or positive

Outgroup Warmth

Error bars indicate 95% CI's
Condition: $F_{(3, 4792)} = 126.10$, $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$
Party ID: $F_{(1, 4792)} = 1.91$, $p = .167$; $\eta_p^2 < .01$
Interaction: $F_{(3, 4792)} = 3.65$, $p = .012$; $\eta_p^2 < .01$

Question: For each of the following groups, indicate how cold or warm you feel towards them, where 0 means very cold and 100 means very warm. [Democrats/Republicans]
Source: More in Common

24

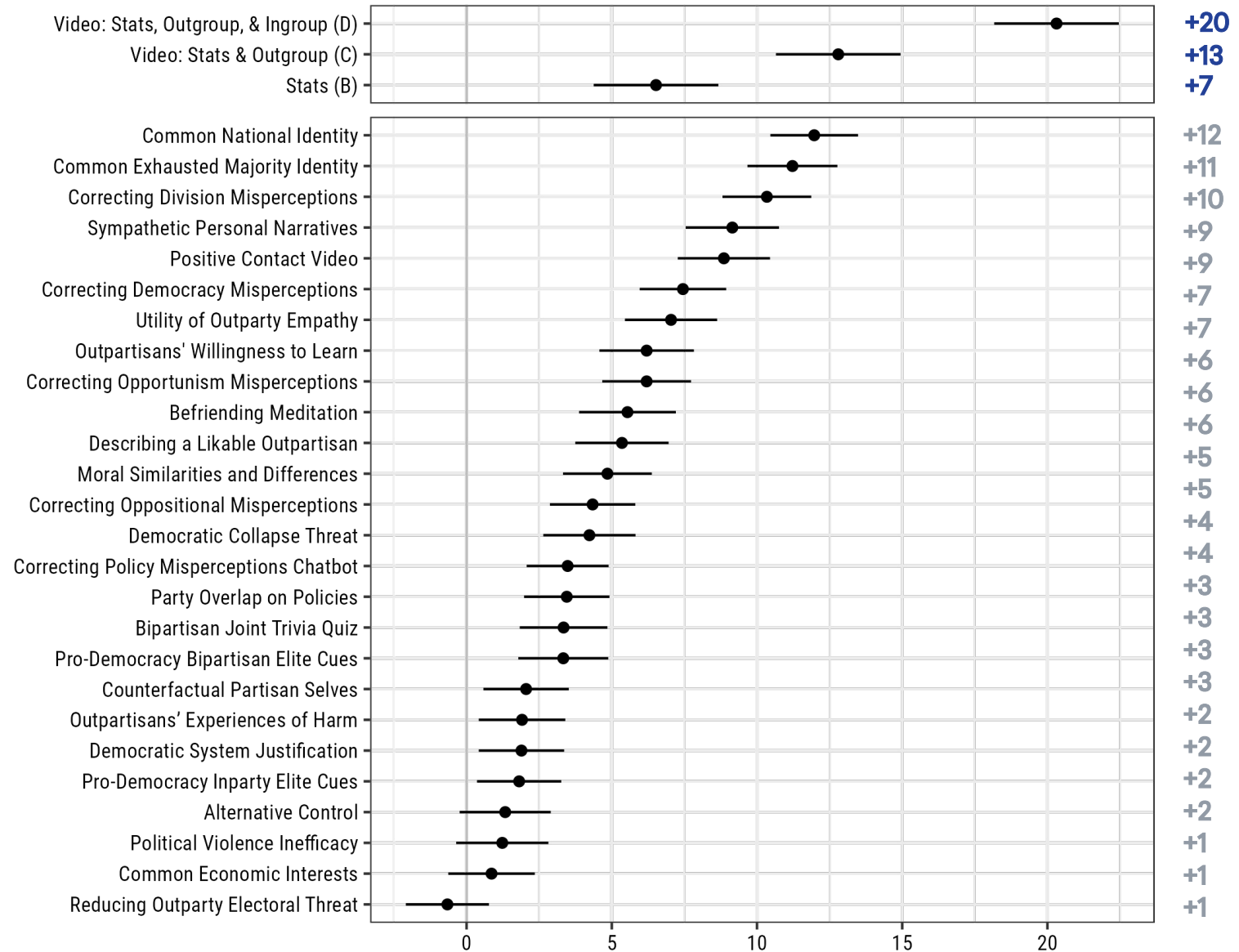# Intervention effects outperform all interventions from Stanford's SDC

**More in Common
3 Interventions**

Intervention	Effect
Video: Stats, Outgroup, & Ingroup (D)	+20
Video: Stats & Outgroup (C)	+13
Stats (B)	+7

Strengthening Democracy Challenge's 25 Interventions

Intervention	Effect
Common National Identity	+12
Common Exhausted Majority Identity	+11
Correcting Division Misperceptions	+10
Sympathetic Personal Narratives	+9
Positive Contact Video	+9
Correcting Democracy Misperceptions	+7
Utility of Outparty Empathy	+7
Outpartisans' Willingness to Learn	+6
Correcting Opportunism Misperceptions	+6
Befriending Meditation	+6
Describing a Likable Outpartisan	+5
Moral Similarities and Differences	+5
Correcting Oppositional Misperceptions	+4
Democratic Collapse Threat	+4
Correcting Policy Misperceptions Chatbot	+3
Party Overlap on Policies	+3
Bipartisan Joint Trivia Quiz	+3
Pro-Democracy Bipartisan Elite Cues	+3
Counterfactual Partisan Selves	+3
Outpartisans' Experiences of Harm	+2
Democratic System Justification	+2
Pro-Democracy Inparty Elite Cues	+2
Alternative Control	+2
Political Violence Inefficacy	+1
Common Economic Interests	+1
Reducing Outparty Electoral Threat	+1

Treatment effects by political identification strength

A Control   B Stats   C Video: Stats & Outgroup   D Video: Stats, Outgroup, & Ingroup

Strong Republican +26 (D-A)

Lean Republican +28

Not very strong Republican +22

Independent +15

Not very strong Democrat +19

Lean Democrat +20

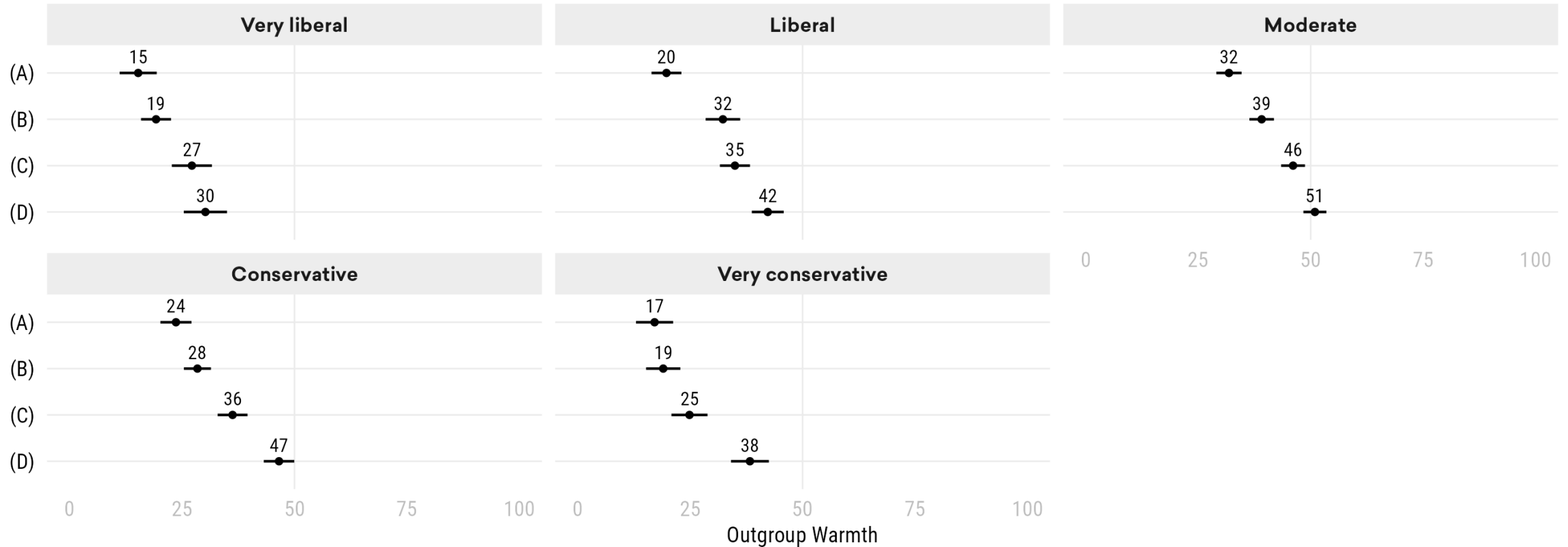**Strong Democrat** +17

Outgroup Warmth

Question: For each of the following groups, indicate how cold or warm you feel towards them, where 0 means very cold and 100 means very warm. [Democrats/Republicans]

Source: More in Common

26

Treatment effects by ideology

Very liberal

	Outgroup Warmth
(A)	15
(B)	19
(C)	27
(D)	30

Liberal

	Outgroup Warmth
(A)	20
(B)	32
(C)	35
(D)	42

Moderate

	Outgroup Warmth
(A)	32
(B)	39
(C)	46
(D)	51

Conservative

	Outgroup Warmth
(A)	24
(B)	28
(C)	36
(D)	47

Very conservative

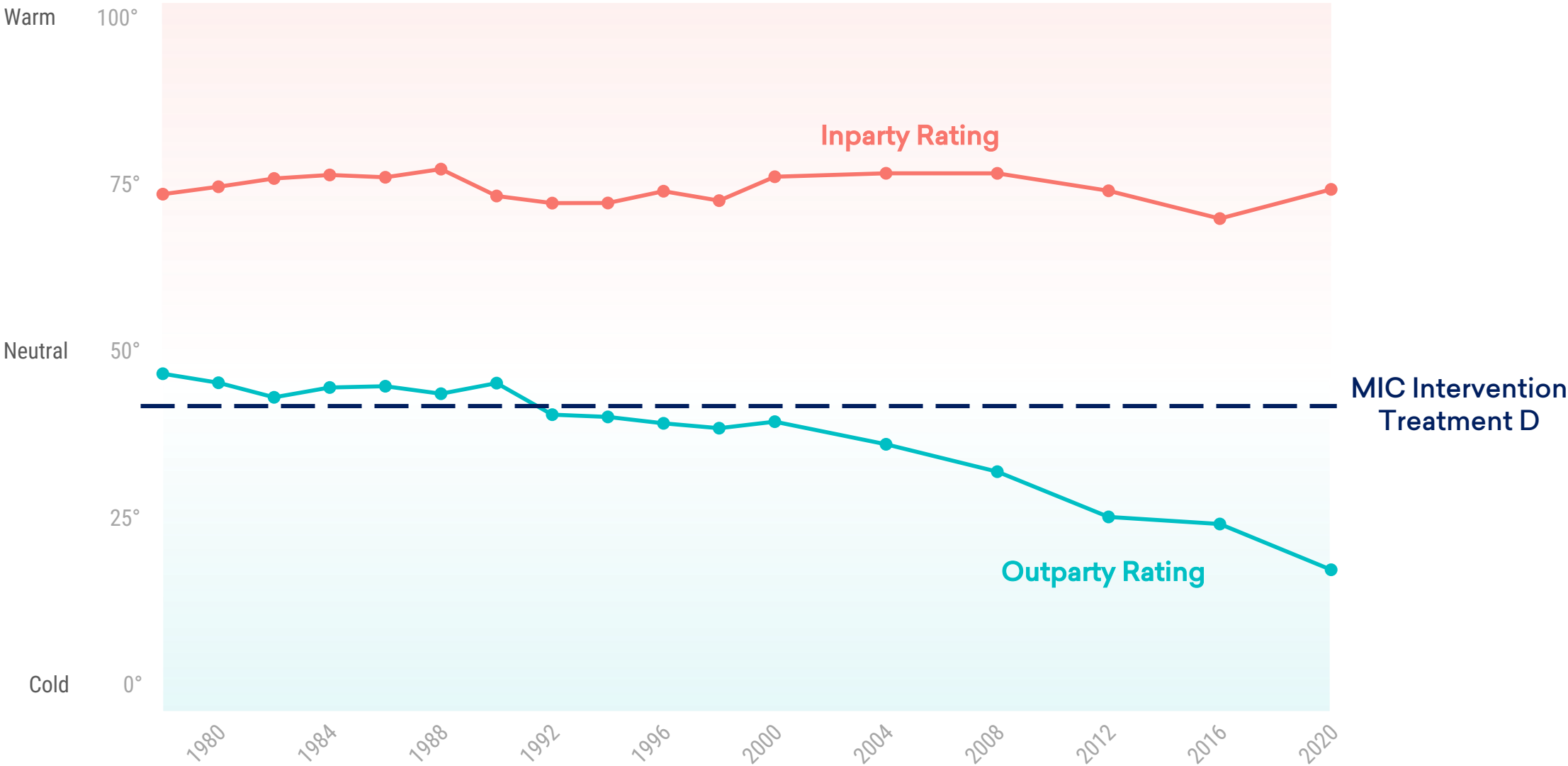|	Outgroup Warmth
(A)	17
(B)	19
(C)	25
(D)	38

Outgroup Warmth

Error bars indicate 95% CI's

Question: For each of the following groups, indicate how cold or warm you feel towards them, where 0 means very cold and 100 means very warm. [Democrats/Republicans]

Source: More in Common

Intervention effects revert partisan animosity to 1980s levels

Warm — 100°
Neutral — 50°
Cold — 0°
75°
25°

Inparty Rating

Outparty Rating

MIC Intervention
Treatment D

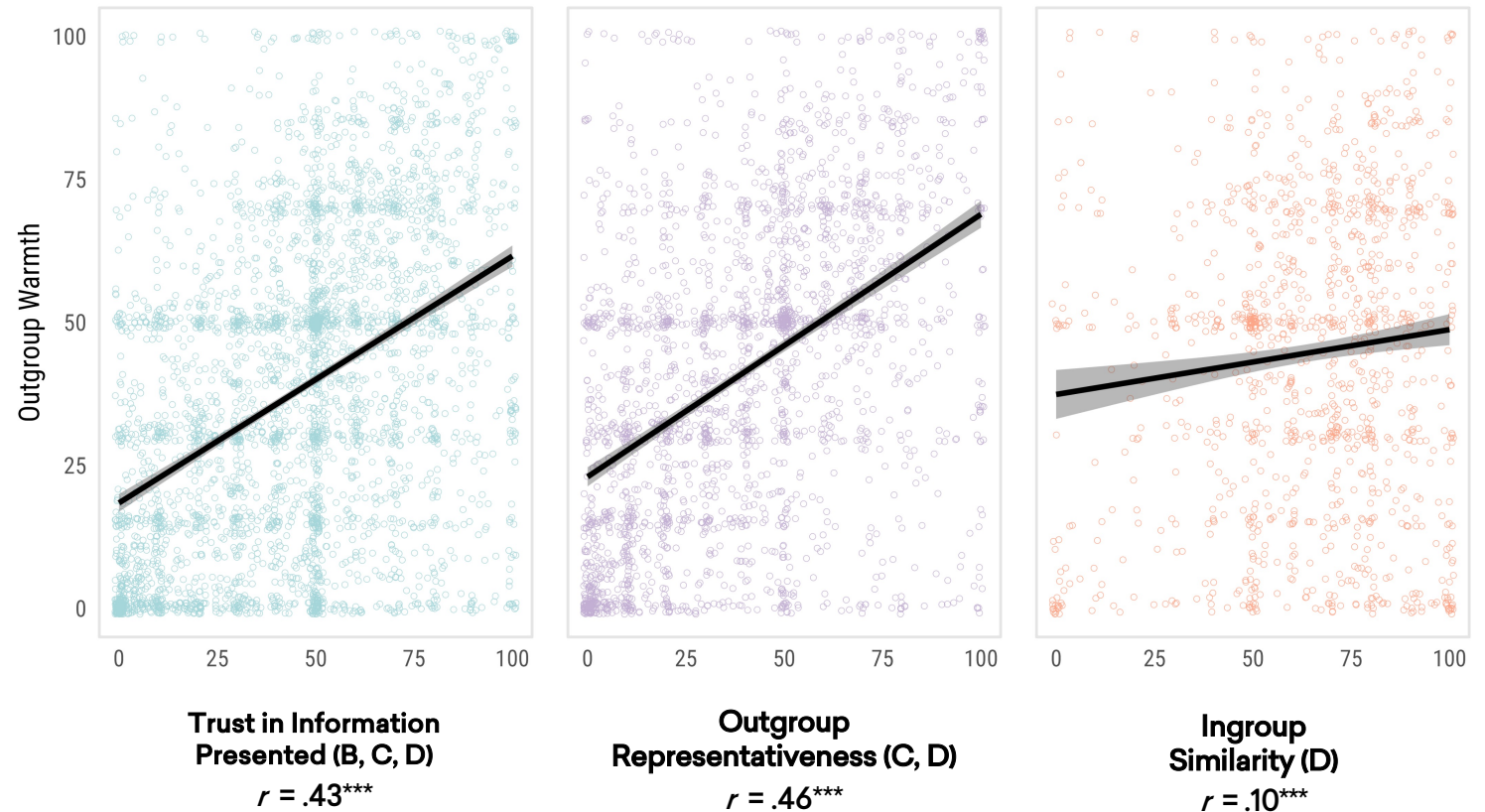1980 1984 1988 1992 1996 2000 2004 2008 2012 2016 2020

Source: ANES

Trust, Outgroup Representativeness, and Ingroup Similarity were positively associated with Outgroup Warmth

Survey respondents who trusted the information presented in the intervention, or thought the outpartisans they watched in the video were representative of the outparty, were more likely to have warmer feelings towards members of their opposing party.

Example: Democrats who thought the Republicans they watched in the video were representative of the Republican Party were more likely to express warmer feelings towards Republicans.

Trust in Information Presented (B, C, D)
$r = .43^{***}$

Outgroup Representativeness (C, D)
$r = .46^{***}$

Ingroup Similarity (D)
$r = .10^{***}$

Error bars indicate 95% CI's

Treatment groups used positive attributes to describe outpartisans at higher rates.

Legend: A Control · B Stats · C Video: Stats & Outgroup · D Video: Stats, Outgroup, & Ingroup

Positive
- Humble
- Caring
- Honest
- Reasonable

Negative
- Arrogant
- Racist
- Hateful
- Brainwashed

X-axis: 0 (Does not apply) — 25 — 50 — 75 — 100 (Strongly Applies)

Question: How much do each of the following phrases or words apply to [outpartisan] voters?
Source: More in Common

30

However, treatment effects decayed after 1 week.

Control (A)

Immediately — 22
1 week later — 21

Stats (B)

Immediately — 30
1 week later — 23

Video: Stats & Outgroup (C)

Immediately — 37
1 week later — 24

Video: Stats, Outgroup, & Ingroup (D)

Immediately — 44
1 week later — 25

0	25	50	75	100
Very cold or negative		Neutral		Very warm or positive

Error bars indicate 95% CI's

Question: For each of the following groups, indicate how cold or warm you feel towards them, where 0 means very cold and 100 means very warm. [Democrats/Republicans]
Source: More in Common

Outgroup warmth, or partisan animosity, of all treatment groups reverted close to the level of control group after 1 week.
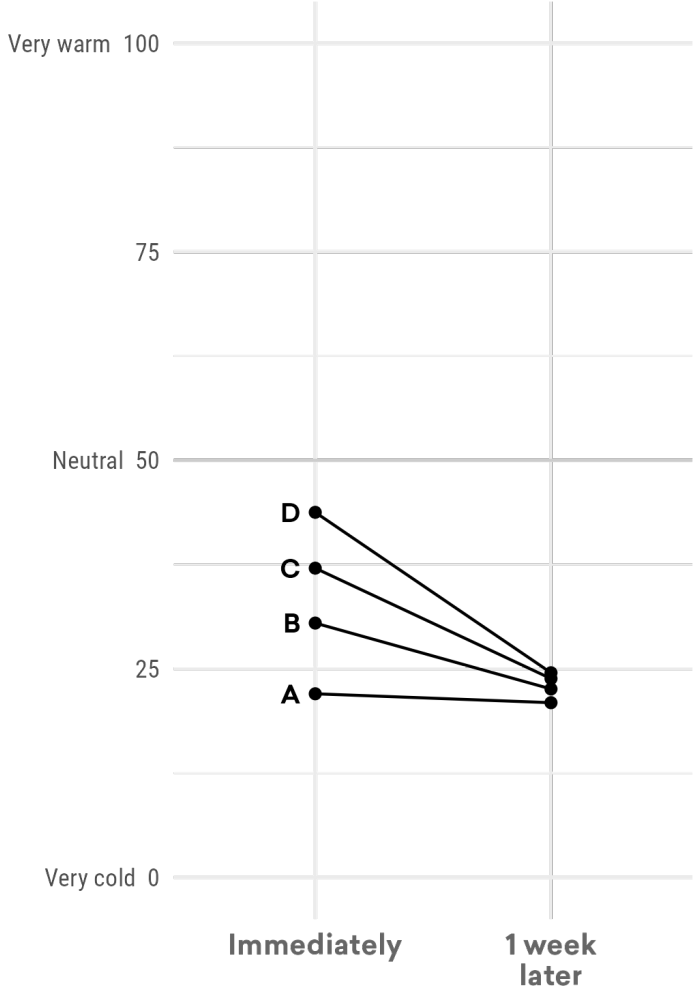
Very warm 100

75

Neutral 50

D

C

B

25

A

Very cold 0

Immediately   1 week later

Error bars indicate 95% CI's

Question: For each of the following groups, indicate how cold or warm you feel towards them, where 0 means very cold and 100 means very warm. [Democrats/Republicans]
Source: More in Common

Challenges and limitations

Information was limited to a single issue: teaching US history.

- Can we replicate the success of the increases in trust and reductions in partisan animosity on other issues?

There were significant decay effects.

- Can we preserve the effects of the intervention through a method of repeated or continuous intervention?

Exposure to video content is expensive.

- Can we identify interested media partners who are motivated to reduce polarization and have capacity to integrate these insights?

Case Studies

Putting it into practice: Building Trust in Elections

Problem

Declining trust in electoral integrity reduces perceived legitimacy of elected officials and threatens our democratic institutions generally

Objective

Higher levels of trust & lower levels of skepticism in validity of elections among target audiences

Op-ed:

- Sympathetically describes a *journey of persuasion*, from skepticism to greater trust
- Draws on *stories* and *quotes* of skeptics responding to evidence
- Offers a concluding perspective

Video campaign:

- Include *skeptical in-group members* (e.g. Trump Republicans) in video
- Reveals compelling testimony or evidence that contradicts their priors
- Show *concluding/shifting reactions*

Putting it into practice: Campaigns

Problem

Given populations express fear, hostility, or dislike of outgroups, such as immigrants, refugees, Muslims, Evangelicals

Objective

Higher levels of warmth/ lower levels of dislike towards given outgroup

Op-ed:
- Sympathetically describe a *journey of persuasion*, from skepticism to greater trust
- Draw on *stories* and *quotes* of skeptics responding to sympathetic members of the out-group
- Offer a concluding perspective

Video campaign:
- Include *in-group members* in video
- Present *sympathetic exemplars* of the outgroup in video testimony and with written evidence that contradicts their priors
- Show *concluding reactions or shifting views* from in-group

Appendix

Treatment effects by political identification strength

Legend: Ⓐ Control Ⓑ Stats Ⓒ Video: Stats & Outgroup Ⓓ Video: Stats, Outgroup, & Ingroup

- Strong Republican: +26 (D-A)
- Lean Republican: +28
- Not very strong Republican: +22
- Independent: +15
- Not very strong Democrat: +19
- Lean Democrat: +20
- Strong Democrat: +17

X-axis: Outgroup Warmth (0, 25, 50, 75, 100)

Question: For each of the following groups, indicate how cold or warm you feel towards them, where 0 means very cold and 100 means very warm. [Democrats/Republicans]

Source: More in Common

38

Treatment effects by ideology

Very liberal

(A)	15
(B)	19
(C)	27
(D)	30

Liberal

(A)	20
(B)	32
(C)	35
(D)	42

Moderate

(A)	32
(B)	39
(C)	46
(D)	51

Conservative

(A)	24
(B)	28
(C)	36
(D)	47

Very conservative

(A)	17
(B)	19
(C)	25
(D)	38

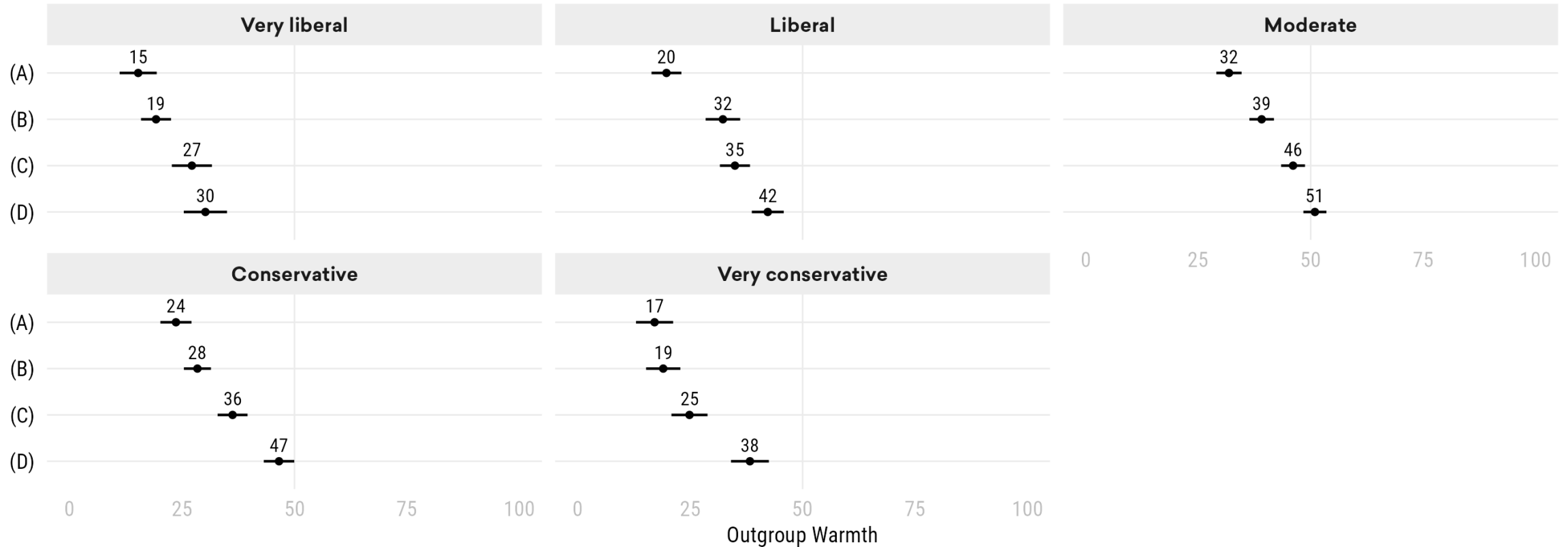Outgroup Warmth

Error bars indicate 95% CI's

Question: For each of the following groups, indicate how cold or warm you feel towards them, where 0 means very cold and 100 means very warm.
[Democrats/Republicans]
Source: More in Common

Treatment effects by political identification strength

D-A

Strong Democrat
(A) 21
(B) 27
(C) 35
(D) 40 **+17 (D – A)**

Lean Democrat
(A) 19
(B) 29
(C) 32
(D) 39 **+20**

Not very strong Democrat
(A) 31
(B) 40
(C) 44
(D) 48 **+19**

Independent
(A) 35
(B) 40
(C) 42
(D) 50 **+15**

0   25   50   75   100

Strong Republican
(A) 16
(B) 23
(C) 31
(D) 42 **+26**

Lean Republican
(A) 16
(B) 27
(C) 33
(D) 44 **+28**

Not very strong Republican
(A) 32
(B) 37
(C) 45
(D) 54 **+22**

0   25   50   75   100   0   25   50   75   100   0   25   50   75   100

Outgroup Warmth

Error bars indicate 95% CI's

Question: For each of the following groups, indicate how cold or warm you feel towards them, where 0 means very cold and 100 means very warm. [Democrats/Republicans]
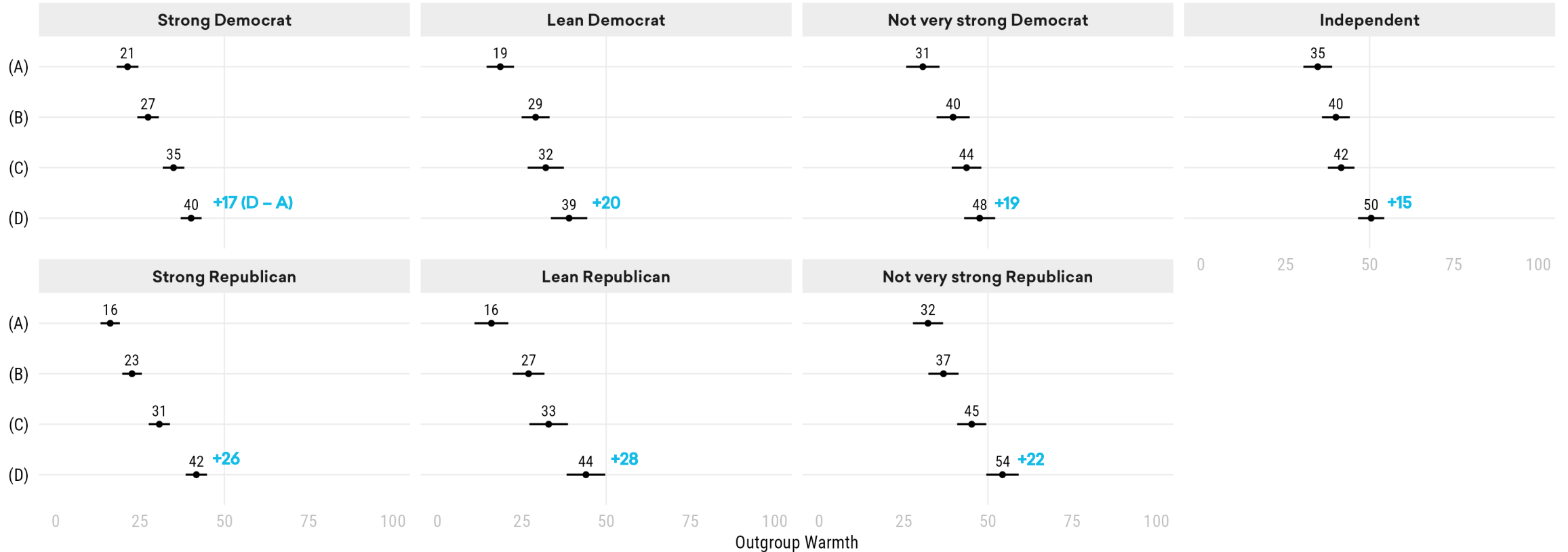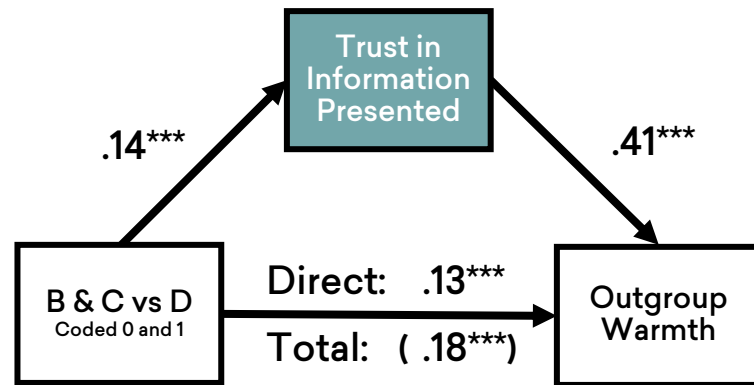Source: More in Common

40

Group D trusted the information more than C and D. Group D somewhat felt the outpartisans were more representative.

Trust in Information

Stats (B)		41	
Video: Stats & Outgroup (C)		43	
Video: Stats, Outgroup, & Ingroup (D)		49	

0
Not at all   25   50   75   100
Very much

Outpartisan Representativeness

Video: Stats & Outgroup (C)   37

Video: Stats, Outgroup, & Ingroup (D)   41

0
Not representative
at all   25   50   75   100
Very
representative

Inpartisan Similarity

Video: Stats, Outgroup, & Ingroup (D)   64

0
Not at all
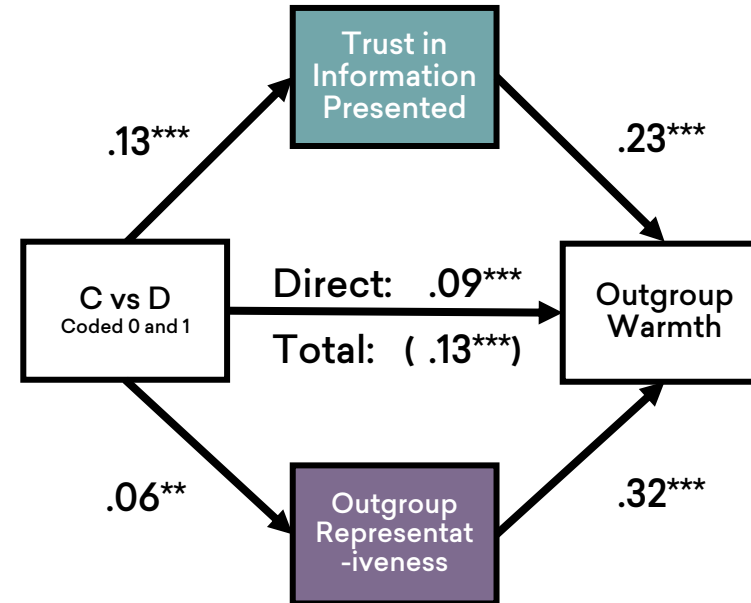similar   25   50   75   100
Very
similar

Question: Thinking about the [statistics/video] you saw earlier, how much do you trust the numbers[information] it presented? [0-not at all, 100- very much]
How representative do you think the [outpartisans] in the video are of the [outparty]?
How similar do you think you are to the [inpartisans] in the video?
Source: More in Common

Error bars indicate 95% CI's

Mediation models suggest that trust and outgroup representativeness partially explain group differences in outgroup warmth.

Left diagram:

Trust in Information Presented

.14*** → Trust in Information Presented → .41***

B & C vs D (Coded 0 and 1) — Direct: .13*** — Total: (.18***) → Outgroup Warmth

Indirect effect: .06 [.04, .07]
Mediation: 70%

Right diagram:

Trust in Information Presented

.13*** → Trust in Information Presented → .23***

C vs D (Coded 0 and 1) — Direct: .09*** — Total: (.13***) → Outgroup Warmth

.06** → Outgroup Representat-iveness → .32***

Mediators *r*= .62***
Indirect effect 1:   .03 [.02, .04]
Indirect effect 2:   .02 [.01, .03]
Indirect contrast: .01   [-.01, .03]
Mediation: 65%

Brackets indicate 10,000 sample bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals

Zero order correlations in parentheses

**   = *p* < .01
*** = *p* < .001

Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Source: More in Common

More in Common