Full length article

The strategic presentation of user comments affects how political messages are evaluated on social media sites: Evidence for robust effects across party lines

Megan A. Vendemia[*,1], Robert M. Bond[1], David C. DeAndrea[1]

The Ohio State University, 154 N Oval Mall, Columbus, OH, 43210, USA

ABSTRACT

This online experiment examines how partisan cues interact with features of newer media to affect how people evaluate political messages online. Specifically, we examine the degree to which obscuring the political affiliations of different online sources can influence how viewers evaluate the political messages they share through social media. We also examine how viewers evaluate political organizations that appear to strategically suppress comments that accompany their political posts. The results indicate that viewers were more trusting and more likely to endorse political messages, the less they perceived that political organizations were strategically controlling comments and the less they believed that the commenters were affiliated with a political organization; notably, these effects were robust across the political spectrum. Theoretical implications for warranting theory and practical implications for evaluating messages shared online are discussed.

1. Introduction

During the 2016 United States presidential election cycle, voters regularly received political information via online sources—including social media sites. Approximately 65% of both Facebook and Twitter users report that "a lot" or "some" of what they see on each site is related to politics (Pew Research Center, 2016). As such, it is not surprising that online platforms are second only to television among news sources (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, & Shearer, 2016). Popular social media sites have the potential to expose citizens to diverse viewpoints and counter-attitudinal political information (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015), perhaps to a greater extent than traditional mass media outlets (Anspach, 2017). Political campaigns and organizations—knowing they have access to a wide-reaching and diverse mass audience—frequently use social media sites to disseminate messages. There are a number of important implications for media consumers' increasing reliance upon online sources for political information. Although considerable research explores political campaigns through traditional mass media outlets, and a growing area of research investigates social media and politics, limited work has examined how unique features of newer media may affect the consumption of political information online. The present study highlights two aspects of social media that are quite prevalent

and have the potential to meaningfully affect how political messages are evaluated: (a) source masking and (b) dissemination control of messages.

Across a variety of contexts, people who seek to influence viewers commonly mask the true identity of information sources and/or with whom the sources are affiliated in order to hide conflicts of interest and gain influence (e.g., Hancock & Guillory, 2015; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016; OpenSecrets.org). In the realm of political influence, political organizations—including parties, campaigns, Political Action Committees (PACs), and think tanks—may disseminate their messages through social media in ways that obscure partisan connections in an effort to appear less biased. Indeed, in the 2016 U.S. election cycle, Super PACs spent more than $1 billion on political advertisements with a substantial proportion going toward social media messaging (see OpenSecrets.org). Although some PACs adopt names that reveal their political leanings (e.g., *Conservative Solutions PAC*), many others adopt names that conceal their partisan ties, economic interests, or organizational affiliations (e.g., *Priorities USA Action* PAC which supported Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton; *Stand for Truth* PAC which supported Republican Senator Ted Cruz). Without a fairly sophisticated knowledge of U.S. politics, knowing the political leanings or industry connections of a wide array of PACs would require significant cognitive investment. In circumstances where political organizations or

commenters on social media obscure their partisan ties, industry connections, or organizational affiliations, viewers must evaluate political messages without the assistance of important source cues or heuristics (Sundar, 2008).

Second, social media sites, like Facebook, enable page administrators to have broad privileges when managing the content that appears on their profiles. These privileges include the ability to delete comments or ban commenters from making future comments. Using these tools, an administrator may suppress comments posted by ostensibly neutral social media users in self-serving ways. For example, partisan organizations may promote comments that are supportive of their cause or candidate and may delete comments that espouse opposing viewpoints.

We examine these two key aspects of political messaging on social media through a controlled online experiment. The experiment enables us to test how social media viewers evaluate political messages differently depending on (a) whether multiple information sources have clear partisan ties, and (b) whether or not political organizations appear to delete user comments. In particular, we examine how these aspects of online messages affect social media viewers' trust in online sources and political messages, and ultimately the degree to which viewers support the political causes for which the sources advocate. In addition, we seek to understand how social media users' partisan identity may interact with these newer media affordances and shape impressions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Political campaigns and social media

The advent and adoption of newer media to dispense political news continues to present unique concerns in the political sphere, from earlier technological innovations in the 19th and 20th century (e.g., newspapers, radio, television) to now online platforms (Bagdikian, 1983; Kaplan, 2002; Lang & Lang, 2002). Traditional mass media introduced novel affordances with each iteration, such as audio and visual channel attributes (Eveland, 2003), which yielded different concerns about how hearing or seeing politicians might differentially impact the political process. Today, political news is increasingly distributed and sought through online platforms, prompting questions about how citizens assess the credibility and influence of news obtained online. For instance, many online platforms allow users to produce and share political news, ostensibly removing gatekeepers and circulation barriers associated with earlier mass media outlets, such as fact-checkers and editors (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Despite these concerns, political campaigns and organizations continue to use the Internet to connect with the public. More recently, these campaigns and organizations have used social media sites as a primary tool to broadcast political messages. Indeed, it is widely believed that Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns ushered in a new era of campaigning with strategies that heavily rely on online contact (Bimber, 2014). As political organizations have become more sophisticated in how they use online modes of contact, and as the tools for creating and maintaining online campaigns through multiple websites have evolved, researchers have become interested in how political organizations present themselves online and how citizens interpret their political messages.

With the shift toward political messaging online, the types of cues that voters use to select and evaluate messages have also changed (Anspach, 2017; Knobloch-Westerwick, Sharma, Hansen, & Alter, 2005; Messing & Westwood, 2014; Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl, & Pingree, 2015). Traditionally, it is assumed that voters evaluate the reputation and political ideology of a source (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Sundar, Knobloch-Westerwick, & Hastall, 2007). However, popular social media sites offer users opportunities to further judge an information source by evaluating not only the message itself, but also how those who have been exposed to it have registered their reactions through social endorsements—such as comments, endorsements (e.g., "likes"), and shares (Anspach, 2017; Messing & Westwood, 2014; Turcotte et al., 2015). Consequently, social media users may assess a variety of cues available (see Walther & Jang, 2012) to inform their political opinions.

Accordingly, to understand how people evaluate political messages shared through social media sites, it is necessary to integrate existing research that explains how people evaluate political messages, in general, with emerging research that details how features of newer media affect the evaluation of information online. The literature on political influence indicates that partisan cues greatly affect political information processing. Partisan cues clearly affect how individuals assess candidates and issues (Cohen, 2003; Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002; Lau & Redlawsk, 2006; Rahn, 1993) and how people evaluate political claims in general (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998; Druckman & Parkin, 2005). A recent study found that both Democrats and Republicans are about 15% more likely to believe ideologically-aligned news headlines on social media, with stronger effects among those with ideologically-homogenous social media networks (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Although the importance of partisan cues is well-established in the literature, the ways in which partisan cues operate in social media environments are less clear. Social media platforms allow multiple information sources to coexist, who may or may not disclose their partisanship, and enable people to strategically share and control information in ways that significantly affect how people evaluate information online.

We draw upon warranting theory to help explain how characteristics of newer media can affect the evaluation of political messages, particularly those shared through social media. In doing so, we not only seek to better understand how political messages are evaluated online, but also seek to challenge predictions posited by warranting theory in a heretofore unstudied context wherein specific source features (e.g., partisan cues) and individual differences (e.g., political ideology) might moderate predictions outlined by the theory. In the next section, we first briefly describe warranting theory and its general predictions and then discuss why these predictions may be modified in the case of political messaging.

2.2. Warranting theory

The transmission of messages through online platforms calls into question the extent to which online claims reflect an offline reality (Stone, 1995) or seem authentic and thus shape viewers' impressions (Walther & Parks, 2002). Warranting theory is a framework used to explain how people evaluate online information across a variety of contexts. For instance, recent research applies the theory to understand how people evaluate products, form interpersonal impressions, and react to online reviews across various online platforms, such as wikis, websites, and social networking sites (see DeAndrea & Carpenter, 2016). A guiding principle of the theory is that people seek to understand who can control or manipulate information that is presented online (Utz, 2010; Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009). The more information is perceived to be controlled or manipulated by the target (e.g., person, company, political organization) who stands to benefit from the message claim, the less believable people perceive the message to be. For example, people believe positive claims posted on social media about a pharmaceutical drug more when they think the company who makes the drug is not producing or influencing the production of the positive claims (DeAndrea & Vendemia, 2016). Likewise, people believe positive online reviews more when they are hosted on a website that the company does not control, relative to when the same reviews written by the same people are posted to their own website (DeAndrea, Van Der Heide, Vendemia, & Vang, 2018). Here we focus on two ubiquitous forms of information control that research indicates can significantly affect how people evaluate online messages: source masking and dissemination control of messages. We also seek to test boundary conditions of warranting theory by considering the role

of relevant individual differences, particularly political ideology.

2.3. Source masking

Source masking or *source obfuscation* occurs when sources intentionally conceal their true identities or affiliations, often to increase the influence of their messages. Masking the identity of a source or multiple sources is certainly not a new tactic or a tactic unique to online contexts. Throughout history there are prominent examples of how people have used source masking to influence others and orchestrate a false appearance of communal support. The idea of such subterfuge even appears in Julius Caesar, with Cassius tricking Brutus by writing many fake letters opposing Caesar "As if they came from several citizens" (Shakespeare, 2010, p. 1.2.329). During the build up to the Revolutionary War, political writers used different pseudonyms or pen names and published works in competing political newspapers to not only protect themselves from any backlash but also to give the appearance that multiple sources shared their opinions (Borneman, 2014).

Prominent modern examples include fake reviews that are written or commissioned by someone who seeks to enhance how people view them, their company, or their products (Malbon, 2013) and native advertising which seeks to blur the once clear distinction between journalism and advertising (Wojdynski & Evans, 2016). Germane to politics, the term "astroturfing" is used to refer to the practice of orchestrating the appearance of grassroots support for a cause or an issue when, in reality, a single entity is responsible for generating multiple fake accounts (or users) who all advocate a desired position (Hancock & Guillory, 2015). Given the many ways and ease with which sources can mask their identities online and the potential size of online audiences, the potential effects of source masking are more profound than ever.

Online comments are thought to be influential because they come from average users who are less biased than other online sources; they do not work for the company selling the product or the politician seeking votes (Hayes & Carr, 2015; Lim & Van Der Heide, 2015). This is precisely why source masking occurs. Warranting theory predicts that online comments that evaluate an entity (e.g., person, company, political organization) are only influential to the extent that viewers believe that the entity being evaluated cannot control or manipulate others' evaluations. Cues, which indicate that online commenters are not average users but instead affiliated with the entity they are evaluating, reduce the warranting value of any claims online commenters make, and thus the degree to which the claims are influential (e.g., DeAndrea & Vendemia, 2016). As such, when it comes to comments that accompany political messages on social media, the tenets of warranting theory would support the following prediction:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). The more viewers believe that online commenters are affiliated with a target (i.e., political organization) that posts messages on social media, the less the viewers trust the commenters and the opinions the commenters and political organization espouse.

The application of warranting theory to the evaluation of political messages on social media raises interesting questions about the boundary conditions of the theory. As previously noted, people are greatly influenced by partisan cues attached to information sources. Online or offline, one should expect individuals to be more likely to favor messages that come from sources who share their same political ideology and oppose messages from those who do not (see Cohen, 2003; Green et al., 2002). Although past research guided by warranting theory has explored information control in variety of online settings (e.g., DeAndrea & Vendemia, 2016; DeAndrea, Van Der Heide, & Easley, 2014; DeAndrea, Tong, et al., 2018), no work to our knowledge has considered how viewer characteristics or individual differences might make information control cues more salient or impactful. Warranting theory suggests that people should discount user-generated comments about a target the more they believe that the commenters are affiliated with the target, regardless of the political leanings of the

commenters or the target. However, given how important information about partisanship can be to the evaluation of political information, it is unclear if online viewers detect and evaluate all cues that connect commenters to partisan organizations in the same way. Specifically, it is possible that people might detect and view affiliations between commenters and organizations differently depending on whether the affiliation is with an organization that supports or opposes their own political ideology. Accordingly, people may only discount messages from commenters who are affiliated with a political organization that opposes their own political views. Essentially, we seek to explore if partisan cues moderate main effects predicted by warranting theory through the following research question:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): Does the political ideology of a political organization interact with the political ideology of viewers to influence (a) how viewers judge the affiliations of online commenters, and (b) the degree to which viewers trust and support political messages posted by online commenters?

2.4. Dissemination control of messages

In addition to source masking, social media sites enable those who post a message to potentially control reactions to the message through the control of comments—referred to as *dissemination control*. Warranting theory suggests that online comments are less influential the more people believe that a target is controlling their dissemination (DeAndrea, 2014; DeAndrea, Tong, & Lim, 2018). As such, online political comments should be less influential the more viewers believe that a political organization is controlling the dissemination of comments. Again, this is a main effect that is predicted to occur regardless of the political leanings of the policy organization that is controlling the comments:

Hypothesis 2 (H2). The more viewers believe that online comments are deleted by a target (i.e., political organization) that posts messages on social media, the less the viewers trust the commenters and the opinions the commenters and political organization espouse.

Might people be less likely to report dissemination control of comments or minimize its importance when comments are controlled by a political organization that shares their own political views? We can again test the boundary conditions of warranting theory by exploring if people detect and react differently to the strategic control of comments depending on who is controlling them:

Research Question 2 (RQ2): Does the political ideology of a political organization interact with the political ideology of viewers to influence (a) how viewers detect comment dissemination control, and (b) how perceptions of dissemination control influence the evaluation of the online comments?

3. Method

3.1. Research design overview

A 3 × 2 × 2 between-subjects online experiment was conducted. Participants (N = 758) viewed a mock Facebook post showing a policy advertisement about the benefits of raising the minimum wage. A section for user-generated comments also appeared with the policy advertisement. The Facebook post varied the political affiliation of the organization posting the policy advertisement (liberal, conservative, nonpartisan), whether or not the Facebook commenters were affiliated with the political organization (affiliated vs. non-affiliated), and whether or not the political organization appeared to remove online comments (deletion vs. no deletion).

3.2. Sample

A sample of 758 undergraduate student participants was recruited

from a large Midwestern university. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 57 (*M* = 20.63, *SD* = 3.10), with 57% of the sample identifying as female and 43% identifying as male. Subjects identified as "Caucasian/ White" (76.4%), "Asian/Asian-American/Pacific Islander" (9.6%), "African-American/Black" (8.6%), "Hispanic/Latino/a" (2.2%), "Native American" (0.3%), and "Other" (2.4%); 0.5% of participants chose not to their report their race/ethnicity. Participants received extra course credit in exchange for their participation.

3.3. Stimulus materials

The content of the stimulus materials was inspired by actual political posts and comments on Facebook and the manipulation of commenter affiliation and comment deletion followed the procedures successfully employed in a recent study examining pharmaceutical advertisements on Facebook (DeAndrea & Vendemia, 2016). The researchers created all stimulus materials for the purpose of this study. Across conditions, participants saw a policy advertisement that an organization purportedly posted to Facebook. The policy advertisement asked viewers to vote in favor of Prop 206 supporting raising the minimum wage. The advertisement always contained the same claim: "2 in 3 single moms in our state will be positively affected by raising the minimum wage." The advertisement was accompanied by three comments from supporters of Prop 206. See Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 for Prop 206 sample stimuli.

3.3.1. Political organization affiliation

The political affiliation of the organization making the post was manipulated as follows: In one condition, the post was generated by a nonpartisan policy organization called the Economic Policy Institute and contained a neutral color scheme. In other partisan conditions, the post was generated by either a liberal or conservative policy organization called the Liberal Policy Institute or Conservative Policy Institute. The color scheme was modified to reflect the political leanings of the organization with the liberal policy organization in blue and the conservative policy organization in red. The other two experimental factors were manipulated in the Facebook comment section.

3.3.2. Commenter affiliation

The commenter affiliation factor was manipulated as follows: In the affiliation conditions, "Economic Policy Institute," "Liberal Policy Institute," or "Conservative Policy Institute" appeared next to the commenters' names for the respective policy organization conditions (e.g., Todd Roberts - Economic Policy Institute). In the non-affiliation conditions, nothing appeared next to the names of the commenters.

3.3.3. Comment deletion

Control over the online comments was varied as follows: In the deletion condition, the caption above the comments read: "NOTE: We reserve the right to hide or delete comments." The comment section also showed evidence that several comments were removed from the comment thread. In the no deletion condition, there was no evidence of

Fig. 1. Conservative Policy Institute, affiliated commenters, comment deletion condition.
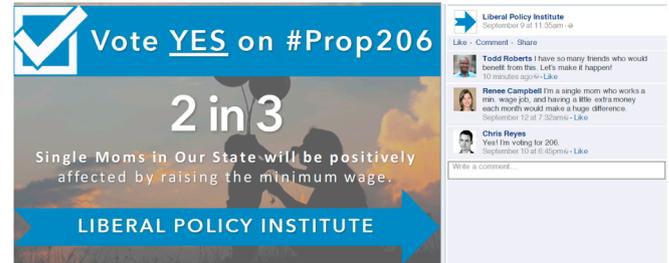
Fig. 2. Liberal Policy Institute, non-affiliated commenters, no comment deletion condition.

deletion on the page.

3.4. Measures

3.4.1. Political organization partisanship

The extent to which the political organization posting the advertisement was perceived to be objective or nonpartisan was assessed with four items measured on seven-point scales (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 7 = *Strongly agree*). A sample item is: "The [Economic/Liberal/ Conservative] Policy Institute is a nonpartisan organization" (Cronbach's α = 0.93).

3.4.2. Commenter affiliation

The extent to which commenters were perceived to be affiliated with the organization presented in the advertisement was assessed with five items (1 = *Extremely unlikely*; 7 = *Extremely likely*). A sample item is: "The people posting comments are connected to the [Economic/ Liberal/Conservative] Policy Institute" (α = 0.75).

3.4.3. Dissemination control of comments

The extent to which the political organization was perceived to be in control of what comments appeared in the comment section was assessed with four items (1 = *Extremely unlikely*; 7 = *Extremely likely*) validated in previous work (DeAndrea & Carpenter, 2016). A sample item is: "The [Economic/Liberal/Conservative] Policy Institute controlled what comments appeared on the Facebook post" (α = 0.94).

3.4.4. Source and information trust

The degree to which participants trusted (a) the political organization, (b) the claim made by the political organization, (c) the commenters, and (d) the claims made by the commenters was measured using five bipolar adjectives assessed on seven-point semantic differential scales adapted from McCroskey and Teven (1999). Endpoints include: *Dishonest – Honest, Untrustworthy – Trustworthy, Not convincing – Convincing, Not believable – Believable*, and *Not credible – Credible* (α's ranged from 0.90 to 0.92).

3.4.5. Policy issue support

The extent to which people supported Prop 206 was assessed with five items (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 7 = *Strongly agree*). These items were created for the purposes of this study and were subjected to exploratory factor analysis. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy value was 0.81 and Bartlett's test of sphericity value was significant supporting factor analysis. The factor analysis supported a single factor structure that explained 73.15% of the variance with an eigenvalue of 3.66 and factor loadings ranging from 0.72 to 0.94. The items are: "I would vote in support of Prop 206," "I would sign a petition to support Prop 206," "I would encourage my friends and family to support Prop 206," "I would volunteer to support Prop 206," and "I would donate $5 to help support Prop 206" (α = 0.91).

3.4.6. Facebook endorsement of the issue

The extent to which people would endorse Prop 206 on Facebook was assessed with two items (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 7 = *Strongly agree*) adapted from DeAndrea and Vendemia (2016). Items include: "I would 'like' the Facebook post," and "I would 'share' the Facebook post" ($\alpha = 0.85$).

3.4.7. Party identification

Party identification was measured by asking participants if they view themselves as a Democrat, Republican, or Independent. Those who indicate Democrat or Republican are asked if they are a strong or weak Democrat or Republican. Self-reported Independents are asked if they feel closer to one party. Ultimately seven categories are created; the breakdown for our sample is as follows: "Strong Democrat" ($n = 125$), "Weak Democrat" ($n = 145$), "Lean Democrat" ($n = 82$), "Independent" ($n = 73$), "Lean Republican" ($n = 56$), "Weak Republican" ($n = 154$), and "Strong Republican" ($n = 121$).

4. Results

4.1. Analytic plan

First, we report how the political organization affiliation factor affected perceptions of organization partisanship and the outcome measures for all participants. Next, we report how the comment deletion and commenter affiliation factors affected the outcomes for participants in the Liberal Policy Institute or Conservative Policy Institute conditions only. This allows us to directly test how comment deletion cues and commenter affiliation cues operate to affect the outcome measures when enacted across the political spectrum (i.e., commenters are affiliated with a liberal or conservative policy organization; a liberal or conservative policy organization appears to delete comments). Notably, focusing on the liberal and conservative policy conditions provides the most direct test of our research questions related to how viewers' party identification might moderate the effects of comment deletion and commenter affiliation on the outcome measures.

4.2. Political organization affiliation factor

An initial analysis of variance (ANOVA)[2] indicated a main effect for the political organization affiliation factor on perceptions that the organization was non-partisan, $F(2, 751) = 5.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$. The Economic Policy Institute conditions were viewed as less biased than the Liberal Policy Institute conditions but no different from the Conservative Policy Institute conditions. Next, we examined if viewers' party identification moderated the effect of the political organization affiliation factor on perceptions of political organization partisanship.

A moderation test (PROCESS macro[3] Model 1; Hayes, 2017) was used to estimate if the effect of the political organization affiliation factor on perceived political organization partisanship was contingent on viewers' party identification. Overall, the interaction effect of political organization affiliation condition × viewers' party identification was significant, $F(2, 747) = 7.34$, $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.02$.

Next, we examined how the political organization affiliation factor interacted with viewers' party identification to affect the outcome measures. Overall, significant interaction effects were found for: organization trust, $F(2, 748) = 16.94$, $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.04$; trust in the organizational claim, $F(2, 749) = 15.74$, $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.04$; trust in the comments, $F(2, 748) = 13.77$, $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.03$; trust in the

commenters $F(2, 747) = 3.13$, $p = .04$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.01$; Facebook endorsement of the issue, $F(2, 749) = 4.76$, $p = .008$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.01$; and policy issue support, $F(2, 749) = 5.75$, $p = .003$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.01$. Estimated conditional means at each level of the moderator are reported in Table 1.

4.3. Commenter affiliation factor

An ANOVA indicated a main effect for the commenter affiliation factor on perceptions that the commenters were biased, $F(1, 502) = 47.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.08$. As expected, participants in the commenter affiliated conditions, $M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.08$, reported greater commenter affiliation than those in the non-affiliated conditions, $M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.00$. Next, a simple mediation test was used (PROCESS macro Model 4; Hayes, 2017) to estimate the effect of the commenter affiliation factor on each outcome through perceptions of commenter affiliation (H1); each estimate is provided with its corresponding 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval based on 10,000 resamples. Consistent with H1, significant indirect effects were found for: organization trust, point estimate = −0.16, 95% CI [−0.27, −0.09]; trust in the organizational claim, point estimate = −0.10, 95% CI [−0.20, −0.03]; trust in the comments, point estimate = −0.27, 95% CI [-0.40, −0.17]; trust in the commenters, point estimate = −0.26, 95% CI [-0.39, −0.16]; Facebook endorsement of the issue, point estimate = −0.09, 95% CI [-0.20, −0.004]; and policy issue support, point estimate = −0.10, 95% CI [-0.19, −0.02].[4]

Next, we examined if participants reacted to the commenter affiliation factor differently depending on viewers' party identification and whether they were in the Liberal or Conservative Policy Institute conditions (RQ1). Moderated, moderated mediation (PROCESS macro Model 11; Hayes, 2017) was tested (see Fig. 3 for illustration). Significance tests revealed no evidence of contingent mediation. That is, there was no evidence that the political organization affiliation factor interacted with viewers' party identification to influence how the commenter affiliation factor affected perceptions of commenter affiliation and thus any of the outcomes: organization trust, point estimate = −0.01, 95% CI [-0.06, 0.04]; trust in the organizational claim, point estimate = −0.004, 95% CI [-0.04, 0.02]; trust in the comments, point estimate = −0.01, 95% CI [-0.10, 0.06]; trust in the commenters, point estimate = −0.01, 95% CI [-0.09, 0.06]; Facebook endorsement of the issue, point estimate = −0.004, 95% CI [-0.04, 0.02]; and policy issue support, point estimate = −0.004, 95% CI [-0.04, 0.02].

We also examined if perceptions of commenter affiliation affected the outcomes differently depending on viewers' party identification and whether they were in the Liberal or Conservative Policy Institute conditions. Moderated, moderated mediation (PROCESS macro Model 18; Hayes, 2017) was tested. Significance tests again revealed no evidence of contingent mediation for any of the outcomes: organization trust, point estimate = 0.05, 95% CI [-0.01, 0.11]; trust in the organizational claim, point estimate = 0.04, 95% CI [-0.01, 0.11]; trust in the comments, point estimate = 0.06, 95% CI [-0.005, 0.13]; trust in the commenters, point estimate = 0.02, 95% CI [-0.04, 0.07]; Facebook endorsement of the issue, point estimate = 0.05, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.13]; and policy issue support, point estimate = 0.01, 95% CI [-0.05, 0.08].

4.4. Comment deletion factor

An ANOVA indicated a main effect for the comment deletion factor on perceptions that the organization controlled the dissemination of comments (hereafter referred to as dissemination control), $F(1, 502) = 142.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.22$. As expected, participants in the

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[2] Assumptions of normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and absence of multicollinearity were met indicating data are suitable for ANOVA.

[3] The PROCESS macro download is available at: http://www.processmacro.org/download.html. The numbered model templates are presented in Appendix A of Hayes (2017).

[4] The significance or magnitude of the effects does not differ when estimated with the full sample (i.e., with the Economic Policy Institute conditions included in these analyses).

Table 1
Estimated conditional means at different levels of party ID of viewer.

| Dependent Variable | Moderator: Party ID of Viewer | | |
Political Organization Affiliation Condition	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative
Political Organization Partisanship			
Economic Policy Institute Condition	2.75ₐ	2.63ₐ	2.50ₐ
Liberal Policy Institute Condition	2.38_b	2.25_b	2.11_b
Conservative Policy Institute Condition	2.24_b	2.50ₐ	2.74ₐ
Organization Trust			
Economic Policy Institute Condition	4.07	3.89ₐ	3.71ₐ
Liberal Policy Institute Condition	4.25	3.90ᵃ	3.55ₐ
Conservative Policy Institute Condition	3.92	4.14_b	4.36_b
Trust in the Organizational Claim			
Economic Policy Institute Condition	4.47	4.21	3.96ₐ
Liberal Policy Institute Condition	4.65ₐ	4.10	3.54_b
Conservative Policy Institute Condition	4.23_b	4.29	4.34_c
Trust in the Comments			
Economic Policy Institute Condition	4.36ₐ	4.06	3.77ₐ
Liberal Policy Institute Condition	4.24	3.96ₐ	3.68ₐ
Conservative Policy Institute Condition	4.00_b	4.23_b	4.45_b
Trust in the Commenters			
Economic Policy Institute Condition	4.33ₐ	4.03	3.73ₐ
Liberal Policy Institute Condition	4.24	3.94ₐ	3.65ₐ
Conservative Policy Institute Condition	3.97_b	4.20_b	4.43_b
Facebook Endorsement of the Issue			
Economic Policy Institute Condition	3.24	2.94ₐ	2.65ₐ
Liberal Policy Institute Condition	3.08	2.51_b	1.92_b
Conservative Policy Institute Condition	2.89	2.77	2.65ₐ
Policy Issue Support			
Economic Policy Institute Condition	3.72	3.29ₐ	2.87ₐ
Liberal Policy Institute Condition	3.48	2.83_b	2.17_b
Conservative Policy Institute Condition	3.51	3.27ₐ	3.03ₐ

Note. For each dependent variable, different subscripts within each column indicate significant mean differences at $p < .05$.
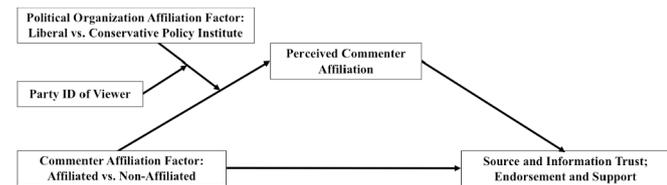
Fig. 3. The moderated, moderated mediation model for the commenter affiliation factor (PROCESS macro Model 11; Hayes, 2017).

comment deletion condition reported greater perceptions of dissemination control, $M = 5.94$, $SD = 1.37$, relative to the no deletion condition, $M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.50$. Next, a simple mediation test was used (PROCESS macro Model 4; Hayes, 2017) to estimate the effect of the comment deletion factor on each outcome through perceptions of dissemination control (H2); each estimate is provided with its corresponding 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval based on 10,000 resamples. Consistent with H2, significant indirect effects were found for: organization trust, point estimate $= -0.29$, 95% CI [-0.42, -0.18]; trust in the organizational claim, point estimate $= -0.13$, 95% CI [-0.27, -0.002]; trust in the comments, point estimate $= -0.27$, 95% CI [-0.42, -0.14]; trust in the commenters, point estimate $= -0.23$, 95% CI [-0.36, -0.12]; Facebook endorsement of the issue, point estimate $= -0.26$, 95% CI [-0.45, -0.09]; and policy issue support, point estimate $= -0.16$, 95% CI [-0.32, -0.02].[3]

Next, we examined if participants reacted to the induction differently depending on viewers' party identification and whether they were in the Liberal or Conservative Policy Institute conditions (RQ2). Moderated, moderated mediation (PROCESS macro Model 11; Hayes, 2017) was tested. Significance tests revealed no evidence of contingent mediation. That is, there was no evidence that the political organization affiliation factor interacted with viewers' party identification to influence how the comment deletion factor affected perceptions of
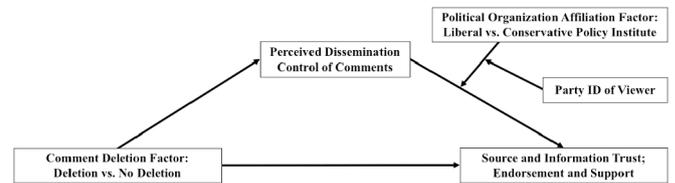
Fig. 4. The moderated, moderated mediation model for the comment deletion factor (PROCESS macro Model 18; Hayes, 2017).

dissemination control and thus any of the outcomes: organization trust, point estimate $= -0.02$, 95% CI [-0.08, 0.02]; trust in the organizational claim, point estimate $= -0.01$, 95% CI [-0.05, 0.01]; trust in the comments, point estimate $= -0.02$, 95% CI [-0.08, 0.01]; trust in the commenters, point estimate $= -0.02$, 95% CI [-0.07, 0.01]; Facebook endorsement of the issue, point estimate $= -0.02$, 95% CI [-0.08, 0.01]; and policy issue support, point estimate $= -0.01$, 95% CI [-0.06, 0.01].

We also examined if perceptions of dissemination control affected the outcomes differently depending on viewers' party identification and whether they were in the Liberal or Conservative Policy Institute conditions. Moderated, moderated mediation (PROCESS macro Model 18; Hayes, 2017) was tested (see Fig. 4 for illustration). Significance tests again revealed no evidence of contingent mediation for any of the outcomes: organization trust, point estimate $= -0.03$, 95% CI [-0.12, 0.05]; trust in the organizational claim, point estimate $= -0.01$, 95% CI [-0.12, 0.09]; trust in the comments, point estimate $= -0.04$, 95% CI [-0.015, 0.06]; trust in the commenters, point estimate $= -0.04$, 95% CI [-0.14, 0.05]; Facebook endorsement of the issue, point estimate $= -0.06$, 95% CI [-0.21, 0.07]; and policy issue support, point estimate $= --0.05$, 95% CI [-0.16, 0.06].

4.5. Post hoc analyses

Our hypotheses tested predictions consistent with warranting theory and our research questions investigated whether viewers' party identification would interact with the political organization affiliation factor to moderate the effects of the commenter affiliation and comment deletion inductions (e.g., Democrats and Republicans might interpret commenter affiliation cues differently and the effects of commenter affiliation might vary depending on whether commenters are affiliated with the Liberal or Conservative Policy Institute; Democrats and Republicans might interpret comment deletion cues differently and the effects of comment deletion might vary depending on whether the Liberal or Conservative Policy Institute appears to delete comments). Overall, no evidence was found to support moderated, moderated mediation.

However, the following analyses assess a more straightforward question about party identification: Does the party identification of participants moderate the effects of the commenter affiliation and comment deletion inductions regardless of the political organization affiliation factor? Put more simply, do Democrats and Republicans interpret commenter affiliation and comment deletion cues differently? Might the effect of perceptions of commenter affiliation and comment deletion on the outcomes vary by viewers' party identification as well? Moderated mediation models were used to assess these possibilities.

Across all conditions, viewers' party identification did significantly moderate how participants interpreted the commenter affiliation factor, which in turn altered the magnitude of the indirect effects (PROCESS macro Model 7; Hayes, 2017). For each outcome measure, the magnitude of the indirect effect increased as party identification decreased. Put differently, the more participants identified as Democrats, the stronger the effect the commenter affiliation factor had on outcomes. Conversely, when participants identified as Republicans, the indirect effects were weaker (see Table 2). A significant moderated mediation

Table 2
Conditional Indirect Effects of the Commenter Affiliation Factor at Different Levels of Party ID of Viewer: PROCESS macro Model 7.

Dependent Variable	Coeff	LLCI	ULCI
Organization Trust			
Test of Moderated Mediation	**.04**	**.01**	**.06**
−1 SD	−.29	−.40	−.18
Mean	−.21	−.30	−.14
+1 SD	−.13	−.22	−.06
Trust in the Organizational Claim			
Test of Moderated Mediation	**.03**	**.01**	**.05**
−1 SD	−.23	−.35	−.13
Mean	−.17	−.26	−.09
+1 SD	−.11	−.19	−.05
Trust in the Comments			
Test of Moderated Mediation	**.06**	**.02**	**.10**
−1 SD	−.46	−.61	−.33
Mean	−.33	−.45	−.24
+1 SD	−.22	−.34	−.11
Trust in the Commenters			
Test of Moderated Mediation	**.06**	**.02**	**.09**
−1 SD	−.45	−.60	−.32
Mean	−.33	−.44	−.24
+1 SD	−.21	−.33	−.11
Facebook Endorsement of the Issue			
Test of Moderated Mediation	**.03**	**.01**	**.05**
−1 SD	−.21	−.35	−.09
Mean	−.15	−.26	−.07
+1 SD	−.10	−.19	−.04
Policy Issue Support			
Test of Moderated Mediation	**.03**	**.01**	**.05**
−1 SD	−.22	−.34	−.11
Mean	−.16	−.25	−.08
+1 SD	−.10	−.18	−.05

Note. The lower levels (LLCI) and upper levels (ULCI) of the 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals based on 10,000 resamples are provided. Boldfaced entries indicate significant index of moderated mediation. Statistical significance is determined by zero falling outside of the bootstrap confidence interval.

(PROCESS macro Model 14; Hayes, 2017) was found for the outcome measure of Facebook endorsement of the issue, but none of the other outcomes (see Appendix A). Alternatively, viewers' party identification did not significantly moderate how participants interpreted the comment deletion cues or how they affected the outcome measures (see Appendices B and C).

5. Discussion

Our experiment had two central purposes. The first was to examine how social media users evaluate political messages differently depending on the degree to which they are aware that information sources have partisan connections (i.e., source masking) and the degree to which they believe political organizations control the dissemination of user comments. The second was to examine if social media users' political party identification affected the degree to which source masking and comment dissemination control was salient and impactful. Our results indicate that participants were more trusting and more likely to endorse political messages, (a) the less commenters appeared affiliated with a political organization, and (b) the less comments appeared controlled or deleted. Most interestingly, these findings did not differ by participants' political party identification. Our findings provide insight into boundary conditions for warranting theory as well as practical implications for political messaging on social media.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Warranting theory offers predictions about how people form impressions online. Our study explored two specific forms of information

control on social media that are thought to meaningfully shape impressions: source masking and dissemination control of messages. Consistent with warranting theory and our hypothesized predictions, participants were less likely to trust and endorse political messages the more participants' believed that the political organization that posted the political message deleted user comments that accompanied the post and the more commenters were affiliated with the political organization. Not only did these considerations reduce the degree to which the participants trusted the commenters, it also reduced their reported trust in the political organization itself.

Although our study contributes additional empirical support for warranting theory, our study differs from previous work in several important ways. Our study extends predictions of warranting theory to a relevant context and encompasses individual differences in the complex exchange of online information. As mentioned, modes of communication continue to shift and so have the ways in which people consume information related to political campaigns (Anspach, 2017; Bakshy et al., 2015; Barberá et al., 2015; Mitchell et al., 2016; Pew Research Center, 2016). The relatively unique nature of the political communication environment provides an interesting test for the bounds of warranting theory as the nature of the relationships between individuals and political organizations differs from those traditionally investigated by the theory. Likewise, warranting theory offers important theoretical insight into a changing communication environment surrounding politics. Though the method of source masking is not novel to the realm of politics, the ways in which people and organizations strategically control information differs online and the reach of such messages has expanded substantially.

Our work also extends prior research by exploring how individual differences—particularly political ideology—may play a role in online impression formation. Previous studies that test warranting theory examine how people evaluate other individuals, companies, or targets with whom they are completely unacquainted (e.g., DeAndrea & Vendemia, 2016; DeAndrea et al., 2014; DeAndrea, Tong, et al., 2018). In this study, participants were asked to evaluate political sources and messages that, in most conditions, had a clear political orientation (i.e., liberal or conservative). Because people have pre-existing political dispositions, it was possible to test boundary conditions of the theory; namely, whether people detect or interpret evidence of information control differently depending on whether information control is exerted by a similar or dissimilar entity. Research should explore whether other relevant individual differences (e.g., digital literacy) moderate the extent to which warranting effects occur.

Our results indicate that warranting effects are robust in that trust was diminished in sources and messages no matter who exerted information control (i.e., liberal or conservative) or who judged the information (i.e., Strong Democrats, Moderates, Strong Republicans). This finding is an interesting one in that a broad literature suggests political ideology and partisan cues guide evaluations of political candidates, issues, and claims (Cohen, 2003; Dalton et al., 1998; Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Green et al., 2002; Lau & Redlawsk, 2006; Rahn, 1993). However, our study demonstrates that features of newer media may determine the likelihood of trusting or endorsing political information across the political spectrum. This finding may be explained by people's underlying competing motives for consumption and evaluation of political information: (a) to attain truthful and unbiased information, and (b) to reduce cognitive dissonance through confirmatory or ideologically-aligned information (Gentzkow, Shapiro, & Stone, 2016). Future work should consider the role of viewers' motivation for judging information in newer media contexts.

However, when we considered participants' party identification alone, we found differences in how political party identification shapes perceptions of commenter affiliation. Democrats were more strongly influenced by the commenter affiliation induction; the effect was weaker for Republicans yet remained significant. Future research may wish to further investigate whether partisan differences in perceptions

of commenter affiliation exist across various political contexts and messages.

5.2. Practical implications

Although efforts to mask one's true identity to gain influence is certainly not a new phenomenon (Hancock & Guillory, 2015; Malbon, 2013) or exclusive to online contexts (e.g., Borneman, 2014; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016), the current ways in which people seek to influence others may differ based on features of online environments. There are many ways for online sources to strategically mask their identities and control information about themselves; however, the effects of these messages may be magnified based on the potential to reach a broad audience and the ease with which people can misrepresent themselves.

The implications of our findings extend beyond the political context. Our study found that evidence of deletion and clear signs of affiliation to a cause resulted in less trust and lower likelihood of supporting the advocated issue. User-generated platforms may be able to make affiliation and deletion cues more transparent to users. For example, online wikis frequently show when users edit or delete content. Although popular social media sites—like Facebook—do not make content editing or deletion apparent to viewers, users could seek additional source information by clicking on the hyperlinked commenters' names to see if and how the person or organization is affiliated with the information. Online platforms that wish to build trust with their users (e.g., commercial websites, online dating apps) may consider making information control cues more salient to users.

Entities sharing information on social media during political campaigns may possess ulterior motives and mask their identity, such as foreign governments attempting to influence voter attitudes and behavior in an election. Though the effects of such strategies on individual voter decisions remains unclear, this research underscores the possibility that political operatives may have an increased likelihood of impacting voters when they mask their true identities and affiliations. The role that social media campaigning will play for future campaigns is likely to only increase. As the political system and the sets of entities using newer media outlets to influence voter thinking increase, the likelihood that these entities will become more sophisticated in exploiting various affordances to enhance the effects of their messages should increase as well. Our research shows that regulators interested in governing how such messages appear online should be mindful of multiple aspects of message appearance.

5.3. Limitations and future directions

As is common to controlled experiments, our study contains trade-offs between internal and external validity. It is worth mentioning that social media sites, like Facebook, do not explicitly indicate that comments have been removed. We manipulated this feature to test predictions of warranting theory and see how viewers might respond if social media sites marked that comments were removed. As previously mentioned, even though popular social media sites do not show when comments are deleted, social media users surely vary in how aware they are that comment suppression occurs and our experiment provides direct insight regarding the importance of such varying perceptions. Further, it is seemingly uncommon to overtly indicate one's affiliation with a political party or issue in connection with his or her name,

though it is possible and such information is sometimes only one click away. In sum, although our experimental manipulations instilled variability in perceptions of comment deletion and commenter affiliation in ways that for the most part do not naturalistically exist, this was done to maximize our experimental variance and estimate the effect that these varying perceptions have on important outcomes. It is also worth noting that social media sites are exploring changes to their platforms to make evaluations of sources more apparent and easier for users to combat trust issues with online information (e.g., Anker, 2017).

Although our experimental inductions were successful, the effect sizes were considered small to medium based on conventional values (Cohen, 1988). It could be the case that social media users suspect that people can delete unfavorable comments and that commenters may have some connection to an entity that they are evaluating. Nonetheless, the fact that viewers' perceptions of deletion and affiliation cues influenced their trust and intentions to support the issue is an interesting finding. People are likely to vary in their knowledge of features provided by online platforms and their ability to navigate them (e.g., Flanagin & Metzger, 2008; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). Some people might be more aware of the various forms of information control than others. Future work should consider the role of digital literacy in how people detect information control and evaluate online information.

Another possible limitation of our work is the political issue used in our stimuli. The issue advocated the benefits of raising the minimum wage for single mothers. Though this issue is realistic, it may be considered a gendered issue and more pressing for specific populations. Future studies should consider a broader range of issues and topics to determine the generalizability of our findings. Relatedly, our work focused on issues relevant to the United States political system. Future work should also seek to understand whether and how the effects identified here replicate in other cultural and political contexts. Clearly the importance for online messaging, particularly through social media, is changing the political information environment around the world. Because the modes through which people interact with social media vary considerably, understanding how cultural context interacts with message processing is critical. Future research should investigate whether and how similar messages impact voter decision-making in other contexts, such as other forms of social media, sponsorship, or political issues.

5.4. Conclusion

It is important to understand how individuals process various aspects of messages broadcast over social media platforms. Although many online platforms provide access to a wide-reaching and diverse audience without official gatekeepers traditionally associated with mass media outlets, various online features enable users to control how messages appear to viewers. The present research suggests that the same message may be interpreted differently based on several forms of information control, regardless of relevant individual differences that are thought to influence message processing.

Acknowledgments

Appendix A. Conditional Indirect Effects of the Commenter Affiliation Factor at Different Levels of Party ID of Viewer: PROCESS Macro Model 14

Dependent Variable	*Coeff*	*LLCI*	*ULCI*
Organization Trust			
Test of Moderated Mediation	.01	−.01	.04
−1 *SD*	−.23	−.33	−.15
Mean	−.20	−.29	−.13
+1 *SD*	−.17	−.28	−.08
Trust in the Organizational Claim			
Test of Moderated Mediation	.03	−.004	.06
−1 *SD*	−.21	−.32	−.12
Mean	−.15	−.24	−.08
+1 *SD*	−.10	−.21	.003
Trust in the Comments			
Test of Moderated Mediation	.01	−.02	.04
−1 *SD*	−.35	−.48	−.25
Mean	−.33	−.44	−.23
+1 *SD*	−.30	−.43	−.19
Trust in the Commenters			
Test of Moderated Mediation	.02	−.01	.05
−1 *SD*	−.36	−.49	−.25
Mean	−.32	−.43	−.23
+1 *SD*	−.28	−.40	−.17
Facebook Endorsement of the Issue			
Test of Moderated Mediation	.04	.004	.08
−1 *SD*	−.22	−.35	−.10
Mean	−.14	−.23	−.05
+1 *SD*	−.06	−.17	.05
Policy Issue Support			
Test of Moderated Mediation	.03	−.0001	.07
−1 *SD*	−.20	−.31	−.10
Mean	−.13	−.21	−.07
+1 *SD*	−.07	−.17	.03

Note. The lower levels (LLCI) and upper levels (ULCI) of the 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals based on 10,000 resamples are provided. Boldfaced entries indicate significant index of moderated mediation. Statistical significance is determined by zero falling outside of the bootstrap confidence interval.

Appendix B. Conditional Indirect Effects of the Comment Deletion Factor at Different Levels of Party ID of Viewer: PROCESS Macro Model 7

Dependent Variable	*Coeff*	*LLCI*	*ULCI*
Organization Trust			
Test of Moderated Mediation	.01	−.01	.03
−1 *SD*	−.31	−.44	−.20
Mean	−.29	−.40	−.20
+1 *SD*	−.27	−.39	−.18
Trust in the Organizational Claim			
Test of Moderated Mediation	.004	−.003	.02
−1 *SD*	−.15	−.28	−.04
Mean	−.14	−.26	−.04
+1 *SD*	−.14	−.25	−.04
Trust in the Comments			
Test of Moderated Mediation	.01	−.01	.03
−1 *SD*	−.30	−.44	−.19
Mean	−.29	−.40	−.18
+1 *SD*	−.27	−.39	−.17
Trust in the Commenters			
Test of Moderated Mediation	.01	−.01	.02
−1 *SD*	−.27	−.40	−.16
Mean	−.25	−.36	−.15
+1 *SD*	−.24	−.35	−.14
Facebook Endorsement of the Issue			

Test of Moderated Mediation	.01	−.01	.03
−1 SD	−.32	−.51	−.16
Mean	−.30	−.47	−.16
+1 SD	−.29	−.45	−.15
Policy Issue Support			
Test of Moderated Mediation	.01	−.01	.02
−1 SD	−.22	−.38	−.09
Mean	−.21	−.35	−.09
+1 SD	−.20	−.33	−.08

Appendix C. Conditional Indirect Effects of the Comment Deletion Factor at Different Levels of Party ID of Viewer: PROCESS Macro Model 14

Dependent Variable	Coeff	LLCI	ULCI
Organization Trust			
Test of Moderated Mediation	.01	−.03	.04
−1 SD	−.30	−.43	−.19
Mean	−.29	−.39	−.19
+1 SD	−.28	−.42	−.15
Trust in the Organizational Claim			
Test of Moderated Mediation	−.02	−.04	.04
−1 SD	−.14	−.28	−.003
Mean	−.14	−.25	−.04
+1 SD	−.15	−.30	.003
Trust in the Comments			
Test of Moderated Mediation	−.01	−.05	.03
−1 SD	−.27	−.42	−.12
Mean	−.29	−.40	−.18
+1 SD	−.31	−.45	−.17
Trust in the Commenters			
Test of Moderated Mediation	.001	−.04	.04
−1 SD	−.25	−.38	−.13
Mean	−.25	−.36	−.15
+1 SD	−.25	−.39	−.12
Facebook Endorsement of the Issue			
Test of Moderated Mediation	−.02	−.08	.04
−1 SD	−.25	−.46	−.06
Mean	−.30	−.46	−.15
+1 SD	−.35	−.57	−.16
Policy Issue Support			
Test of Moderated Mediation	−.03	−.07	.02
−1 SD	−.15	−.31	−.01
Mean	−.21	−.34	−.08
+1 SD	−.26	−.45	−.09

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