Response Decoupling and Partisans’ Evaluations of Politicians’ Transgressions

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Abstract
There is growing interest in the study of expressive responding in public opinion surveys, with scholars seeking to determine whether partisan differences in response to survey items attest to genuine differences in perceptions or to insincere responses meant to signal in-party approval or out-party disapproval. This study focuses on partisan gaps in evaluations of the inappropriateness of politicians’ transgressions and tests the effectiveness of a technique designed to reduce expressive responding. This “response decoupling” technique gives respondents the opportunity to separate their evaluations of a politician’s performance from their evaluations of a transgression committed by the politician, thereby allowing partisans to both disapprove of the transgression and signal support for the politician. The technique was experimentally tested in a study in Israel (N=906) and in two pre-registered studies in the US (total N=3,172), as these studies presented respondents with a real-life transgression of an actual politician. Overall, the technique had a weak effect, as only in the Israeli study was the effect statistically significant. On the whole, these results suggest that while partisan gaps in evaluations of politicians’ transgressions may reflect genuine perceptual differences, it may also be the case that allowing respondents to decouple their responses is not a sufficiently powerful method to reduce expressive responding. The paper concludes by discussing the implications and limitations of these findings.

Keywords Expressive responding · Partisan bias · Response decoupling · Transgression

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Introduction

Supporters of rival partisan groups routinely differ in their responses to survey questions, including factual questions (e.g., Bartels 2002; Bullock et al., 2015). For decades scholars have understood these responses as attesting to genuine partisan perceptual differences (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960; Lodge & Taber, 2013). Yet recently there is growing interest in the academic study of “expressive responding” in public opinion surveys, with some scholars and observers questioning whether partisans report their genuinely held beliefs and attitudes in surveys (e.g., Badger, 2020; Bullock & Lenz, 2019). Expressive responding (or “partisan cheerleading”) is a process where respondents knowingly provide insincere survey responses to advance partisan goals (e.g., Schaffner & Luks 2018).

This paper contributes to this burgeoning literature by testing the effectiveness of a technique termed “response decoupling”, which is designed to detect and reduce expressive responding in surveys. We tested this technique in three survey experiments that assessed partisan differences in evaluations of politicians’ transgressions.

Many studies have shown partisan differences in respondents’ evaluations of the severity or inappropriateness of transgressions committed by in- and out-party politicians (e.g., Fischle 2000; Walter & Redlawsk, 2019). It is possible, however, that some partisan respondents are simply using their answers to an inappropriateness item to signal a “partisan sentiment”, e.g., in-party support or out-party disapproval (Yair & Huber, 2020). Building on Yair and Huber’s (2020) argument, the “response decoupling” technique presented in this paper gives partisans the opportunity to separate their evaluations of a politician’s performance from their evaluations of a certain transgression committed by that politician by reporting that the transgression is in fact unrelated to the politician’s performance. We expected that allowing partisans to effectively “decouple” performance evaluations from evaluations of a given transgression would reduce partisan gaps by making it more likely that partisans would report that a transgression of an in-party (out-party) politician is inappropriate (appropriate).

We test the efficacy of this “response decoupling” technique in three studies: a survey experiment in Israel (N=906) and two pre-registered survey experiments in the US (total N=3,172). All studies presented respondents with a real-life transgression of a politician, and, congruent with previous studies (e.g., Walter & Redlawsk 2019), both studies found partisan gaps in evaluations of the inappropriateness of the politician’s transgression.

Altogether, the results provide mixed but mostly weak support for the response decoupling technique’s effect on partisans’ responses. The approach had a small and statistically significant effect on right-wing Israelis’ willingness to report that the then-right-wing Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, acted in an inappropriate manner in a certain controversy. However, in the US, this technique had a smaller and insignificant effect on Republicans’ and Democrats’ evaluations of transgressions committed by President Trump and then-presidential candidate Joe Biden (Study 2), as well as on partisans’ evaluations of transgressions allegedly
committed by Republican Congressman Matt Gaetz (Study 3). A meta-analysis of the three studies provides additional support for a weak treatment effect that is not statistically significant at conventional levels.

Overall, these results suggest that while partisan gaps in evaluations of politicians’ transgressions may be somewhat due to expressive responding, a larger part of those gaps are likely driven by genuine perceptual differences between rival partisans (relatedly, see Glinitzer et al., 2021). The paper concludes by detailing the implications, and limitations, of these results, and calls for more studies to test the potential role of expressive responding in public opinion surveys and to develop approaches to detect this behavior.

The Causes of Partisan Gaps in Surveys: Motivated Reasoning or Expressive Responding?

Various studies have shown that rival partisans differ in their responses to many items in public opinion surveys, including responses to factual questions (e.g., Bartels, 2002; Bullock et al., 2015) and subjective assessments such as the severity of a corruption case (e.g., Anduiza et al., 2013; Wagner et al., 2014) and physical attractiveness (e.g., Nicholson et al., 2016).

The common explanation for these partisan gaps is genuine perceptual differences due to “directional” motivated reasoning—a desire to reach a conclusion that supports one’s existing views (e.g., Balcetis & Dunning, 2006; Kunda, 1990; Leong et al., 2019). And as it pertains to politics, a common claim in the political science discipline is that partisan identification biases partisans’ perceptions and their evaluations of reality, as manifested in Campbell et al.’s (1960, p. 133) famous claim that partisan identification acts as a “perceptual screen.” Specifically, people’s “partisan” motivations to defend their party or their party leader(s) lead them to perceive reality differently compared to their partisan rivals; this, in turn, results in partisans providing disparate survey responses. These partisan gaps therefore are said to reflect genuine responses—partisans report in surveys what they honestly believe or think.

However, several scholars have recently argued that some portion of these perceptual gaps is the result of partisans providing insincere responses (e.g., Bullock et al., 2015; Prior et al., 2015). Namely, according to the “expressive responding” explanation, partisans perceive reality rather similarly; yet they knowingly provide insincere survey responses in order to present their favored (disfavored) party/politician in a positive (negative) light, thereby inducing systematic measurement error to survey items. Notably, these suggestions accord with studies in psychology that have shown that people generally do not consider it unethical to tell lies if these lies benefit the ingroup—especially in a context of an intergroup competition (Hildreth & Anderson, 2018; relatedly, see Weisel & Shalvi, 2015).

Most studies in the expressive responding literature offer survey respondents monetary incentives for accurate answers, showing that such incentives reduce, sometimes substantially, partisan gaps in response to factual items (Bullock et al., 2015; Khanna & Sood, 2018; Peterson & Iyengar, 2021; Prior et al., 2015; Robbett & Matthews, 2018). These findings are said to attest to many public opinion surveys
being replete with insincere responses, as the monetary incentives provide respondents with a stronger motivation to report what they genuinely believe or think. Other studies, however, have offered critiques of these monetary incentives (e.g., Berinsky, 2018; Malka & Adelman, 2022). Some studies have also demonstrated expressive responding in survey items using alternative approaches (Graham & Coppock, 2021; Schaffner & Luks, 2018; Yair & Huber, 2020). Importantly, Yair and Huber (2020) suggest that expressive responding can be understood as a case in which rival partisan are using their survey responses to convey a “partisan sentiment” of in-party support and/or out-party dislike.

To date, there is no clear answer concerning the psychological mechanism(s) underlying partisan gaps in survey responses (see also Leong et al., 2019; Malka & Adelman, 2022). Accordingly, there is no clear way to discern how much of these gaps is the result of sincere perceptual differences and how much is driven by insincere expressive responding. Furthermore, it is not clear how to reduce the incentives for respondents to provide expressive responses. This study thus proposes a technique intended to detect and reduce expressive responding. We test this “response decoupling” approach, which borrows from previous expressive responding papers, in areas where persistent partisan gaps were documented: evaluations of politicians’ normative transgressions.

Partisans’ Responses to Politicians’ Transgressions

Politicians’ normative transgressions are a rather common phenomenon across the democratic world. Many studies, however, have shown that in public opinion surveys, supporters of rival political parties tend to differ in their evaluations of transgressions of politicians from various parties. Whether it is a hypothetical or real-life case, partisans report that transgressions of in-party politicians are less serious, inappropriate, and immoral compared to similar transgressions committed by out-party politicians. This phenomenon includes corruption cases and financial scandals (e.g., Anduiza et al., 2013; Wagner et al., 2014), sexual scandals (e.g., Costa et al., 2020; Fischle, 2000), and different moral violations of politicians (Walter & Redlawsk, 2019). Furthermore, rival partisans exhibit the same trend in their evaluations of various normative violations of co-partisan and out-partisan laypeople (Claassen & Ensley, 2016; see also Yair & Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2018). Notably, all these studies suggest that motivated reasoning—and genuine partisan differences in perception—underlie their findings.

In contrast, according to the expressive responding literature, rival partisans may perceive the different normative transgressions rather similarly but knowingly choose to provide insincere survey responses. According to Yair and Huber (2020), in many cases partisan respondents are asked questions about an instance that could depict a certain politician or party in a negative (or positive) light. However, since partisans are usually asked only about that instance—and thus are not given an opportunity to otherwise convey that despite said instance they still consider their preferred politician/party as better than their rival politician/party—some partisans engage in “response substitution” where they provide an answer to a question that...
the researcher has not asked about but partisans would like to answer (see also Gal & Rucker, 2011; Graham & Coppock, 2021). Put differently, some partisans use the item they were asked to convey a “partisan message” about another, unasked question.

Accordingly, it might be that in the case of partisan differences in evaluations of politicians’ transgressions, partisans perceive reality similarly—but they nonetheless use the survey questions to convey another sentiment, e.g., their support for their preferred politician/party (or their dislike of an opposing politician/party). Such a process induces systematic measurement error to survey items tapping inappropriateness evaluations. To date, most studies of partisans’ evaluations of politicians’ or co-partisans’ normative transgressions have not examined whether their findings are affected by expressive responding (for an exception, see Yair & Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2018). This paper introduces a technique intended to detect and reduce expressive responding and tests its applicability in the case of partisans’ evaluations of politicians’ transgressions. Notably, while this technique follows the logic of previous “response substitution” papers, below we suggest that it might be more suitable than other techniques for reducing expressive responding in the specific case of partisans’ evaluations of politicians’ transgressions.

The “Response Decoupling” Technique

Bhattacharjee et al. (2013) note that previous studies on the transgressions of public figures suggest that people’s reactions to such transgressions are characterized by “moral rationalization”; namely, to maintain support for an immoral actor people justify and excuse said transgressions, and more generally reconstruct immoral actions as less immoral. However, Bhattacharjee et al. (2013) also note that “moral rationalization” has a notable downside as it “requires condoning behavior that would otherwise be seen as immoral,” and people “risk violating their own moral standards or being evaluated negatively by others” (p. 1169).

Accordingly, these authors contend that people’s reactions to immoral actions are sometimes characterized by a different strategy of “moral decoupling”, defined as “a psychological separation process by which people selectively dissociate judgments of performance from judgments of morality” (p. 1169). In essence, this entails condemning the act as immoral, but at the same time maintaining that the immoral act is irrelevant to the public figure’s performance, and therefore “should not influence judgments of performance” of the public figure (p. 1169).

Importantly, such dissociation between performance and morality enables individuals to keep their moral standards intact—having acknowledged the public figure acted immorally—while at the same time maintain support for the public figure and

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1 Bhattacharjee et al.’s (2013) paper presents several hypothetical and real-life cases in which individuals support a transgressor’s performance while simultaneously condemning his/her transgression, and additional papers have shown that moral decoupling extends to people’s evaluations of transgressions of brands and corporations (Haberstroh et al., 2017; Lee & Kwak, 2016).
their performance. Aiming at examining expressive responding in partisans’ evaluations of politicians’ transgressions, this study incorporates Bhattacharjee et al.’s (2013) insights. Specifically, we test the effects of allowing partisan respondents to decouple their evaluations of a given politician’s performance from their assessments of the inappropriateness of a certain transgression committed by said politician, a technique we name “response decoupling”. If partisans engage in response substitution in their responses to inappropriateness items, allowing partisans to report that a transgression is not at all relevant to the politician’s performance might make partisans more willing to “admit” that a (presumably performance-unrelated) transgression is more inappropriate than they would otherwise admit.2

This “response decoupling” technique builds on several “response substitution” techniques used in previous studies, such as Yair and Huber’s (2020) “blow-off-steam” technique. Similar to previous “response substitution” techniques, the “decoupling” technique allows respondents to answer another “unasked question” prior to answering the item of interest (in this case, the inappropriateness evaluations). However, we believe that this “decoupling” technique might be more suitable for items tapping evaluations of politicians’ transgressions since the approach carries much less risk of backlash or “rationalization” effects compared to other “response substitution” techniques. For example, we could allow respondents to “blow-off-steam” by answering an item about the politician’s favorability prior to the question of the inappropriateness of the politician’s transgression, as a favorability item could certainly capture a previously “unasked question”. But we note that doing so may make it more difficult for partisans to acknowledge the inappropriateness of a transgression due to rationalization, resulting in no change in the inappropriateness evaluations (or perhaps even a backlash).3 In contrast, we posit that the “decoupling” technique would not entail any rationalization, as it should reduce the motivation for expressive responding by allowing respondents to explicitly decouple their assessment of the transgression from the politician’s performance. We return to this issue in the “Discussion” section.

Accordingly, we hypothesized that allowing partisans to decouple their evaluations of an in-party politician’s normative transgression from their evaluations of the politician’s performance would cause partisans to report that the transgression is more inappropriate (H1).

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2 Bhattacharjee et al. (2013) did not directly test whether allowing respondents to “decouple” performance and immorality affected respondents’ evaluations of public figures’ transgressions. Throughout their paper these authors mostly used a “moral decoupling” scale to tap the extent of respondents’ decoupling in response to an immoral action. In fact, it seems that these authors consider decoupling as a “directionally-motivated” response intended to maintain support for the public figure.

3 Indeed, in a recent study Fahey (2022) employed a “response substitution” experimental treatment where he randomly assigned some Republican respondents to answer a question which allows for stating support for former President Trump (agreement with the statement that “it would be better for America if Donald Trump were still the president”) prior to answering questions regarding voter fraud in the 2020 Presidential election and the January 6 insurrection. Fahey’s results show a “backlash” effect, with these Republican respondents being slightly more likely to endorse conspiratorial beliefs compared to those in the control condition.
As for out-partisans, while response decoupling might have no effect on their inappropriateness evaluations, it might also be that it could allow out-partisans to convey the message that said transgression is very much related to the performance of the rival politician; this, in turn, could reduce out-partisans’ incentives to report that the transgression is more inappropriate than they actually believe it to be. Overall, the response decoupling technique is expected to reduce partisan gaps in evaluations of the inappropriateness of politicians’ transgressions.

Overview of the Studies

To test \(H1\), we conducted three experimental studies—one in Israel and two in the US. All studies presented respondents with a real-life transgression of an actual major politician. The Israeli study (\(N=906\)) served as a preliminary test of \(H1\), as respondents evaluated the inappropriateness of a transgression committed by then-Prime Minister (PM) Benjamin Netanyahu. The subsequent US studies were pre-registered and included larger samples. Study 2 respondents (\(N=2172\)) evaluated the inappropriateness of a transgression committed by either President Trump or the then-presidential candidate Joe Biden, while Study 3 respondents (\(N=1000\)) evaluated the inappropriateness of an alleged transgression committed by Republican Congressmen Matt Gaetz.

Study 1—Israelis’ Evaluations of PM Netanyahu’s Transgression on Passover Night

On Passover Seder of 2020 (April 8, 2020), during the first COVID-19 lockdown in Israel, then-PM Netanyahu hosted his son Avner, who did not live in the same house as his father, on a nationally broadcasted event on TV. This event took place while millions of Israelis were prohibited, following the decision of the Israeli government headed by Netanyahu, from hosting on Passover Seder family relatives who did not live with them, including parents and sons/daughters (Shalev, 2020b). This violation of the restrictions of his own government by Netanyahu,\(^4\) and on a night in which millions of Israeli Jews usually celebrate the Passover with their families, was heavily criticized, and many claimed that this violation—along with similar violations of other Israeli politicians including the Israeli President—substantially damaged Israelis’ trust in their leaders and their decisions vis-à-vis the COVID-19 pandemic (Linder, 2020; Shalev, 2020a).

Accordingly, this study focused on Israelis’ evaluations of this transgression by Netanyahu, one of the most important, and polarizing, political figures in Israel over the last 25 years (e.g., Oshri et al., 2021; Tsfati et al., 2021; Yair, 2021). Specifically, we expected that supporters of Netanyahu, mostly rightists, would evaluate this

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\(^4\) A mere week prior to Passover Seder, Netanyahu specifically told Israelis during a televised declaration “don’t bring home [to Seder] your student son… or you soldier daughter” (Linder, 2020).
transgression as less inappropriate compared to those opposing Netanyahu, mostly leftists and centrists. More importantly, this study also tested whether employing the “response decoupling” technique rendered Netanyahu supporters more likely to “admit” that Netanyahu’s violation of the restrictions was indeed inappropriate.

Sample

A total of 906 Israelis answered an online survey. They were recruited by iPanel, a company that operates the largest opt-in internet panel in Israel. The sample is not representative of the Israeli population, as it contains more young people, right-wing voters, and Arab respondents, as well as fewer college-educated individuals, than the Israeli population at large. Nonetheless, the sample is diverse with regard to various demographic and political variables (see Table A1 in the Online Resource for more data on the sample characteristics). The survey was fielded on May 3–11, 2020, two months after the March 2 national election and about a month after Netanyahu’s transgression.

Procedure and Research Variables

After answering various unrelated items, as well as an item tapping their vote in the March 2020 election, respondents were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions.

In the control condition, a short excerpt described the Netanyahu transgression, followed by an item asking respondents to indicate the appropriateness of his actions. Specifically, respondents read the following excerpt (translated from Hebrew):

During Passover Seder Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was seen on Television hosting his son, Avner, at the Seder table. Many saw this as a violation of the government restrictions since Avner Netanyahu does not live in the same house as the Prime Minister, and the government restrictions prohibited Israelis from meeting on Passover Seder people who do not live with them in the same house.

Respondents were then asked, “to what extent do you think Netanyahu’s decision to host his son on Passover Seder was appropriate or inappropriate?” The item was followed by a seven-point scale anchored by 1 = appropriate to a large extent; 4 = appropriate and inappropriate to the same extent; 7 = inappropriate to a large extent. A “don’t know” option was also available. Those who chose it (8.1%) were removed from the analyses.

This control condition is similar to other studies that examined partisan differences in responses to politicians’ transgressions (e.g., Walter & Redlawsk, 2019). Yet, when respondents were asked only this item, supporters of Netanyahu are unable to convey a message that they still approve of Netanyahu’s performance and handling of the COVID-19 pandemic; and some of them might use this item to signal their support for Netanyahu by reporting that his actions are less inappropriate than
they really believe (cf. Yair & Huber, 2020). Accordingly, we expected that allowing Netanyahu supporters to “decouple” their evaluations of Netanyahu’s handling of the pandemic from his transgression on Passover Seder would make them more likely to report the transgression as inappropriate. The opposite effect could manifest among Netanyahu opponents in the control condition: respondents might use the inappropriateness item to signal disapproval of Netanyahu even if they thought that Netanyahu’s transgression was not very inappropriate; and the “decoupling” technique might make them less likely to report that said transgression was inappropriate.

Thus, in the treatment (“response decoupling”) condition respondents were similarly shown the short excerpt detailing Netanyahu’s transgression, but instead of being asked the inappropriateness item, respondents were first asked “do you think Benjamin Netanyahu’s decision to host his son is relevant to the question of the quality of Netanyahu’s performance concerning the Coronavirus crisis, or the two are entirely unrelated?” followed by a four-point scale anchored by 1 = relevant to a large extent; 2 = relevant to some extent; 3 = relevant to a small extent; 4 = entirely unrelated. A “don’t know” option was also available and 7.6% of respondents chose this option. On the next page, respondents answered the abovementioned inappropriateness item.

As a proxy for support of Netanyahu, a pretreatment vote choice item was used. With Netanyahu heading the right-wing Likud party and considered the undisputed leader of the Israeli right as of May 2020 (Yair, 2021), respondents who reported voting for right-wing parties were considered as Netanyahu supporters (n = 492; 55.1% of the sample), while the remaining respondents were considered as Netanyahu opponents (n = 401). Thirteen respondents who chose the “other party” option in the voting item were dropped from the main analyses since they could not be credibly associated with either side.

Results and Discussion

Overall, respondents evaluated Netanyahu’s transgression as inappropriate to a small extent: $M = 4.98$ ($SD = 2.16$) on the 1–7 scale (higher values denote more inappropriateness). Respondents also evaluated Netanyahu’s transgressions as relevant to his handling of the Coronavirus crisis to a small extent: $M = 2.23$ ($SD = 1.21$) on a 1–4 scale (higher values denote more relevance).

As expected, and in line with previous studies of partisan bias, rightists and non-rightists differed in their inappropriateness evaluations: Rightists considered the transgression as only slightly inappropriate ($M = 4.39$; $SD = 2.19$) and non-rightists considered it as much more inappropriate ($M = 5.71$; $SD = 1.89$) [$t(822) = 9.14$; $p < .001$, two-tailed tests throughout], a medium-to-large difference in terms of effect size ($Cohen d = 0.64$). In addition, rightists and non-rightists substantially differed in their evaluations of the relevance of Netanyahu’s transgression to his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic: Rightists considered the transgression as only slightly relevant ($M = 1.79$; $SD = 1.04$) and non-rightists—as relevant to some extent ($M = 2.83$; $SD = 1.16$) [$t(826) = 13.49$; $p < .001$; $Cohen d = 0.95$]. These latter results
suggest that the decoupling treatment might indeed allow rival partisans to convey a message of support for (disapproval of) Netanyahu.

Did the “response decoupling” treatment alter respondents’ inappropriateness evaluations? Models 1 and 2 in Table 1 present results from OLS regressions predicting inappropriateness evaluations among rightists and non-rightists, respectively. As expected, the decoupling treatment rendered rightists significantly more likely to consider Netanyahu’s transgression as inappropriate ($b = 0.44; p = .032$). This effect amounts to about half a point on a 1–7 scale. In contrast, the decoupling treatment did not significantly affect inappropriateness evaluations among non-rightists ($b = 0.08; p = .668$).

Model 3 tested the difference in the treatment effect among rightists and non-rightists with an interaction between dummy variables for the political group and the treatment condition. The results show that in the control condition the difference between rightists and non-rightists in inappropriate evaluations is $b = 1.49$ ($p < .001$); but this difference is reduced by 0.35 points in the treatment condition, a 24% reduction in the partisan gap. Figure 1 shows these results graphically. The interaction effect is statistically insignificant at the conventional level ($p = .212$), but this study lacks sufficient statistical power to detect such an effect ($power = 0.24$).

Overall, these results provide initial support for the decoupling hypothesis ($H1$). Still, the effect was rather small, and the specific scenario presented a transgression of only a right-wing politician and in one country. Accordingly, Study 2 sought to replicate the Study 1 results in another context (the US), among partisans from both sides of the political aisle, and with a preregistered experiment.

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Table 1 Predicting inappropriateness evaluations in Study 1

|                         | (1) Rightists (Co-partisans) | (2) Non-rightists (Out-partisans) | (3) Combined |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------|
| Response decoupling     | 0.44* (0.20)                | 0.08 (0.20)                       | 0.08 (0.20)  |
| Rightist                |                             | 0.08 (0.20)                       |              |
| Decoupling × rightist   |                             | -1.49*** (0.20)                   |              |
| Constant                | 4.18*** (0.14)              | 5.67*** (0.14)                    | 5.67*** (0.14)|
| Observations            | 460                         | 364                               | 824          |
| R-squared               | 0.010                       | 0.001                             | 0.098        |

The control condition is the reference category.
The dependent variable varies 1–7; higher values denote greater inappropriateness.
Robust standard errors in parentheses; ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$ (two-tailed test).

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5 Power estimates in the studies were obtained using the ‘Retrodesign’ Stata package (Gelman & Carlin, 2014).
Study 2—US Partisans’ Evaluations of Presidential Candidates’ Transgressions

We conducted Study 2 in the US during the 2020 presidential election campaign, focusing on transgressions related to comments that each candidate (Donald Trump, Joe Biden) made about groups that are traditionally subjected to prejudice in the US. This approach was chosen because such comments violate norms regarding explicit expressions of prejudice and because both candidates had made controversial comments of this nature, allowing for a test of \( H1 \) with the leaders of both major political parties.

For Trump, two comments that he had made about women during his time as president were used. The first was an instance where the president called adult film actress Stormy Daniels “horse face” after she claimed to have had an affair with Trump and unsuccessfully sued the president for defamation. The second quote was when Trump called his former White House aide Omarosa Manigault Newman a “dog” after she published a book detailing her time working for the Trump administration (Edelman & Clark, 2018). Both instances received significant attention from the news media and fit with a longer tradition of Trump using derogatory language towards women.

For Biden, one controversy during his campaign for president was chosen. In May, 2020, Biden was giving an interview with an African American radio host, Charlamagne tha God. When Biden told Charlamagne that he had to wrap up the interview, Charlamagne replied that “we’ve got more questions.” Biden then
responded, “You’ve got more questions? Well I tell you what, if you have a problem figuring out whether you’re for me or Trump, then you ain’t black.” The remarks led to days of controversy for the Biden campaign and Biden felt compelled to apologize several times during the subsequent days after the interview (Bradner et al., 2020).

Sample

For this study, 2172 Americans answered an online survey. The pre-registration (see here: https://aspredicted.org/n77kx.pdf) aimed at recruiting 2400 respondents but a slightly smaller sample was recruited. Respondents were recruited by Lucid, an online survey company that provides samples suitable for conducting social science research (Coppock & McClellan, 2019). Lucid recruits a sample that is a nationally representative set of survey participants based on age, gender, ethnicity, and region (see Table A2 in the Online Resource for sample characteristics). Pertaining to party affiliation, Democrats (including independents leaning Democratic) constituted 43.4% of the sample and Republicans (including independents leaning Republican) constituted 41.1%. The remainder (15.5%) are pure independents and those who chose “other”. The survey was fielded July 30–August 2, 2020, three months prior to the November 2020 presidential election.

Procedure and Research Variables

After answering various demographic items, including items tapping their partisan identification, survey respondents were randomly assigned to one to four conditions, in a 2 (politician: Trump/Biden) × 2 (treatment: control/response decoupling) factorial design.

Those assigned to the two Trump conditions were presented with the following short excerpt: Since becoming president, Donald Trump has called one woman “horse face” and another woman “a dog.” Those assigned to the two Biden conditions were presented with this short excerpt: During a recent interview, Joe Biden told a black reporter “if you have a problem figuring out whether you’re for me or Trump, then you ain’t black.”

The decoupling treatment was similar to Study 1. In the control condition, after reading about the politician’s transgression respondents immediately answered an inappropriateness item. In both the Trump and Biden conditions, that item asked: To what extent do you think these comments are appropriate or inappropriate?“ followed by the same seven-point scale used in Study 1. A “don’t know” option was also available. Those who chose it (4.7%) were removed from the analyses.

In the treatment (“response decoupling”) condition, after reading the short excerpt respondents first answered a relevance item: “Do you think these comments from [Donald Trump/Joe Biden] are relevant to his performance as president, or are they entirely unrelated?“ followed by the same four-point relevance item used in Study 1. A “don’t know” option was also available and 9.2% of respondents chose this option. This item allowed respondents to decouple the politicians’ transgression from either their actual performance as president (Trump) or his predicted/future
performance as president (Biden). Respondents then answered the inappropriateness item on the next page.

**Results and Discussion**

Overall, respondents evaluated Biden’s transgression as inappropriate to a small extent ($M=5.00; SD=2.19$), and Trump’s transgression as somewhat more inappropriate ($M=5.45; SD=2.10$) on the 1–7 inappropriateness scale. Respondents also evaluated both transgressions as somewhat relevant to the politicians’ performance: Trump’s transgression: $M=2.64$, $SD=1.27$; Biden’s transgression: $M=2.66$, $SD=1.20$ (both on a 1–4 relevance scale).

As expected, Democrats and Republicans differed in their inappropriateness evaluations of the two transgressions, depending on whether the politician was a co-partisan or not. Starting with the Trump transgression, Republicans ($M=4.62; SD=2.20$) evaluated the transgression as significantly less inappropriate than Democrats ($M=6.05; SD=1.86$) [$t(853)=10.32; p<.001; Cohen d=0.71$] (estimates among “pure” independents are reported in Sect. 3 of the Online Resource). In contrast, in the case of the Biden transgression it was Democrats ($M=4.66; SD=2.07$) who evaluated the transgression as significantly less inappropriate than Republicans ($M=5.28; SD=2.32$) [$t(922)=4.28; p<.001$], but the magnitude of this partisan gap was relatively weak ($Cohen d=0.28$). Given that Biden apologized for his comments (whereas Trump did not apologize), Democrats may have felt more at liberty to identify the comments as inappropriate. Combining the two transgressions, co-partisans evaluated their politician’s transgression ($M=4.64; SD=2.13$) as significantly less inappropriate than out-partisans ($M=5.66; SD=2.14$) [$t(1777)=10.07; p<.001; Cohen d=0.48$].

Also as expected, in both the Trump and Biden conditions partisans differed in their relevance evaluations, with co-partisans evaluating the politician’s transgression ($M=2.25; SD=1.18$) as significantly less relevant to the politician’s performance compared to out-partisans ($M=3.04; SD=1.17$) [$t(1720)=14.00; p<.001; Cohen d=0.68$].

Did the “response decoupling” manipulation affect partisans’ inappropriateness evaluations? In keeping with the pre-registration, we first present the co-partisan results. Next, we present the results among out-partisans, followed by a combined analysis of both co-partisans and out-partisans. The main text below presents the analyses combining the two transgressions, with results from OLS regressions presented in Table 2. Table A4 in Sect. 2 in the Online Resource presents the separate analyses of the Trump and Biden transgressions. The results of these separate analyses are very similar to the combined analyses presented in the main text.

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6 In retrospect, since at the time Joe Biden was only a presidential candidate, the item should have asked whether the comments of Joe Biden are relevant to how he would perform as president. Still, it is likely that most respondents properly understood the question’s intention, and it should be noted that the results of the Biden transgressions conditions are similar to those of the Trump transgressions conditions.
Among co-partisans (Model 1), the moral decoupling manipulation has a positive but small and insignificant effect ($b = 0.12; p = .398$), with a similar magnitude of effect among out-partisans in Model 2 only in the opposite direction ($b = -0.12; p = .389$). Figure 2 shows these results graphically. The Decoupling × Co-partisan interaction (Model 3) is, as in Study 1, positive, attesting to a reduction of the partisan gap by about 21% compared to the control condition. This estimate is insignificant at conventional levels ($b = 0.24; p = .228$), but Study 2 also has low statistical power to detect this interaction effect ($power = 0.23$).

### Table 2 Predicting inappropriateness evaluations in Study 2

|                      | (1) Co-partisans | (2) Out-partisans | (3) Combined |
|----------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| Response decoupling  | 0.12 (0.15)      | -0.12 (0.14)      | -0.12 (0.14)|
| Co-partisan          |                  |                   |             |
| Decoupling × co-partisan |        |                   | 0.24 (0.20) |
| Constant             | 4.58*** (0.11)   | 5.72*** (0.10)    | 5.72*** (0.10)|
| Observations         | 839              | 940               | 1779        |
| R-squared            | 0.001            | 0.001             | 0.055       |

The control condition is the reference category
The dependent variable varies 1–7; higher values denote greater inappropriateness
Robust standard errors in parentheses; ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$ (two-tailed test)

![Figure 2](image.png)

*Note.* Whiskers denote 95% confidence intervals. The solid line on the y-axis denotes the midpoint of the scale (4).

**Fig. 2** Study 2—experimental results
Overall, however, while the decoupling treatment did somewhat reduce the partisan gap, the results of Table 2 provide weak support for H1.

Overall, Study 1 found a weak but significant effect for the response decoupling technique while Study 2 did not. Faced with somewhat inconclusive results, we decided to conduct a third experiment. Importantly, while the transgressions in both studies were obviously inappropriate, they would perhaps not be universally viewed as inappropriate and morally reprehensible. Accordingly, in Study 3 we focused on transgressions of a real-life politician that are more clearly inappropriate and reprehensible. We reasoned that when a transgression is undoubtably morally reprehensible, allowing supporters of the politician to decouple the transgression from the politician’s behavior is likely to exert a stronger effect given that the supporters will have a hard time justifying such a transgression (see Bhattacharjee et al., 2013). In addition, unlike Studies 1 and 2, the politician in question in Study 3 was not a nationally prominent leader, and we believed partisan respondents might have less emotional attachment to him as well as more readiness to criticize his actions, leading to a stronger “decoupling effect”.

Study 3—US Partisans’ Evaluations of a Republican Congressman’s Transgressions

In 2021, Representative Matt Gaetz, a Republican member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Florida, was identified as the subject of an investigation by federal prosecutors for potentially violating sex trafficking laws. Specifically, the investigation focused on whether Gaetz had a sexual relationship with a 17-year-old woman and paid her to travel with him (Schmidt et al., 2021). Coverage of the Gaetz investigation was reported in national news outlets throughout 2021 owing in part to the fact that Gaetz is a loyal ally of Donald Trump and one of many Republicans who vocally spread misinformation relating to the integrity of the 2020 presidential election. Nevertheless, since Gaetz represents just one of 435 congressional districts in the United States, his national profile is much more limited than that of the politicians from the first two studies.

Sample

The sample for this study came from a module to the 2021 Cooperative Election Study (CES), which was administered online by YouGov. YouGov is a high-quality online survey firm that uses a matched random sample design to produce nationally representative samples of the U.S. adult population (see Table A2 in the Online Resource for sample characteristics). Overall, the sample consists of 1000 adult Americans. Democrats (including independents who leaned Democratic) constituted 46.5% of the sample and Republicans (including leaners) constituted 32.6%. The survey was in the field from November 3–December 7, 2021. We completed a pre-registration for our analysis before the survey went into the field (see here: https://aspredicted.org/zr36s.pdf).
**Procedure and Research Variables**

After answering various unrelated items, respondents were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the control condition, respondents read that...

Matt Gaetz, a Republican member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Florida, is being investigated by the Justice Department for having a sexual relationship with a 17-year-old girl and paying for her to travel with him across state lines.

And were then asked: “If the accusations are true, to what extent do you think Gaetz’s behavior is appropriate or inappropriate?” followed by the same seven-point scale used in Studies 1–2. A “don’t know” option was also available. Those who chose it (7.3%) were removed from the analyses.

In the treatment (“decoupling”) condition, after reading the short excerpt respondents first answered a four-point relevance item: “To the extent that these accusations are true, do you think Gaetz’s behavior is relevant to his performance as a member of Congress and how he represents his constituents, or is it entirely unrelated?” (A “don’t know” option was also available and 16.1% of respondents chose this option). This item provides an opportunity for respondents to decouple Gaetz’s alleged transgressions from his performance as a member of Congress. Respondents then answered the inappropriateness item.

**Results and Discussion**

Respondents evaluated Gaetz’s alleged transgressions as very inappropriate: $M = 6.36$ ($SD = 1.51$) on the 1–7 inappropriateness scale. Respondents also evaluated these transgressions as relevant to Gaetz’s performance: $M = 3.07$ ($SD = 1.14$) on a 1–4 scale. In this study, Democrats and Republicans only slightly differed in their inappropriateness evaluations: Democrats ($M = 6.55$; $SD = 1.34$) considered the transgression only slightly more inappropriate than Republicans ($M = 6.13$; $SD = 1.69$) [$t(751) = 3.82; p < .001; Cohen d = 0.28$]. There was a larger partisan gap on the relevance item: Democrats ($M = 3.46$; $SD = 0.90$) considered Gaetz’s transgressions more relevant to his performance than Republicans ($M = 2.45$; $SD = 1.20$) [$t(689) = 12.50; p < .001; Cohen d = 0.98$].

In contrast to our preregistered hypothesis, the “response decoupling” treatment did not significantly affect Republicans’ (i.e., the co-partisans) inappropriateness evaluations. Model 1 in Table 3 shows a very small and insignificant effect of the decoupling treatment among Republicans ($b = 0.03; p = .875$). In fact, the results of Model 3, which tests the treatment effect on the partisan gap, shows that the gap in fact slightly increases in the decoupling condition ($b = -0.10; p = .680$)—from 0.38 to 0.48—since Democrats were slightly more likely to consider Gaetz’s transgressions as very inappropriate in the decoupling condition (Model 2). Figure 3 shows these results graphically.
Table 3  Predicting inappropriateness evaluations in Study 3

|                    | (1) Republican (Co-partisans) | (2) Democrat (Out-partisans) | (3) Combined          |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Response decoupling| 0.03 (0.19)                   | 0.13 (0.13)                 | 0.13 (0.13)           |
| Republican         |                               | −0.38* (0.17)               | −0.10 (0.23)          |
| Decoupling × republican |                        |                             |                       |
| Constant           | 6.12*** (0.14)                | 6.49*** (0.09)              | 6.49*** (0.09)        |
| Observations       | 305                           | 448                         | 753                   |
| R-squared          | 0.00                          | 0.00                        | 0.02                  |

The control condition is the reference category
The dependent variable varies 1–7; higher values denote greater inappropriateness
Robust standard errors in parentheses; ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05 (two-tailed test)

Note. Whiskers denote 95% confidence intervals. The solid line on the y-axis denotes the midpoint of the scale (4).

Fig. 3  Study 3—experimental results

Notably, while in Study 3 the experimental results are very week, Studies 1–2 found that the decoupling treatment reduced the partisan gap by 20–25%, not a minor reduction given the rather mundane nature of this manipulation. To improve the precision of the estimates obtained in our studies, the next section presents a (not pre-registered) meta-analysis.
As Costa et al., (2018, p. 11) explain, a meta-analysis “gives more weight to studies that measure the treatment effect with more precision”. The combined, meta-analysis estimate of the effect of the response decoupling treatment for co-partisans in the three studies, using a random effects model, is 0.18, and this estimate is only marginally significant ($z = 1.74; p = .081; 95\% \text{ CI } -0.02, 0.38$). Figure 4 presents these estimates graphically. More generally, the meta-analysis estimate for the Decoupling × Co-partisan interaction in the three studies, using a random effects model, is 0.15, which is insignificant ($z = 1.15; p = .250; 95\% \text{ CI } -0.11, 0.42$). Figure 5 presents these estimates graphically.

Using fixed effects models for all analyses presented in this section results in very similar estimates (results not shown).
Discussion

In three experiments fielded in two different political systems, this paper finds overall weak support for the efficacy of a “response decoupling” technique intended to reduce expressive responding in survey items. Focusing on partisans’ evaluations of the inappropriateness of transgressions committed by co-partisan and out-partisan politicians, the paper shows that a manipulation intended to “decouple” evaluations of performance from evaluations of the transgression—specifically, answering another short item prior to an inappropriateness item—failed to consistently reduce the partisan gap in reported inappropriateness evaluations. The decoupling effect among co-partisans of the transgressing politician was significant only in one study, and the estimates obtained from a meta-analysis were not significant at conventional levels. What conclusions can be drawn from these results?

First, these results could be taken as evidence that expressive responding is not particularly common in surveys tapping partisans’ evaluations of politicians’ transgressions; that is, partisan gaps in evaluations of said transgressions are mostly the result of genuine partisan perceptual differences rather than partisan cheerleading (relatedly, see also Berinsky, 2018; Malka & Adelman, 2022). If this is indeed true, then it helps researchers to better contextualize the large partisan gap in what people think and believe about politics. Specifically, these partisan differences in survey responses are consequential for the stability of democratic political systems since they reflect true beliefs and attitudes rather than simply expressive responding. This is especially so since both politicians and the public observe the results of public opinion surveys and can also be affected by them.

Nonetheless, it is also possible that the specific experimental manipulation employed in the paper—a subtle intervention—was not powerful enough to eliminate expressive responding. Expressive responding occurs because a survey is a low stakes context where providing dishonest or misleading responses usually does not have any real consequences or costs for the individual. Many respondents who wish to answer questions in an expressive way may not change their calculus merely because they are first offered the opportunity to decouple a co-politician’s transgression from the job that the politician holds. After all, even if the respondent is able to disconnect the politician’s behavior from his/her job performance, they may still wish to refrain from publicly expressing dissatisfaction with the politician for fear of how that dissatisfaction may undermine the politician’s status or power in the future—especially so if the politician’s transgression is not very serious such that rating it appropriate (or not very inappropriate) does not make partisan respondents feel as if they condoned an outrageous, unjustifiable action. And, notably, in Study 3, which showed the most severe transgression, rival partisans were very much in agreement that the transgression was very inappropriate.

Ultimately, then, the results of the paper seem to provide support for the suggestion that, when they exist, a significant share of partisan gaps in inappropriateness evaluations are genuine. This comports with another recent study which
examined the presence of expressive responding in survey items—this time in response to a factual item—and concluded that a reduction of about 25% in the partisan gap following a treatment specifically intended to reduce expressive responding signifies that “expressive responding can only partially account” for the disparate survey responses that rival partisans gave (Glinitzer et al., 2021, p. 1053; see also Malka & Adelman, 2022).

That said, we acknowledge that our test of the “decoupling” technique is preliminary, and future studies, including studies employing different techniques with the intention of reducing “response substitution”, might find different results. And given that several different recent studies—including Yair and Huber (2020) and Graham and Coppock (2021)—show that adding one survey item prior to the item of interest substantially reduces partisan gaps, at the very least it seems appropriate to be cautious as to the magnitude of genuine perceptual differences. As noted earlier, we reasoned that our “decoupling” technique would be more suitable for reducing expressive responding in assessments of normative transgressions than other “response substitution” techniques (e.g., Graham & Coppock, 2021; Yair & Huber, 2020) since it carried less risk of rationalization (cf. Fahey, 2022). But given our mostly null results, we consider future tests of the “blow-off-steam” technique, such as asking directly about support for or favorability of the transgressing politician prior to asking about the inappropriateness of the transgression—as well as potential similar techniques—as an important next step in this burgeoning research program.

Regardless of the true effect of expressive responding on survey items, the limited results of this paper are also important to report since publication of inconclusive results of experimental manipulations is crucial for reducing publication bias in the social sciences (e.g., Franco et al., 2014).

Some important limitations should be noted. First, there were some important differences between the Israeli and the US studies. Unlike the three US transgressions, the Netanyahu transgression is arguably more related to his actual performance; and thus it might be that it is mostly in such cases—where the transgression is in fact related to the politician’s performance—that decoupling works. Future research could tackle this possibility. Additionally, the Israeli study was fielded several weeks after the national election while the US studies were either fielded several months prior to the presidential election (Study 2) or a year prior to the congressional elections (Study 3); and it is possible that US respondents were less likely to report honest responses due to fears that doing so would make their preferred in-party politician look worse prior to the upcoming elections. These potential “temporal effects” could be investigated in future studies.

Second, the samples in the three studies suffer from different problems. The Israeli sample is not representative of the Israeli population.8 In the US case, some scholars have raised concerns regarding the data quality in Lucid at the time of our Study 2 (Aronow et al., 2020; Peyton et al., 2021). While in the latter case dropping respondents who answered the survey very quickly did not alter the results (see

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8 That said, testing for moderating effects in this sample (namely, across age, gender, education, and religiosity) we did not find evidence of any heterogenous effects (analyses not shown).
additional analyses in Sect. 2 of the Online Resource), it is possible that low data quality has contributed to the null effects found in Study 2. Finally, all three studies were underpowered to detect small interaction effects.

Finally, our three studies all included real-life cases. While doing so no doubt improves a study’s ecological validity, and while using hypothetical case studies have been criticized by some scholars in recent years (e.g., McDonald, 2020; see also Incerti, 2020), real-life scenarios nonetheless entail pretreated subjects (Druckman & Leeper, 2012). Thus, future studies could test the effectiveness of the decoupling technique in hypothetical case studies.

In sum, this paper contributes to the burgeoning expressive responding literature by finding that a response decoupling technique had an overall weak and inconsistent effect on partisans’ evaluations of the inappropriateness of politicians’ transgressions. More studies on this issue—perhaps studies that would pit the decoupling treatment against other techniques to detect partisan cheerleading—would certainly contribute to our understanding of the “partisan mind”.

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