Americans Can Imagine Changing Partisan Affiliation: Evidence from Hypothetical Scenarios*

Alexander Coppock, Donald P. Green, and Ethan Porter[†]

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Abstract

While attempts to change Americans' partisanship via persuasive treatments largely fail, partisanship can and does change over time. In this paper, we first confirm, via survey and field experiments, that typical campaign messaging in the United States does not budge partisanship. We then present experiments in which participants encounter extraordinary hypothetical scenarios (e.g., one party causes economic collapse) before reporting what their partisanship would be under such circumstances. Twelve percent of partisans imagine switching parties in our pro-out-party hypothetical conditions, compared with five percent in our control hypotheticals in which the status quo persists, for a 7 percentage point (SE 1.5 points) difference. These hypothetical shifts are on par with the largest changes in American macropartisanship ever recorded. While the act of ruminating on hypothetical scenarios is not followed by changes in partisanship measured post-treatment, our evidence suggests that extraordinary world events may be able to shift partisanship.

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Data Availability: A replication archive with the code and data necessary to reproduce all findings will be made available on Dataverse upon publication.

Preregistration: The design and analysis of the field experiment and second hypotheticals experiment were pre-registered. Anonymized versions of these documents are available in the appendix, along with details of the few deviations we made.

Few literatures in political science are more extensive than the accumulated body of scholarship on partisan evaluations and attachments. Spanning several decades and drawing data from many countries, the study of voters' views about political parties encompasses a broad array of theoretical perspectives and research methods. The vitality of the literature on partisan attitudes – a capacious term that includes the affective sense of identification with a party as well as the cognitive assessments of parties' attributes and competencies – reflects their strong correlation with evaluations and preferences related to day-to-day politics. Partisans of different stripes often have sharply divergent opinions about how things are going, who is to blame, and what should be done. This pattern is especially pronounced in the United States, where partisan conflict has intensified in recent decades.

Can people be persuaded to change their partisanship? Is there an advertisement, a speech, a debate, an appeal to principle, or a political event that could turn a Republican into a Democrat or a Democrat into a Republican? If that seems too ambitious, what about more modest change? Can very strong Republicans, for example, be turned into less strong Republicans? Can independents be induced to lean Democratic?

One answer to all of the above questions is an across-the-board "no." Partisanship is said to be the "unmoved mover."[1] The "unmoved" portion of the claim conveys the idea that no force can change individual partisanship. The "mover" portion of the claim, meanwhile, asserts that partisanship itself has effects on downstream outcomes like policy attitudes and vote choice. (We do not take up the "mover" portion of the claim in this paper, though we note the difficulty of credibly assessing its validity if we are unable to experimentally "move" partisanship in the first place.) Yet even if individual-level change in partisanship is rare, researchers are called to account for the gradual shifts in partisanship observed when respondents are reinterviewed over long stretches of time (Green and Palmquist, 1994; Green and Platzman, 2024). In light of the descriptive evidence that partisanship does not remain unmoved, we would like to understand at least some of the causes of change, even if a complete causal model of partisan attachments is out of reach.

Our goal in this paper is to bring a sense of scale to the study of partisan change. A political event as gargantuan as the post-1965 Southern realignment clearly resulted in lasting partisan change. To date, though, experimentalists have relied on what we would characterize as feather-light-touch interventions—a survey question-order manipulation, a video advertisement, a brief criticism, statements of issue positions—to demonstrate that partisanship is immutable. If, following Campbell et al. (1960) and Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002), we conceive of partisanship

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[1] This (originally Aristotelian) concept is often cited in conjunction with the Michigan School and *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960), though the phrase itself does not appear in that text.

as a social identity, with the commitments and exposures that entails, it is little wonder that political scientists have failed to isolate treatments that cause partisan change. Typical treatments of the kind that social scientists can randomize do not speak to the scale of events that are argued to have triggered partisan change (e.g., the Voting Rights Act), neglect the extent to which partisanship is an entrenched social identity, and overlook the possibility that that partisan allegiance is informed by deeply-held issue positions (as discussed in Fowler et al. (2020)). To be frank, our own experimental attempts to move partisanship (described below) are prime examples of these shortcomings. In these initial experiments, we randomly assigned participants to video- or mail-based treatments that conveyed standard messages about the parties as they were at the time of fielding. Again and again, we do not find that such messages move partisanship.

To refocus our investigation at the appropriate order of magnitude, we need to reason about possible sledgehammer-heavy-touch interventions. The Civil Rights Era transformation of Southern politics, the Watergate scandal, the 9/11 attacks – these are the sort of seismic political events whose effects we would seek to estimate. Of course, the research design challenges are daunting. These events happen to everyone, so there is no untreated group; these events do not happen in isolation, so any observed change might be due to co-occurring developments; and these events have (observed and unobserved) causes that may have directly influenced partisanship themselves. In sum, even the most sophisticated panel survey design cannot generate data about how individuals' partisanship would have developed if, counterfactually, those events had not occurred. Our approach to this problem will be to ask participants to imagine those counterfactuals by reading hypothetical scenarios that call to mind events of similar scale. The scenarios we study are designed to approximate, however briefly, the sort of phenomena that are said to precipitate partisan change.

In the spring of 2024, we asked participants to consider hypothetical scenarios such as the following: What if Donald Trump were to win the then-upcoming presidential election, withdraw support for Ukraine, and allow Vladimir Putin to invade Poland, resulting in many deaths? What if Democratic health care policies force all Americans to rely on a government-approved doctor? What if on Election Day, armed Trump supporters shoot and kill unarmed Biden supporters? What if Republicans successfully arm more police officers and teachers, causing school shootings to all but disappear? We ask our subjects to reflect on these scenarios and then report what their partisanship *would* be under such circumstances.

While our use of hypotheticals mirrors other recent work (Hamrak, 2025), a skeptic might reasonably worry that subjects' guesses about their counterfactual selves are of little use for learning about causal effects. We grant, of course, that the design carries no guarantee of unbiasedness

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because, like researchers, subjects cannot know with certainty what their partisanship would be in counterfactual worlds. More generally, there is good reason to view claims about intended attitudinal or behavioral change with caution (Henry, Zhuravskaya, and Guriev, 2022). Even so, we offer two main defenses of this measurement procedure. First, holding to the side whether or not the subjects are correct, say, about what their party attachments would if Republican fiscal policy crashes the stock market, the fact that subjects say they would or would not switch parties teaches us about the strength of the party attachments. If subjects were to vociferously deny the idea that they would ever betray their party, we can infer the identity is extremely strongly held, but if they can imagine switching sides, we can infer the strength of the attachment is somewhat weaker.

A second defense is that subjects may in fact be better at generating counterfactual guesses than we might have thought. Some prior work on other topics (Graham and Coppock, 2021) shows that average effect estimates obtained using this method are reasonably close to benchmark causal effect estimates established by random assignment. For example, in that paper, the "counterfactual format" estimates of the average effects of learning that a state senator blocked a bill protecting staffers making sexual misconduct allegations on a seven-point electoral support scale (Democrats: -0.88, Republicans: -0.30) were very close to the average effect estimates from an experiment in which that information was randomized (Democrats: -0.95, Republicans: -0.37). Barari et al. (2024) use the counterfactual format to estimate the effect of a Trump indictment on electoral support (but do not have a benchmark against which to compare that estimate because nearly all subjects had been "pre-treated" with news of the indictment). As elaborated in Graham and Coppock (2021) and Barari et al. (2024), the reason asking subjects to imagine counterfactual *levels* appears to outperform asking subjects to report *changes* is that the change format suffers from a form of measurement error called "response substitution," wherein subjects appear to answer different questions from those asked. For this reason, we think asking subjects to report the level of their partisanship under different scenarios is superior to an alternative in which we ask subjects to report how their partisanship would change under different scenarios.

To preview our results, subjects who were (at random) asked to consider our pro-Republican hypothetical scenarios reported they would identify on average 0.56 points more Republican on the traditional 1 - 7 point scale than those asked to consider status quo hypothetical scenarios. Estimates for the pro-Democratic hypothetical scenarios yielded an average effect of 0.46 scale points more Democratic. We also calculate the fraction of partisans (including learners) who would switch parties at 7.0 percentage points higher in the pro-outparty scenarios than in the status quo scenarios. Our findings echo observational estimates of the short-term effects of the January 6th insurrection on party identification. That event depressed identification with the Republican Party

by between two percentage points as measured by changes in Twitter bio self-presentation (Eady, Hjorth, and Dinesen, 2023) and ten percentage points as measured in a contemporaneous survey (Frye, 2024).

We interpret these estimates as showing that under extreme hypothetical scenarios that unequivocally flatter one party or denigrate the other, people express a moderate willingness to shift their allegiances. In a second experiment, we replicate this finding. Importantly, in both experiments, participants respond to our hypothetical scenarios by shifting their partisanship in the direction of the scenarios. Scenarios meant to increase identification with Democrats lead people in that direction, as do scenarios for Republicans. Characterizing effects of a third to a half a scale point on the 1 to 7 scale as small, medium, or large is a matter of perspective. One perspective is that since the standard deviation of the 1-7 scale is 2, a 1/3 scale point effect is an 0.16 standard unit effect size, which by convention is considered "small." Another perspective is that these hypotheticals cause subjects to imagine shifts in macropartisanship (among this sample) comparable to the largest shifts in macropartisanship ever recorded.

Our own perspective is that at the very least, when confronted with certain extraordinary circumstances (albeit imaginary ones) people are willing to entertain changes to their partisan allegiances. Had we seen no movement in response to our extraordinary hypotheticals, we might infer that partisans responded to them only defensively, concocting justifications to resist the information before them and stand pat (in line with the "partisan intoxication" view critiqued by Fowler et al. (2020)). Instead, after being exposed to new information, they moved—hypothetically.

Even so, the effect of considering hypothetical scenarios on post-treatment party identification is a very precisely estimated zero. In other words, after considering the scenarios and in some cases imagining a concomitant shift in their own partisanship, these respondents concluded the interview with the same party attachments they had when they started. In the follow-up replication experiment, we tried to help subjects draw the connection between the hypothetical scenarios and possible futures, to aid in consolidation and persuasion (Petty et al., 1986). Yet even this effort did not lead to changes in post-treatment partisanship. While participants appeared to grant the premise of our hypothetical scenarios, their party identification, when measured after exposure to the hypotheticals, was unchanged. We tested the effects of our hypothetical scenarios on post-treatment partisanship in an effort to extend prior findings that claim that imagined change leads to real change in certain outcomes, including political beliefs (McLaughlin and Velez, 2019; Escalas, 2004). We find that partisan identity should not be included among such outcomes, as hypothetical changes to partisanship are not followed by real-world shifts.

This paper proceeds by laying out the current state of knowledge about the causes of partisan

change. We include in this review a series of reports on prior experiments of our own aimed at changing partisanship. Despite concerted efforts to find effective treatments and ample statistical precision, these interventions invariably produced meager effects. Ultimately, we concluded that this line of research – light-touch messaging interventions delivered via survey or mail – would fail to uncover substantively meaningful effects on partisan identification. We recognize that reporting prior studies in this way is a departure from the conventions of a standard empirical research paper in political science, but we think it is appropriate in this case. For interested parties, we include detailed descriptions of these studies in the appendix both to overcome the file drawer problem and convey to readers our thought process as it evolved.

In the main portion of the article, we describe two sets of experiments in which the intervention is a hypothetical partisan catastrophe or miracle. After presenting subjects with a wide array of such scenarios, we estimate the cumulative effect of being asked to imagine pro-Republican or pro-Democrat (versus status quo) hypotheticals on post-treatment partisanship. We scale the relationship between partisan change observed after hypothetical scenarios using historical partisan changes outside of controlled experimental setting and conclude that the changes elicited by our hypothetical scenarios rival the largest ever recorded. In principle, partisanship *is* movable—but this movement is likely to occur due to real-world events of a magnitude that falls well outside the scope of what social science researchers can confect.

Previous evidence on the causes of partisan change

Clearly, partisanship does change, at least somewhat. Although partisanship tends to change only gradually from age thirty on, a good deal of change occurs during one's twenties (Niemi and Jennings, 1991). Later in life, gradual adjustments can add up to important shifts over long stretches of time (Green and Palmquist, 1994; Green and Platzman, 2024).

Many public opinion scholars have offered their perspective on the causes of these changes. Fiorina (1981) and MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson (1989) argue that macroeconomic fluctuations and scandals cause citizens to reappraise the parties. Although Lenz (2013) focuses on vote choice as an outcome, as opposed to party identification, his findings would also seem to suggest that voters are especially responsive to performance. Another leading theory focuses on policy positions rather than performance evaluations. Voters are said to select their preferred party by comparing their own location on leading issues to the positions advocated by party leaders (Jackson, 1975; Franklin and Jackson, 1983). Fowler et al. (2020) notes that that canonical scholarship which purports to minimize the role of issue voting (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960) suffers from an observational

equivalence problem, insofar as it does not separate the effects of issue positions from underlying psychological attachment (but see Rogers et al. (2020) for a response). A third leading theory, inspired by evidence suggesting that many voters have limited understanding of the parties' ideological locations, stresses instead the personal appeal of prominent party figures (Harris, 1954). A fourth theory suggests that citizens are attentive to the social group imagery associated with party coalitions and political campaigns, and gravitate to the party whose partisans look most like them (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler, 2002).

A residual perspective posits that partisan evaluations have theoretically nonspecific origins, and are instead simply byproducts of respondents' broad feelings about which party is vindicated by the "nature of the times." This school of thought can be traced back at least to Converse (1964). Such evaluations may be shaped by the tone of media coverage about the leading parties. While media coverage may encompass messages about performance, policy, and personae, the specific thematic content is less important than the overall impression about the nature of the times left by the balance of media coverage (McCombs, 2014; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006; Kepplinger et al., 1989).

Each of these arguments has generated a sizable empirical literature comprised largely of observational evidence. Drawing on a combination of cross-sectional and panel surveys, individual-level research suggests that partisanship is shaped by short-term forces. Critics, however, charge that citizens' short-term perceptions are themselves a by-product of partisan attitudes (Green and Palmquist, 1990). The resulting literature is a thicket of methodological arguments about nonrecursive modeling, observational equivalence, and unobserved heterogeneity. Ultimately, although some evidence indicates that Americans have increasingly "sorted" themselves into distinct social and ideological groups (Levendusky, 2009; Mason, 2018; Brown and Enos, 2021), the causal ordering and isolation of the processes involved remains unsettled.

Experimental work on this question has been decidedly thin. In an early lab study, Cowden and McDermott (2000) attempted to change partisan attachments by exposing respondents to hypothetical election contests in which one party or the other took ideologically extreme stances; they also had lab subjects read and write briefs in support of or in opposition to the impeachment of Bill Clinton. Neither intervention moved party attachments. A subsequent field experiment (Gerber, Huber, and Washington, 2010) had better success by sending letters to randomly selected Connecticut residents who declined to state a party affiliation when registering to vote; the letters urged them to register with a major party so that they could vote in the upcoming 2008 presidential primary. This encouragement did seem to increase participants' level of party identification when they were surveyed a few months later. Gerber, Huber, and Washington (2010) also find some

evidence that as new registrants attach themselves to a party, they become more likely to adopt its issue stances. In a survey experiment, Schiff, Montagnes, and Peskowitz (2022) randomized whether subjects respond to a presidential approval question before answering the party identification question under the theory that reminding respondents of their (presumably low) opinion of President Trump would decrease Republican identification. The authors report eight specifications (the intersection of weights or not, covariates or not, outcome includes leaners or not), with the estimates crossing the significance threshold in two of them. Hopkins et al. (2020) report five experiments that estimate the effects of perceived discrimination on partisanship. Across experiments involving different ethnic groups, they find little partisan change.

Other experiments have been conducted in which respondents' partisanship has been measured post-treatment; we are aware of two such experiments that have been written up. Schiff, Montagnes, and Peskowitz (2022) reanalyze Kriner and Schickler (2014), who measured partisanship after randomly assigning criticism of the Obama administration. Such criticism markedly decreases the fraction of the sample who identify as independent and increases the fraction who identify as partisans (by about 10 percentage points). Weiner (2015) reports a similarly surprising 10 point effect on Republican affiliation, attributed to having participants reflect on Hurricane Sandy. Analysts of both experiments express skepticism that the question ordering manipulations genuinely change partisanship, leaning toward the interpretation that priming politics in subjects' minds one way or another causes them to reflect differently on their own partisan identification when answering the survey question.

We suspect that many other experiments have been conducted that randomize some treatment before measuring partisanship post-treatment but that authors do not report or do not emphasize the treatment effects on partisanship. Indeed, the Schiff, Montagnes, and Peskowitz (2022) study is part of a debate on the relative merits of measuring partisanship (and other possibly sensitive covariates (d'Urso, Bonilla, and Bogdanowicz, 2025)) pre- or post-treatment. Measuring pre-treatment could prime partisanship in a way that distorts later answers, but measuring post-treatment risks post-treatment bias. Klar, Leeper, and Robison (2020) argue for measuring partisanship (and other characteristics) post-treatment, writing "we know of no treatments that lead partisans to change their party preference (e.g., from Democrat to Republican or vice versa)." Sheagley and Clifford (2023), on the other hand, argue for measuring partisanship (and other characteristics) pre-treatment, because they find no effect of priming partisanship via pre-intervention measurement on their treatment effects. Considering the back-and-forth of this debate, it seems likely that many studies must have measured partisanship after treatment; since those effects have gone unreported, we infer that a large class of treatments including information, primes, and frames

likely have small to zero treatment effects on partisanship.

Experiments on Partisan Identification

Our own contributions to the experimental literature on changing partisanship, consisting of survey and field experiments, have been just as modest.

Survey experiments

In five survey experiments, conducted in 2018 and 2019, we randomized subjects to view professionally-produced videos variously extolling Democrats' policy performance, their personal charisma, their issue stances, and their social inclusiveness. Produced by two firms with long track records of political success, the videos were explicitly intended to change respondents' partisanship. Our tests of issue proximity highlighted those issues about which Democrats are most closely identified, such as climate change, gay rights and gun control. The Democratic Party, contends one such ad, represents "the issues we believe in." For messages inspired by the persona theory, the ad-makers presented viewers with images and audio of party leaders, from Kennedy through Obama. The ads related to economic performance relied on empirical evidence concerning the economy. These ads credited the Democratic Party for overseeing greater job growth than the Republican Party. We also tested a generic advertisement produced by the Democratic National Committee and an ad by one of our firms that contrasted the Democratic and Republican parties. In total, we tested 12 ads; screenshots of all the ads can be found in the appendix.

In the first two of these experiments, participants were randomly assigned to one video at a time. Exposure to a single ad scarcely seemed to affect party ID: the ATE in the first study was -0.08 scale points (robust SE: 0.18) and -0.06 (robust SE: 0.15) in the second (both in the direction of Democratic Party identification); the mild differences in effectiveness across videos observed in study 1 were not replicated in study 2.

Faced with these null results, we reasoned that perhaps the trouble was that a single video was too weak a treatment, so in the next three studies we manipulated the *dosage* of advertisements that participants saw. In one experiment, we randomly assigned whether subjects saw 0, 1, 2, or 3 treatment videos; in two others, subjects could be assigned to see 0, 3, or 6 treatment videos. For the dosage studies, the remaining videos were placebos (advertisements for paper towels or ice cream).

Unfortunately, what initially appeared to be small but nevertheless enduring effects were fundamentally confounded by an attrition problem: being assigned to high dosages caused some re-

spondents to exit the survey before answering the post-treatment questions. Since this differential attrition was positively correlated with identifying as a Republican at baseline, we think our effect estimates were systematically biased in the direction of our hypothesis. Learning from these flawed experiments about the causal effects of these video treatments on partisanship is tricky, but if anything, we think they provide further evidence that partisanship is hard to move. When we use trimming bounds (Lee, 2005) to address the problem of differential attrition, our estimates exclude average effects of a six-video dose larger than half a scale point on the 1 to 7 scale. (See the Appendix for further details, including analysis and a description of the treatments.)
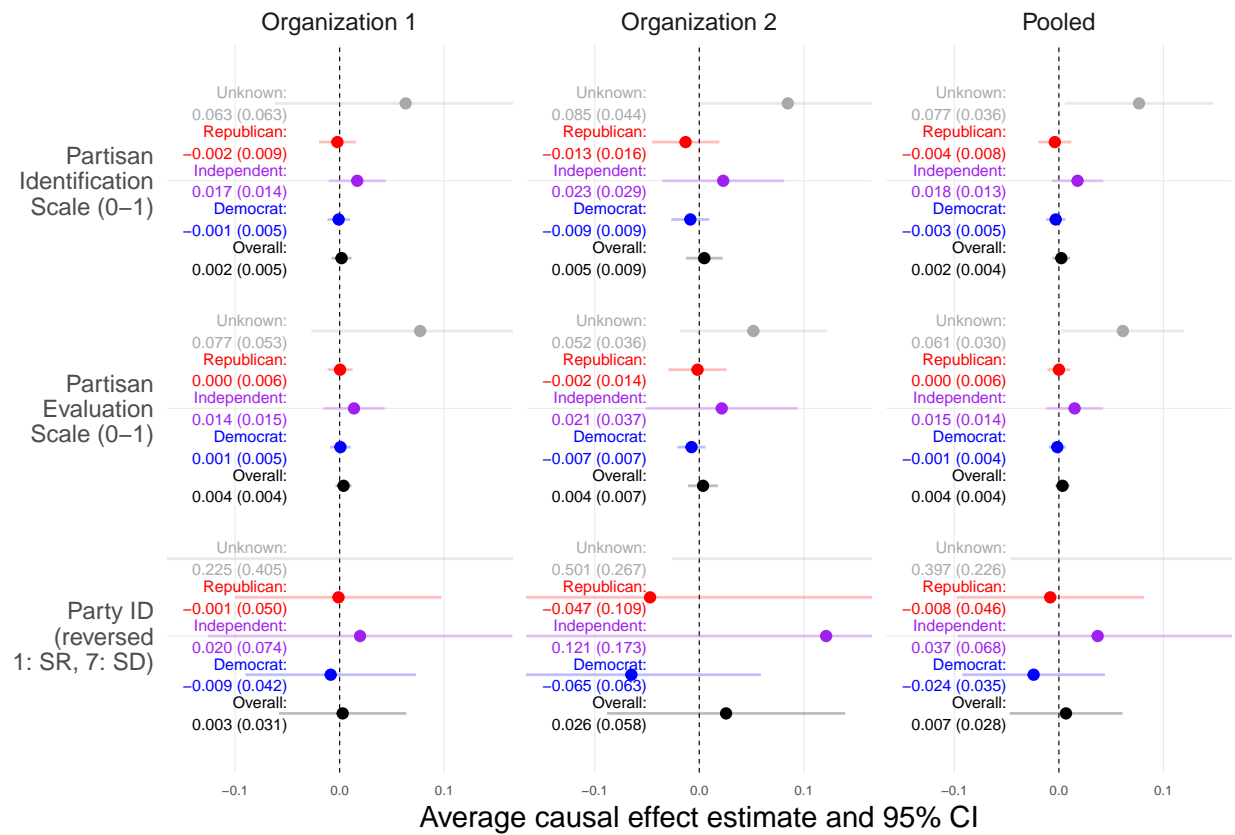
A field experiment

In the fall of 2023, we worked with two left-leaning political organizations in Minnesota to run a postcard and phone field experiment cluster-randomized at the household level. Treated participants received four postcards, two of which focused on education policy; a third focused on abortion; a fourth highlighted the achievements of Governor Tim Walz. Two of the postcards featured unflattering photos of Mike Pence and Ron DeSantis. Treated participants also received phone calls and text messages, with messages focusing on abortion access, public education and school meals. Designed in tandem by the researchers and the two partner organizations, the tested treatments were meant to bolster identification with the Democratic Party.

Our estimate of the effect of these treatments on party ID was 0.007 (cluster-robust SE: 0.028), which amounts to less than a hundredth of a scale point on the 1 to 7 scale. The very small standard error implies that we were powered at 80% to detect a 2.8*0.028 = 0.0784 scale point effect, suggesting that our design was exceptionally strong. Despite ample precision, and despite distributing multiple messages to treated subjects, party identity remained unchanged. Figure 1 displays results. The partisan identification scale and the partisan evaluation scales are the same as the outcome measures described in the next section. The overall null effect that we report (bottom-and-right-most estimate in the figure) does not appear to mask heterogeneity by partner organization, subjects' pre-treatment party ID, or outcome variable.

Evidently, these treatments are also too weak to cause partisan change. These mailers and phone calls were relatively run-of-the-mill in the sense that they sang the praises of Democratic policy and politicians while denigrating Republican leaders. (See the Appendix for the details of our experimental design and analysis, as well as displays of all treatments.) The treatments did not provide radically new information, nor did they draw explicit connections between their content and party identity, i.e., the treatments did not directly ask recipients to change their partisanship.

Our summary evaluation of the experimental literature on partisan change, including our own

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Figure 1: Field Experiment Results

contributions to this literature, is that the treatments analyzed to date by experimentalists have quite simply been too weak. Given the robustness of partisan attachments, these results may not be altogether surprising. Of course, deploying treatments that are somehow strong enough to overcome such attachments is no small feat; very quickly, we encounter feasibility, resource, and ethical constraints that preclude material increases in treatment strength. In that light, we turn now to the study of hypothetical treatments in order to get a sense of the scale of intervention that would be required to bring about appreciable partisan change.

Soliciting Hypothetical Partisan Identification

We conducted two studies that asked subjects for their partisanship under a series of hypothetical scenarios. In Study 1, we recruited 988 respondents via Cloudresearch, soliciting Republicans, Democrats, and Independents separately in order to reach approximately equal numbers of each partisan group. Study 2 replicates the design of Study 1 almost exactly (differences described in detail below) among 3,050 subjects recruited in an identical fashion, with the sample size chosen via the R package `DeclareDesign` (Blair, Coppock, and Humphreys, 2023) to ensure 100% power to recover an average treatment effect of 0.05 scale points on the 1-7 party identification scale (see Study 2 pre-analysis plan in the appendix for a description of this power analysis procedure).

After obtaining informed consent, we introduced subjects to the concept of the ANES seven-point branching party ID question and showed them the distribution of party ID as measured in the 2016 ANES. We then asked subjects to tell us their party ID using the ANES question. We then asked them to guess the partisanship of five fictional characters from the US television show "The Office." See the appendix for the survey instrument and for an analysis of survey responses to The Office questions. The purpose of these warm-ups was to familiarize participants with the 7-point party ID scale and prepare them for the experimental task that followed. In the experimental task, they were asked to provide responses on the 7-point Party ID scale to hypothetical situations that, by definition, they were unlikely to have encountered before. By asking them to guess the partisanship of Office characters, we wanted to acclimate them to the experience of repeatedly providing responses on the scale to unknowable questions.

After these preliminaries, we turned to the main section of the survey, which solicited respondents' partisanship under a series of hypothetical scenarios. Specifically, we told respondents:

"Next, we are going to ask you to consider several hypothetical situations. They don't describe real events, but these are events that could happen. We'd like you to read them and answer the questions that follow."

Imagine that the following occurs:

[Scenario]

If this really happened, how do you think you would describe your political affiliation?

[Strong Republican, Republican, Lean Republican, Undecided/Independent/Other, Lean Democrat, Democrat, Strong Democrat]

The full text of the scenarios is presented in Table 1. A careful reader might notice that this response format is different from the "branched" 7-point scale that is conventionally used to measure party identification. Even so, we think that subjects were able to use the self-placement scale to convey their hypothetical partisanship with no more than typical levels of survey measurement error, especially given the warm-up exercises. In our data, the correlation in the control group between pre-treatment branched party identification and the first 7-point self placement is 0.884 in study 1 and 0.840 in study 2, which closely corresponds to the 0.886 that Green and Schickler (1993) report (Table 9). Moreover, correlations of this size are typical of test-retest correlations when branched measures are compared to other branched measures (Green and Platzman, 2024, Table 4).

A further possible source of measurement error relates to sensitivity bias or experimenter demand. Respondents in the pro-Democratic hypotheticals might falsely report identifying more strongly with the Democratic party out of self-presentation concerns, rather than genuine partisan change. In our experiments, the introduction of unflattering hypotheticals about one's party might be akin to the introduction of certain unflattering terms applied to other social identities. This, in turn, might reduce willingness to identify with the party to a researcher without affecting one's inner sense of their own partisan identity. While we cannot rule this possibility out, the fact that respondents snap back to their earlier partisan identity after the hypotheticals suggest that they are not wary of communicating to researchers about the stability of their partisan identity. Margolis (2022) reports that, even though the terms are often conflated, some Christians who identify as "Born Again" do not identify as "'Evangelical." Analogously, it could be the case that some of our treated participants temporarily avoid the labels Democrat or Republican, even though they still would vote for their party, had we measured hypothetical vote choice.

In both studies, participants were randomly assigned with equal probability to a *Pro-Democratic* condition in which they evaluated only hypothetical scenarios advantaging the Democratic Party, a *Pro-Republican* condition in which they evaluated only hypothetical scenarios advantaging the Republican Party, or a *Status Quo* condition in which they evaluated only hypothetical scenarios in which the status quo was unchanged. The sequence of hypotheticals was randomized in each study.

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Table 1: Hypothetical Scenarios

SQ Healthcare	Political leaders from both parties try to come together to improve our healthcare system, but they fail to pass any legislation. The costs of prescription drugs, the number of people without health insurance and the cost of insurance–they all remain the same. OR Political leaders from both parties pass a bill to change the U.S. healthcare system. But after the bill is signed into law, nothing changes. The costs of prescription drugs, the number of people without health insurance and the cost of insurance–they all remain the same.
Pro-D Healthcare	Republicans in Congress have long tried to repeal government-funded medical care. Now, imagine that they succeed, and that you are diagnosed with an aggressive form of stomach cancer. Because Republicans repealed government-funded medical care, you can't afford the medical treatment that you need.
Pro-R Healthcare	Democrats in Congress have long tried to force people to use government-run health insurance. Now, imagine that they succeed, and that you are diagnosed with an aggressive form of brain cancer. Because of the Democratic health care law, you don't get to choose your provider and must be treated by the government-selected doctor.
SQ Guns	Republicans and Democrats try to pass a new gun law that both parties can agree to. But they don't successfully pass any new bills into law. School shootings occur at the same rate they do now, and the number of violent crimes does not go up or down. OR Republicans and Democrats team up to pass a new gun law that both parties can agree to. But after the bill is signed into law, nothing changes. School shootings occur at the same rate they do now, and the number of violent crimes does not go up or down.
Pro-D Guns	Over intense Republican objections, Democrats in Congress pass a ban on assault weapons. After the ban, school shootings decline to 1% of what they had been before. The number of violent crimes also decreases dramatically.
Pro-R Guns	Over intense Democratic objections, Republicans in Congress pass legislation that provides more guns to police officers and school teachers. Afterwards, school shootings decline to 1% of what they had been before. The number of violent crimes also decreases dramatically.
SQ Ukraine	For the next few years, the Russia-Ukraine war remains at a stalemate. Neither side advances far beyond where they are today. The fighting is constant but does not escalate.
Pro-D Ukraine	Donald Trump wins the 2024 election and immediately withdraws all U.S. support for Ukraine. Putin easily conquers Ukraine, slaughtering hundreds of thousands of people in the process. He then invades Poland, again killing many innocent people in his quest for domination.
Pro-R Ukraine	Donald Trump wins the 2024 election and immediately negotiates a ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine. Russia withdraws from most of Ukraine, and hundreds of thousands of lives are spared because of Trump.
SQ Violence	On Election Day 2024, Governors around the country call up the National Guard because they are afraid of violence at the polls. Their fears are not realized, however, and voters cast their ballots peacefully, without any notable acts of violence.
Pro-D Violence	On Election Day 2024, armed supporters of Donald Trump march into Democratic areas to intimidate Democratic voters. Some of Trump's supporters shoot at and kill unarmed Biden supporters.
Pro-R Violence	On Election Day 2024, armed supporters of Joe Biden march into Republican areas to intimidate Republican voters. Some of Biden's supporters shoot at and kill unarmed Trump supporters.
SQ Economy	Republicans and Democrats attempt to pass a comprehensive economic bill to deal with taxing and spending. Their efforts do not bear fruit, and their attempt has no impact on the economy or on your family's financial well-being. OR Republicans and Democrats pass a comprehensive economic bill to deal with taxing and spending. However, the new law doesn't actually do much, and has no impact on the economy or on your family's financial well-being.
Pro-D Economy	Republicans have long resisted Democrats' efforts to regulate Wall Street. Now, because Republicans have limited regulation on Wall Street, the stock market crashes. The U.S. economy collapses, with widening unemployment. You have trouble meeting your monthly expenses. Your friends and family members suffer the same fate.
Pro-R Economy	Democrats have long tried to raise taxes, over Republican objections. Now, because of Democratic tax increases, the amount of money you owe in taxes increases dramatically. You have trouble meeting your monthly expenses. Your friends and family members suffer the same fate.
SQ Camps (Study 2 only)	The 2024 election occurs. The winner does not lock up his opponents in camps and does not create camps for undocumented immigrants.
Pro-D Camps (Study 2 only)	After winning the 2024 election, Donald Trump oversees the construction of internment camps for undocumented immigrants. It is later revealed that some of the undocumented immigrants in the camps were executed. Many people, including women and children, are killed.
Pro-R Camps (Study 2 only)	After winning the 2024 election, Joe Biden oversees the construction of internment camps for Trump campaign officials and their families. It is later revealed that many of the people in the camps were killed, including women and children.

In Study 1, subjects responded to five hypothetical scenarios, then proceeded to the outcome battery (described below). The scenarios touch on issues of perennial controversy and importance, from gun control to foreign policy to the state of the economy. Study 2 added a sixth hypothetical scenario about internment camps, as well as an exercise meant to prompt respondents to consolidate their responses to our hypothetical scenarios into partisan change.

For this Study 2 exercise, after evaluating the hypothetical scenarios, participants were reminded of the hypothetical and their response and then were asked to evaluate the probability the scenario would actually occur. The goal of asking subjects to reflect on the probability of the hypotheticals was a) to heighten participants' capacity to visualize the scenarios, which prior research suggested may be linked to persuasiveness (McLaughlin and Velez, 2019; Escalas, 2004), and b) to cause participants to devote more effort to considering the scenarios, in line with canonical theories of persuasion (Petty et al., 1986). For example, in Study 2, a participant in the pro-Democratic condition would see the following as part of the consolidation exercise about Ukraine:

> After you were presented with a scenario describing Donald Trump's policy toward Ukraine leading to the death of many innocent Ukrainians, you said that your party affiliation would be the following: [participants' original response].
>
> Nobody can know for sure, but some observers have anticipated that the scenario described could become reality. How likely do you think it is that Donald Trump's Ukraine policies would lead to the death of many innocent Ukrainians?

Respondents were presented with a 7-point likelihood scale, ranging from "Extremely unlikely" to "Extremely likely." This exercise was repeated for all hypothetical scenarios. To prevent order effects, we randomized the order in which the hypothetical scenarios were presented initially, and we randomized the order in which they appeared in the consolidation exercise. The outcome battery followed.
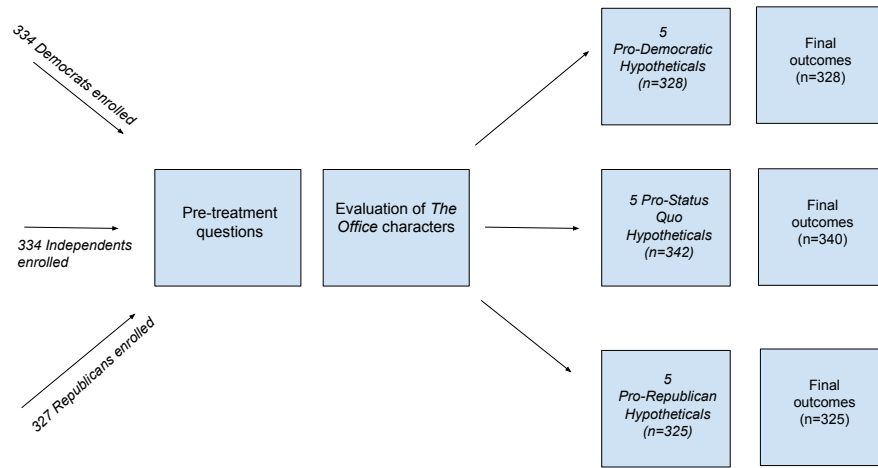
Figure 2a provides an overview of Study 1's design, while Figure 2b does so for Study 2.
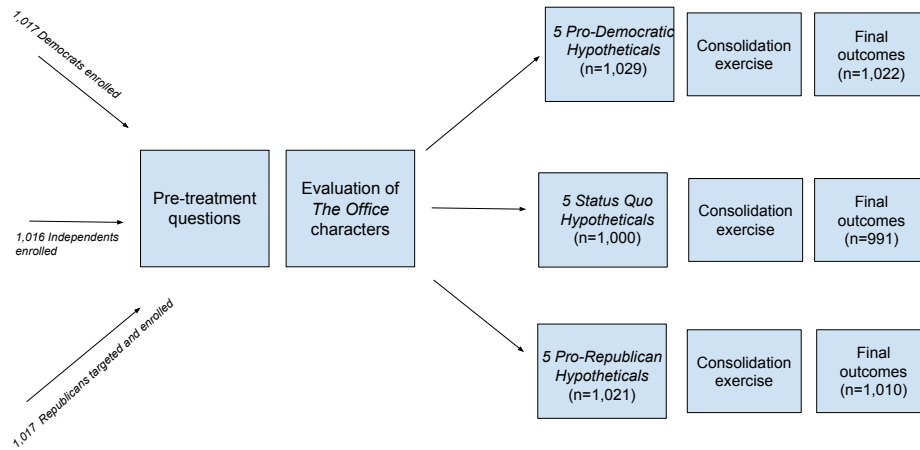
Inferential targets

Our goal is to estimate two classes of estimands.

The first class comprises average differences-in-hypotheticals, or a comparison of the average hypothetical partisan identification in either the pro-Democratic or the pro-Republican condition to the hypothetical partisan identification in the status quo condition. We calculate this difference-in-hypotheticals separately for each hypothetical category (healthcare, guns, political violence,

Figure 2: Study Designs

(a) Study 1 Design

(b) Study 2 Design

Ukraine, economy, and camps). Relative to the actual (unknowable) difference in partisanship across these possible worlds, the value of the hypothetical estimand might be too high or too low, and there is of course no way to determine its accuracy. Our interest in this estimand is rooted in a judgment call that it is roughly the right order of magnitude. We estimate these targets for the whole sample and separately for respondents at each of the seven points on the pre-treatment partisan identification scale.

The second kind of estimand is the straightforward average treatment effect of considering the pro-Democrat or pro-Republican hypotheticals (relative to considering the status quo hypotheticals) on post-treatment party ID, a partisan identification index, and a partisan evaluation index. Reflecting on how one's partisan identification *would* change under hypothetical scenarios may cause subjects to reflect on the world as it is (or how it may develop) differently, and then bring their actual partisan identification in line with their hypothetical partisan identification. In Study 1, we relied on subjects to draw any such connections themselves. In Study 2, we helped subjects to draw the connection with the consolidation exercise described above.

The post-treatment outcomes are:

- Feeling thermometers for these nine political leaders (Kamala Harris, Barack Obama, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Donald Trump, Marjorie Taylor Green, Ron DeSantis, Mitt Romney, Mike Pence, Joe Biden) and these six groups (The Democratic Party, The Republican Party, The National Rifle Association, Black Lives Matter, Planned Parenthood, The American Civil Liberties Union)

- A vote preference question: "If the 2024 presidential election was held today, would you want to see the Republican Party or Democratic Party win?" [The Republican Party, The Democratic Party, Neither/don't know]

- Favorability scales: "On a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being the least favorable and 7 being the most favorable, how would you rate the Republican party?" "On a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being the least favorable and 7 being the most favorable, how would you rate the Democratic party?"

- "On a scale from 1 to 10, where '10' represents a description that is perfect for you, and '1' a description that is totally wrong for you, how well do each of the following describe you?" [A Republican, A Democrat, A Midwesterner, An environmentalist, A feminist, An evangelical Christian]

From these measurements, we focus on three main outcomes:

- A partisan evaluation index that averages together the following 12 outcomes with equal weights, all rescaled from 0 to 1 with higher values indicating more pro-Democratic sentiment: FT Kamala Harris, FT Barack Obama, FT Joe Biden, FT Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, FT Donald Trump (reversed), FT Marjorie Taylor Green (reversed), FT Ron DeSantis (reversed), FT Mitt Romney (reversed), FT Mike Pence (reversed), vote preference (Democratic Party = 1, Republican Party = 0, Neither/don't know = 0.5), favorability toward the Democratic Party, and favorability toward the Republican Party (reversed).

- A partisan identity scale that averages together the following three outcomes, all rescaled from 0 to 1 with higher values indicating more Democratic self-identification: Seven-point party ID (reversed), Self-Description Democrat, and Self-Description Republican (reversed).

- Seven point party ID

We estimate both kinds of estimands with OLS regressions of the outcome on the treatment, indicators for each level of pre-treatment party identification, and indicators for each recruitment batch (that is, indicators for whether the subject was recruited as part of an effort to recruit Democrats, Republicans or independents). We assess uncertainty with HC2 robust standard errors. As described in our pre-analysis plan for Study 2, we use a significance cutoff of $\alpha = 0.025$ for one-sided tests of the effects of the Pro-Democrat hypotheticals versus status quo hypotheticals (in the pro-Democratic direction) and of the effects of the Pro-Republican hypotheticals versus status quo hypotheticals (in the pro-Republican direction). We use one-sided tests because we have a clear directional prediction, but we use $\alpha = 0.025$ for a cutoff because we do not want skeptics to think we are using a lower standard of evidence. All other tests will be two-sided with $\alpha = 0.05$.

We estimate both types of quantities separately for each study, and in the appendix, we meta-analyze the results from Study 1 and Study 2 using random-effects meta-analysis.

Results

Effects of hypothetical scenarios

Figure 3 shows the average effects of the pro-Democrat and pro-Republican hypothetical scenarios in Study 1, relative to a status quo hypothetical on how subjects imagine they would respond to the party identification question. Turning first to the "overall" effects, we see that in all five pro-Democratic hypothetical settings, subjects imagine they would report stronger identification with the Democratic party. The smallest estimate is -0.36 (Guns) and the largest is -0.67 (Healthcare).

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We see a similar pattern for the pro-Republican hypotheticals, with the smallest estimate coming in at 0.26 (Healthcare) and the largest at 0.58 (Economy), and all hypotheticals moving respondents in the Republican direction on average. In sum, we see average effects of these hypotheticals of approximately one-quarter to two-thirds of a scale point on the 1 to 7 scale.

Figure 4 shows an almost identical pattern of results for Study 2. Once again, among pro-Democratic scenarios, the Guns hypothetical generates the smallest effect (-0.37) and the Health-care hypothetical generates the largest (-0.55). For Republicans in this study, the Guns hypothetical yields the smallest estimate (0.44) and the new Camps hypothetical, not present in Study 1, results in a 1.02 increase in the Republican direction. As with Study 1, as the "Overall" rows in Figure 4 make clear, all of the Democratic and Republican hypotheticals moved participants in the intended directions. We consider Study 2 to be a successful replication of Study 1.

When we investigate whether these effects vary according to respondents' pre-treatment par-tisan identification, the main story is one of homogeneity. To a first approximation, all partisan subgroups appear to move in the expected direction by similar amounts. In study 1, pure in-dependents appeared to imagine the least movement, but the differences from Republicans and Democrats were nonsignficant and the apparent pattern did not recur in study 2.

One question that naturally arises is whether these subjects are imagining changing their af-filiation from one party to another or whether they are imagining intermediate shifts along the seven point scale that never cross the boundary from one party to another. In a non-preregistered analysis, Figure 5 plots pre-treatment party identification on the horizontal axis and hypothetical party identification on the vertical axis, with one plotted point for each hypothetical that a sub-ject responded to.[2] The boxed areas show subjects that cross party lines from pre-treatment to hypothetical. In Study 1, 13.4 percent of Republican subjects report they would be Democrats if the hypothetical came to pass; this figure is 11.1% in Study 2. These figures are almost perfectly mirrored by Democrats, 11.8% (Study 1) and 13.0% (Study 2) of whom would switch affiliation to Republican under the hypothetical scenario. The status quo hypotheticals serve as a useful point of comparison, since even when (or perhaps because) nothing changes, between 3 and 8 percent of partisans report willingness to switch. These changes might also reflect survey measurement error that we want to difference off when comparing to the partisan hypothetical condition. Over and above the changes in the status quo hypotheticals, partisans in the pro-outparty conditions are 7.0 percentage points more likely to switch (cluster-robust SE: 1.5 points).

It is possible that, as participants proceed through these hypothetical scenarios, the cumula-tive effects of being exposed to multiple cataclysms in the same partisan direction shaped their

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[2]Analogous figures broken down by hypothetical are presented in the Appendix.

Figure 3: Study 1: Average effects on hypothetical partisanship
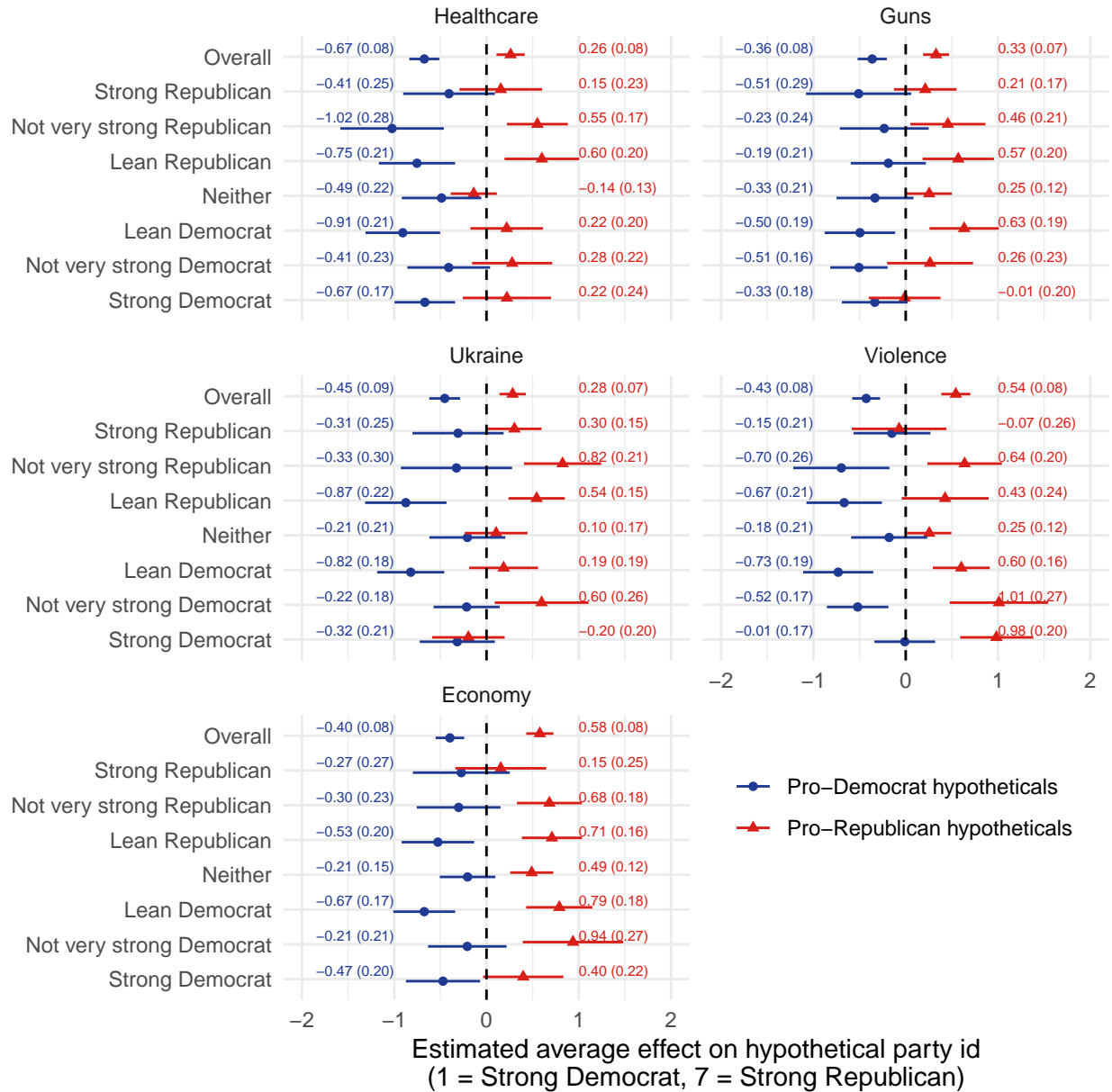
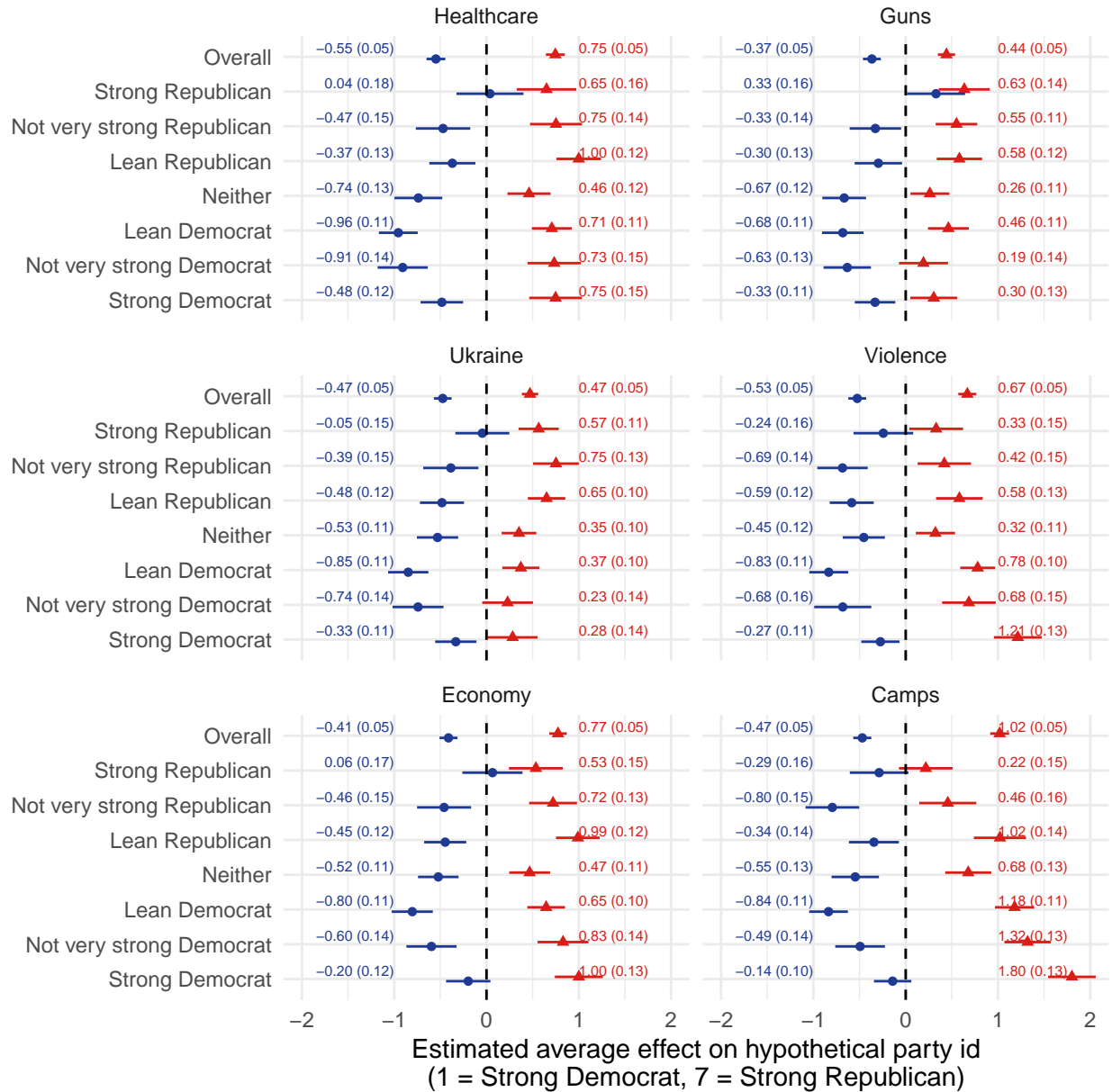Figure 4: Study 2: Average effects on hypothetical partisanship

Figure 5: Study 1 and 2: Average rates of party switching by treatment condition
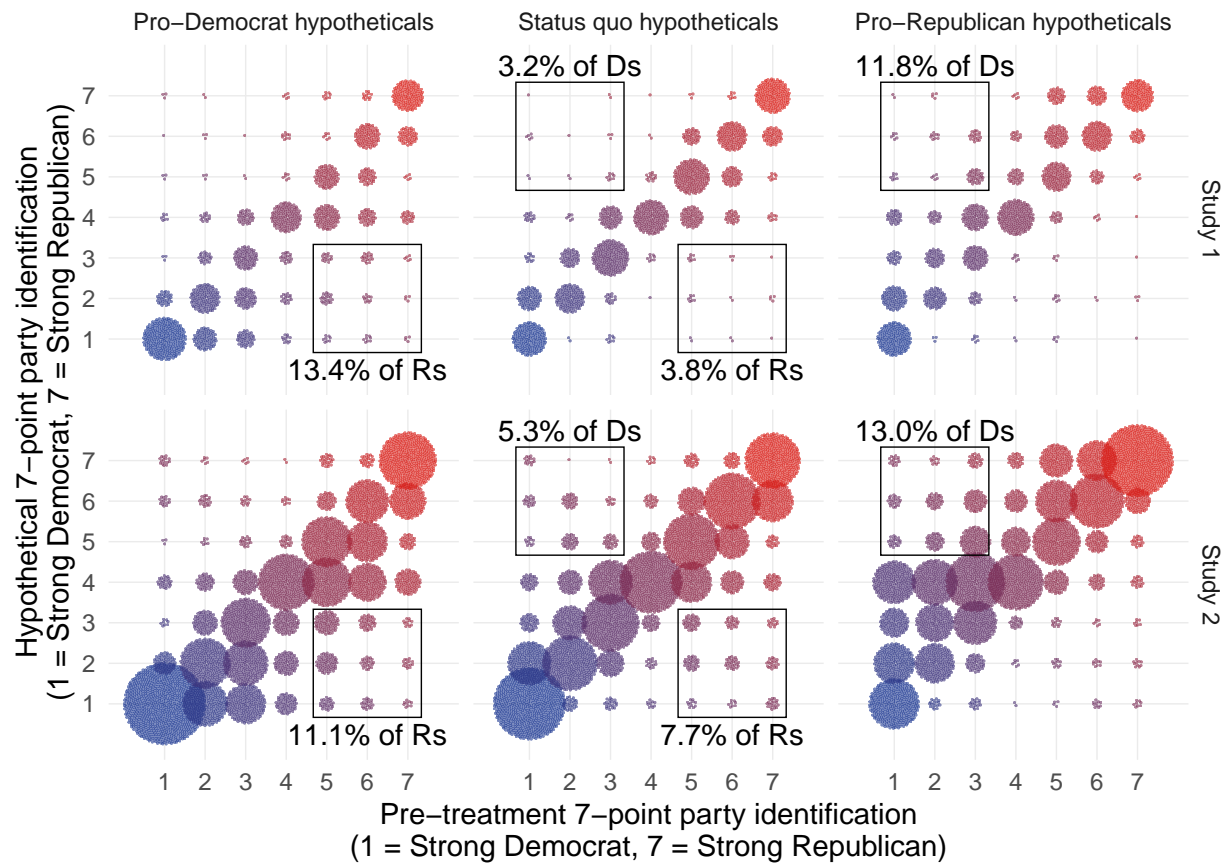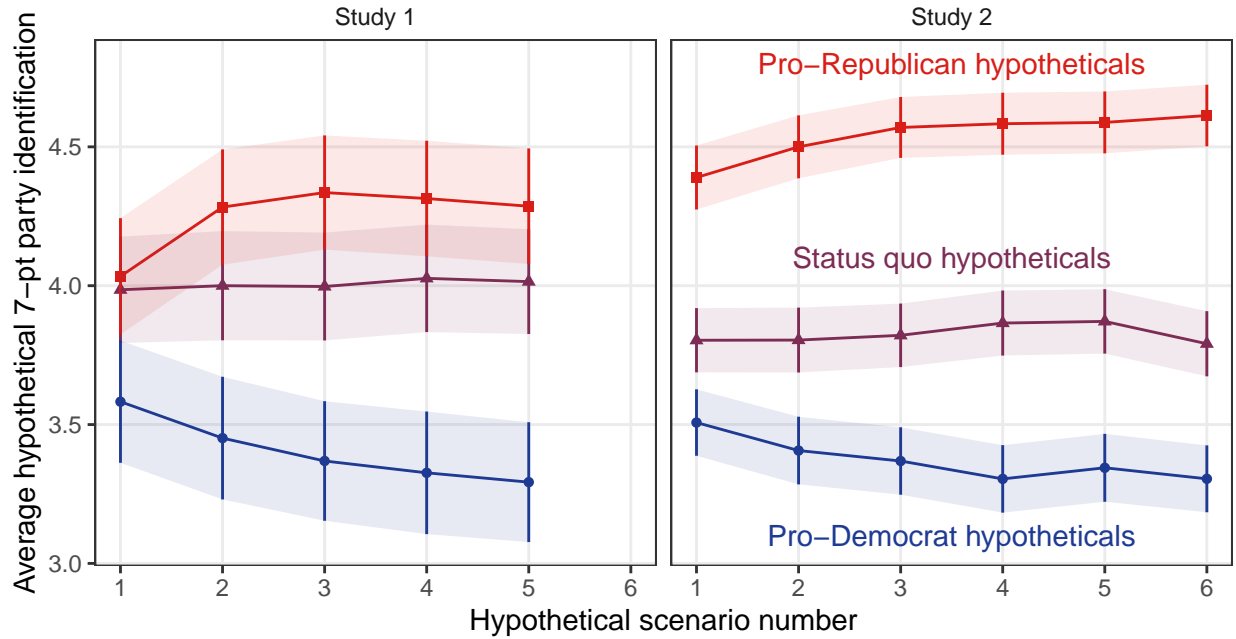
Figure 6: Later hypotheticals generate larger hypothetical effects

responses. To evaluate this possibility, Figure 6 shows a further non-preregistered analysis of how responses to the hypothetical scenarios changed over the course of the experiment. In the status quo condition, average hypothetical partisanship remains similar across the all the hypotheticals considered. In the pro-Democrat condition, average hypothetical partisanship is more Democratic with each subsequent hypothetical scenario; the opposite is true in the Republican hypotheticals. The estimated slopes with respect to hypothetical scenario number in both partisan conditions and in both experiments are statistically significant. Evidently, mounting "dosage" of what-if scenarios leads respondents to increasingly imagine themselves changing their partisan attachments.
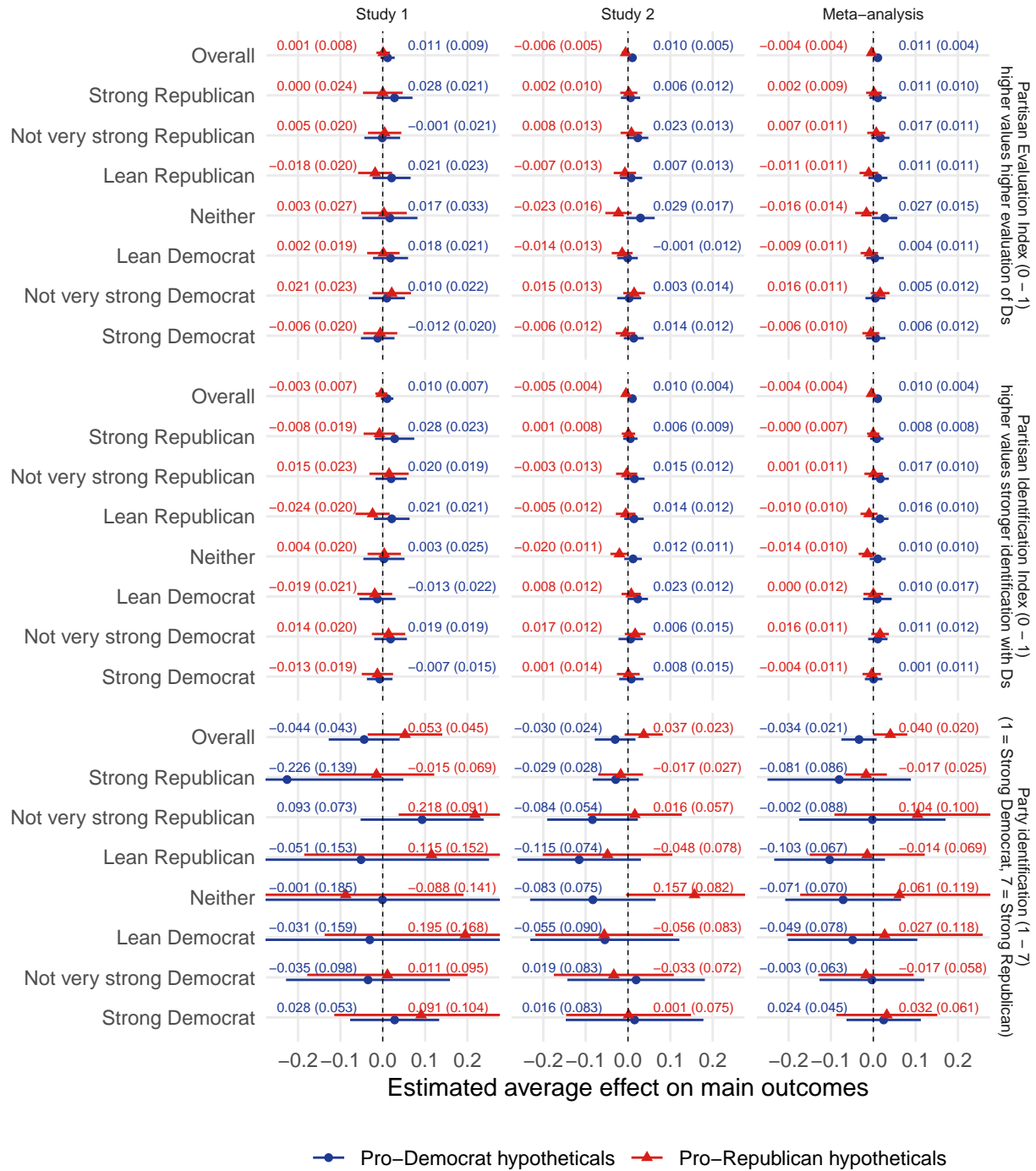
Effects on post-treatment outcomes

Now we consider the effect of confronting the series of pro-Democratic or pro-Republican hypothetical scenarios (relative to status quo hypothetical scenarios) on post-treatment party identification, an index of three partisan identification questions, and an index of 14 partisan evaluation questions. Figure 7 shows that the effects are clearly null across the board. In study 1, the overall estimate on post-treatment party ID of considering the pro-Democrat hypotheticals is -0.04 scale points (SE: 0.04) and the effect of considering the pro-Republican hypotheticals is 0.05 (SE:

0.04). While these are the in "right" direction, they amount to a minuscule twentieth of a scale point. The effects on the two indexes are similarly null, with estimates of a percentage point or less. We also see that this null average effect is not masking countervailing heterogeneous effects by pre-treatment partisan group. The effect of considering these hypotheticals had no effect on any partisan subgroup, save one significant result (pro-Republican hypotheticals among Not very Strong Republicans, one-sided p-value: 0.009) that does not survive any conventional correction for multiple comparisons.

Figure 7 shows that in Study 2, the effects on these post treatment outcomes were also null; this, despite achieving 100% power for the estimated effect sizes from Study 1 and despite helping subjects to draw the connection between the hypothetical world and the real world by asking them to consider how probable each hypothetical scenario is. As it happens, our respondents found the status quo hypotheticals to be reasonably probable, with mean judgments exceeding 50% in all partisan subgroups. Naturally, we observe a strong partisan gradient to the probability of partisan hypotheticals, with Republicans finding the pro-Republican hypotheticals to be more probable than Democrats and vice-versa. Further details of these analyses can be found in the Appendix.

Lastly, the rightmost column of facets in Figure 7 shows even with the extra precision gained by pooling study 1 and study 2 in a meta-analytic framework, we do not find that entertaining hypothetical partisan change leads to actual partisan change.

Figure 7: Average effects on post-treatment outcomes in Study 1 and Study 2

Discussion

The contentious literature on partisan change consists of multiple strands, some of which emphasize the ease with which partisanship changes with political circumstances, while others emphasize its stubborn resistance to change. The maximalist reading of the literature adduces evidence of aggregate partisan change in the wake of shifts in presidential approval or economic performance (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson, 2002), shifting party platforms on hot-button issues such as race or abortion (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Goren and Chap, 2017) at least for certain groups of voters (Achen and Bartels, 2016), occasionally drawing support from some survey experiments that show surprisingly large momentary effects of subtle treatments, such as priming subjects to think about Hurricane Sandy (Weiner, 2015). The minimalist reading instead calls attention to the slow pace of partisan change in aggregate time-series data (Green, Hamel, and Miller, 2023), limited evidence of partisan change in panel surveys over long stretches of time (Green and Platzman, 2024), and the difficulty of changing party affiliation with experimental inducements (Cowden and McDermott, 2000; Schiff, Montagnes, and Peskowitz, 2022; Hopkins et al., 2020)

Recognizing that the experimental literature is thin but crucial to this debate, the present paper attempts to build on it in two ways. First, we describe recent survey and field experimental attempts to persuade subjects about the merits of one party. Both lines of research find precisely estimated effects that are close to zero. The notion that party attachments can be moved by succinct, one-shot interventions receives no support. Second, reasoning that only high-intensity treatments are likely to be sufficient to generate detectable change in party attachments, we set about to create a new experimental paradigm that asks subjects to imagine such treatments.

Our two hypothetical scenario experiments present subjects in the treatment groups with evocative descriptions of cataclysms or achievements that paint one party in a favorable or unfavorable light. When the outcome is assessed based on the respondents' judgments about what their party identification would be if the scenario were to occur, the effects prove to be very large in both studies. In order to express the magnitude of these effects using the same metric as the literature on "macropartisanship," we define the outcome as the ratio of strong or weak Democrats over strong or weak partisan of either party. On average, the pro-Democratic scenarios boost imagined Democratic macropartisanship by 15 percentage points; pro-Republican scenarios lower imagined Democratic macropartisanship by 17 percentage points. By comparison, the high and low points of the Gallup macropartisanship series from 1953-2021 occur in the wake of Watergate in 1977 (69.7%) and shortly after the second Iraq War in 2003 (47.2%), for a 22.5 point difference. The largest pro-Democratic swings within a 10-year period include 1968 to 1977 (12.5 points), 1956 to 1965 (12.2 points), and 2003 to 2009 (10.7 points), whereas the largest pro-Republican swings

in a 10 year-period include 1977 to 1985 (-18.7 points), 1965-1968 (-10.5 points), and 1993 to 2002 (-9.4 points). In other words, our hypotheticals produce shifts on par with the largest changes observed in the past seven decades.

In sum, brushing partisanship with a (randomly assigned) feather induces no change but knocking it with a (hypothetical) sledgehammer appear to produce much larger imagined changes. To us, these findings indicate that the "unmoved mover" perspective requires revision, as it should account for the way in which extraordinary circumstances can spur meaningful change. To be sure, these circumstances may be rare, but our results show that people will at least consider adjusting their partisanship if they were to occur.

The size of these changes leaves no doubt that subjects found the scenarios engaging and could *imagine* undergoing partisan change. But does this exercise of contemplating evocative hypothetical outcomes – or, more precisely, a series of scenarios that all militate in favor of one party – change what subjects later say when describing their party affiliation at the conclusion of the interview? We find that the apparent shift is a precisely estimated zero. This null result holds even for Study 2, which asked respondents to review the plausibility of each scenario in order to consolidate its psychological effect before asking respondents to describe their party affiliation. It seems clear that ruminating on hypothetical scenarios, even those that respondents find plausible or even likely, are insufficient to produce partisan change.[3] These findings diverge from evidence gathered in psychology which suggests that mental visualizations of scenarios are sufficient to change outcomes such political attitudes (McLaughlin and Velez, 2019) and brand evaluations Escalas (2004). They are instead closer in spirit to Egan (2020), which concludes that partisanship is so sticky that some people change their other identities (e.g., sexual orientation) so that those identities better match their partisanship.

While our studies were not designed to adjudicate between theories of partisan change, we can connect each hypothetical vignette to a theory as best we can. By our judgment, the Healthcare, Guns, and Ukraine hypotheticals blend performance and policy, the Violence and Economy hypotheticals are mostly about performance, and the Camps hypotheticals concentrate on policy. We find that all three sets generate important levels of imagined partisan change, so our analysis makes no special progress on teasing our which theories apply under which circumstance. That said, we can conceive of extensions of this study that could systematically test different theories of partisan change using hypotheticals. For example, hypothetical changes to the demographic composition of the parties could be described, thereby allowing for tests of social identity theory. Hypothetical situations with extremely personal stakes—such as changes to the partisan identity of one's partner

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[3]Hypothetical questions have been shown to change certain behaviors in other domains (Moore et al., 2012).

or family members—could also be tested. In any event, we believe that the hypothetical approach can and should be used by scholars interested in evaluating the effects of treatments that are beyond the scope of most social scientists to implement.

The scenarios used here, of course, hardly exhaust the supply of possible scenarios from leading theories of partisan change. Hypotheticals could call attention to instances in which the parties embrace new issue stances, akin to the literature on the extent to which the public gravitates toward parties based on their ideological proximity (Kollman and Jackson, 2021). Relatedly, hypothetical scenarios could invite respondents to reflect on changes to the social identities that are embraced or rejected by the parties. For example, the scenarios might describe cabinet or Supreme Court appointments that illustrate a party's overtures to a particular ethnic group. Scenarios need not be all of a piece theoretically; one could imagine an especially compelling scenario that blends information about a party's performance, platforms, and social group ties.

We close with a reflection on the extreme difficulty of studying causes of partisan change. Even the most ambitious interventions which, in theory, *could* have moved partisan identity have not done so. Consider, for example, the Broockman and Kalla (2025) experiment wherein Fox News viewers were encouraged to switch to CNN during the weeks leading up to the 2020 election. Although this substantial change to subjects' media diets produced significant pro-Democratic shifts in evaluations of the presidential candidates (their Figure OA5), it left negligible changes in party identification (their Figure OA17). Changing party attachment would seem to require at least as large and sustained an effort as undertaken in that paper, and even that may not be enough. Only cataclysmic events, beyond the scope and resources of social science (and perhaps knowable only via hypothetical approximations), may be capable of shifting a social identity as entrenched as partisanship.

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