Exploring the Partisan Underpinning of Conspiracy Theories

The Honors College at the University of Missouri-Kansas City

Exploring the Partisan Underpinnings of Conspiracy Theories

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Introduction

Conspiracy theories are an often overlooked but major threat to societies. Conspiracies theories in the realm of politics do not exist in a bubble and have many alarming effects on people and society. Emerging research has found that beliefs in conspiracy theories are "associated with political apathy, support for non-normative political action, climate denial, vaccine refusal, prejudice, crime, violence, disengagement in the workplace, and reluctance to adhere to COVID–19 recommendations." (Douglas, 2021). In the midst of a global pandemic, with distrust in government steadily declining ("Public Trust in Government: 1958-2019", 2019), it is of grave importance to understand how conspiracies theories spread, why conspiracy theories spread, and what role political partisanship plays in who believes conspiracy theories.

In my research, I set out to explain what role political partisanship plays in an individual's propensity to believe conspiracy theories

Abstract

From QAnon to the Anti-Vaxxer movement, conspiracy theories arise and are spread from all parts of the political, ideological spectrum. I hope to find what role political partisanship plays in an individuals' likelihood to believe these conspiracy theories. The hypothesis for my research is as follows: The political partisanship of an individual is a deciding factor in an individual's propensity to believe a conspiracy theory. To test my hypothesis, participants were surveyed through MTurk and asked to respond to a number of questions regarding fake conspiracy theories shown in the form of tweets. I find that partisanship is a major deciding factor when it comes to conspiracy theories and individuals' beliefs about them. Specifically, a tweeter or retweeter who is of the 'in-party' is rated more positively than of one of the 'out-party' and the 'out- party' only holds importance when showing agreement with 'in -party'.

Literature Review

From QAnon to the Anti-Vaxxer movement, conspiracy theories arise and are spread from all over the political, ideological spectrum. Research has found that "at least 63% of registered voters in the United States by into at least one political conspiracy theory," (Cox & Halpin, 2020) reenforcing the idea that "a significant number of Americans appear susceptible to believing unproven claims (Cox, 2019). To further analyze these phenomena and to apply them to develop an understand of how they are impacted by partisanship, I offer an explanation of why people believe conspiracy theories and how conspiracy theories are spread.

Here, I define the concept of a conspiracy theory. This definition is understood to be what I am referring to when discussing conspiracy theories throughout the paper. Conspiracy theories are beliefs about "a group of actors that collude in secret to reach malevolent goals" (Bale, 2007). For the purpose of my research, the actors as described by Bale are referencing the United States government at the federal and local level. Using the United States government as the possible malevolent actor allows two factors to be used to build a foundation for the inclination to believe conspiracy theories: the distrust in the government and the distrust of members of the opposing political party.

American distrust in the government has eroded over the past 50 years. In 1958, the National Election Study surveyed the population and found that three-quarters of Americans had the highest level of trust in government to do the right thing. The trust in government eroded over the years following various economic and political scandals such as Watergate. Though there were slight upticks in Americans' trust in government, specifically following 9/11, an overall steady decline has remained. As of 2019, American's trust in government to do what is right, all or most of the time, sits around 30%, with a slight decline still occurring ("Public Trust

in Government: 1958-2019", 2019). This distrust in government sets the scene for conspiracies like the 9/11 terrorist attacks being an inside job done by the government (Singleton, 2017), or the involvement of politicians in the deep state (QAnon) to develop and flourish in the United States to develop and be believed by Americans.

Americans do not only have distrust in the government, but also distrust and (maybe) hatred for members of the opposing political parties. At the roots, the main reason for distrust against members of the opposing political parties can be explained by the belief that there is a huge difference between each parties' political beliefs. Political discourse about laws regarding topics such as immigration and abortion has driven a wedge between the Republican and Democratic parties, and their members. More than half of both republicans and democrats believe that the opposing party few or no good ideas. Three-quarters believe that the divide between republicans and democrats goes beyond politics and that members of the parties cannot even on what would be considered basic facts ("The partisan landscape and views of the parties", 2019). The perceived difference of beliefs between the Republican and Democratic parties has led to a real division and feelings of dislike and distrust toward members of the opposing party.

When looking at the feelings of American's about opposing political parties and their members, it follows that those people would be more likely to have a favorable view toward someone who was of the same political party. Individuals tend to view people with similar values more favorably and, tend to be less trustworthy of those who have different values. (Everret, 2015). This phenomenon remains the same when discussing feelings of party members toward members of the oppositional party. It also explains the partisan divide in which conspiracy theories are believed. For example, 60% of Democrats believe Russia has damaging information about Donald Trump and 59% of Republicans believe there has been a coordinated effort to

undermine the Trump administration. (Cox & Halpin, 2020). The percentage at which each political party believes the stated conspiracy theories provides two distinct explanations: 1.) Individuals are more likely to believe what their party believes and 2.) individuals are likely to believe that an oppositional party is committing some wrongdoing.

Ditto and Lopez find that "people weigh facts differently when those facts are personally threatening" (Ditto, P. H., & Lopez, D. F. (1992). In the realm of conspiracy theories, this can present itself in the manner stated above. People are likely to believe conspiracy theories that indicate wrongdoing by the government and by an oppositional political party or its members. This concept is developed in my research by looking at conspiracy theories regarding surveillance with gun ownership and water poisoning with pharmaceutical company corruption, all of which are ideas that have conspiracy theories surrounding them, see (Mayo, 2016); (Samory & Mitra, 2018);(Kleinman, 2017); and(Blaskiewicz, 2013) and are deemed by many to be personally threatening.

With the basis of what a conspiracy theory is and the factors that contribute to their development, it is now time to look at how conspiracy theories spread. In relation to the information as a whole, Sathyanarayan Rao funds that typically, information is learned by "what we hear and keep hearing from others." (Rao, T S et al, 2009). This suggests that that verbal and/or visual repetition is of high importance when it comes to remembering, believing, and relaying information. Verbal and visual repetition indicates that traditional methods of receiving information or news (radio, tv, newspapers) would not be the top catalyst for conspiracy theories or disinformation to spread.

Traditional methods of receiving news are not the most likely starting or spreading places for conspiracy theories but social media is. In 2020, it was found that one-in-five adults in the

United States gets news regarding politics primarily through social media. Those who only received news through social media were also found to be much less knowledge than those who did not (Mitchell, 2020). While social media is not inherently dangerous, the problem lies within the algorithms of the sites and apps. The algorithms are created to show users information. This may be information that a user already enjoys, or it may be information the user might enjoy based on previous search history. The algorithm can cause users to go down rabbit-holes of disinformation and creates what are known as echo chambers. Echo chambers, defined as " isolated ideologically, homogenous spaces.. where similar opinions reinforce each other and lead to polarization" (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Del Vicario et al. 2015; Del Vicario, Zollo, Caldarelli, Scala, & Quattrociocchi, 2017). When conspiracy theories or conspiracy related information becomes a part of a user's algorithm, more and more related information will be shown and less information that debunks the conspiracy theory, or shares opposing information will appear. Adding in the fact that 2021 has peak social media usage with 72% of adults using at least one social media site ("Demographics of Social Media Users and Adoption in the United States", 2021), there is a clear reason for the development of conspiracy theories that increase distrust in government and negative feelings towards members of opposing political parties.

The combination of all of these factors, distrust in government and against opposing partisans, and the spread of conspiracy theories through social media, is the foundation for my research. Social media is a contributing factor to conspiracy theories spreading and individuals being less knowledgeable about politics, in addition people tend to have less favorable views towards the opposing political parties and their members. With this information, I am able to research the impact partisanship has on an individual's propensity to believe conspiracy theories.

Participants

Two hundred and twenty-two participants in total (% Female = 38.29; % Caucasian = 75.23; % graduated with BA/BS or higher = 69.37 % Democrat = 57.47; % Independent = 21.72; % Republican = 20.81) surveyed through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform. Participants were informed that they would be completing a survey about their demographics and political attitudes, and social media information. For complete participation in the study, participants were paid $3[1]. This study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board.

Methods

Participants were asked to complete a pre-stimulus questionnaire in which they provide their sex, race, age, and highest completed level of education. Questions regarding religious beliefs, frequency of attending religious services, social media use, perception of news on social media, and level of attention paid to politics were also asked. Participants were then asked how they identify politically (Republican; Democrat; Independent; Don't Know). To narrow down where participants stood politically even further, they were asked to choose which party they felt closest to (Republican or Democrat). Figure 1 illustrates the initial party identification of participants and Figure 2 narrows it down to Democrat or Republican.

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[1] Project was funded through the University of Missouri-Kansas, SEARCH grant for undergraduate research
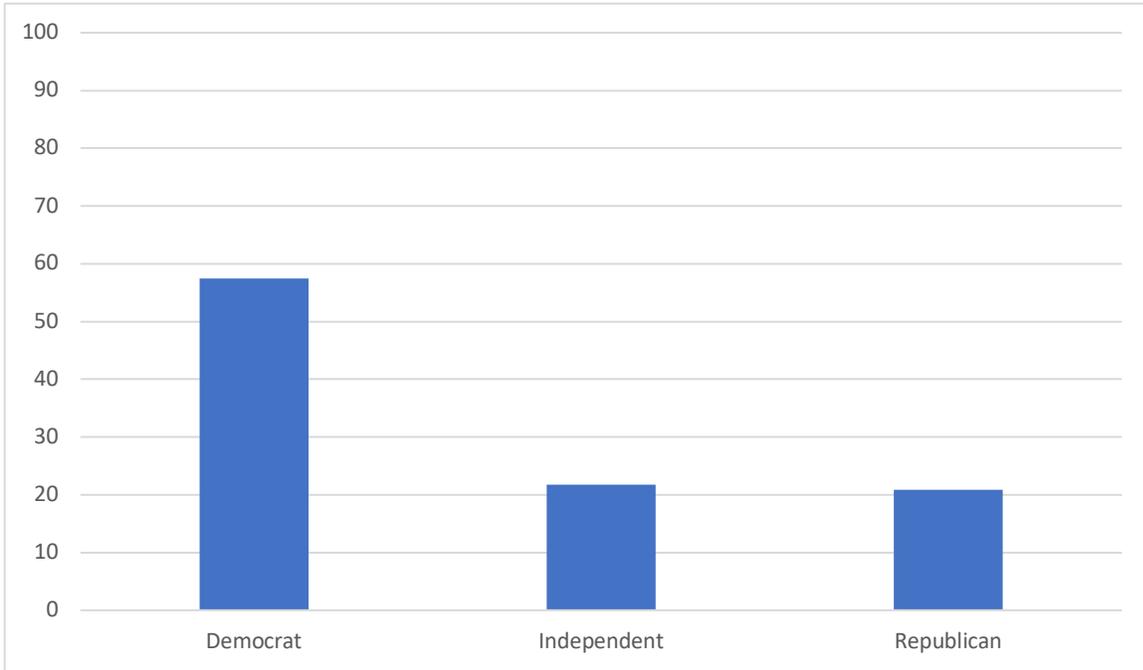
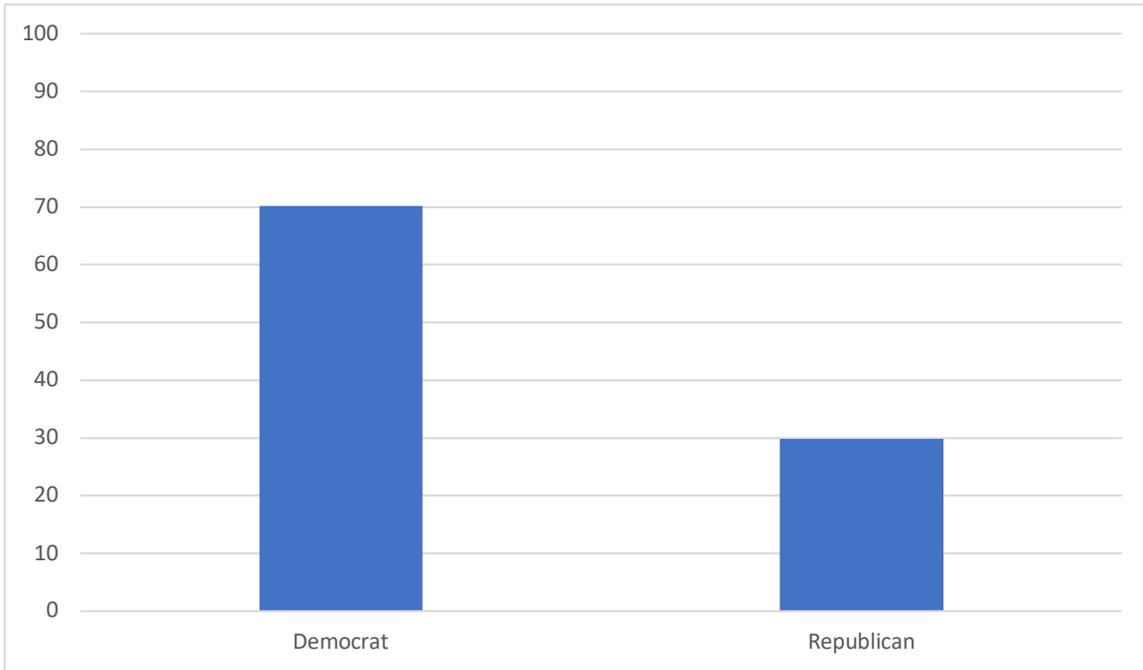Figure 1: Participant's political identification

Figure 2: Participant's political identification narrowed

Participants were also asked to respond to a variety of policy questions, either ranking themselves on a scale (1-7;1-10) or answering (yes or no) to gauge their policy positions. Additionally, participants answered questions to gauge their level of political knowledge. The questions ranged from current (which political party currently holds the majority in the U.S. House of Representatives?) to more general questions (What is the length of a U.S. Senate term?)

Participants were then shown one of eight variations of either tweet. The different variations that a participant could receive differed by the political party affiliation of the account that made the tweet and the political party affiliation of the account that retweeted the tweet. The different possible combinations were Republican, Republican; Republican, Democrat; Democrat, Republican; and Democrat, Democrat. I also had two different types of tweets: a leftwing tweet (focused on pharmaceutical companies and illustrated in Figure 3) and a rightwing tweet (focused on gun rights and illustrated in Figure 4).

Figure 3: Example of Tweet 1 with Democrat Tweeter and Retweeter

Figure 4: Example of Tweet 2 with Republican Tweeter and Retweeter.

After viewing the tweets, participants were asked to answer questions related to the information shown to them. Participants were first asked to describe the tweet. This measure was used to ensure that participants were actively engaged with the study. Next, participants were required to answer whether or not they believed the conspiracy in the Tweet occurred. The scale on which this question was rated ranged from 'definitely no' to 'definitely yes' with a total of five categories participants could rate with. Participants were also asked to assess the tweeter and retweeter on a scale from 0-100 with 0 representing negative feelings and 100 representing positive feelings.

Results   To test my hypothesis, I first created a partisan match variable ranging from one to four based on the partisan match between the participant, the tweeter, and the retweeter. The variable equals one if the participant did not match the tweeter or the retweeter (out-party/out-party); two if the participant did not match the tweeter but did match the retweeter (outparty/inparty); three if the participant matched the tweeter but not the retweeter (inparty/outparty); and, four if the participant matched the partisanship of both the tweeter and the retweeter (inparty/inparty). Prior work suggests that participants should have positive

attitudes and believe conspiracies advocated by fellow partisans more than out-partisans, but it is not clear what happens when there are bipartisan conspiracy beliefs. To examine this possibility, I regressed the match variable on my three dependent variables: feelings toward the tweeter, feelings toward the retweeter, and believability of the tweet. Table 1 presents the results of the first two analysis and Table 2 presents the results of the analysis for believability.

VARIABLES	(1) Tweeter	(2) Retweeter
Outparty/Inparty	0.37	28.36***
	(4.52)	(4.77)
Inparty/Outparty	12.28**	-4.08
	(4.79)	(5.05)
Outparty/Outparty	9.59*	20.78***
	(4.89)	(5.16)
sex	-0.56	0.66
	(3.50)	(3.70)
white	-10.97***	-6.16
	(3.98)	(4.20)
age	-0.18	0.10
	(0.18)	(0.19)
college	8.56**	10.24***
	(3.62)	(3.82)
knowledge	-3.61**	-4.05**
	(1.65)	(1.74)
Constant	62.95***	43.72***
	(9.92)	(10.46)
Observations	220	220
R-squared	0.148	0.271

Table 1: Partisan Matching and Attitudes toward Tweeters and Retweeters

Note: The comparison category is the out-party/out-party scenario. Standard errors in parentheses; *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0$.
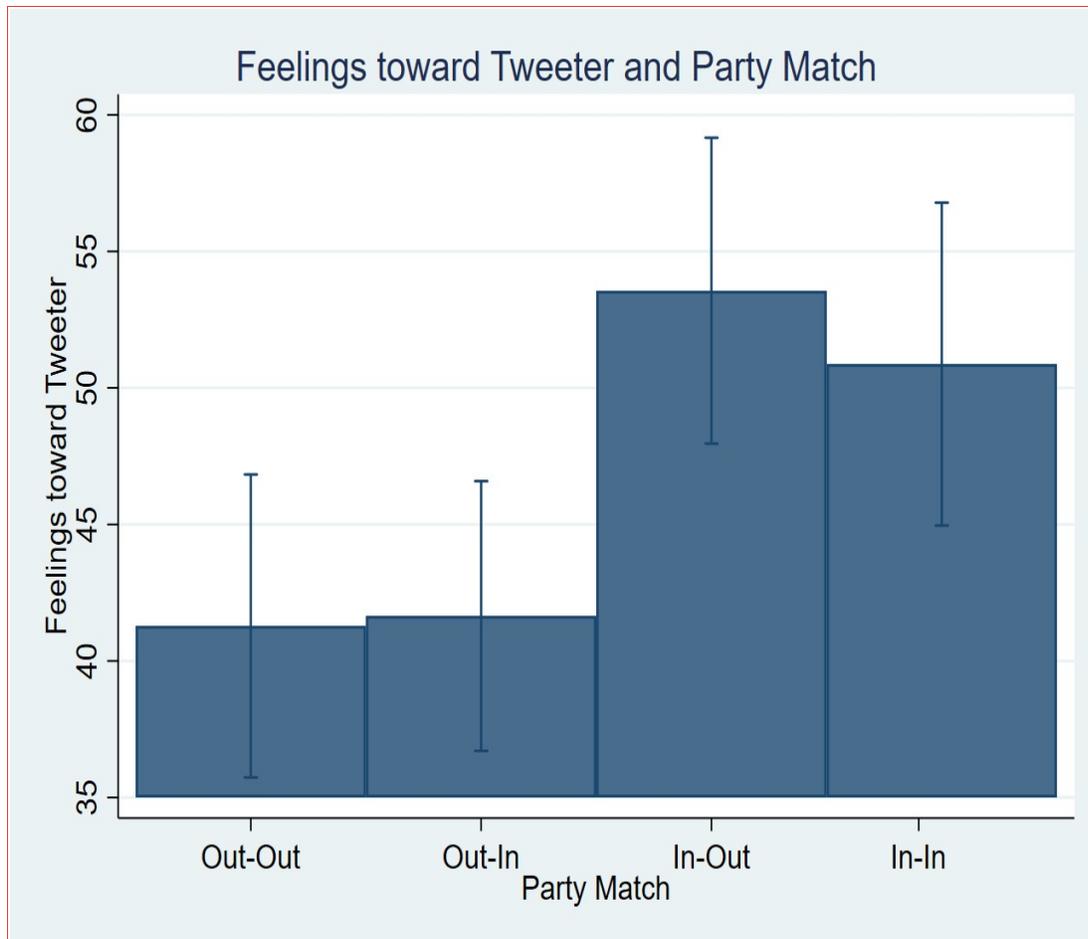
Figure 5: Feeling Thermometer Toward Tweeter

Illustrated in Figure 5, 'in-party' tweeters were more likely to be perceived favorably than 'out-party' tweeters. The 'out-party' holds no significance unless they are agreeing with 'in-party' tweeter, as seen in the 'in-out' party match. Seeing as the 'in-out' party match had more favorable views, than the 'in-in' party match, I propose that despite the distrust that individuals hold for members of the opposing party, when a participant sees that their 'in-party' is agreeing with the 'out-party', they have a more favorable view of their own political party. I also suggest that the more favorable rating the 'in-out' party has is due to confirmation bias. Instead of viewing the information as a partisan conspiracy theory, participants rated it more favorably because it was labeled as bipartisan and therefore, assumed to be more accurate.
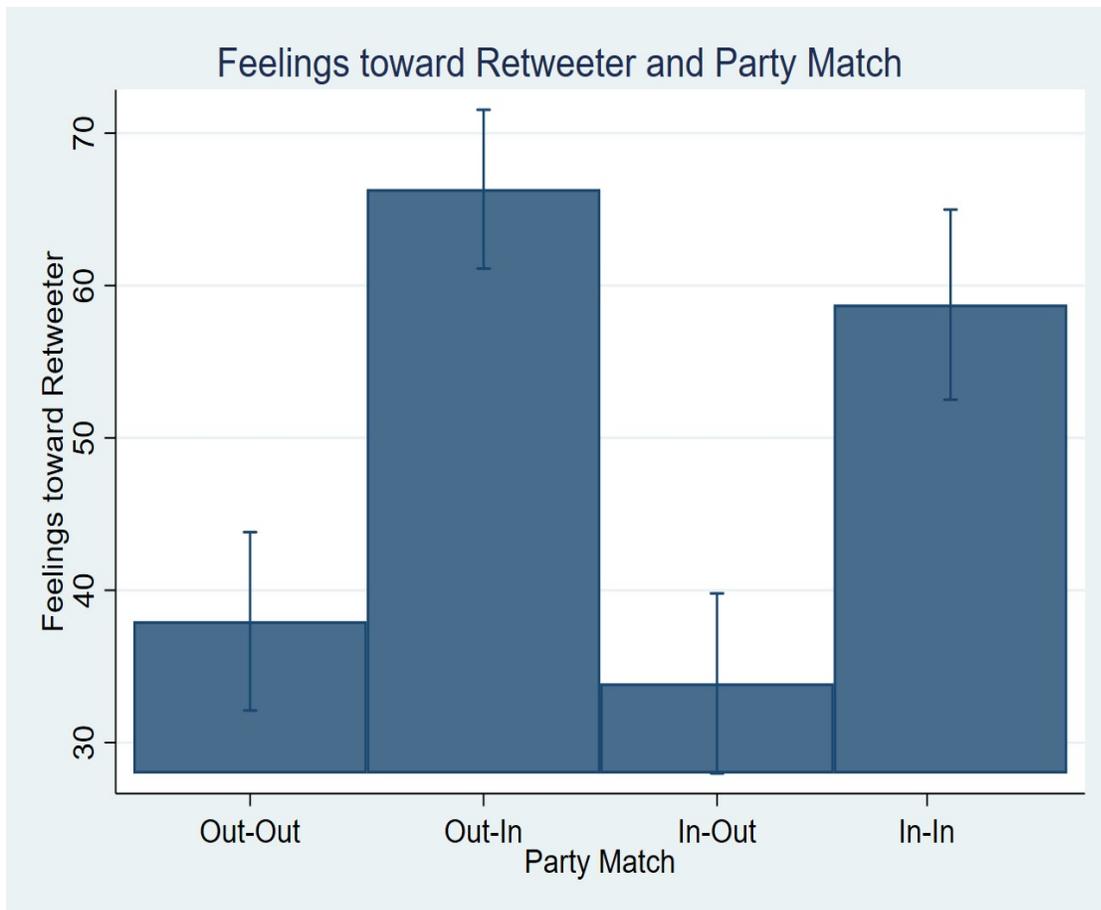
Figure 6: Feeling Thermometer Toward Retweeter

The same phenomenon holds true when accessing participants' feelings toward the retweeter. As seen in Figure 6, 'in-party' retweeters are rated significantly more positively than 'out-party' retweeters. In this instance, the 'in-party' retweeter with an 'out-party' tweeter is viewed more positively than the 'in-in' party match. Again, suggesting that despite the distrust that individuals hold for members of the opposing party, when a participant sees that their 'in-party' is agreeing with the 'out-party', they have a more favorable view of their ownpolitical party. Still, there is solid evidence that participants are more likely to view a retweet by an 'in-party' source more favorably than one from an 'out-party' source.

VARIABLES	(1) Believability
Outparty/Inparty	-0.48**
	(0.22)
Inparty/Outparty	-0.34
	(0.24)
Outparty/Outparty	0.05
	(0.24)
sex	0.03
	(0.17)
white	0.24
	(0.20)
age	0.01
	(0.01)
college	-0.33*
	(0.18)
knowledge	0.17**
	(0.08)
Constant	10.42***
	(0.49)
Observations	221
R-squared	0.088

Table 2: Partisan Matching and Tweet Believability

Note: The comparison category is the out-party/out-party scenario. Standard errors in parentheses; *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0$.

What's interesting about these results is that they do not spill over to believability. As Table 2 indicates, partisan matching did not have a significant effect on believability. Participants matching the tweeters and retweeters were not significantly different from those facing out-partisans. The only significant finding is that participants facing an out-party tweeter and an in-party retweeter were the least likely to believe the tweet.

Conclusion

Partisanship is shown to have a significant impact on an individual's propensity to believe conspiracy theories. Instances where there was a 'in-party' tweeter or retweeter, received more favorable ratings by participants than ones with an 'out-party' tweeter or retweeter. This confirms that individuals react more positively toward information shared by fellow partisans than information shared by the opposing party. In the realm of believability, the 'in-in' party match was considered to be the most believable, suggesting that individuals are likely to believe information that matches their political partisanship. Participants were also highly likely to believe conspiracy theories that have an 'out-out' party match. As previously mentioned, in referencing why certain political parties believed certain conspiracies, 1.) individuals are more likely to believe what their party believes and 2.) individuals are likely to believe that an oppositional party is committing some wrongdoing. The high believability rating of the 'out-out' may suggest that the latter is occurring. Participants may have believed the 'out-out' conspiracy theory because of the belief that the opposing party was doing something corrupt.

Overall, partisanship is seen to have a significant impact on an individual's propensity to believe conspiracy theories. When a tweet or retweet comes from the 'in-party' it is rated more positively than one coming from the 'out-party'. When looking at believability, an 'in-in' party match received the highest rating of believability. Individuals are more likely to favorably view and believe conspiracy theories that come from sources that match their preferred political partisanship.

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