

Group-based reputational incentives can blunt sensitivity to societal harms and benefits

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Abstract

People's concern with maintaining their individual reputation powerfully drives judgment and decision making. But humans also identify strongly with groups, and concerns about group-based reputation may similarly shape people's psychology. Here, we ask how group-based reputational incentives shape individuals' reactions to present societal events that bring about broad suffering (or benefits) while simultaneously bolstering (or diminishing) the reputational standing of the ingroup versus a competitive outgroup. Do group-based reputational concerns counteract sensitivity to societal outcomes and the preference for outcomes that help versus hurt others? Examining both affective responses and financially-incentivized behavior of partisans in the United States, five pre-registered experiments (N=6430) demonstrate that reputational incentives can weaken—and sometimes even eliminate—differentiation between current societal harms and benefits. This occurs even when these societal harms and benefits are substantial—including economic devastation and national security threats—and when the consequences impact *ingroup* members. Strikingly, individuals were less likely to act on opportunities to avert immediate societal harm if the suffering stood to burnish the outgroup's reputation. Results reveal a nuanced underlying process: Partisans care about group-based reputation in part because it holds strategic value, positioning their group to improve its standing *viz-a-viz* the outgroup. Preliminary evidence further suggests that this calculus occurs subconsciously (vs. consciously). By allowing group-based reputational incentives to reduce their sensitivity to present societal outcomes, partisans may play into the other side's cynical narratives about their disregard for human suffering, damaging bridges to cooperation.

Keywords: Conflict, groups, reputation, judgment and decision making, societal harm

Across continents and centuries—from the dusty planes of Mesopotamia to the trendiest coffee shop in Brooklyn—humans have remained exquisitely attuned to their reputations. Some researchers even liken people to “intuitive politicians,” navigating the world by managing the impressions they make on the audiences they most seek to curry favor with (Tetlock, 2002). Within psychology, most prior research on reputation focuses on individual-level reputation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Berman & Silver, 2022; Lerner & Tetlock, 1999; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). But humans are social animals who belong to, identify with, and derive value from groups; just as we care about our own reputations, so too do we care about the image of the groups with which we are closely identified (Barnett, Jermier, & Lafferty, 2006; Cialdini et al., 1976; Love, Lim, & Bednar, 2017; Rodell, Sabey, & Rogers, 2020; Snyder, Lassegard, & Ford, 1986). Although understudied, we know that a concern with the reputation of one’s group can be a force for good, for example leading us to avoid engaging in immoral behavior that reflects poorly on our group (e.g., Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998). But might our sensitivity to group-based reputational incentives sometimes conflict with—and potentially offset—other valued considerations?

Here, we investigate whether group-based reputational concerns can counteract affective differentiation between societal harm and benefits (c.f., Bandura, 1990; Schein & Gray, 2015, 2018) that occur in the present term (by affective *differentiation*, we refer to the degree to which people feel better about events that create societal benefit over harm).¹ We assess partisans’ reactions to both societal harms and benefits when group-based reputational incentives are (vs. are not) at stake. Examining both affective responses and behavior, we test whether group-based reputational incentives can blunt individuals’ differentiation between present harm and benefit,

¹ As we return to later, we separate certain societal harm and benefit in the present term from more uncertain projections about a given outcome’s potential longer-term societal ramifications.

leading us to feel better when people suffer but it makes our group look good, or feel worse when people are spared of suffering but it makes our group look bad.

Prior work on *schadenfreude* suggests we might expect people to feel pleasure when the *outgroup* suffers (relatively minor) harm (e.g., Leach, Spears, Branscombe, & Doosje, 2003). By contrast, we consider harms and benefits that are both highly consequential and impact society as a whole, including the *ingroup* (e.g., broad-based economic devastation and threats to national security).

Can group-based reputational incentives reduce sensitivity to societal outcomes?

On the one hand, given the fundamental aversion to hurting others (Schein & Gray, 2015, 2018), group-based reputational incentives could lack the motivational force necessary to blunt partisans' differentiation between present events that result in societal harm versus benefit, perhaps especially when these harms and benefits are large-scale. Tolerating widespread harm—especially when those bearing the brunt of the harm include the *ingroup*—might be a bridge too far, no matter the implications for the *ingroup*'s reputational standing. Individuals might consider it *gauche* to factor in the implications for the *ingroup*'s reputation when they are faced with news that implies a significant setback or upside to society. For example, it would likely have felt “un-American” for a Republican to let any happiness at the increased approval rating for Republican President George W. Bush dilute their sadness after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Similarly, partisans may be loath to let reputational considerations blunt their joy about advances that generate widespread and immediate societal benefit. For example, it might have felt uncouth for Democrats to feel less positively about a successful COVID-19 vaccine because it was developed under Republican President Donald Trump. Indeed, research suggests that individuals treat certain domains as morally sacred and impervious to instrumental considerations (Tetlock et

al., 2000). Consistent with this idea, in Supplemental Experiment 1, 89% of participants thought an individual who attended solely to the prevention of material suffering was more moral than an individual who also attended to group-based reputational incentives (see Supplemental Information (SI) for details).

On the other hand, there are good reasons to posit that group-based reputational incentives *will* blunt sensitivity to present societal outcomes, either by increasing tolerance for societal suffering, decreasing appreciation for societal benefits, or both. A positive reputation can provide an important strategic advantage for a group and its members in competitive contexts, helping to deliver valued resources like power and legitimacy. Consider the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, in which the two groups compete for third-party support over the legitimacy of their respective territorial claims (Shamir, 2007; Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, & Nadler, 2012). Actions that substantially tarnish Israel’s international reputation—like, for example, being seen to withhold scarce COVID-19 vaccines from Palestinians in favor of Israelis (Kingsley, 2021; Rasgon, 2021)—could have significant and rewarding strategic benefits for Palestinians (Saguy & Kteily, 2011). By bolstering the perceived legitimacy of Palestinians’ grievances among the international community, Palestinians could obtain long-term value in terms of winning allies in pursuit of the effort to pressure Israel to make political concessions. Along similar lines, victories in the court of public opinion could allow Democrats or Republicans to persuade independent voters to vote for their preferred presidential candidate, thereby gaining an electoral edge over their counterpart.

Importantly, while gaining the reputational upper hand and attaining power and legitimacy can feel rewarding in its own right—it could simply feel good to “win”, and to have more rather than less power—there are additional, more prosocial, reasons why groups might

value group-based reputational standing. For example, gaining the reputational upper hand can also better position a group to enact policies it believes are materially better for the world in the long run. Viewed from this perspective, partisans who respond to reputational incentives by becoming less likely to differentiate between social harm and benefit today may be sacrificing short-term societal harm for what they believe to be long-term societal benefit. Despite potentially laudable motives, this psychology could have negative ramifications: for one, individuals' calculus about long-term societal benefit may be misguided. But beyond that, a group seen to tolerate present societal suffering (or disapprove of societal progress) could, in the process, feed into any sinister views held of them by the outgroup, perpetuating intergroup conflict.

Of note, reputational incentives—and the associated strategic benefits—could shape people's differentiation between present societal harm and benefit either consciously or subconsciously. In some cases, individuals might deliberately make the calculation that a material harm borne by society is worth the reputational benefit for the ingroup or that a material gain for society is not worth the reputational cost to the ingroup—perhaps particularly if the situation makes the strategic consequences highly salient. For example, when contemplating an upcoming United Nations vote, some Palestinians might explicitly calculate that the strategic value of the reputational boost to Palestinians if Israel is seen to withhold vaccines, and decide that the political benefits outweigh the material cost of delayed vaccinations and potential lost lives. But our logic about sensitivity to group-based reputational incentives does not *require* individuals to consciously weigh pros or cons or even to be consciously aware of reputation's operative effects on their psychology (see also Jordan & Rand, 2020). Even if strategic benefits are the ultimate reason why partisans attend to group-based reputational incentives, at the

proximate level, partisans might simply intuitively feel better when events bolster their group's reputation relative to the outgroup's. In the present work, we seek not only to test whether and how group-based reputational incentives shape individuals' sensitivity to current societal harms and benefits, but also to shed light on the extent to which this involves conscious deliberation.

The strongest support for the hypothesis that group-based reputational incentives can blunt differentiation between societal harm and gain comes from a series of clever studies conducted by Combs and colleagues (Combs, Powell, Schurtz, & Smith, 2009). Using samples of United States undergraduates, the researchers revealed that participants reported the positive feeling of *schadenfreude* in response to harmful societal outcomes (e.g., troop deaths, economic harm) when those same outcomes reflected poorly on the oppositional party. For example, in one study, Democratic undergrads reported higher levels of *schadenfreude* than their Republican counterparts after reading about an economic downturn during a Republican Presidency. The researchers also showed the inverse can be true: in another study, participants reported greater negative affect when reading an article detailing a presidential candidate of their party (vs. the other party) failing to stop a housing and economic crisis, presumably because it would hurt their favored candidate in the upcoming presidential election. Combs and colleagues thus provided valuable evidence that political gain for one's party can trigger positive affect (here, *schadenfreude*) even amid significant societal harm.

Still, this early work leaves open consequential questions, several of which we take up in our manuscript. For one, we generalize beyond the set of contexts Combs and colleagues considered and test our effects among larger samples. We also consider generalizability to positive societal outcomes: that is, do individuals also allow reputational considerations with strategic implications to dampen their happiness about events that bring about positive material

near-term outcomes for society? Critically, we also shed significant new light on the process underlying the affective consequences of societal events that impact the image of the ingroup. We center the role of group-based reputational considerations, and test whether individuals' affective differentiation between societal events that impose harm but make the ingroup look good versus those that bring benefits but make the ingroup look bad is indeed driven by a sensitivity to how these events impact that group's strategic standing. We further begin to consider whether individuals' affect is shaped by a conscious consideration of the strategic implications of events that impact their group's reputational standing, or whether these processes operate on a more internalized (i.e., unconscious) level.² Finally, we consider not only whether group-based reputational considerations impact individuals' affective reactions to societal events, but further whether they have the motivational force necessary to impact behavior. In particular, we test whether reputational considerations might sometimes make individuals less likely to enact changes that could bring about significant present-term societal benefits, but at the expense of the ingroup's reputational standing relative to the outgroup.

Present research

In the present research program, we investigate whether group-based reputational incentives can blunt partisans' affective differentiation between present societal harm and benefit. In doing so, we provide a proof-of-principle test rather than seeking to make general claims about the precise relative importance of these two considerations (group-based reputation and societal harm/gain) broadly writ. Still, across experiments, we investigate whether group-based reputational incentives *have no effect on* individuals' affective differentiation between societal harm and gain, *weaken* differentiation, or even *eliminate* differentiation, stress-testing

² Combs and colleagues' theorizing is agnostic to this question, although they do speculate that "people are likely to resist admitting any semblance of pleasure as a result of obvious tragedies" (p. 636).

our hypothesizing across a broad range of scenarios, including scenarios that vary in the starkness of the material stakes to society. Building on past research that began to investigate how attention to strategic consequences influences affective reactions to negative societal events (Combs et al., 2009), the present research allows for a direct test of how much attention to reputation “closes the gap” in reactions to negative *and positive* societal outcomes and whether such effects extend to behavior.

Our experiments proceed as follows. In the context of an economic stimulus package at a local peak in the COVID-19 pandemic, Experiments 1A and 1B provide an initial test of whether group-based reputational incentives reduce affective differentiation between societal harm and benefit for Republicans and Democrats, respectively. Experiments 2A, 2B, and 3 replicate and extend Experiment 1 in a new context (national security) while also addressing alternative explanations. Experiment 4 investigates the extent to which attention to strategic benefits underpins the effect of reputational incentives on affective differentiation between societal harm and benefit, and begins to examine whether attention to strategic benefits operates consciously or subconsciously. Finally, Experiment 5 turns from affective responses to financially incentivized behavior, assessing whether partisans are less willing to actively intervene to stop material suffering when doing so would yield reputational gains for the outgroup.

We also conducted four supplemental experiments. Supplemental Experiment 1 (mentioned above) reveals that participants evaluate an individual who attended solely to the prevention of material suffering as more moral than an individual who also attended to group-based reputational incentives. Supplemental Experiments 2-3 provides manipulation checks for Experiments 1-3, confirming their internal validity. Finally, Supplemental Experiment 4 provides a proof-of-concept demonstration that, in cases where relative reputational (vs. material) stakes

are sufficiently large, partisans might be happier in scenarios involving worse material outcomes (but better reputational ones) versus those involving better material outcomes (but worse reputational ones). Full details for all Supplemental Experiments are available in the SI.

Experiments 1A and 1B

Experiments 1A and 1B begin to test whether group-based reputational incentives can reduce affective differentiation between present societal harms and benefits for Republicans and Democrats, respectively. To do so, we investigate whether partisans feel better about societal harms when it makes their group look good, and vice versa (i.e., feel worse about societal benefits that make one's group look bad).

Method

Open science statements. We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures in all experiments (Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2012). For all experiments, we first conducted pilot studies to generate estimated effect sizes. We then conducted a-prior power analyses for each experiment and chose sample sizes that ensured at least 90% statistical power to detect effect sizes obtained in the relevant pilot. In doing so, we recruited a diverse sample of adults in the United States and included at least 200 participants per experimental condition in all experiments. All experiments were conducted on Amazon Mechanical Turk and were preregistered on aspredicted.org. All data, materials, pre-registrations, and analysis code can be found on Researchbox.com [here](#). This research was approved by the host university's Institutional Review Board (IRB Number: STU00213032). We included a detailed debriefing procedure at the end of studies in which participants read fictional news stories.

Participants. We conducted an experiment with a sample of 991 Republicans (Experiment 1a: $M_{age} = 42.07$, $SD = 12.96$, 51% female) and 1023 Democrats (Experiment 1b: $M_{age} = 38.10$, $SD = 12.00$, 53% female). As pre-registered, we included only the 915 Republicans (92.3%) and 973 Democrats (95.1%) who passed an attention check before random assignment and did not ask to have their data removed. Of note, Experiment 1 was conducted in August 2020 at the time of the first spending bill aimed at addressing widespread unemployment at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic ([Cochrane, 2020](#)).

Procedure. In all experiments, participants always first gave informed consent, answered an attention check (for full text, see SI), and completed a set of demographics (age, gender, and political party identification). To measure party identification, we followed the procedure used by Pew Research Center (2015). Specifically, we first asked participants whether they considered themselves more of a Democrat or a Republican. If the participant indicated Independent, we then asked the following question: “As of today, do you lean more Democrat or Republican?” After the party identification question, participants completed a variety of exploratory individual difference measures, including ingroup glorification and ingroup attachment (Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006; for full text, see online materials).

After completing this opening set of questions, participants learned that they would read an ostensibly real news story and answer questions about it on the following pages. Full text for all news stories is available in the SI. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four between-subjects experimental conditions in a 2 (societal benefit vs. societal harm) x 2 (low reputation salience vs. high reputation salience) design.

All participants read a news story in which a public figure made a pessimistic prediction, suggesting that there would be major economic harm if a policy they were advocating for was

not implemented (i.e., speedy reopening by states of coronavirus-shuttered businesses for Republicans; new government stimulus package for Democrats). In the low reputation salience condition, the public figure was a group of leading economists whose party affiliation was not mentioned. In the high reputation salience condition, the public figure was either (then) Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (for Republicans) or House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (for Democrats).

Participants read that the public figure warned that, if the policy they were advocating for was not implemented, homelessness rates would rise by 30% in the next month and jobless claims would remain above one million per week. In the low reputation salience condition, there were no reputational consequences for the ingroup if the (economist's) prediction was right or wrong; in contrast, in the high reputational salience condition, the partisan leader being right or wrong about the policy would reflect well or poorly on the ingroup. To amplify the reputational stakes in the high reputation salience condition, we included language from the outgroup implying that the ingroup figure's prediction would be wrong. In particular (depending on condition), McConnell and Pelosi's concerns were dismissed by an outgroup Senator (Democrat Kristin Gillibrand or Republican Lindsey Graham, respectively) as merely "alarmist politics."

In the societal harm condition, the negative forecast came to pass. Specifically, participants read that a new report on the U.S. economy commissioned by the Federal Reserve confirmed that homelessness rates had increased by 30% and that the report cited data from the Labor Department indicating that jobless claims had persisted above one million per week. The article thus concluded that the public figure's forecasts were spot on. In the societal benefit condition, participants learned that the forecasts were off base. Specifically, participants learned about the same report from the Federal Reserve (and data from the Labor Department), but read

that homelessness rates had remained stable and that jobless claims had fallen below one million per week. Of note, we took a conservative approach, not directly mentioning reputational consequences for the predictor or electoral/strategic consequences for one's group (based on our theorizing about individuals' sensitivity to group-based reputational standing, we reasoned that perceivers would nevertheless pick up on reputational consequences).

One additional point regarding the societal outcomes merits note. In this and all experiments, participants responded to societal gains (vs. harms) that we expected people across the political spectrum to agree were worthwhile. While in many cases competing groups want different outcomes (e.g., legalized status of abortion), here we purposefully selected outcomes about which there is bipartisan consensus about the end (minimizing economic suffering) even when there might be differences in opinion about the optimal means to achieve it. See Supplemental Experiments 2-3 for manipulation checks confirming the internal validity of the experimental manipulations. In these Supplemental Experiments, participants read the vignettes from Experiments 1-3 and reported how much harm (vs. gain) was experienced by society and how the vignette reflected on group reputation. Results provided robust support that participants perceived large differences in societal and reputational outcomes (see SI for further details).

Participants then answered questions regarding their affective reactions to the news story. These answers constituted the primary dependent variable in this experiment. We measured affect using a composite of ten specific emotion items. All items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale anchored at "Not at all" and "Very much." We measured positive affect as the average of five items (happy, relieved, enthusiastic, glad, excited). We also measured negative affect as the average of five items (upset, sad, distressed, concerned, uneasy). We created a combined index by subtracting the average of the negative affect scores from the average of the

positive affect scores. Thus, zero indicated equal levels of positive and negative affect, positive scores indicated more positive experiences, and negative scores indicated more negative experiences. The index achieved a high level of reliability (alphas = .90 for both experiments after reverse-scoring negative items).

Results

Across Experiments 1-3, we maintained the same 2 (reputation salience: high vs. low) x 2 (societal outcome: benefit vs. harm) design. For clarity, we report only the subset of analyses most central to our hypotheses in the main text. Raw data for all conditions in Experiments 1-4 is depicted in Figures 1-5.³

Across Experiments 1-3, we had two overarching hypotheses. First, we expected people to show a robust pattern of responding more positively to societal benefits than harms. We expected this to manifest in a clear simple effect of societal outcome (benefit vs. harm) when the predictor was an economist, and thus no reputation was at stake (i.e., the low reputation salience condition).

Second, and of more central interest, was whether individuals would be sensitive to reputation in a context with large-scale and immediate societal consequences (including for ingroup members). Put another way, we were interested in whether group-based reputational incentives could temper affective differentiation between societal harms and benefits. We predicted that they would, and that this would manifest in an interaction in which for partisan (vs. non-partisan) predictors, the affective differentiation between societal benefits vs. harms

³ We do not report a “main effect of reputation” in Experiments 1-3 because it is uninterpretable in our context. The reason is because we expected the reputation factor to have opposite effects depending on the level of material outcome for society. When the material outcome for society is positive, in our studies this typically means the reputational outcome is negative; and the reverse is also true (when the material outcome is negative, in our studies this typically means the reputational outcome is positive). As such, there is not really an interpretable “effect” of reputation across conditions, as reputation has a different direction depending on the level of material outcome.

would be blunted because societal outcomes were in opposition to reputational outcomes for an ingroup leader. As such, in addition to the interaction (the primary hypothesis test), we also report the simple effect of societal outcome when reputation is at stake (i.e., the high reputation salience condition). Given the identical designs and hypotheses for Experiments 1A and 1B, we report them together below, as well as including details about individual sub-experiments where relevant.

We found support for both hypotheses in Experiment 1. First, when the predictor was an economist (i.e., the low reputation salience condition), we found a simple effect of societal outcome: participants reported a more positive overall response for societal benefit (vs. harm), and this effect was quite substantial in size, both when collapsing across both the Republican and Democrat sub-experiments ($M_{\text{harm}} = -3.34$ vs. $M_{\text{benefit}} = 0.32$, $t(893) = 26.45$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.72$) and when considering each of the Republican (Experiment 1a: $M_{\text{harm}} = -2.87$ vs. $M_{\text{benefit}} = 0.84$, $t(435) = 18.62$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.75$) and Democrat (Experiment 1b: $M_{\text{harm}} = -3.37$ vs. $M_{\text{benefit}} = -0.15$, $t(451) = 19.75$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.76$) sub-experiments individually. Thus, participants showed clear affective differentiation between present harms and benefits to society when reputation was not at stake.

Second, and supporting our key theoretical prediction, we found that this affective differentiation was significantly attenuated when the predictor was a partisan (i.e., in the high reputation salience condition). Results are depicted in Figure 1. Collapsing across the two sub-experiments yielded robust evidence for a significant interaction between societal outcome and reputational salience (interaction: $b = 0.81$, $se = 0.19$, $t = 4.24$, $p < .001$). In Experiment 1a (i.e., among Republicans), we found significant evidence to support this hypothesis (interaction: $b =$

1.18, $se = 0.26$, $t = 4.49$, $p < .001$) and in Experiment 1b (i.e., among Democrats) we found marginally significant evidence (interaction: $b = 0.44$, $se = 0.26$, $t = 1.71$, $p = .088$).

Thus, reputational considerations blunted individuals' preferences for good over bad societal outcomes. That is, partisans let reputational considerations influence their (degree of) preference for good over bad societal outcomes. Rather than simply focusing on whether the policy had wrought economic destruction on society as a whole, their affective responses factored in how these respective outcomes made their group look.

Of note, although we predicted a significant interaction effect, we also theorized that the effect size of the interaction would be relatively small in this specific experimental context. After all, the difference between societal outcomes here was grave, representing the presence or absence of economic devastation amid a global pandemic. Although we thought it would be noteworthy if, even within this context, individuals' affective responses were shaped by reputation, we expected that we would still observe a more substantial effect of societal outcome, with individuals overall preferring good over bad societal outcomes in both the partisan and economist conditions. As depicted in Figure 1, this was in fact the case: although affective differentiation between societal harm and benefit was smaller when reputation was on the line (vs. when it was not), individuals felt more positive about societal benefit vs. harm in both conditions (simple effect in the high reputation salience condition: $M_{\text{bad}} = -2.93$ vs. $M_{\text{good}} = -0.08$, $t(932) = 21.69$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.41$). Collapsing across Experiments 1a and 1b, the sensitivity to societal outcomes was reduced by approximately 20% in high reputation salience condition relative to the low reputation salience condition (i.e., from $d = 1.72$ to $d = 1.41$), suggesting that despite a substantial effect of reputational considerations, the relative size of the effect of societal outcomes was much larger in this context.

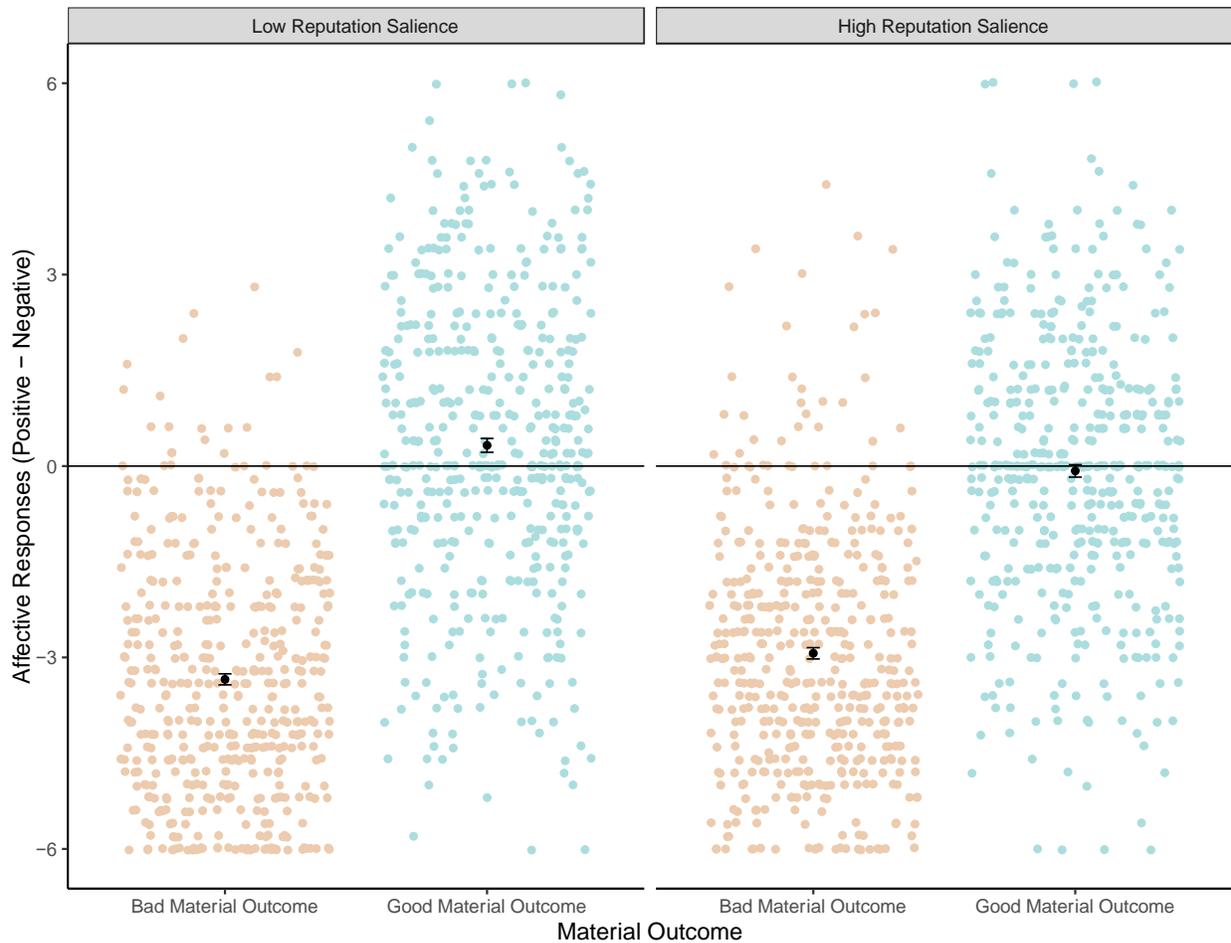


Figure 1. In the context of domestic economic policy, Republicans’ and Democrats’ preferences for good vs. bad societal outcomes were significantly blunted when the good vs. bad societal outcomes were yoked, respectively, to bad vs. good reputational outcomes for an ingroup leader (Experiment 1). Error bars represent 1 SE and colored dots represent raw data.

Discussion

Experiment 1 provided initial evidence that reputational incentives can blunt partisans’ affective differentiation between societal harms and benefits. At least in Experiment 1’s specific context, partisans’ affective reactions were driven more strongly by societal outcomes than by reputational considerations; we diversify contexts, and continue examining the relative effect sizes of societal outcomes and group-based reputational incentives, in Experiments 2-3.

Experiments 2A and 2B

Experiment 2 tests whether reputational incentives can blunt partisans' sensitivity to current societal harms and benefits in a new domain: national security. Experiment 2a explores this possibility among Republicans. Experiment 2b is a parallel experiment with Democrats, reported separately because of a few noteworthy design differences (described below).

Experiment 2a Method

Participants. We conducted an experiment with a sample of 600 Republicans ($M_{age} = 43.95$, $SD = 13.12$, 49% female). As pre-registered, we included only the 581 Republicans (96.8%) who passed an attention check and did not ask to have their data removed. Experiment 2a was conducted in April 2021.

Procedure. Republicans were randomly assigned to one of four between-subjects experimental conditions. In all conditions, participants read an ostensibly real news story in which they learned that a leading public figure had predicted that Iran's cyber capabilities were stagnating (i.e., a predicted positive material outcome for Americans, given the intergroup animosity between the United States and Iran). Specifically, they learned that, despite some internal differences in perspective among foreign policy analysts, a public figure had staked much of his foreign policy credibility on his view that Iran's cyber capabilities were stagnating.

As in Experiment 1, we manipulated both the salience of reputational outcomes (high vs. low) and the valence of the societal outcome (harm vs. benefit in the form of news about Iran's actual cyber capabilities). To manipulate reputation salience, we mimicked the design of Experiment 1 by manipulating the partisan identity of the predictor—in this case, either Democratic President Biden (high reputation salience) or CIA Director Burns (low reputation salience; Burns' partisan group membership was not mentioned, and he was confirmed unanimously by the United States Senate). To manipulate societal outcome, participants learned

that a new, independent report either confirmed (societal benefit) or contradicted (societal harm) the prediction regarding Iran's stagnating capabilities. Specifically, participants learned that a report relying on a systematic assessment by U.S. intelligence sources and American operatives had found either that Iran's cyber capabilities were either less sophisticated (societal benefit) or more sophisticated (societal harm) than previously believed. Thus, relative reputational gain for Republicans (i.e., Biden looking bad) co-occurred with harm for the country (i.e., Iran's cyber capabilities growing more sophisticated than anticipated) and vice-versa.

The primary outcome variable was participants' affective reactions to reading the news story, which we measured in two ways. First, we measured it using a single item of overall positivity vs. negativity on a 100-point sliding scale anchored at "Extremely negative" and "Extremely positive." Second, we used the same combined index of ten specific emotion items from Experiment 1, including five positive items and five negative items. The index again achieved a high level of reliability ($\alpha = .91$ after reverse-scoring negative items).

While now in the context of national security rather than domestic economic policy, the design parallels Experiment 1 in which participants read a news story in which a public figure makes a public prediction with reputational consequences. One other design feature merits note: We sought to provide a stringent test of our theorizing about the role of reputation by further raising the countervailing societal stakes. In particular, we intentionally amplified participants' perceptions of Biden's (or CIA Director Burns') involvement in national security. That is, when participants learned that the prediction was inaccurate, they further learned that this raised question marks about general foreign policy competence, increasing the national security risk to the United States. Consequently, the more desirable reputational outcome for Republicans (i.e., Biden looking bad) involved even greater societal downsides: not only were Iran's cyber

capabilities more sophisticated, but the U.S. faced the additional harm of reduced competence in handling related threats from China and Russia. The reverse was also true (i.e., when the prediction was accurate, it reflected well on general competence and ability to handle related threats). With these heightened societal stakes, any effects of reputation would be still more impressive.

Experiment 2a Results

As in Experiment 1, we first examined the simple effect of societal outcomes in the low reputation conditions. As predicted, when the predictor was CIA Director Burns (i.e., the low reputation salience condition), we found a clear and sizeable effect of societal outcome: participants responded much more positively to societal benefit vs. harm, for both the single general affect item ($M_{\text{harm}} = 33.74$ vs. $M_{\text{benefit}} = 64.77$, $t(280) = 13.17$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.55$) and the 10-item composite ($M_{\text{harm}} = -2.15$ vs. $M_{\text{benefit}} = 1.79$, $t(284) = 16.55$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.95$).

As in Experiment 1, we theorized that this sensitivity to societal outcomes would be significantly attenuated when societal gain helped an outparty partisan leader's (in this case, President Biden's) reputation. As depicted in Figure 2, this interaction prediction was confirmed: we found significant evidence that reputational gains blunted affective responses to societal benefits for both the single general affect item (interaction: $b = 10.01$, $se = 3.55$, $t = 2.82$, $p = .0049$) and for the combined index (interaction: $b = 0.97$, $se = 0.34$, $t = 2.86$, $p = .0044$). Of note, individuals continued to feel more positively about societal gains (vs. harms) in the high reputation salience condition (Single-item slider: $M_{\text{bad material}} = 29.88$ vs. $M_{\text{good material}} = 50.91$, $t(277) = 8.03$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.93$; 10-item composite: $M_{\text{bad material}} = -2.33$ vs. $M_{\text{good material}} = 0.63$, $t(272) = 12.35$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.43$). Critically, however, this represented an

approximately 30-40% reduction in the gap in affective responses between low vs. high threat to the United States from Iran (Single item: $d_{\text{low reputation salience}} = 1.55$ vs. $d_{\text{high reputation salience}} = 0.93$; Composite: $d_{\text{low reputation salience}} = 1.95$ vs. $d_{\text{high reputation salience}} = 1.43$). Thus, building on Experiment 1, the results provided converging evidence that reputational considerations can reduce sensitivity to societal outcomes.

Of note, and unlike in Experiment 1, in Experiment 2a the interaction appeared primarily driven by individuals feeling less good about societal benefits when there were reputational downsides than it was by individuals feeling happier about societal harms when there were reputational upsides. We make note of this distinction where relevant across experiments and return to discuss it further in the General Discussion. For now, it is worth noting that in both Experiments 1 and 2a, reputational incentives reduced overall differentiation between societal harm and benefit.

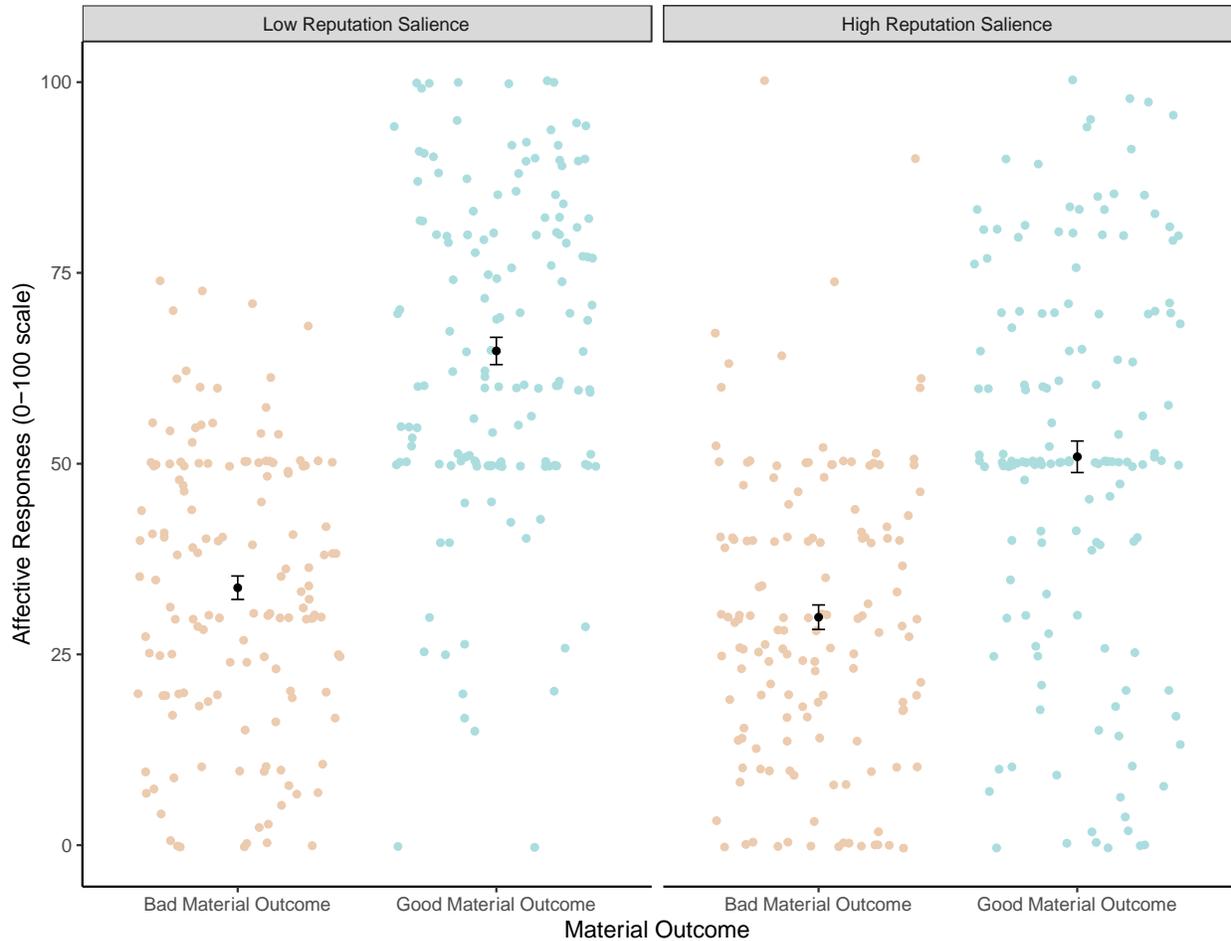


Figure 2. In the context of national security, Republicans’ preferences for good vs. bad societal outcomes were blunted when the good vs. bad societal outcomes were yoked, respectively, to bad vs. good reputational outcomes for an outgroup leader (i.e., President Biden) (Experiment 2a). Error bars represent 1 SE and colored dots represent raw data.

Experiment 2b Method

Participants. We conducted an experiment with a sample of 903 Democrats ($M_{age} = 40.05$, $SD = 12.60$, 50% female). As pre-registered, we included only the 869 Democrats (96.2%) who passed an attention check and did not ask to have their data removed. Experiment 2b was also conducted in April 2021.

Procedure. Experiment 2b was a parallel experiment with Democrats. Democrats also read an ostensibly real news story in which a public figure made a prediction regarding Iran’s

cyber capabilities. Participants were randomly assigned to one of six between-subjects experimental conditions: four primary conditions that closely followed the conditions from Experiment 2a and two supplemental conditions (described later).

In the four primary conditions, Democrats were randomly assigned in a 2 (reputation salience: high vs. low) x 2 (societal outcome: benefit vs. harm) fully between-subjects design. The predictors were again either President Biden (here, an ingroup member) or CIA Director Burns and the prediction regarding Iran's cyber capabilities was either contradicted or confirmed. In contrast to Experiment 2a, in Experiment 2b the public figure predicted that Iran's cyber capabilities were *growing more sophisticated* (rather than stagnating). Thus, reputational gains for Democrats in the high reputation salience condition (i.e., Biden looking good) again co-occurred with societal harm (i.e., Iran's growing cyber capabilities) and vice versa. The primary outcome variable was again participants' affective reactions to reading the news story, which we measured in the same two ways as in Experiment 2a: with a single global evaluation and with a combined index of ten specific emotion items (five positive and five negative; $\alpha = .84$ after reverse-scoring negative items).

In addition to the four conditions described above, we also included two additional conditions aimed at addressing a potential alternative explanation. We theorized that—despite societal upsides—Democrats would be less happy when Biden (vs. a CIA director with unknown partisan membership) made a pessimistic prediction that turned out to be inaccurate because the inaccurate prediction would have negative effects on Democrats' reputation.

Alternatively, however, it could be the case that this interaction is driven less by group-based reputational considerations per se than by reducing confidence in Biden's general competence with respect to foreign policy and ability to handle related threats (e.g., from China

and Russia). That is, participants might view Biden's incorrect prediction as reflecting negatively on the U.S.'s ability to handle foreign policy challenges effectively. If so, then their negative affect might be due not to reputational damage but to a calculation that, despite the positive news about Iran's weaker-than-predicted capabilities, the U.S. would be facing greater threats overall (because Biden's incorrect prediction revealed incompetence on the foreign policy change).

To address this potential alternative explanation, we needed to separate the reputational effects of Biden's prediction from the broader consequences of his (in)accuracy. To do this, we included two additional conditions in our randomized design that were identical to the high reputation salience conditions described above, with one exception. Specifically, the article participants read included additional text indicating that while citizens often attend to and care about the president's views on foreign policy (i.e., that reputation is at stake), the underappreciated reality behind the scenes is that he is not in fact closely involved in the day-to-day operations, which are largely handled by the CIA and military officials (i.e., that the president's inaccuracy has less impact on the U.S.'s material ability to manage foreign policy challenges than might be expected). With this design, the text including Biden's prediction would still reveal materially impactful information about Iran's capabilities, but would no longer provide a basis for drawing broader material conclusions about U.S. foreign policy competence. We theorized that if we again obtained a comparable interaction even when we replaced the two high reputation salience conditions described above with these two supplemental conditions, then it would yield greater confidence that the interaction is in fact specifically driven by reputational considerations.

Experiment 2b Results

We again began by examining the simple effect of societal outcomes in the low reputation conditions. As predicted, participants in the low reputation salience conditions demonstrated strong sensitivity to societal outcomes: they reported a more positive affective response when the pessimistic prediction turned out to be incorrect (i.e., resulting in societal gain: Iran's cyber capabilities in fact *not* growing more sophisticated) compared to when the prediction was confirmed (i.e., resulting in societal harm: Iran's cyber capabilities *indeed* growing more sophisticated). This was true both for responses on the single item measuring general global affect ($M_{\text{harm}} = 38.91$ vs. $M_{\text{gain}} = 57.52$, $t(292) = 8.07$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.94$) and on the 10-item affect composite ($M_{\text{harm}} = -1.79$ vs. $M_{\text{gain}} = 0.87$, $t(291) = 11.65$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.36$).

We next tested our focal interaction prediction. While we hypothesized that participants would report a more positive overall response for societal gain in the low reputation salience condition, we theorized that this effect would be attenuated (and potentially even eliminated) when societal gain hurt an ingroup leader's (in this case, President Biden's) reputation. This was in fact the case: analyses yielded strong evidence for an interaction between reputation salience and societal outcomes for both the single general affect item (interaction: $b = 16.75$, $se = 3.09$, $t = 5.43$, $p < .001$) and the collapsed 10-item scale (interaction: $b = 1.52$, $se = 0.31$, $t = 4.85$, $p < .001$). Of note, individuals no longer demonstrated a statistically significant sensitivity to societal outcomes when affect was measured with the single-item slider ($M_{\text{harm}} = 51.29$ vs. $M_{\text{gain}} = 53.14$, $t(289) = 0.91$, $p = .37$, Cohen's $d = 0.11$). Sensitivity to societal outcomes persisted—but was meaningfully reduced—as measured by the 10-item composite ($M_{\text{harm}} = -0.97$ vs. $M_{\text{gain}} = 0.16$, $t(290) = 5.28$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.62$). Critically, the blunting through reputational incentives represented an approximately 55-90% reduction in differentiation between societal

harm and gain in the form of threat to the United States from Iran (Single item: $d_{\text{low reputation salience}} = 0.94$ vs. $d_{\text{high reputation salience}} = 0.11$; Composite: $d_{\text{low reputation salience}} = 1.36$ vs. $d_{\text{high reputation salience}} = 0.62$).

Finally, we found evidence to support the notion that the interaction was driven (as theorized) by reputational concerns rather than by inferences regarding Biden's competencies. Specifically, when replacing the two primary high reputation salience conditions with the two supplemental Biden conditions (in which we specified that his incorrect prediction had little bearing on U.S. foreign policy competencies), we again find significant evidence that the reputation effect attenuates the effect of societal outcomes for both the single general affect item (interaction: $b = 15.55$, $se = 3.27$, $t = 4.76$, $p < .001$) and for the combined index (interaction: $b = 1.21$, $se = 0.33$, $t = 3.71$, $p < .001$). Of note, the interaction with the primary conditions was almost equal in magnitude to the interaction with the supplemental conditions (Single item: $b_{\text{primary}} = 16.75$ vs. $b_{\text{supplemental}} = 15.55$; Composite: $b_{\text{primary}} = 1.52$ vs. $b_{\text{supplemental}} = 1.21$), suggesting that implications for general competency in handling other foreign threats were not the primary driver of the interaction.

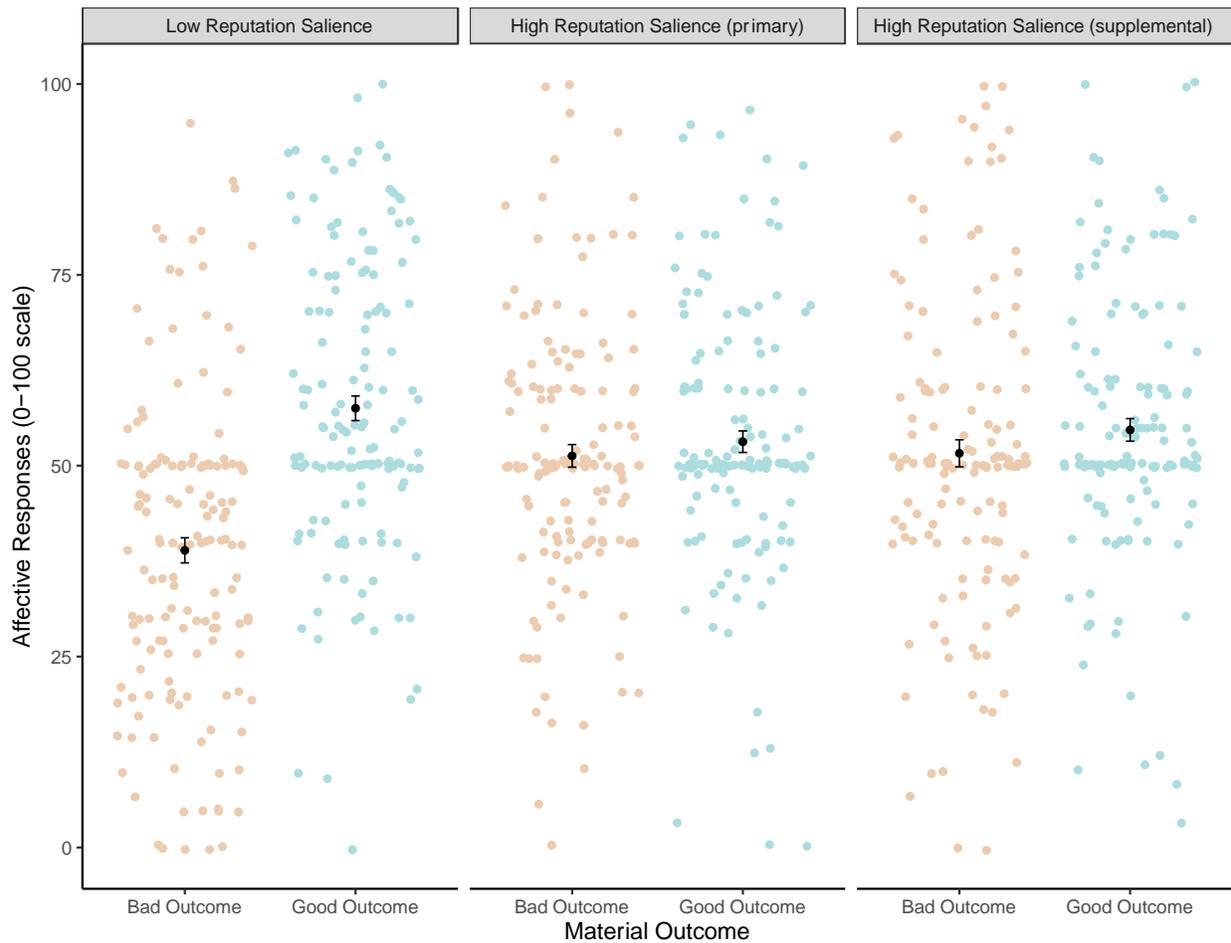


Figure 3. In the context of national security, Democrats’ preferences for good vs. bad societal outcomes were effectively eliminated when the good vs. bad societal outcomes were yoked, respectively, to bad vs. good reputational outcomes for an ingroup leader (i.e., President Biden). This pattern of results held in two supplemental conditions which addressed an alternative explanation based on non-reputational considerations (Experiment 2b; see main text for details). Error bars represent 1 SE and colored dots represent raw data.

Discussion

Experiment 2 demonstrated that, in certain cases, reputational stakes can nearly eliminate affective differentiation between societal harm and gain. Of note, the fact that the relative effect of societal outcomes versus group-based reputational incentives was larger among Republicans (where societal harm regarding Iran’s threat co-occurred with the additional material risk of

presidential incompetence) than among Democrats (where societal harm about Iran occurred absent concerns about presidential incompetence) suggests—albeit tentatively—that the relative size of societal versus reputational considerations in shaping affect may depend on the relative balance of societal versus reputational stakes. Indeed, Supplemental Experiment 4 reveals that, when differences in societal stakes are sufficiently small, countervailing reputational stakes can reverse affective preferences for more (vs. less) societal harm. We return to this point in the General Discussion.

Experiment 3

In Experiment 3, we sought to address an alternative possibility that could account for some of the prior results: perhaps partisans aren't feeling happier (unhappier) because of reputation per se, but because they are having their expectations confirmed (disconfirmed; e.g., Kaiser, Vick, & Major, 2004; Major, Kaiser, O'Brien, & McCoy, 2007). That is, perhaps Democrats, for example, feel better (worse) when Pelosi or Biden (vs. an economist or CIA Director) is right (wrong) about a pessimistic prediction not because of their sensitivity to Democrats' reputation relative to Republicans but simply because Pelosi or Biden being right (wrong) about things is more consistent with their political expectations, with expectancy-violations yielding affective costs. To disentangle the relative contributions of reputation and having one's expectations confirmed, we needed to examine a context in which reputational gain for the ingroup occurs because of events that disconfirm one's expectations.

Method

Participants. We conducted an experiment with a sample of 973 Republicans ($M_{age} = 44.31$, $SD = 12.84$, 52% female). As pre-registered, we included only the 926 Republicans

(95.2%) who passed an attention check and did not ask to have their data removed. Experiment 3 was conducted in July 2021.

Procedure. Republicans were randomly assigned to one of four between-subjects experimental conditions. Across conditions, participants read an ostensibly real news story in which they learned that a leading public figure had made a private, pessimistic prediction about a new domestic economic policy. Specifically, participants read that the leading public figure had privately noted reservations about using targeted efforts to reduce unemployment (i.e., an approach advocated in the new policy).

As in Experiments 1-2, we manipulated both the salience of the reputational outcome (high vs. low) and the valence of the societal outcome (harmful vs. beneficial effects of the policy) in a fully between-subjects design. To manipulate reputation salience, the predictor was either Democratic President Biden (high reputation salience) or Council of Economic Advisors Chair Rouse⁴ (low reputation salience). To manipulate the societal outcome, participants learned that a new report found either that the policy had reduced unemployment and efficiently allocated resources (societal gain) or had no effect on unemployment and inefficiently allocated resources (societal harm). Specifically, participants read either that over one million families had received nutritional assistance that they badly needed (societal gain) or that there had been almost no reduction in the number of families receiving nutritional assistance that they badly needed (societal harm). The story made clear in all conditions that while the policy was put into effect while the public figure was in office (thus impacting their reputation), the policy was in

⁴ While Chair Cecilia Rouse is female, we gave her a male-gendered name (Charlie) to avoid introducing a confound for gender in the experiment. Of the 500 participants in the low reputation salience condition (and thus read about Rouse), none indicated familiarity with Rouse or commented on the name change in an open-ended text box at the end of the experiment.

fact developed and implemented independently of the public figures (and of their private opinions about the policy's likely effectiveness). The text noted that the public figure was credited or blamed with the policy's success or failure by the public (i.e., reputation was always at stake for the public figure; note though that this impinged on group-based reputational considerations for the participant only when Biden was the public figure in question).

The key conceptual change in Experiment 3 compared to Experiments 1-2 was the dissociation between confirming expectations regarding the “wrongness” of an outgroup's leader and reputational incentives. Unlike Experiments 1-2, Experiment 3 created a contrast between the correctness of the private prediction and the public perception. Specifically, in the societal gain conditions, the leader made an incorrect private prediction (i.e., incorrectly assuming the policy would be a failure), but happened to be publicly credited for the success of the policy; in the societal harm conditions, the leader made a correct private prediction (i.e., correctly assuming the policy would be a failure), but happened to be publicly blamed for the policy. Republicans' expectations should be confirmed to a greater extent in the societal gain/bad reputational outcome condition (in which Biden made an incorrect prediction) compared to the societal harm/good reputational outcome condition (in which Biden made a correct prediction). Thus, Republican participants experience reputational *gain* when their expectations are *disconfirmed* and vice versa, disentangling confirmation one's expectations from reputational gain.

Results

Our analysis plan proceeded as in Experiments 1-2, with the overarching hypothesis that a similar pattern of results would emerge even though any effect of confirming one's expectations regarding the “wrongness” of an outparty leader could, if operative, oppose any

effect of reputation. Despite this potential oppositional force, a near-identical pattern of results emerged. First, we again found a simple effect of societal outcome in the low reputation salience conditions: participants in the conditions involving Council of Economic Affairs Chair Rouse responded much more positively to societal gain vs. harm, for both the single general affect item ($M_{\text{harm}} = 38.69$ vs. $M_{\text{gain}} = 51.86$, $t(459) = 6.66$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.62$) and the 10-item composite ($M_{\text{harm}} = -1.61$ vs. $M_{\text{gain}} = 0.50$, $t(459) = 10.86$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.01$). However, and more critically, we again found evidence for an interaction: this sensitivity to societal outcomes was significantly attenuated when it conflicted with an outparty partisan leader's (in this case, again President Biden's) reputation, for both the single general affect item (interaction: $b = 11.54$, $se = 2.86$, $t = 4.03$, $p < .001$) and the 10-item composite (interaction: $b = 1.25$, $se = 0.28$, $t = 4.53$, $p < .001$). Mirroring the results of Experiment 2b, individuals no longer demonstrated a statistically significant differentiation between societal harm and gain when affect was measured with the single-item slider ($M_{\text{harm}} = 39.16$ vs. $M_{\text{gain}} = 40.78$, $t(456) = 0.79$, $p = .43$, Cohen's $d = 0.07$), although this differentiation persisted—but was meaningfully reduced—as measured by the 10-item composite ($M_{\text{harm}} = -1.45$ vs. $M_{\text{gain}} = -0.60$, $t(459) = 4.34$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.40$).

Of note, and as depicted in Figure 4, the reputation effect was again quite substantial in magnitude: it represented an approximately 60-90% reduction in the gap in affective responses between low vs. high threat to the United States from Iran (Single item: $d_{\text{low reputation salience}} = 0.62$ vs. $d_{\text{high reputation salience}} = 0.07$; Composite: $d_{\text{low reputation salience}} = 1.01$ vs. $d_{\text{high reputation salience}} = 0.40$). Indeed, in the high reputation salience condition, Republicans reported nearly identical affective responses for the general affect item when the policy was a failure and materially hurt society as a whole, including the ingroup (but Biden was blamed: Mean = 39.16) as compared to when the

policy was a success and materially benefited society as a whole, including the ingroup (but Biden was credited: Mean = 40.79).

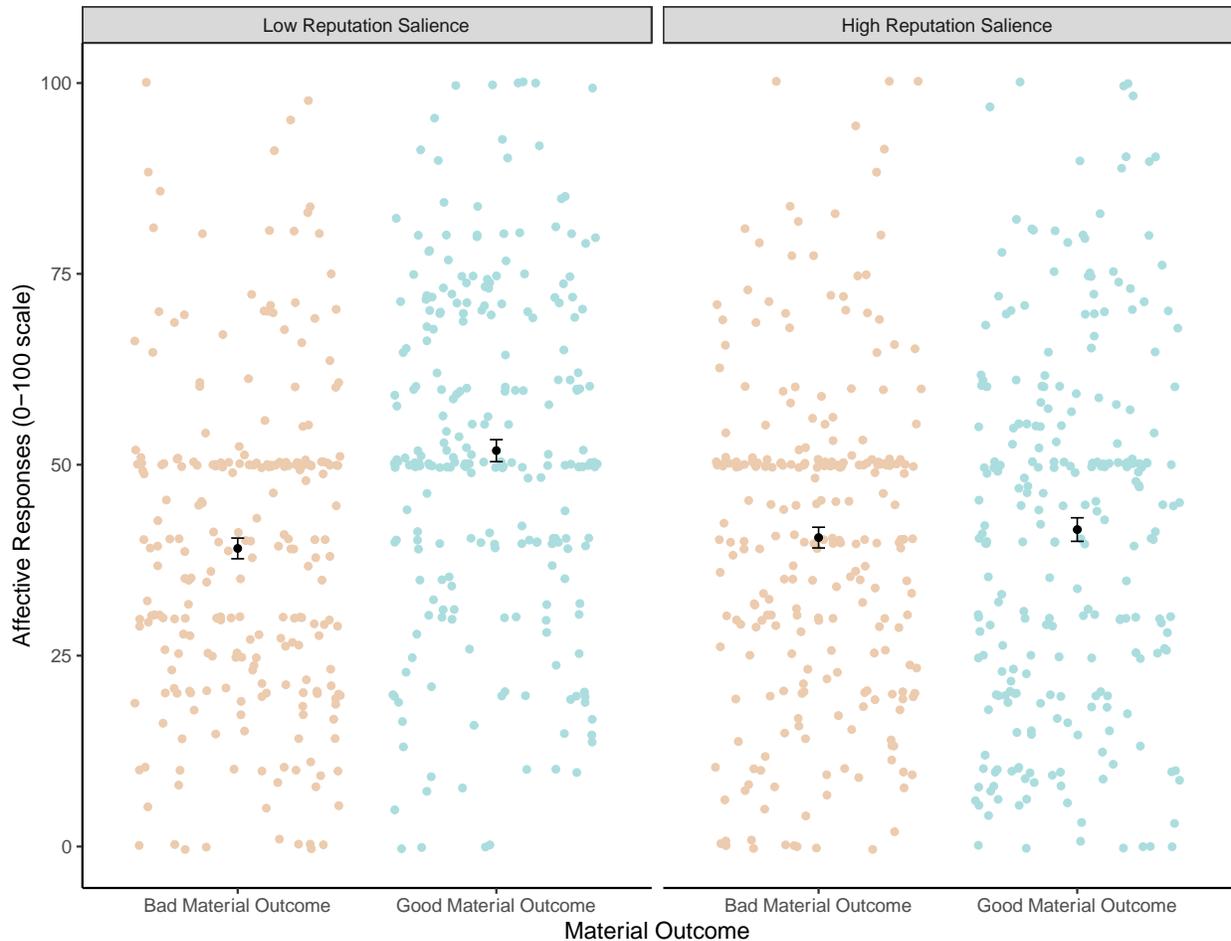


Figure 4. In the context of domestic economic policy, Republicans’ preferences for good vs. bad material outcomes were eliminated when the good vs. bad material outcomes were yoked, respectively, to bad vs. good reputational outcomes for an outgroup leader (i.e., President Biden). This pattern held even though any positive affective consequences of reputational gain could, in principle, have been counteracted by negative affective consequences of disconfirming prior expectations about an outgroup/ingroup leader (Experiment 3). Error bars represent 1 SE and colored dots represent raw data.

Discussion

Experiments 1-3 provided consistent evidence that group-based reputational incentives can reduce (or even largely eliminate) affective differentiation between societal harms and gains,

even when these outcomes influence the ingroup. Moreover, this pattern did not seem to be driven by affective costs (or benefits) of disconfirming (or confirming) prior expectations about an outgroup/ingroup leader being wrong/right about the world.

Experiment 4

Experiment 4 investigates why group-based reputational incentives temper sensitivity to societal outcomes. Thus, while Experiments 2b and 3 attempted to support the role of reputation by *ruling out* alternative explanations, Experiment 4 attempts to *rule in* an underlying mechanism for why individuals care about reputational incentives: potential strategic benefits for one's group.

Adapting the methodology from Experiment 2b, Democrats read a news story in which a public figure correctly predicted an increasing national security threat from Iran (thereby bolstering the predictor's reputation) and reported their affective reaction. Thus, all participants were assigned to a condition that included societal harm. They were again randomly assigned such that there were low versus high reputational stakes (i.e., the predictor was either a non-partisan public official or a party leader). In Experiment 4 (and unlike prior studies), we built on this design by measuring stated attention to strategic benefits for one's ingroup and testing whether this attention mediated the effect of reputational incentives on affective reactions.

Of note, prior studies were relatively subtle in identifying the strategic benefits for one's group: strategic benefits were often implied as a consequence of reputational gain, but were not directly noted. This was because we expected that participants would be (consciously or subconsciously) sensitive to strategic implications associated with reputational stakes even when these were not spelled out. Nevertheless, if our theoretical account is correct—that is, if individuals' affect is influenced by reputational considerations because of its strategic

consequences for the ingroup—then making the strategic implications of reputation more salient should further amplify our effect.

Thus, in Experiment 4, in addition to measuring stated attention to strategic benefits, we also include a new experimental condition in which we make the strategic benefits for one's group more salient. We expected that Democrats would report a more positive affective reaction when their group's leader (vs. a non-partisan public official) accurately predicted an increased security threat from Iran, but we additionally expected that such effects would be even stronger when the strategic benefits were further spotlighted.

Finally, of further interest, we sought to conduct a preliminary investigation of whether the consideration of reputation's strategic consequences occurs subconsciously (vs. consciously). To test this, after measuring affect (but *before* directly asking about strategic implications), we asked people to tell us *why* they felt as they did. If people are consciously deliberating about the strategic consequences of reputation and knowingly factoring that into their affective reaction, we might expect individuals to refer to that directly. If on the other hand the process is more subconscious, we ought to expect very few individuals to refer to it directly, at least until they're explicitly asked about it on the following page. We test this by evaluating open-ended responses of individuals when a partisan leader makes a correct prediction, but strategic benefits are not explicitly noted.⁵

Method

⁵ One might reasonably worry that individuals who *did* consciously consider strategic implications might not report it to us when asked because of social desirability concerns. If social desirability were a significant factor tempering the proclivity to report considering strategic considerations among those who nevertheless did, however, we would expect individuals to deny being influenced by strategic benefits when explicitly asked about it on the following page. We return to this in the main text, but to foreshadow our results: it does not appear to be the case that individuals are “shy” to report caring about strategic considerations when explicitly asked, mitigating the concern that they might have substantially underreported the same on our preceding open-ended question.

Participants. We conducted an experiment with a sample of 748 Democrats ($M_{age} = 41.35$, $SD = 12.85$, 59% female). As pre-registered, we included only the 704 Democrats (94.1%) who passed an attention check and did not ask to have their data removed. Experiment 4 was conducted in December 2022 (i.e., after the 2022 midterm election in which President Biden and Democrats maintained power in the Senate but lost power in the House of Representatives and just weeks before the incoming Congress took power).

Procedure. Experiment 4 adapted the procedure from Experiment 2b. After answering the same individual difference and demographic questions as in prior experiments, Democrats in all conditions read a news story in which a public figure correctly predicted an increasing national security threat from Iran (thereby burnishing the predictor's reputation). Democrats then reported their affective reactions after reading the news story (here, using only the slider scale from 0-100).

Democrats were randomly assigned to one of three between-subjects experimental conditions. The first two conditions were identical to the societal harm conditions from Experiment 2b, thereby manipulating reputation salience (low vs. high). In the low reputation salience condition (i.e., the CIA Condition), the public figure was CIA Director Burns. In the high reputation salience condition (i.e., the Baseline Biden Condition), the public figure was President Biden. As in Experiment 2b, we predicted that Democrats would report more positive affective reactions when President Biden (vs. CIA Director Burns) accurately predicted the increased threat from Iran.

Beyond this main effect of experimental condition on affect, Experiment 4 also examines the underlying mechanism of perceived strategic benefits for one's group. To do so, on the page following the affect slider, we included two Likert items explicitly asking participants whether

they considered strategic consequences for the Democratic Party when reading the news story (“When reading, how much (if at all) did you think about how the events described in the news article would influence the strategic standing of Democrats as compared to Republicans?”; “When reading, how much (if at all) did you think about how the events in the news article would give Democrats the upper hand on Republicans?”; inter-item correlation = .87). Both items were answered on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). We predicted that Democrats would report higher attention to strategic standing in the Biden (vs. CIA) condition, and that this difference would mediate the effect of condition on affect.

In addition to the two conditions described above, we included a third experimental condition: the high reputation salience + strategic salience condition (i.e., the Strategic Salient Biden Condition). The goal of this condition was to include a manipulation that made the implicit explicit; that is, to directly make top-of-mind the potential strategic implications of a boost to the group’s reputation. In this way, this third condition was designed to “manipulate the mediator”, experimentally manipulating the proposed mediator (sensitivity to strategic consequences associated with reputation) by making the consideration of long-term strategic consequences for the ingroup salient and testing for effects on the outcome variable of interest (i.e., affective responses).

In this third condition, the public figure was again President Biden—but the news story also made salient the potential consequences of Biden's improved standing in the eyes of the public for the strategic goals of the Democratic party. More concretely, the headline of the news story included the following subheading: “Analysts suggest Biden’s astute perspective could impact Democrats’ political position.” At the end of the news story, participants in this condition

also read that the boost to Biden's reputation could boost Democrats' political position and afford an advantage with the incoming Congress.

We had two specific predictions relating to this new, third experimental condition. First, we predicted that participants would report *even more* positive affective reactions in the Strategic Salient Biden Condition compared to the Baseline Biden Condition (which we expected itself would generate more positive affective reactions to the CIA condition, replicating Study 2b). Second, we expected a parallel pattern for self-reported attention to strategic benefits: that participants would report *even more* attention to strategic benefits in the Strategic Salient Biden Condition to the Baseline Biden Condition, and that this difference in attention to strategic benefits would mediate the difference between the Baseline Biden Condition and the Strategic Salient Biden Condition on affect.

Beyond these hypotheses, Experiment 4 allowed us to examine one further question of interest: to what extent does consideration of strategic benefits occur consciously (vs. subconsciously)? It is possible that individuals care about strategic advantage for their group—but that these considerations are typically subconscious and internalized rather than operating via conscious calculated deliberation. To assess this possibility, on the same page as the affect slider (but before the page in which participants are directly asked about strategic incentives), participants had the opportunity to write in an open-ended text box what they were considering and thinking about when giving their affect ratings. We theorized that, in the Baseline Biden condition, which lacked a direct prime to think about strategic consequences but included a central role for a party leader, a very small percentage of participants (i.e., under 5%) would report thinking about strategic consequences (i.e., conscious deliberation), providing evidence consistent with the hypothesis that this process is often subconscious. The first author (blind to

condition) coded every open-ended response for whether it mentioned societal harm/gain, strategic implications, and/or the leader's reputation.

Results

Our analysis proceeds in lockstep with the procedure described above: we first replicate and extend our analyses of the two experimental conditions from Experiment 2b, then analyze the novel third experimental condition, before finally turning to coding of open-ended responses. All analyses and statistical estimates described below were fit in a single overarching model including contrasts between all three conditions to ensure that we appropriately account for all of the variance; however, we report pairwise contrasts separately for clarity.

CIA Condition vs. Baseline Biden Condition. In a first set of analyses, we examined our first two experimental conditions: the CIA Condition and the Baseline Biden Condition. Directly replicating Experiment 2b and conceptually replicating the other prior experiments, Democrats reported a more negative affective reaction in the CIA Condition compared to the Baseline Biden Condition ($M_{CIA} = 45.10$ vs. $M_{Baseline\ Biden} = 52.67$, $t = 4.35$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.39$). New to Experiment 4 was measurement of attention to strategic consequences associated with reputation. Participants also reported considering strategic incentives for Democrats less often in the CIA condition (Mean = 2.32) than in the Baseline Biden Condition (Mean = 3.38: $t = 7.19$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.66$). We tested for mediation using the Lavaan package in R (Rosseel, 2012). The independent variable was experimental condition, the mediator was consideration of strategic incentives (using the Likert items), and the dependent variable was self-reported affect. Notwithstanding limitations of correlational designs testing mediation (Bullock, Green, & Ha, 2010; Fiedler, 2013; Simonsohn, 2022), the model provided evidence for a significant and positive indirect effect (Indirect effect = 3.93, SE = 0.71, $z = 5.57$, $p < .001$). Of

note, the indirect effect was moderate in magnitude: differences in consideration of strategic incentives explained approximately 52% of the total effect of condition on affective responses. Results are depicted in Figure 5 (top panel).

Baseline Biden Condition vs. Strategic Biden Condition. In a second set of analyses, we conducted parallel tests with the new third condition: the Strategic Salient Biden Condition. Participants reported *even more* positive affective responses in the Strategic Salient Biden Condition compared to the Baseline Biden Condition ($M_{\text{Baseline Biden}} = 52.67$ vs. $M_{\text{Strategic Biden}} = 61.06$, $t = 4.79$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.45$). Given that the only difference between these conditions was that the strategic consequences of a boost to Biden's reputation was made explicit, this result supports the notion that partisans are influenced by strategic boosts associated with reputational gains, even when this comes at the cost of current societal harm. In addition, and confirming the internal validity of the experimental manipulation, participants reported higher levels of attention to strategic incentives in the Strategic Salient Biden Condition compared to the Baseline Biden Condition ($M_{\text{Baseline Biden}} = 3.38$ vs. $M_{\text{Strategic Biden}} = 4.10$, $t = 4.86$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.44$). As predicted, this difference in consideration of strategic incentives mediated the effects of condition on self-reported affect (Indirect effect = 2.68, SE = 0.63, $z = 4.26$, $p < .001$). Of note, the effect was again moderate in magnitude, explaining approximately 32% of the total effect of condition on affective responses. Results are depicted in Figure 5 (bottom panel).

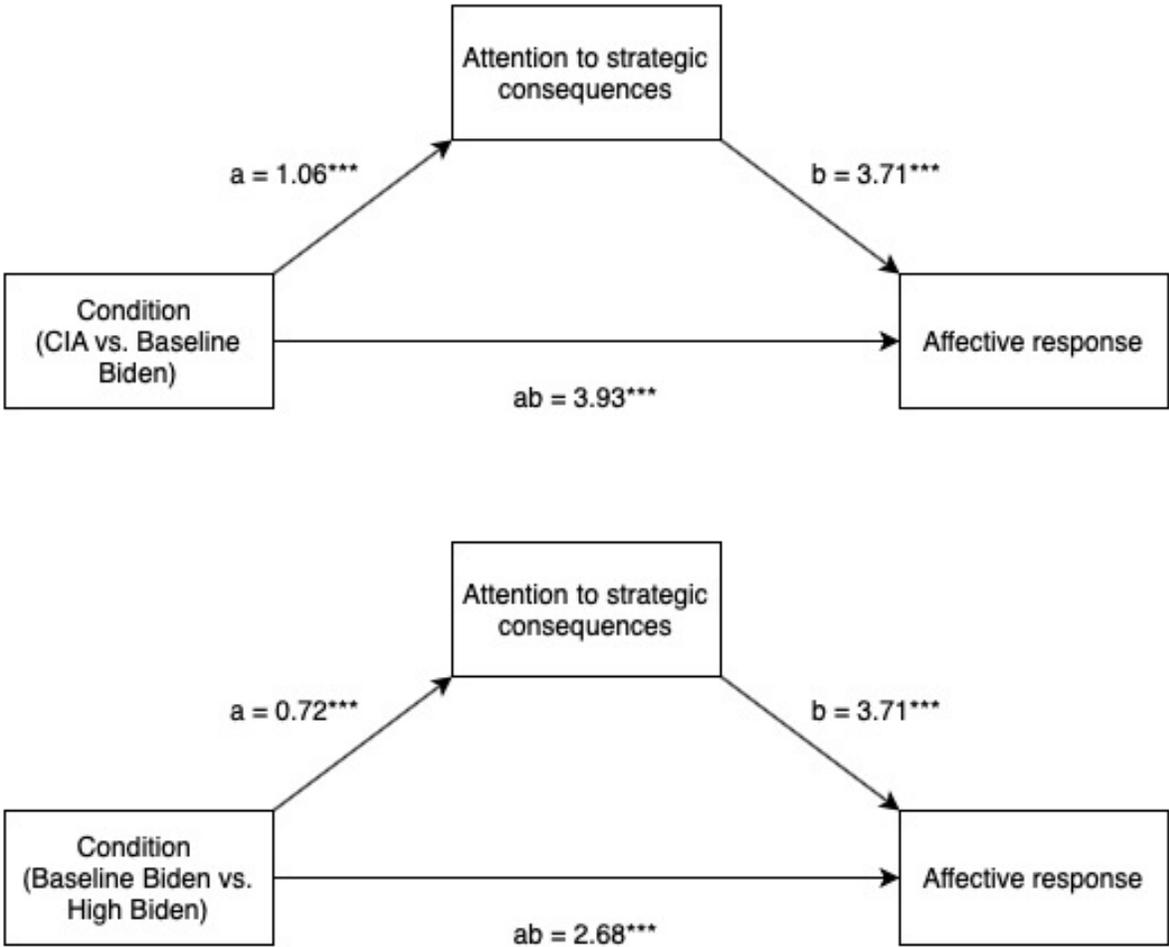


Figure 5. In the context of national security, Democrats’ aversion to negative societal outcomes was reduced when negative societal outcomes were yoked to good reputational outcomes for an ingroup leader (i.e., President Biden). This pattern was underpinned by attention to the strategic benefits of such reputational gain. All coefficients were significant at the $p < .001$ level.

Coding of open-ended responses. Taken together, the two sets of analyses above provide converging evidence that partisans’ reputational considerations influence their affect even in light of societal harm because of reputation’s strategic value for the ingroup’s standing relative to the outgroup. A key open question remains: to what extent is this consideration a conscious and deliberate calculation vs. subconscious one? To gain insight into this question, we coded the open-ended text responses given by participants directly after giving their affect ratings. The coder was blind to experimental condition. These text responses were completed

before participants encountered the Likert questions on the following page, which explicitly tapped strategic considerations (we thus avoided the risk of ourselves bringing strategic considerations to mind for participants). Results revealed that a negligible percentage—just 5% of participants in the Baseline Biden Condition—mentioned long-term strategic consequences for their party.⁶

Discussion

Experiment 4 provides converging evidence for the underlying psychology driving the effect of group-based reputational incentives on sensitivity to societal outcomes. Via tests both measuring and manipulating our proposed mediator, we obtained evidence consistent with the claim that partisans' affective responses to reputational stakes (even in the face of societal harms) are driven by sensitivity to the strategic value of reputation for the ingroup's standing relative to the outgroup. Furthermore, coding of open-ended response data offers preliminary support for the idea that this sensitivity to the strategic implications of reputation is something that is not typically top-of-mind (i.e., it appears to be subconscious, with individuals not referencing its role until it is primed or directly measured; c.f., Jordan & Rand, 2020).

Experiment 5

Experiments 1-4 provide robust evidence that reputational stakes shape partisans' affective responses to societal events, that they do so because of (perhaps subconscious) attention to strategic consequences, and that they do so quite substantially—sometimes even eliminating affective differentiation between immediate societal harms and benefits.

In Experiment 5, we turn from affective responses to behavior. Whereas participants might feel better about societal harm when it helps their group's reputation, will they also *act* in

⁶ Instead, the most common responses mentioned either the harm to society (28%) or impressions of Biden's competence to address other threats (16%).

ways that help entrench material suffering on account of group-based reputational considerations? Experiment 5 uses an incentive-compatible design to test whether partisans are less willing to actively intervene to stop suffering when doing so would yield reputational gains for the outgroup.

Method

Participants. We conducted an experiment with a sample of 1,192 Democrats ($M_{age} = 40.03$, $SD = 12.79$, 54% female). As pre-registered, we included only the 1,117 participants (93.7%) who passed an attention check and did not opt to have their data removed. Of note, Experiment 5 was conducted mere days after the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines received emergency use authorization in the United States in December 2020.

Procedure. As in prior experiments, participants learned that they would read an ostensibly real news story and answer questions about it on the following pages. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two between-subjects experimental conditions (low reputation salience vs. high reputation salience). In the low reputation salience condition, participants then read an article with the following headline: “Multiple priorities considered for COVID-19 vaccine strategy, including marketing and logistics.” The article (1) described how a vaccine could provide hope to the United States after widespread harm from COVID-19; (2) noted that there were two competing priorities: marketing and ground logistics; and (3) described AmeriCares as an organization focused on helping with ground logistics. Participants in the high reputation salience condition read the identical news story, except the headline included the additional sentence “President Trump eager to take credit for logistics” and the article included a final paragraph that indicated that in a recent interview, President Trump had said that, as President, his job was to oversee the logistics operation and ensure its success and that “people

are going to look back and say Trump did something that had never ever been done before.” We wrote this additional paragraph to raise the reputational stakes (here, an outgroup President receiving acclaim) for Democrats.

On the following page, participants then learned that for participating in the survey, they were eligible to receive a \$.50 bonus. They also learned that they had the opportunity to donate the bonus (or any part of it) to AmeriCares in order to help with COVID-19 vaccine logistics. The choice of whether to donate the bonus (and how much) served as the primary dependent variable in this experiment. Of note, participants kept any money they did not donate.

Results

We hypothesized that participants would be less likely to donate their bonus in the high reputation salience condition because they would be hesitant to contribute to a cause that could eventually shed a positive light on the Republican effort to stem coronavirus. This hypothesis was supported: Democrats were significantly (albeit slightly) less likely to donate their bonus in the high reputation salience condition ($M = 51\%$) compared to the low reputation salience condition ($M = 57\%$), $b = 0.24$, $se = .12$, $t(1116) = 2.03$, $p = .043$. This difference—obtained in the immediate aftermath of the announcement of a lifesaving vaccine, following on months of lockdowns and extreme death tolls—represents an approximately 12% relative reduction in probability of donating to a cause that could dramatically relieve material suffering on the basis of averting reputational gain to the outgroup. Thus, results revealed that reputational incentives can blunt partisans’ willingness to actively intervene to stop societal harm.

General Discussion

When groups get locked into competition, they can become highly focused on outcompeting the other side, with costly societal ramifications (Sidanius et al., 2007). Here, we

consider one such manifestation of this psychology. We consider how reputational stakes with the potential to impact the relative standing between the ingroup and outgroup impact affective differentiation between present societal harms and benefits. In the context of the competitive relationship between Democrats and Republicans, five pre-registered experiments revealed that group-based reputational incentives shape partisans' responses to current societal outcomes, including economic devastation, national security threats, and healthcare emergencies. Strikingly, incentives for reputational standing can weaken—and sometimes even eliminate— affective differentiation between current societal harms and benefits. Moreover, our work suggests that individuals might sometimes forgo opportunities to avert suffering if avoiding harm comes at the expense of burnishing the outgroup's reputation.

Building upon important past work investigating enjoyment at outgroup pain (i.e., *schadenfreude*; e.g., Cikara, Bruneau, & Saxe, 2011; Leach, Spears, Branscombe, & Doosje, 2003), our work sheds light on a new psychological mechanism with the potential to reinforce group-based conflict. While prior research has demonstrated the potential for partisans to feel positive emotions in response to societal harm when there may be upsides for the ingroup (Combs et al., 2009), the present work contributes to the psychology literature by identifying a key role for group-based reputational concerns.⁷ In doing so, it also reveals that group-based

⁷ Of note, while there is a relative lack of research in psychology on how individuals are influenced by group-based reputational concerns, there is a body of research outside of psychology (in management) studying how firms manage their reputation. That research is focused on how to burnish or protect the reputation of a given organization by individuals who are squarely attending to the interests of their organization. In our work, individuals are presumably seeking to manage *tradeoffs* between what is good for society and what is good for their group, in a context where they might reasonably care about both aspects. Moreover, in contrast to most research on corporate reputation, our research has direct implications for intergroup hostility and conflict in society. When Democrats and Republicans believe that their outgroup is prioritizing ingroup interests over societal harms/benefits, this may come to harden their own hostility towards the outgroup and their own willingness to prioritize their ingroup over other considerations. This psychology is less relevant to the research on corporate reputation, which focuses more squarely on how an individual company might take actions that protect its own bottom line (by managing its reputation).

reputational incentives can “close the gap” in affective differentiation between societal harm and benefit—and even have the motivational force necessary to change behavior. Whereas prior work has often focused on the ways that groups act prosocially to maintain or restore their reputation (e.g., by offering intergroup apologies; Wohl, Hornsey, & Bennett, 2012), our work illuminates new contours of the darker side of sensitivity to group-based reputation (see also Saguy & Kteily, 2011). Previous research also suggests that individuals are sensitive to their group’s reputation, for example expressing concern over maintaining the ingroup’s moral standing in the eyes of others (Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, & Nadler, 2012; Rothschild, Landau, Molina, Branscombe, & Sullivan, 2013). Here, we highlight that individuals may sometimes tolerate societal suffering or devalue societal gain when these outcomes conflict with group-based reputational incentives. By focusing more on making the other side look bad than on averting immediate societal suffering (or assuring immediate societal gain), partisans may play into the other side’s cynical narratives about their disregard for the sanctity of human life, damaging potential bridges to cooperation and increasing the outgroup’s conviction in the righteousness of its conflict. Even if partisans have worthy goals of hoping to ensure long-term benefit for society by implementing what they perceive as valuable policies, when two sides are more focused on looking good than seeking good, prospects for cooperation diminish.

Limitations and Future Directions

While we found across multiple contexts (e.g., Democrats and Republicans, affective responses and financially incentivized behavior) that group-based reputational incentives shaped individuals’ reactions societal outcomes, we also found notable variation. Reputational incentives *weakened* affective differentiation between societal harm and benefit in Experiments 1 and 2a, but *eliminated* it in Experiments 2b and 4. Indeed, in Supplemental Experiment 4, we

provided a proof of concept test that reputational incentives can *reverse* such affective differentiation when societal stakes are sufficiently small and reputational stakes are sufficiently big. Future research should explore how the relative balance between societal and reputational stakes play an important role in determining how strongly reputational incentives shape affective responses to societal harms and gains.

One additional factor worth considering more systematically is the extent to which individuals factor reputational considerations similarly when faced with contexts involving societal harm versus societal benefit: If a societal gain is paired with a reputational loss and a societal harm is paired with an equivalently-sized reputational gain, are participants equally moved by reputation under both scenarios? In Experiments 1 and 2b reputational effects were approximately equal in the context of societal benefit and harm, but reputational considerations appeared stronger in the context of societal gains (vs. harms) in Experiments 2a and 3. Future work should consider whether there is robust evidence for an asymmetry in the effect of reputation in the context of societal gains versus harms. Future research should explore this potential asymmetry further, as well as consider whether participants differentiate between reputational gain to the ingroup and reputational loss to the outgroup (or between reputational loss to the ingroup and gain to the outgroup) at varying levels of reputational and societal stakes.

Experiment 4 also provided evidence for the psychological process underlying these effects. Why might group-based reputational incentives blunt sensitivity to societal harm? Our results supported a nuanced answer. A set of analyses that involved both measuring and manipulating our proposed mediator provided compelling evidence that one reason group-based reputational incentives hold motivational force is because they yield strategic gains for one's group. That is, a positive reputation can also serve as an important strategic advantage to a group

(and its members) in competitive contexts, helping to deliver valued resources like power and legitimacy. Interestingly, coding of open-ended responses revealed that such considerations are rarely top-of-mind, providing evidence consistent with the conclusion that these calculations may be subconscious rather than conscious. Based on this evidence, it seems that partisans may come to simply intuitively enjoy reputational gains for their group because they can bring about strategic benefits, even if partisans do not stop to deliberately calculate these benefits in real time. Still, it is worth noting one limitation of our design worth considering further in future research: it may be that participants *did* consciously think about the reputational incentives' impact on the strategic standing of their group, but failed to report it in the open-ended response section either out of mere "laziness" (preferring not to expend the effort to complete the open-ended response) or because of social desirability considerations (not wanting to appear "calculated"). Of additional interest for future research, mediation analyses in Experiment 4 revealed that approximately one third of the effect of reputation on affect could be attributed to consideration of strategic benefits; future research should explore complementary potential mechanisms, including mere joy at defeating a rival (independent of any strategic considerations).

Relatedly, future research could more deeply consider what individuals seek to do with the strategic advantages that positive reputational events afford. In certain cases (e.g., when a reputational boost comes with a bump in electoral chances), events that improve the group's relative reputational standing may come with the increased power, including the power to shape social policies and material reality. Power may be affectively rewarding for several reasons, including because it is associated with status and freedom from constraints. But for at least some individuals, group power may be affectively rewarding because it allows the ingroup to structure

society in ways that they believe are materially better. For example, Democrats likely believe that Joe Biden winning an election over Donald Trump and gaining power would have significant positive ramifications to society, including things like a fairer economy and an enhanced social safety net; it is conceivable that Democrats with this mindset could calculate that an event that caused great suffering today but dented Trump's reputation might be worth it in the long run if it put Democrats in a position to reduce suffering going forward. Most of our experiments did not involve upcoming elections that would straightforwardly lend themselves to this logic, and our data in Experiment 4 did not clearly suggest that many individuals are engaging in such deliberative calculations. Still, it may be that some individuals—perhaps especially those who are more consequentialist in nature—might allow long-term calculations like this to influence how reputational considerations shape their affective differentiation between immediate-term societal harm and benefit.

Finally, it would be useful to complement the present methodological approach with observational data collected outside of a controlled laboratory setting. For example, one such potential study could examine emotional/linguistic cues on social media during conflicts to examine whether reputationally-damaging actions by the outgroup elicit positivity, even when this comes at the expense of ingroup suffering. Future work could also go beyond the context of partisanship in the United States to examine other contexts where similar dynamics might be at play, including conflicts like those between Israel/Palestine, India/Pakistan, and Russia/Ukraine.

Conclusion

Affectively-charged conflicts can impede cooperation, creating situations in which group members attend heavily to their group's relative standing. We highlight the critical role of group-

based reputational incentives in reinforcing conflict by decreasing differentiation to present societal harms and benefits, thus contributing to a vicious cycle of conflict escalation.

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