

What Would You Say? Asymmetric Ideological Conformity in Political Speech

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Abstract

I report a survey experiment to study political speech, understood as an expression of political identity that is at once highly performative and broadly consequential. I develop a novel measure of participants' knowledge and usage of various politically-charged terms, and apply two randomized treatments (in a between-subjects 2×2 factorial design) to test the effects of social context and identity salience on participants' overall speech ideology: their propensity to use words and phrases associated with a more liberal or conservative identity.

Preliminary results indicate that conservatives (but not liberals) engage in a form of ideological code-switching, using conservative language with close friends, but adopting much more liberal language with new acquaintances. Similarly, I find that conservatives (but not liberals) conform to their in-group speech norms when primed to consider the phrases' implicit ideological identities, such that they use more polarized conservative phrases.

I also report substantively interesting descriptive results: I find that college education is associated with more liberal speech (but appears to work differently among liberals *versus* conservatives); identifying as a person of color is associated with more liberal speech for conservatives (but not liberals); and identifying as male (as opposed to female or non-binary) is associated with more conservative speech, particularly among liberals.

Though preliminary, these findings have important substantive implications regarding the role of ideological and demographic identities in the polarization of political discourse. I plan various extensions to pilot, which I will incorporate into the design of a finalized pre-registered experiment, to be fielded in an nationally-representative sample.

1 Background & Motivation

When we talk about politics, our words carry more than literal meaning: when one person speaks of “undocumented immigrants,” and another speaks of “illegal immigrants,” both refer to the same topic, but signal very different political identities. Knowing the difference is important for anyone who wishes to speak about politics – in a polarized society, miscommunicating one’s identity can incur great social cost, so it is not surprising that we choose our words carefully. And although this social motivation makes political speech a highly performative behavior, this does not mean that it is inconsequential cheap talk; on the contrary, these performances help us to construct and revise our political identities (Cramer, 2004; c.f. Butler, 1999). The earliest scholars of political communication recognized that interpersonal speech shapes individuals’ political attitudes and beliefs (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955), and rise of social media has lent unprecedented broadcasting power the mass public (Tufekci, 2017). Those who speak up online can help set the political agenda (Barberá et al., 2019; King, Schneer and White, 2017), and iteratively redefine the ideological norms that structure political coalitions – a discursive power historically reserved for elites (Noel, 2012). Thus, if social forces shape our political lexicons, the downstream consequences could be quite far-reaching.

In particular, I speculate that this linguistic differentiation threatens a worrisome form of polarization. If liberals and conservatives are socially required to speak differently on every topic, it may become difficult to participate in a shared conversation. If individuals conform to their groups’ speech norms, independent of their actual ideological positions, we may miss opportunities to process political conflict productively.

I am therefore proposing a survey experiment, in which I apply a novel measure of citizens’ knowledge and usage of politically-charged terms, and employ randomized treatments to test hypotheses about how social context and ideological identity affect political speech. My research design is oriented around two questions that I have developed for this purpose: one, which I call the “placement question,” asks the respondent to categorize a set of words and phrases as either “liberal,” or “conservative,” in order to measure their awareness of the political connotations of various terms (see Figure 3 for an example of the placement question). The other, which I call the “usage question,” asks whether the respondent would use each of these terms, in order to measure their willingness to speak in politically-charged ways (see Figure 4, Appendix A for an example of the usage question). I refer to the placement and usage questions collectively as a “political fluency” test.

To make this test, I have developed a set of stimuli designed to represent the kind of phrases a person might use when talking about politics, either online or in face-to-face interactions. This set includes well-known slogans (“Black lives matter”), as well as abstract concepts (“empathy”) that have long fascinated political psychologists (Jones et al., 2018). My procedure for developing this list of terms includes quantitative methods of text classification developed in a related study of Twitter, as well as qualitative methods.

Collecting placement and usage responses with regard to this diverse set of words and phrases allows me to test whether particular words and phrases do indeed have different implicit ideological identities. And by randomly manipulating key aspects of the fluency test, I can test hypotheses about how people code-switch with different audiences, and conform to their political in-groups:

Hypothesis 1 (Non-Directional): Participants engage in ideological code-switching, using different words with new acquaintances than with close friends, shifting their overall speech ideology between audiences.

Hypothesis 2 (Directional): Priming the phrases’ ideological slant induces conformity, such that liberals’ speech ideology is more liberal, and conservatives’ speech ideology is more conservative.

2 Pilot

A pilot test of the proposed experiment was fielded from April 9th-10th, 2021, with a non-representative sample of $N = 500$ US adults, recruited via Prolific, using a between-subjects 2×2 factorial design. First, to test Hypothesis 1, I manipulated the usage question to vary the “imagined audience” (Marwick and boyd, 2011) to be one of the following:

1. Please indicate whether each word/phrase is something you would use with **a close friend, who knows you very well**. (As shown in Figure 4)
2. Please indicate whether each word/phrase is something you would use with **someone you just met, who doesn’t know you too well**.

I expected that respondents would code-switch, using different words with friends than they do with strangers, leading to an overall leftward or rightward shift in speech ideology, depending on audience.

Second, to test Hypothesis 2, I manipulated the order of the placement and usage components of the fluency test. If categorizing the phrases as liberal or conservative primes respondents' awareness of these implicit ideological identities, I expect this to increase their propensity to conform to their in-groups' speech norms when subsequently answering the usage question, such that liberal respondents will be more likely to report using liberal terms, and less likely to report using conservative terms, while conservative respondents are expected to show an opposite effect.

2.1 Analysis & Results

In my analysis, the key dependent variable is phrase-level `usage` responses, coded as 0 ("I wouldn't say this"), 1 ("I might say this"), or 2 ("I would say this"). I therefore estimated the following mixed-effects probit model (using the R package `ordinal`) on this outcome:

```
clmm(usage ~ 1 + (1 | respondent)
      + (1 + stranger + primed + ideology + college + POC + male | phrase),
      link = "probit", threshold = "flexible")
```

Of primary interest in this model are the random effects estimated at the phrase level: the coefficient on `stranger` represents the phrase-level usage effect of the "someone you just met" condition (relative to the "close friend" condition), and the `primed` coefficient represents the phrase-level usage effect of receiving the usage question after the placement question (relative to the reverse order). Likewise, the coefficients on `college`, `POC`, and `male` represent the correlation between these binary-coded respondent traits and propensity to use each phrase. Finally, and very importantly, because the coefficients on `ideology` reflect the correlation between respondents' self-described ideology (on a six-point scale with no midpoint) and their propensity to use each phrase, these coefficients can be interpreted as an ideological scaling of the phrases.

2.1.1 Experimental Results

This model specification allows me to test whether the treatments affect speech ideology, by examining the bivariate relationship between treatment effects and ideology coefficients at the phrase level, as shown in Figures 1 and 2: a *positive* slope indicates that the treatment tends to increase usage of conservative phrases and/or decrease the usage of liberal phrases, and thus the treatment can be said to shift speech in a conservative direction. Correspondingly, a treatment whose slope is *negative* with respect to these ideology coefficients can be said to shift speech in a liberal direction. Due to the substantial ideological asymmetries discovered in this pilot, I estimated the model separately on liberals' and conservatives' responses, and present the results side-by-side, overlaid with OLS fits and 95% confidence bounds (see next page).

As can be seen in Figure 1, liberal-identifiers' responses show no significant relationship between the stranger treatment effect and phrase ideology, but there is a striking negative relationship among conservative-identifiers: conservative respondents show a strong tendency to use more liberal language when speaking to new acquaintances, and to use more conservative language among close friends. If these behaviors generalize to actual speech situations, it would seem that compared to liberals, conservatives have a far greater inclination to self-censor their ideological speech patterns when speaking to strangers.

Meanwhile, as can be seen in Figure 2, the ideology priming treatment makes conservatives much more likely to use conservative language, and much less likely to use liberal language. The relationship is indistinguishable from the null among liberals, when the outliers "privilege" and "wear a mask" are excluded. So, it seems that when conservatives are reminded of the ideological inflection of their language, they *polarize* by conforming more to conservative speech norms (independent of their actual ideology), but (contrary to expectations) this pattern is not mirrored among liberals.

Though unexpected, these ideological asymmetries are consistent with prior evidence that conservatism is associated with conformity (in the sense of deference to authority, see Jost et al., 2018). However, my findings strongly contradict widespread perceptions that it is primarily *liberals* who engage in "virtue signalling," adjusting their speech to conform to liberal speech norms, and that it is *conservatives* who are the primary defenders of free speech, who "tell it like it is," regardless of whether doing so might offend their audience.

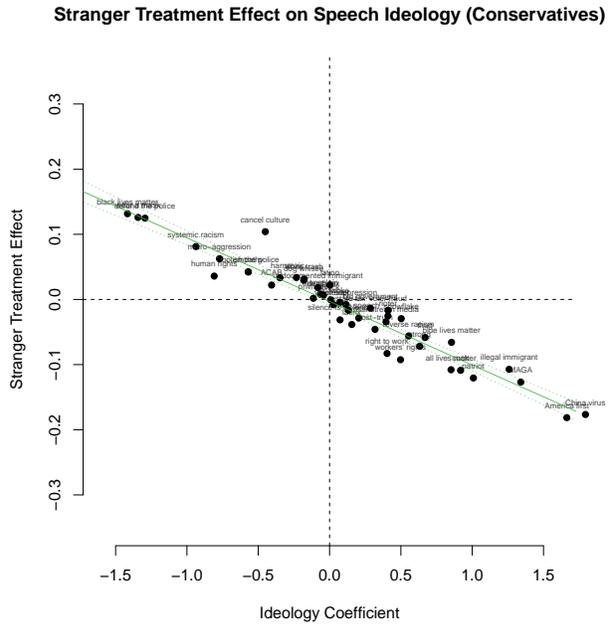
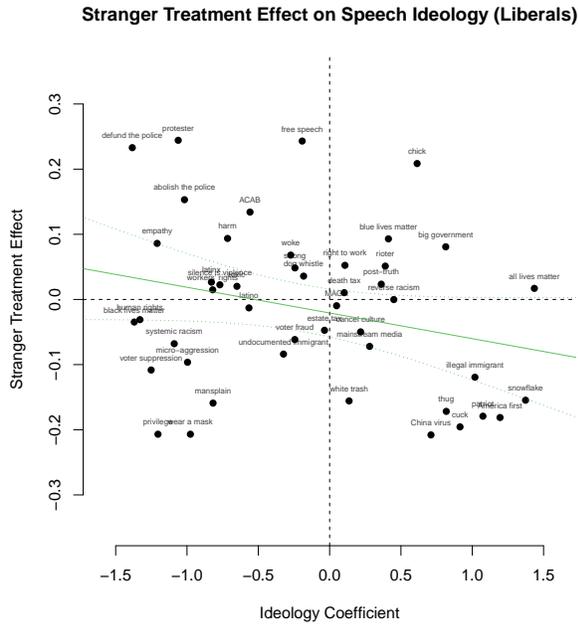


Figure 1: **Stranger treatment** effects (y axis) and phrase ideologies (x axis), among liberal (left) and conservative (right) respondents.

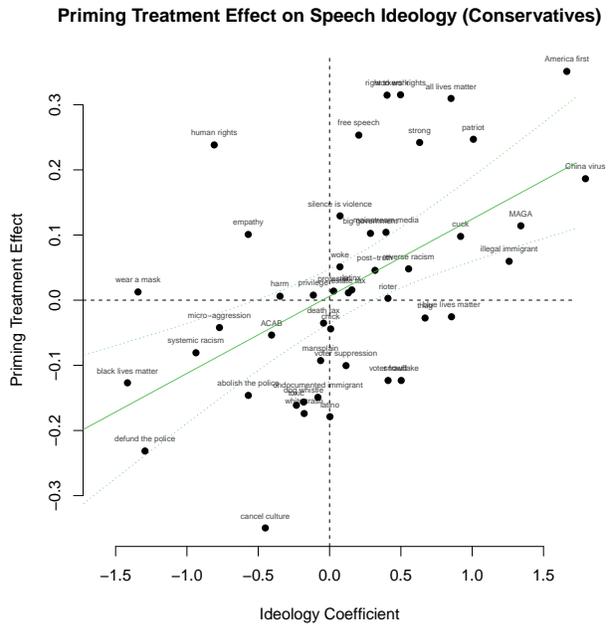
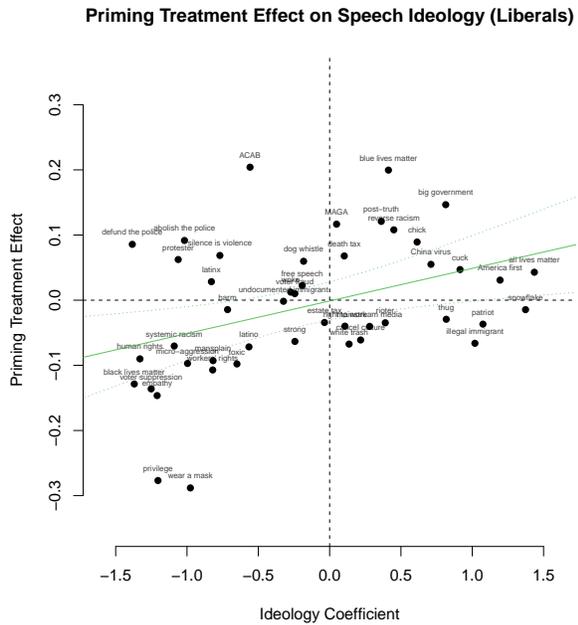


Figure 2: **Priming treatment** effects (y axis) and phrase ideologies (x axis), among liberal (left) and conservative (right) respondents.

2.1.2 Descriptive Results

I use the same analytic approach to characterize the relationship between speech ideology and three key demographic characteristics: education, race/ethnicity, and gender.

With respect to education, I find that attending college (Figure 6, Appendix B) is associated with a substantial leftward shift in speech ideology. For example, college-educated liberals are much more likely to use phrases like “mansplain,” “micro-aggression,” and “latinx,” and less likely to use phrases like “big government,” and “all lives matter,” compared to noncollege liberals. Interestingly, the leftward speech shift associated with college education for conservatives manifests via different phrases: for example, college-educated conservatives are much more likely to say “Black lives matter,” and much less likely than noncollege conservatives to use nationalistic rhetoric like “America first,” “China virus,” “illegal immigrant,” and “patriot.” So, college is associated with more liberal speech patterns, but these patterns are different for liberals and conservatives.

I find that identifying as a person of color (Figure 7) correlates with more liberal speech among conservatives (exemplified by “abolish the police” and “illegal immigrant”), but not among liberals. And, with respect to gender, I find that identifying as male (Figure 8) corresponds to significantly more conservative speech among liberals (with “mansplain” and “big government” taking especially large coefficients) but not conservatives. Of course, these are merely correlations, so while we might say that male speech is more conservative than female and non-binary speech, it could equally be said that conservative speech is more masculine than liberal speech.

Finally, I conduct the same analysis for the phrase-level intercepts (Figure 9). While these intercepts are (by construction) orthogonal to ideology, they have an interesting substantive interpretation: they represent willingness to say each phrase, independent of one’s ideology and demographic characteristics. It is perhaps heartening that many dehumanizing and derogatory terms take negative intercepts, whereas those with positive intercepts are generally pro-social phrases like “wear a mask,” “human rights,” and “empathy.” However, several pro-social-justice slogans and neologisms (e.g. “abolish the police,” “micro-aggression,” “latinx”) take large negative intercepts, indicating that many people are uncomfortable saying these phrases, independent of their personal ideology, education, and identity.

3 Next Steps

I plan to conduct further pilots of this research design, and subsequently field a pre-registered final version of the experiment in a nationally-representative sample. In my subsequent pilots, I propose to employ a stronger priming treatment, by asking participants how they would expect their in-group to socially judge them for using each phrase (c.f. Groenendyk, Kimbrough and Pickup, 2020), rather than merely asking them to categorize each phrase as liberal or conservative. Furthermore, I will add an issue battery to the questionnaire, to explore how policy ideology relates to speech ideology. I am also considering piloting a version of the audience treatment that asks whether participants would use each phrase when posting on social media or when speaking with colleagues in their workplace. I eagerly seek feedback on these proposed next steps, and suggestions of other extensions to this design I might explore before proposing it for a national sample.

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A Fluency Test Examples

Here is a list of words and phrases that someone might use when talking about politics, either online or in a face-to-face conversation.

Please indicate whether **a liberal or a conservative** would be **most likely to use** each term.

That is, **if someone used this term**, would you **expect them to be a liberal or a conservative?**

You can guess based on stereotypes ("liberals drive Priuses, conservatives drive pickups," etc.) if you need to.

	Liberal	Conservative
"...systemic racism..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...MAGA..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...big government..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...wear a mask..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...human rights..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...America first..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...snowflake..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	Liberal	Conservative
"...dog whistle..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...black lives matter..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...abolish the police..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...reverse racism..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...free speech..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...strong..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...undocumented immigrant..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	Liberal	Conservative
"...illegal immigrant..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...post-truth..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...cancel culture..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...mansplain..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...white trash..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...woke..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	Liberal	Conservative

Figure 3: Placement question, as formulated when presented first.

Here is a list of words and phrases that someone might use when talking about politics, either online or in a face-to-face conversation.

Please indicate whether each word/phrase is something **you would use with a close friend, who knows you very well.**

	I Would Say This	I Might Say This	I Would <u>Not</u> Say This
"...systemic racism..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...MAGA..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...big government..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...wear a mask..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...human rights..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...America first..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...blue lives matter..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	I Would Say This	I Might Say This	I Would <u>Not</u> Say This
"...white trash..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...thug..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...toxic..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...post-truth..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...mainstream media..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...woke..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...defund the police..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	I Would Say This	I Might Say This	I Would <u>Not</u> Say This
"...latino..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...abolish the police..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...right to work..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...all lives matter..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...undocumented immigrant..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...micro-aggression..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	I Would Say This	I Might Say This	I Would <u>Not</u> Say This

Figure 4: Usage question, as formulated when presented first, under the “friend” treatment.

Here is a list of words and phrases that someone might use when talking about politics, either online or in a face-to-face conversation.

Please indicate whether a **liberal** or a **conservative** would be most likely to use each term.

That is, if someone used this term, would you expect them to be a liberal or a conservative?

You can guess based on stereotypes ("liberals drive Priuses, conservatives drive pickups," etc.) if you need to.

Liberal	Conservative
<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...systemic racism..."	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
"...MAGA..."	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
"...big government..."	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
"...wear a mask..."	<input type="radio"/>
"...human rights..."	<input type="radio"/>
"...America first..."	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
"...reverse racism..."	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Liberal	Conservative
<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...voter suppression..."	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
"...snowflake..."	<input type="radio"/>
"...post-truth..."	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
"...blue lives matter..."	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
"...strong..."	<input type="radio"/>
"...dog whistle..."	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
"...protester..."	<input type="radio"/>
Liberal	Conservative
<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...abolish the police..."	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
"...mainstream media..."	<input type="radio"/>
"...chick..."	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
"...white trash..."	<input type="radio"/>
"...micro-aggression..."	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
"...black lives matter..."	<input type="radio"/>
Liberal	Conservative
<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Now please indicate whether each word/phrase is something you would use with a close friend, who knows you very well.

Here are the statements you said were **"Conservative"**:

I Would Say This	I Might Say This	I Would Not Say This
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...MAGA..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...big government..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...America first..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...reverse racism..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...snowflake..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...blue lives matter..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...strong..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...mainstream media..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...chick..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I Would Say This	I Might Say This	I Would Not Say This
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...systemic racism..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...wear a mask..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...human rights..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...voter suppression..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...post-truth..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...dog whistle..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...protester..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...abolish the police..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...white trash..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...micro-aggression..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...black lives matter..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Here are the statements you said were **"Liberal"**:

I Would Say This	I Might Say This	I Would Not Say This
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...systemic racism..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...wear a mask..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...human rights..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...voter suppression..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...post-truth..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...dog whistle..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...protester..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...abolish the police..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...white trash..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...micro-aggression..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"...black lives matter..."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Figure 5: Example of first-stage responses (in this case, placement responses) carried forward to the second stage question (in this case, the usage question). Note how first-stage responses are listed according to their first-stage categorization, to raise their salience when participants respond at the second stage.

B Figures for Descriptive Results

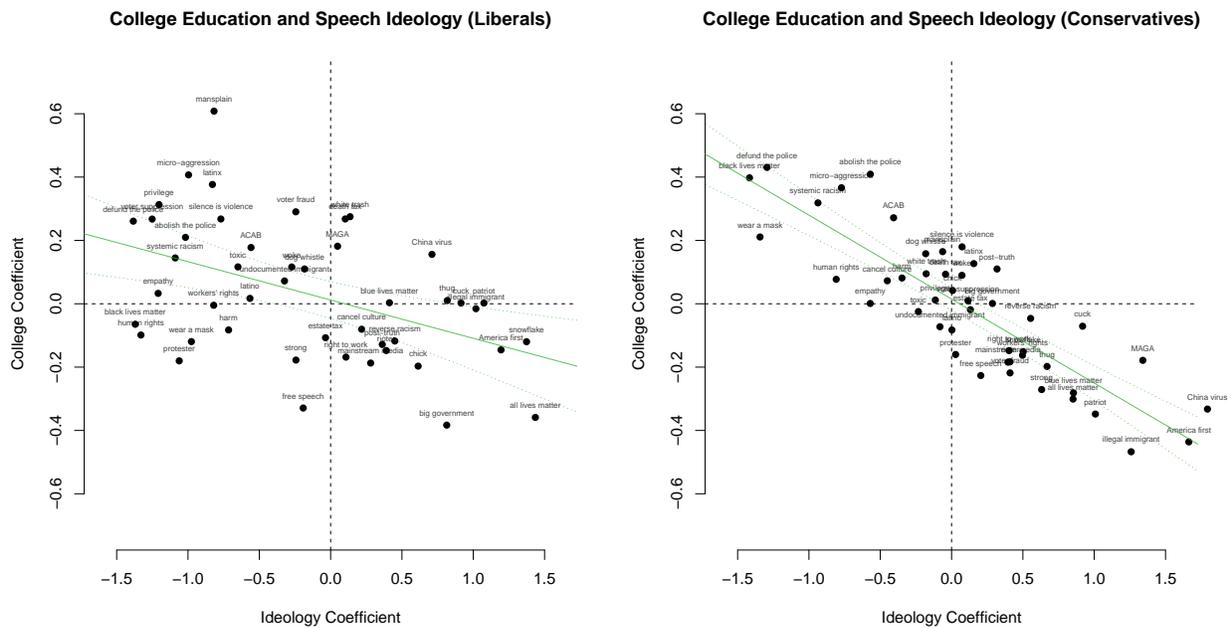


Figure 6: College attendance coefficient (y axis) and phrase ideologies (x axis), among liberal (left) and conservative (right) respondents.

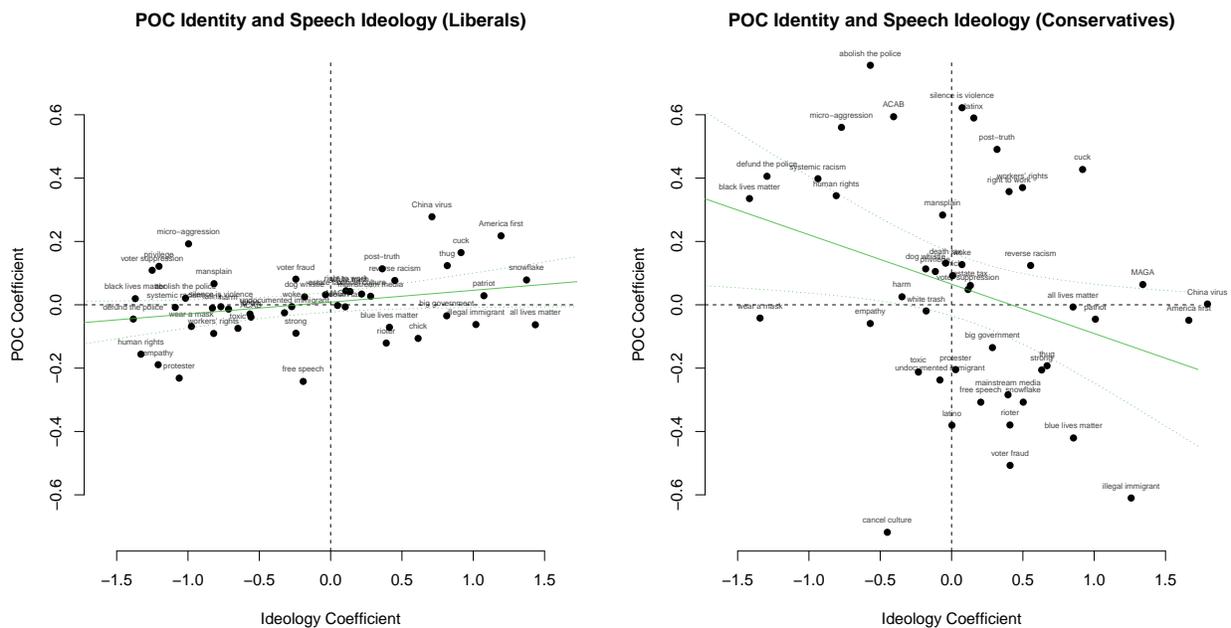


Figure 7: Person of color identification coefficient (y axis) and phrase ideologies (x axis), among liberal (left) and conservative (right) respondents.

