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Resolving Ideological Conflicts by Affirming Opponents' Status: The Tea Party, Obamacare and the 2013 government shutdown

Abstract

Ideological conflicts, like those over the Affordable Care Act (ACA), are highly intractable, as demonstrated by the October 2013 partial government shutdown. The current research offers a potential resolution of ideological conflicts by affirming an opponent's status. Results of one experiment collected during the 2013 government shutdown and a second conducted shortly after the implementation of the health insurance marketplaces in early 2014 indicate that status affirmation induces conciliatory attitudes and a willingness to sacrifice one's own outcomes in favor of ideological opponents' by decreasing adversarial perceptions. These studies demonstrate that status is an important social dimension whose affirmation by an ideological opponent buffers the integrity of one's identity, thereby reducing defensiveness and resistance to compromising in political conflicts.

Keywords: Ideological disputes, political opposition, status-affirmation, Tea Party, government shutdown, Obamacare

"It is morally unacceptable for lawmakers in Congress to vote to fund the health care law."

Senator Mike Lee (R-Utah)

"[The Tea Party] is not going to be disrespected. We've got to get something out of this, and I don't know what that even is."

Congressman Marlin Stutzman (R-Ind.)

The $24 billion shutdown of the U.S. federal government in October, 2013 that was driven by the Tea Party caucus of the Republican Party in an attempt to undermine implementation of the Affordable Care Act (a.k.a. "Obamacare," hereafter the ACA) baffled and infuriated many people. Proclamations by some pundits of the Tea Party's demise after the shutdown ended without delaying the ACA's implementation appear to have been unmerited (Skocpol, 2013): The Tea Party remains an influential political movement in the United States and antagonism over the ACA remains high. Continuing political polarization over this issue is inevitable.

Ideologically-based disputes like those over the ACA are notoriously intractable because they invoke deep, personal values (Wade-Benzoni et al., 2002). For instance, as the opening quote by Senator Lee suggests, many people's opinions about the ACA can be described as "moral mandates:" Strong attitudes that reflect people's core moral values (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005). When conflicts are imbued with moral conviction, antagonists tend to be uncompromising and politically motivated (Skitka, et al., 2005; Turiel, 1983; Wright, Cullum, & Schwab, 2008). Ideological disputes may also be perceived as involving "sacred values" over which compromise threatens people's self-images and social identities (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson,

Green, & Lerner, 2000; Wade-Benzoni, et al., 2002). Furthermore, ideological conflicts often involve identification with social institutions, such as political parties, that mobilize individual activism and resistance to compromise (Wade-Benzoni, et al., 2002). For example, opposition to the ACA has become an issue over which political conservatives, particularly those associated with the Tea Party movement, can cohere despite their diverse interests (Skocpol & Williamson, 2011).

In the current research, I aim to identify ways to reduce the intractability of this kind of ideological dispute. The most promising approach may be enabling opponents to "save face" (Goffman, 1967) by affirming their identities on alternative values (Wade-Benzoni, et al., 2002). Self-affirmation theory states that the motivation to protect the perceived worth and integrity of the self makes people resistant to threatening information (Steele, 1988), such as ideological opposition, and uncompromising over core, sacred values. Affirming the value of the self in an alternative domain, for instance by reflecting on important personal values, reduces defensiveness to conflicting information (Sherman & Cohen, 2002; Ward, Atkins, Lepper, & Ross, 2011). For example, Cohen, et al. (2007) demonstrated that allowing people to affirm their identity increased their open-mindedness and willingness to compromise during political conflicts. Other research has found that affirming the groups with which individuals identify has similar de-biasing effects on defensive attributions (Sherman, Kinias, Major, Kim, & Prenovost, 2007).

Self- or group-affirmation may be effective strategies for self-regulation, but they are not necessarily practical conflict management strategies because it is unclear how an opponent could induce a self-affirmation process. Indeed, an admonition to "[G]o affirm yourself!" might escalate tensions rather than encourage compromise. Congressman Stutzman's quote above

offers a tantalizing clue that affirming the *status* (socially-conferred respect and esteem; Magee & Galinsky, 2008) of one's opponent could be an effective alternative approach in the context of ideological disputes and political conflicts. Desire for status is a subtext in many social conflicts (Bendersky & Hays, 2012; Goffman, 1967; Gould, 2002), and conveying respect stimulates openness and cooperativeness (Brett et al., 2007). Thus, affirming the status of one's ideological opponent may be a more effective way to shore up their *social* identity against the threat of compromising on an ideological issue during a political conflict than is opponent's self-affirmation about their important personal values. I, therefore, hypothesize that affirming the status of ideological opponents and the political groups with which they identify can alleviate their antagonism.

I conducted two experimental studies to test this hypothesis. I administered the first study during the government shutdown in October 2013 as a proof-of-concept. In it, I determine that the negative association between identification with the Tea Party and support for ending the shutdown is alleviated more by affirming the status of the Tea Party than by a description of the competing budget continuing resolutions proposed by the House and Senate that dominated the media discourse. I conducted a more in-depth second study shortly after the implementation of the ACA health insurance marketplaces in early 2014 in which I focused on opposing attitudes about the ACA and compared the effect of status-affirmation with an alternative self-affirmation approach along with a true control condition on a financially-meaningful behavioral outcome. I had participants play a "dictator game" in which they decided how many of their own tickets for a bonus lottery drawing to give away to ostensible partners whom the participants believed held opposing opinions about the ACA (Wright, et al., 2008). Participants who received a status-affirming message from their opponent perceived him as less of an adversary and, therefore,

gave him more lottery tickets than did either those who received a neutral, control message or those who engaged in a self-affirmation process prior to the resource allocation decision.

The results make several contributions. First, they suggest that affirming the status of ideological opponents and the political groups with which they identify can alleviate perceived antagonism in sacred-values conflict. Thus, this research offers a novel, promising approach for resolving intractable political disputes. Second, the results contribute to self-affirmation theory by demonstrating the potential benefits of affirming an important social value (i.e., status) by one's ideological opponent and by suggesting a boundary condition on the effectiveness of the self-affirmation mechanism in conflict contexts.

Study 1: Tea Party identification and the government shutdown

Given the role of social institutions in driving attitudes during ideological disputes (Wade-Benzoni, et al., 2002), this first study focuses on identification with and status affirmation of the Tea Party.

Material and methods. I administered an online survey during the government shutdown between October 11 and 17, 2013. Two hundred participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk ("Mturk") in exchange for $0.25 and another 18 through email solicitations sent to various Tea Party affiliated organizations after I made a private donation of $50.00 to one of them. Although I solicited relatively few observations through the Tea Party affiliated organizations, doing so substantially increased the variation in identification with the Tea Party in the combined sample that I used for analyses.

The independent variable is participants' Tea Party Identification (six-item scale adapted from (Mael & Tetrick, 1992). e.g., "When someone criticizes the Tea Party, it feels like a personal insult." Alpha = .93). The moderator is a two-condition between-subjects description of

the dispute (Budget Negotiation v. Status-Affirming). Participants were randomly assigned to read either the Status-Affirming description, which conveys respect for the Tea Party, or the Budget Negotiation description, which presents the Senate's counter-proposal to the House as a tradeoff between the ACA and the federal budget in the way that it was widely reported in the media at the time. Participants in the Status-Affirming condition read:

> *Many people who disapprove of the government shutdown nonetheless <u>respect</u> the passionate commitment of the Tea Party Republicans in the House of Representatives to defunding or delaying the Affordable Health Care Act (a.k.a. Obamacare). This situation has increased the status of the Tea Party in many people's eyes.*

Participants in the <u>Budget Negotiation</u> condition read:

> *The Senate has <u>passed</u> the identical bill to fund the government that the House has passed, but without the provision to defund or delay the Affordable Health Care Act (a.k.a. Obamacare). In other words, the Senate has <u>agreed</u> to adopt a clean version of the House's budget.*

The dependent variable is participants' rating of their agreement with the statement, "How strongly do you agree that the House of Representatives should vote to <u>end</u> the Government shutdown without defunding or delaying the Affordable Health Care Act (a.k.a. Obamacare)" ("End Shutdown"). All items are on seven-point Likert scales from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree. Respondents additionally indicated their sex, age range and primary political party affiliation.

Results. Descriptive and correlation statistics are presented in Table 1. The average End Shutdown ratings are significantly different between samples recruited from Mturk ($M = 5.41$, $S.D. = 1.93$) and the Tea Party organizations ($M = 1.67$, $S.D. = 1.61$), $t(216) = 7.97$, $p = .00$.

Therefore, I conducted OLS regression analyses with clustered standard errors that adjust for the non-independence within samples.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Among people who strongly identify with the Tea Party (at least 6 on the 7-point Tea Party Identification scale), mean End Shutdown is significantly higher in the Status-Affirming (M = 2.17, $s.d.$ = 1.94) than in the Budget Negotiation condition (M = 1.08, $s.d.$ = .29; t = 12.61, p = .05). Using the full sample, regressing End Shutdown on Tea Party Identification, Condition and their interaction produces a negative association between Tea Party Identification and End Shutdown (B = -1.57, p = .05, η_p^2 = .33, CI [-2.30 to -.14]). This relationship is significantly moderated by the interaction with Condition (B = .31, p = .03, η_p^2 = .01, CI [.13 to .49]). The simple slope of the association between Tea Party Identification and End Shutdown is attenuated in the Status-Affirming Condition (B = -1.26, p = .00, CI [-1.45 to -1.06]) compared to in the Budget Negotiation Condition (B = -1.57, p = .00, CI [-1.79 to -1.35]) (graphed in Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 About Here

Discussion. This study offers preliminary support for the hypothesis that affirming the status of the political groups with which people identify can reduce their intransigence in ideological disputes. By collecting data on this topic during the government shutdown in October 2013 and soliciting at least some participation from people who identify strongly with the Tea Party, I demonstrably moved the needle during a very hot conflict. Although the effect is modest, affirming the Tea Party's status significantly attenuated the association between Tea Party Identification and resistance to ending the shutdown.

Although an externally-valid proof-of-concept, the study has some important limitations that make replication essential. The effect sizes are small; the comparative condition is not a true

control; there is no manipulation check; the participants themselves are not directly involved in the conflict so their status is being affirmed only indirectly; and I was unable to determine if a self-affirmation tactic that has been found to be effective in similar conflicts in the past (Cohen, et al., 2007) would have worked equally well. To address these limitations, I administered a second experiment with increased internal validity.

Study 2: Cooperation between Obamacare Opponents

I conducted Study 2 shortly after the implementation of the health insurance marketplaces in 2014 when the ACA was again a topic of antagonistic public discourse. I hypothesized that participants who received a status-affirming message from their opponent would perceive him as less of an adversary and, therefore, give him more resources than would those who received a neutral, control message or engaged in a self-affirmation process prior to the resource allocation decision.

Material and Methods. I recruited 254 participants from MTurk in exchange for $1.00 for a three condition (Status-Affirmation, Self-Affirmation, Control) between-subjects experiment. To parallel the focus of the first study, I screened prospective participants for political conservatism and included only those who indicated that their political orientation was at least somewhat conservative (≥ 5 on a scale from 1 = Extremely Liberal to 7 = Extremely Conservative.

The study was introduced as being about "how people who agree or disagree with each other about important topics of the day make decisions together." All participants were told "[h]ealthcare reform by the Affordable Care Act (a.k.a. Obamacare) has been extremely controversial. One side sees increased cost, less coverage and a slippery slope toward Socialism. The other side views it as an essential expansion of access to healthcare. Many experts predict

that conflicts over Obamacare will be a central feature of the 2014 midterm elections." They

were then informed that they would be matched with a partner who may <u>agree</u> or <u>disagree</u> with

their opinions about the ACA; that there are several versions of the study with different

opportunities to communicate with each other to which they and their partner will be randomly

assigned; and that they will then make a series of decisions, some of which will be made

independently and some jointly. They were next told that, "<u>Based on the outcomes of the</u>

<u>decisions you make</u>, you may both be entered into a <u>bonus lottery</u> drawing for a $25 Amazon gift

card" that was actually awarded to one study participant.

Participants then answered, "[d]o you generally support or oppose the Affordable Care

Act (a.k.a. Obamacare)" (1 = Strongly Oppose to 7 = Strongly Support; "Support") and "[w]hat

type of politicians best represent your opinions about the Affordable Care Act? Please pick the

one that comes closest to representing your point of view about Obamacare" (Republicans,

Democrats or Tea Party politicians).[1] Participants' Support response was used to pair them with

a "partner" (identified by the initials K.m.L.). The partner was not real, but I took a variety of

steps to increase the plausibility that participants were interacting with another study participant,

such as holding them on screens with a message saying "Please wait while we check to see if

enough participants are currently available," and "Please wait just a few more moments while the

other participants review the introductory screens." About 13% of participants nonetheless

expressed skepticism that they were interacting with another person; excluding them from

analyses does not change the results.

Participants who indicated Moderate or Strong Support of the ACA ($N = 22$) were told

their partner "STRONGLY OPPOSES the Affordable Care Act and identifies most closely with

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[1] I also recorded participants' responses to Skitka, et al.'s (2005) moral mandate question and the political party identification scale from Study 1 (referencing the participants' entry), but neither exert significant effects in any analyses and so are not reported below.

<u>Tea Party</u> politicians." Participants who indicated Moderate or Strong Opposition to the ACA (*N* = 130) were told their partner "STRONGLY SUPPORTS the Affordable Care Act and identifies most closely with <u>Democratic</u> politicians." Participants who indicated more neutral opinions about the ACA were randomly assigned to one or the other version of the partner. Participants then indicated if they thought that K.m.L <u>agrees</u> or <u>disagrees</u> with their opinion about the ACA. Because I am interested in cooperation in the context of *opposition*, I only retained the 213 participants who perceived their partner as disagreeing with their opinion about the ACA.

Participants were then randomly assigned to one of three conditions, Status-Affirmation, Self-Affirmation or Control. In all three conditions, participants were told that their partner has been given an opportunity to communicate with them before the decision making tasks, received a message ostensibly from their partner and then were instructed to write a few sentences on specific topics.

In the <u>Control</u> condition, participants received the following message from K.m.L (with intentional typos):

Hi [participant's initials], I guess we disagree about Obamacare. i heard about
the [politicians with which participant identifies] in Washington having conflicts over
Obamacare.

They were then instructed to "please take a moment to think and write about what you ate for breakfast this morning. Describe what you ate in the space below."

In the <u>Status-Affirmation</u> condition, participants received the following message from K.m.L.:

Hi [participant's initials], I guess we disagree about Obamacare. I have a lot of
respect for people like you who stand by their principles. i think the [politicians with

> *which participant identifies] have gained a lot of status and influence in Washington*
>
> *from the conflicts over Obamacare.*

They were then instructed to "please take a moment to think and write about what you ate for breakfast this morning. Describe what you ate in the space below."

Participants in the Self-Affirmation condition received the same message as in the Control condition:

> *Hi [participant's initials], I guess we disagree about Obamacare. i heard about*
>
> *the [politicians with which participant identifies] in Washington having conflicts over*
>
> *Obamacare.*

They were then instructed to "please take a moment to think and write about a personally important value of yours. Describe that value in the space below" (Sherman & Cohen, 2002).

Two participants in the Status-Affirmation condition, one in the Control condition and one in the Self-Affirmation condition were dropped from the analyses for writing about their opinions about the ACA instead of what they had for breakfast or their personal values (e.g., "I think that Obamacare is damaging to the economy"), thereby undermining the manipulations. Leaving them in dampens the effects in some analyses but does not change the interpretation of any results.

Participants then engaged in a dictator game in which they were told to allocate 10 lottery tickets between themselves and their partner that would be entered into the bonus lottery drawing for both of them. They were given specific instructions to decide how many tickets (from 0 – 10) to give to their partner and how many to keep for themselves, with a few examples (e.g., if you give K.m.L. 3 tickets for the lottery, you keep 7 to be entered for yourself). They were also told their partner would not learn about the decision until the study is over. The number of tickets

participants gave to their partner is non-normally distributed, with modes at zero (28%) and five (49.5%), which is typical in dictator games (c.f., Engel, 2011). I, therefore, transformed the variable by squaring it to smooth the distribution to use as the dependent variable ("Give^2").[2] It can be interpreted as the percent of the total pie of resources the participant gave to their opponent.

I then collected a six-item mediator variable, "Adversarial Perceptions" comprised of three items from Menon, Thompson and Choi (2006), (e.g., "I see K.m.L. as my adversary") along with three reverse-coded items, (e.g., "I believe that I could collaborate effectively with K.m.L." (α = .89)). I then collected a four-item manipulation check (e.g., "I feel that K.m.L. respects me;" α = .87). Participants reported their age and gender, then were debriefed and paid. Including age (but not gender) in the analyses substantially increases the R^2 of all models and so I use it as a covariate.

Results. Descriptive and correlation statistics are presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 About Here

Analysis of the manipulation check scale indicates a significant effect of condition (F = 9.62, p =.00, η_p^2 = .09). Planned contrasts confirm that participants in the Status-Affirmation condition (M = 4.30, $S.D.$ = .13) had higher scores than did both participants in the Control condition (M = 3.56, $S.D.$ = .13. t = 4.14, p = .00, CI [-1.09 to -.39]) and in the Self-Affirmation condition (M = 3.68, $S.D.$ = .12. t = 3.51, p = .00, CI [-.96 to -.27]).

ANOVA of Give^2 reveals a significant effect of condition (F = 3.19, p = .04, η_p^2 = .03). Planned contrasts show that participants in the Status-Affirmation condition (M = 22.54, $S.D.$ = 2.23) gave a higher percentage of the total tickets to their partners than did either those in the

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[2] Treating the un-transformed Give variable as a count and running a Poisson regression of it produces the same pattern of results.

Control condition (M = 13.73, *S.D.* = 2.25. t = 2.78, p = .01, *CI* [-15.08 to -2.56]) or in the Self-Affirmation condition (M = 16.20, *S.D.* = 2.16. t = 2.11, p = .04, *CI* -12.47 to -.20]) (see Figure 2). Next, I determined that Adversarial Perceptions differ by condition (F = 4.21, p =.02, η_p^2 = .04). Participants in the Status-Affirmation condition (M = -.98, *S.D.* = .16) viewed their partners in less adversarial terms than did either those in the Control condition (M = -.27, *S.D.* = .16. t = 3.16, p = .00, *CI* [.26 to 1.14]) or in the Self-Affirmation condition (M = -.53, *S.D.* = .15. t = 2.03, p = .04, *CI* [.01 to .87]) (see Figure 3). When Adversarial Perceptions is added to the ANOVA on Give^2, it has a significant effect (F = 29.27, p =.00, η_p^2 = .13, *CI* [-7.06 to -3.40]) and the Condition variable is no longer significant (F = 1.24, p =.29, η_p^2 = .01). Bias-corrected bootstrap 95% confidence intervals with 500 replications (Hayes & Preacher, 2013; James & Brett, 1984) indicate that differences in Adversarial Perceptions fully mediate the differences in Give^2 across conditions (Status-Affirmation v. Control *CI* [-6.71 to -1.61]; Status-Affirmation v. Self-Affirmation *CI* [-5.18 to -.31].[3]

Insert Figures 2 and 3 here

General Discussion

These studies contribute to understanding the psychology of ideological opposition and political conflicts. Though highly intractable, as demonstrated by the October 2013 government shutdown over the ACA, giving face (Goffman, 1967) by affirming the status of one's opponent appears to reduce adversarial perceptions and induce conciliatory attitudes and cooperative, even self-sacrificing behaviors. Status is an important social value, so its affirmation likely buffers opponents against the identity-threat they would incur for compromising on an ideological issue, thereby reducing their defensive intransigence (Cohen, et al., 2007; Steele, 1988; Wade-Benzoni,

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[3] I also ran supplemental analyses to test if participants' support for the ACA moderates these effects and none of the interaction terms are significant.

et al., 2002). Although the study conducted during the government shutdown has some notable limitations, these were addressed in the second study, which replicated and extended the results. Status-affirmation, thus, offers a potentially effective tactic for opponents to manage ideological conflicts.

This is a different form of identity-affirmation than is typically used in self-affirmation research, so I included a standard self-affirmation condition where participants reflected on important personal values in Study 2 to compare the effects. Self-Affirmation did not attenuate participants' adversarial perceptions of their partner or induce more giving in the dictator game than did either the Status-Affirmation or Control condition. This finding indicates a boundary condition on the effectiveness of self-affirmation in conflict contexts where it appears that an opponents' affirmation of a *social* value may protect the integrity of the self more effectively than does self-affirmation of important personal values in general.

Importantly, this finding appears to contradict those of Cohen, et al. (2007) who induced conciliatory behaviors and open-mindedness in similarly politicized conflict contexts when oppositional identity was highly salient. In the most relevant of their studies, participants role-played a negotiation about abortion with an ideological opponent. Participants either wrote about a time they lived up to or a time that they had failed to live up to an important personal value as a manipulation of self-affirmation or self-threat, respectively. The authors also manipulated the salience of participants' identity as committed partisans on the issue of abortion or as cooperative negotiators. The authors found that participants in the self-affirmation condition made more concessions than did those in the self-threat condition when they focused on their identity as committed partisans but they made fewer concessions when they focused on their identity as cooperative negotiators. This result was interpreted as indicating that self-affirmation effectively

reduces intransigence only in contexts where one's ideological fidelity is salient because self-affirmation shores up one's identity against the threat of compromise. These results suggest that the self-affirmation manipulation in my second study should have induced more resource-giving because the context made participants' ideological identities highly salient. One reason why I did not find that predicted effect may be because Cohen, et al.'s contrast condition was an explicit *threat*, where participants reflected on a time when they failed to live up to an important value, whereas mine was a neutral control condition. Their results, therefore, may reflect increased intransigence due to self-threat more than cooperation due to self-affirmation. Future research is needed to directly reconcile these conflicting findings.

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Table 1.

Study 1: Correlation and descriptive statistics. N = 218.

Table 1a: Correlations						
	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1.End Shutdown	1					
2.Tea Party Identification	.71***	1				
3. Sample	-.50***	-.54***	-.49***	1		
4. Sex	.03	.04	.03	-.05	1	
5. Age	.29***	.42***	.35***	-.47***	.20***	1
6. Political Party Identification	-.00	-.07	-.04	.03	-.01	-.03

Table 1b: Descriptive statistics	
End Shutdown	$M = 5.10$, $S.D. = 2.16$
Tea Party Identification	$M = 2.16$, $S.D. = 1.51$
Sample	92% Mturk (coded 0)
	8% Tea Party affiliates (coded 1)
Sex	63% Male
	37% Female
Age range	47.72% 18 – 29 years old
	22.02% 30 -39 years old
	8.72% 40 – 49 years old
	12.39% 50 – 59 years old
	1.38% 60 years or older
Political Party Identification	13.76% Republican
	37.61% Democratic
	8.26% Tea Party
	22.94% Independent
	17.43% None
Condition	49.54% Budget Negotiation
	50.46% Status-Affirmation

Note. * $p<.05$, ** $p>.01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2.

Study 2: Correlation and descriptive statistics. N = 209.

Table 2a: Correlations						
	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Give^2	1					
2. Adversarial Perceptions	-.40***	1				
3. Condition	.05	-.07	1			
4. Age Range	.11	-.06	.01	1		
5. Sex	.07	-.10	.04	.13	1	
6. Political Party Identification	.05 6	.07	-.01	.05	-.00	1

Table 2b: Descriptive statistics	
Give^2	M = 17.50, $S.D.$ = 18.79
Adversarial Perceptions	M = -.59, $S.D.$ = 1.32
Sex	62.68 % Male
	37.32 % Female
Age Range	38.76 % 18 – 29 years old
	33.49 % 30 -39 years old
	12.92 % 40 – 49 years old
	9.57 % 50 – 59 years old
	5.27 % 60 years or older
Political Party Identification	59.81 % Republican
	22.49 % Democratic
	17.70 % Tea Party
Condition	32.06 % Control
	33.01 % Self-Affirmation
	34.93 % Status-Affirmation

Note. * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p < .001

Figure 1:

Study 1, simple slopes of Tea Party Identification at +/- 1 standard deviation, on End Shutdown with 95% CI error bars, by Condition.

Figure 2:

Study 2, Give^2 by Condition with 95% CI error bars.

Figure 3:

Study 2, Adversarial Perceptions by Condition with 95% CI error bars.
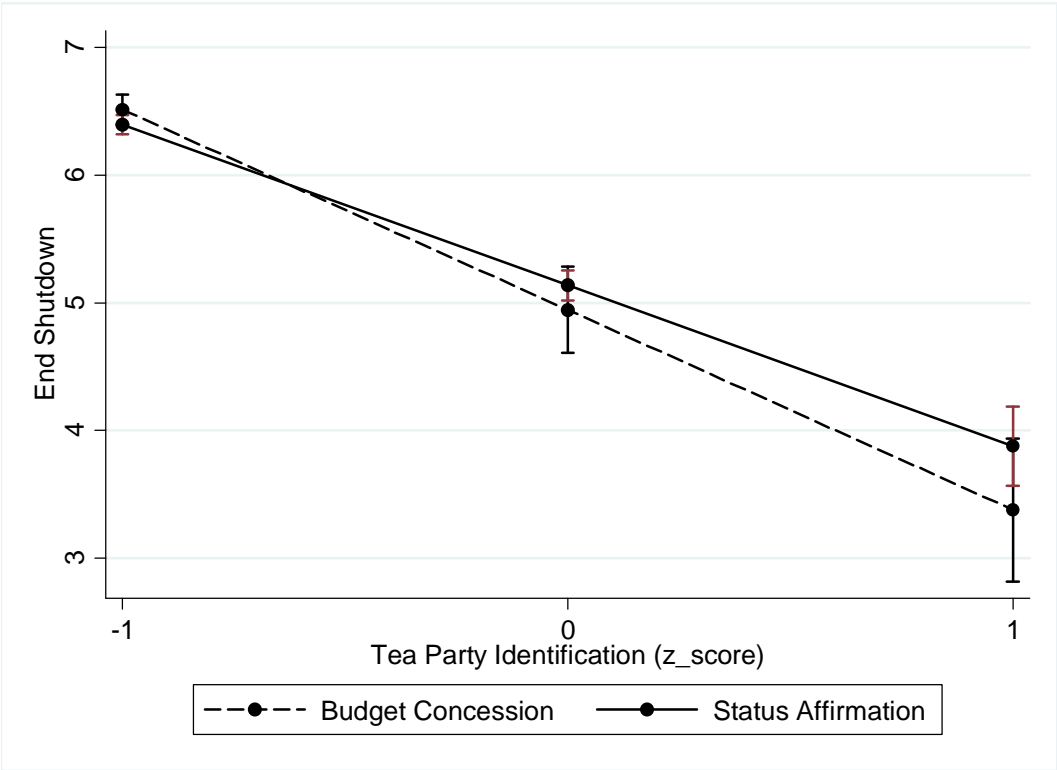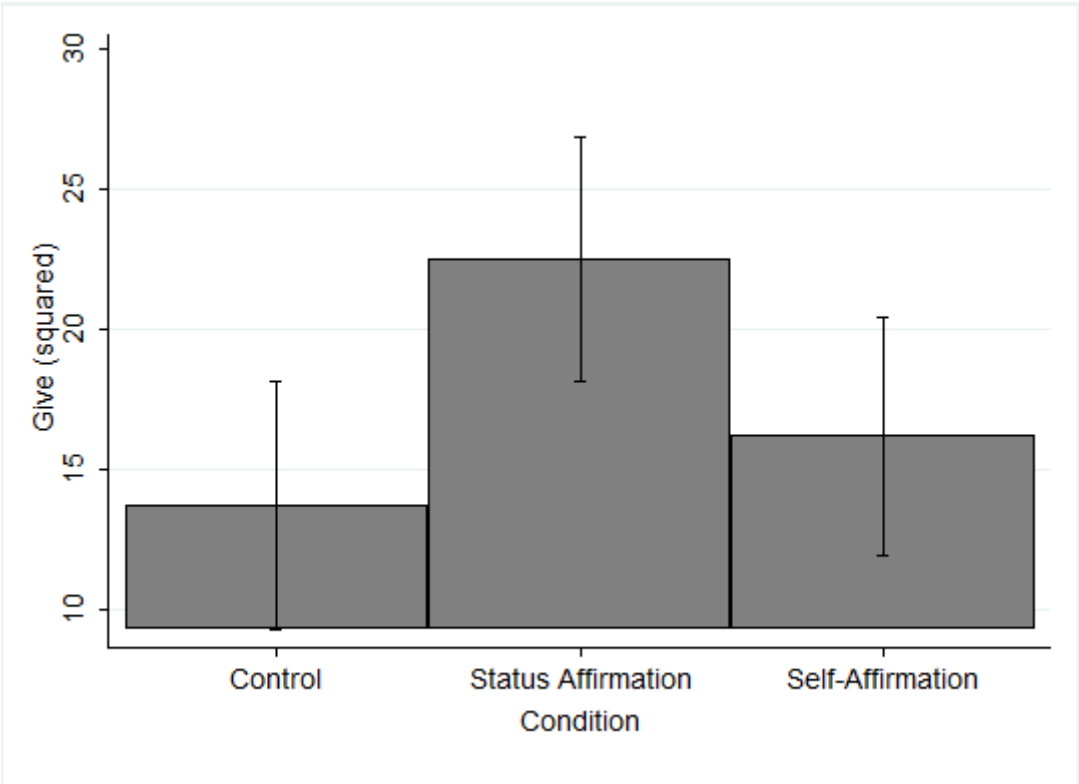
Figure 1

Figure 2:

Figure 3: