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Political Moral Violations on Social Media: How Emotional Responses Shape Political Cynicism

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Abstract

The rise of social media has fundamentally reshaped the political information environment. Citizens now regularly encounter political content on platforms where messaging is designed to evoke strong emotional reactions that drive virality. This study investigates whether short-form video content depicting moral violations committed by politicians increases political cynicism through the activation of negative emotions (anger, disgust, and outrage). A between-subjects survey experiment was conducted testing whether exposure to a moral violation committed by a politician increases political cynicism via emotional activation. It also examines whether the effect is stronger when the violator is a member of the viewer's out-party rather than their in-party. Results show that moral violations increased political cynicism through negative emotions. Group identity did not alter the strength of these effects. Given the established association between political cynicism and reduced political participation, these findings underscore a potential threat to democratic stability in digital media environments.

Introduction

Political Cynicism in the U.S.

Public trust in the federal government has declined rapidly over the past several decades. In 1964, 77% of Americans reported trusting the government to do what is right "just about always" or "most of the time." By 2024, this number has plummeted to just 22% (Pew Research Center, 2024a). This erosion of trust has been accompanied by the belief that the government does not act in the public's interest and that corruption fuels distrust (Ranie, Keeter, & Perrin, 2019). Together, these beliefs reflect a politically cynical citizenry. Political cynicism refers to the belief that political institutions and leaders are corrupt,

self-serving, and motivated by personal interest rather than public interest (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

Rising political cynicism should be of concern for scholars concerned with democratic backsliding, as it has been associated with apathy, reduced political engagement, and withdrawal from civic life (Ahmad Iqbal et al., 2025; Pinkleton & Austin, 2001, 2004; Yamamoto et al., 2017), all of which can threaten democratic stability. The news media play a crucial role in this process. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) propose the “Spiral of Cynicism,” which describes how consumption of news reporting on “who is winning” rather than policy issues, can increase political cynicism and ultimately reduce political engagement. However, this pattern of disaffection has been contested. When proposed, the model was situated within the context of legacy media (for example., newspaper, broadcast television). In today’s information environment, where citizens are increasingly turning to social media for political news, it is essential to reassess how modern news consumption may be driving these attitudes.

Social Media As A Political Information Source

The proliferation of social media in the past several decades has generated a noticeable shift in the ways that citizens obtain and consume political information. In 2024, more than half of US adults reported getting their news from social media at least some of the time (Pew Research Center, 2024b). This is particularly true for young adults (aged 18-29), 78% of whom report encountering news on social media at least occasionally. According to Leppert & Matsa (2024), young adults are increasingly turning to short-form video platforms, such as TikTok, as a news source. Between 2020 and 2024, the number of young adults in America who reported regularly consuming news on TikTok jumped from 9% to 39%. This rapid increase has positioned TikTok above other platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, X, and Reddit as a primary news source among this demographic (Leppert & Matsa, 2024). Given the rapid expansion of short-form video platforms as a news source, it is critical to examine how the content available on these platforms may be shaping critical political attitudes, including political cynicism.

Moral Emotions in Digital Politics

Political discourse on social media can be highly contentious. Content that elicits negative emotions, such as anger, stimulates user engagement in the form of likes, comments, and shares (see Hiaeshutter-Rice et al., 2021; Klinger et al., 2023). These actions, in turn, fuel the diffusion of this content across social media networks. Notably, the use of moral-emotional language in political content increases message diffusion by 20% for each additional word (Brady et al., 2017). Given that political content creators have a financial motivation for virality, it is logical to conclude they may strategically employ such language to achieve those goals.

One strategy for deploying moral-emotional language is to focus on scandal, which involves the public exposure of perceived ethical or moral violations committed by public figures (Entman, 2012; Thompson, 2000). Moral violations are a key component of scandal, and are defined as behaviors that violate an individual's intuitive sense of right and wrong (Walter & Redlawsk, 2023). Content focusing on politicians' moral violations inherently utilizes moral-emotional language.

Importantly, these messages are situated within the context of a polarized political climate, where opposing political parties harbor animosity toward one another (Iyengar et al., 2019). Brady et al., (2017) demonstrate that social media messages employing moral-emotional language diffuse asymmetrically across partisan lines. While such messages spread widely within networks of individuals who share the same political affiliation, they often fail to reach audiences across party lines. This pattern suggests that partisans respond differently to content depending on whether it targets their own party (in-party) or the opposing party (out-party), resulting in message diffusion that is largely confined to partisan boundaries.

In summary, as political cynicism rises and social media becomes an increasingly prominent source of political information, it is essential to understand how popular forms of political content, including that which utilizes moral-emotional language, may be shaping political attitudes. This thesis investigates whether exposure to political moral violations, presented in the format of a short-form social media video, may be contributing to increased levels of cynicism. Specifically, it examines whether negative emotional reactions play a key role in translating exposure to cynicism and whether partisan identification may influence the strength of this chain reaction from exposure to negative emotion to cynicism.

Literature Review

Moral Violations and Political Cynicism

Witnessing a moral violation by a political elite may lead to increased political cynicism. When a political leader violates widely held moral norms, observers may extend their judgment beyond the individual politician, attributing the wrongdoing to the broader institution they represent. Prior research supports this: exposure to scandals involving legislators has been shown to negatively impact attitudes towards political institutions and processes (Bowler & Karp, 2004). Similarly, exposure to news articles about corruption among well-known politicians has been associated with increased political cynicism (Corral-Cumbreras & Powell, 2019). However, these studies rely on either pre-existing datasets (Bowler &

Karp, 2004) or text-based vignette methods (Corral-Cumbreras & Powell, 2019), and do not address the increasingly relevant context of short-form video.

It is likely that short-form social media videos depicting immoral behavior by politicians will have a similar effect on political cynicism. Since political cynicism involves the belief that political leaders are corrupt and self-serving, exposure to their moral wrongdoings, even in short video formats, may reinforce or trigger these perceptions. If the government is perceived as tolerating or enabling immoral conduct, this may erode public confidence. However, partisan identity may fundamentally shape how such violations are processed, prompting an investigation into how group identity influences the strength of the relationship between moral violations and political cynicism.

Group Identity, Moral Violations, & Political Cynicism.

According to Tajfel & Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory (SIT), social identities are components of an individual's self-concept. They are developed through the recognition of membership to a group and the assignment of value to that membership. In the context of politics, partisan identity is a strong social identity that shapes individuals' political perceptions (Greene, 2004). Identification with a political party generates an in-party. Equally significant is the formation of an out-party, any political affiliation that diverges from one's in-party. Group members are motivated to view their in-party as favorable, unique, and superior, while also derogating the out-party (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). An example of this can be seen with political polarization, where identification with a political party creates support for one's in-party and dislike of the out-party (Iyengar et al., 2019).

In the context of exposure to a moral violation committed by a politician, individuals are likely to process the violation as a threat to their partisan identity. When the violator is an in-party member, people may downplay the behavior in an attempt to preserve their self-esteem. However, when the violator is from the out-party, they may judge the politician more harshly, and extend this judgment to the political institution the politician represents. Thus, the strength of the relationship between exposure to a political moral violation and political cynicism may depend on whether the violator belongs to one's in-party or out-party. Beyond partisan alignment, it is also important to examine what may be linking moral violations to political cynicism. Importantly, moral violations can evoke intense negative emotions, which can have an impact on downstream cynicism.

Moral Violations and Negative Emotions

Emotions are elicited in response to moral violations (Haidt, 2001; Haidt, 2003). The Social Intuitionist Model (SIM; Haidt, 2001) posits that exposure to a moral violation evokes moral intuition, defined as "the sudden appearance in consciousness of a moral judgment, including an affective valence (good-bad,

like-dislike)” (Haidt, 2001, p. 818). Specific emotions guide the affective component of moral intuition. Scholars have established that anger, disgust (see Haidt, 2003; Walter & Redlawsk, 2023), and outrage (see Crockett, 2017; Salerno & Peter-Hagene, 2013) are evoked in response to moral norm violations. When applied to SIM, these emotions comprise the affective state that constitutes moral intuition. The present study treats these individual emotions as components of a broader negative emotional state, which in turn plays a pivotal role in downstream thinking. However, individuals’ emotional reactions may differ according to different contexts. While SIM explains how moral violations intuitively evoke negative emotions, it does not account for variation in emotional responses in a political climate where partisan identity often shapes reactions.

Intergroup Dynamics of Negative Emotion.

The preceding discussions of partisanship and emotion raise important questions about their interrelationship. Intergroup Emotion Theory (IET; Smith & Mackie, 2015; Mackie & Smith, 2017) bridges these lines of research by positing that emotions are shaped not only by individual experiences, but also by group memberships, such as partisanship. The theory suggests that emotional responses arise from individuals' perceptions of a situation's relevance to their social group (Smith & Mackie, 2016).

In the context of exposure to a moral violation by a politician, group emotions will be triggered due to the association with the group identity of partisanship (Smith & Mackie, 2016). Walter & Redlawsk (2023) find that when a violator is an in-party member, individuals tend to suppress negative emotions in order to maintain positive self-esteem. In contrast, when the violator is from the out-party, individuals experience a stronger negative emotional response. These negative emotional reactions are critical because they can influence downstream evaluations of political leaders, parties, and the institutions they represent, ultimately increasing political cynicism.

Negative Emotions and Political Cynicism

The negative emotions evoked in response to a violation of moral norms are consequential, as they have the potential to greatly shape downstream evaluations and judgments. The Theory of Affective Intelligence (Marcus et al., 2000) posits that affective (emotion-based) reactions impact political information processing. More recent expansions of the theory make key predictions about anger. Marcus et al. (2019) suggest that anger activates the dispositional system, prompting individuals to rely on pre-existing attitudes and beliefs when evaluating incoming information. This pattern has been supported by experimental evidence: Webster (2018) found that when individuals were prompted to write about a time they were angry about politics, they subsequently reported increased levels of distrust in the government compared to those who were prompted to write about what they had for

breakfast. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that a similar process will occur in response to a violation of moral norms, which is expected to induce anger. This anger, in turn, will prompt reliance on pre-existing beliefs (for example, that the government is corrupt and self-serving), strengthening the intensity of political cynicism.

Exposure to morally violating stimuli, however, is anticipated to produce a combination of negative emotions, beyond solely anger. Salerno & Peter-Hagene (2013) find that anger, disgust, and outrage can co-occur in response to a moral norm violation. Thus, the present study extends the logic of the Theory of Affective Intelligence to the context of moral violations, where these emotions are likely to coexist. Based on the logic of the theory, it is expected that this unified emotional reaction will elicit a similar response to that of anger, consistent with the pathway outlined above.

Hypotheses

H1. Exposure to a moral violation (versus no violation) committed by a politician will increase political cynicism.

H2. The positive effect proposed in H1 will be stronger when the moral violation is committed by an out-party politician (versus an in-party politician).

H3. Exposure to a moral violation (versus no violation) committed by a politician will increase the intensity of negative emotions (anger, disgust, and outrage).

H4. The effect proposed in H3 will be stronger when the moral violation is committed by an out-party politician (versus an in-party politician).

H5. Greater intensity of negative emotions will increase political cynicism.

H6. Exposure to a moral violation (versus no violation) committed by a politician will increase the intensity of negative emotions which will in turn increase political cynicism.

H7. The effect proposed in H6 will be stronger when the moral violation is committed by an out-party politician (versus an in-party politician).

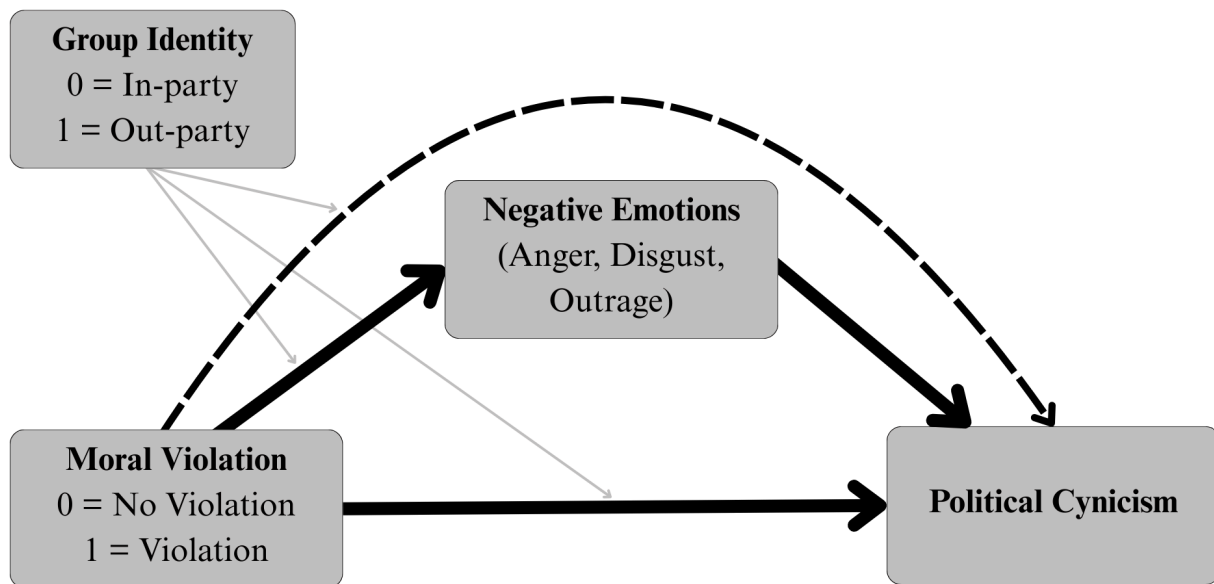


Figure 1. Hypothesized model of the relationship between moral violation, negative emotions, group identity, and political cynicism.

Note. Thick, solid arrows represent direct relationships, the dashed arrow represents the indirect relationship through negative emotions, and the thin, grey, solid arrows represent where group identity is expected to (in-party versus out-party) strengthen the relationships.

Methods

Participant Sample

Participants were recruited from Prolific.com, an academic research platform designed for social science studies, allowing any registered U.S. resident to opt in for participation. Quotas were set to collect data from 296 participants. All participants reported their political identity as either Democrat or Republican. Participants were provided a minimum cash payment of \$1, or the equivalent of \$12.00/hour based on study length. A total of 41 participants were excluded from the analysis. Five participants self-identified their political affiliation as ‘other’ and were excluded due to the requirement of affiliation with one of the two major American political parties for eligibility in this study. Additionally, three participants failed the attention check and 33 were removed for failing the manipulation check. This resulted in a final sample consisting of $N = 255$ participants. Of these, 117 participants (45.88%) identified as Democrat, and 138 participants (54.12%) identified as Republican. Regarding sex assigned at birth, 119 participants

(46.67%) identified as male, 135 participants (52.94%) identified as female, and 1 participant (0.004%) identified as other.

Design and Procedures

The experiment was conducted as a four condition, between-subjects design. Participants clicked on a link directing them to a survey with embedded stimuli on Qualtrics. Participants began by reporting their political identity. Responses to this question were used to randomly assign participants to a video displaying either an in-party or out-party politician. Participants were then randomly assigned to either the moral violation condition or the non-violation comparison condition.

Participants read a prompt informing them that they were about to watch a video pulled from a TikTok account: D.C. News Today. After reading the prompt, participants watched a one-minute video. In reality, the video was not taken from TikTok but was created by the researcher to maintain control over the content and ensure consistency across experimental conditions. The video stimuli in both conditions were nearly identical in terms of visuals, script, and tone, with only minor wording changes to reflect the respective conditions.

Participants in the no violation condition viewed a video describing a fictitious politician involved in a car accident caused by hazardous weather conditions, resulting in injuries to two children. Participants in the violation condition viewed a video describing the same fictitious politician as responsible for a drunk-driving accident. Stimuli were pilot-tested to validate manipulation effectiveness.

After viewing the video, participants completed a series of questions measuring their emotional reaction to the politician's behavior, level of political cynicism, and demographics. Upon completion of the survey, participants were redirected to Prolific and provided a minimum cash payment of \$1, or the equivalent of \$12.00/hour based on study length.

Measures

Party Identity.

Party identity was measured by asking participants, *"Do you think of yourself as a Democrat or Republican?"* Response options included: Democrat, Republican, and Other. Participants who selected "Other" were excluded from the study and directed to the end of the survey, as in-party/out-party eligibility required identification with one of the two major political parties.

Negative Emotions.

Emotional responses were measured following exposure to experimental stimuli, echoing the technique utilized by Walter & Redlawsk (2023). Participants were asked, *"When you think about the behavior of this politician, how [angry/disgusted/outraged] does it make you feel?"* Responses were recorded on a

five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all), to 5 (extremely). Items were averaged to create a score for negative emotions. The negative emotions scale demonstrated excellent internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.93$). See Appendix B for the full measurement items.

Political Cynicism.

Political cynicism was assessed using a modified version of the scale employed by Hassel et al. (2024) (for example, *“To what extent do you believe that politicians cannot be trusted to do the right thing?”*). The original scale, which broadly measured cynicism toward politicians as a whole, was adapted to include 12 items evaluating participant’s cynicism toward politicians in general, as well as Republican and Democrat politicians specifically. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all), to 5 (completely). Scores from the 12 items were averaged to generate an overall measure of political cynicism. The scale demonstrated good internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.85$). See Appendix B for the full measurement items.

Results

Results are summarized in Figure 2, which illustrates the full model with unstandardized regression coefficients. Detailed statistical results, including coefficients, standard errors, and confidence intervals, are reported in Table 1 (Appendix). Below is a summary of the outcomes for each hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1

It was hypothesized that seeing a politician commit a moral violation (versus no violation) would cause an increase in political cynicism. However, this was not the case: people who saw a violation were no more cynical than those who did not.

Hypothesis 2

It was expected that the relationship between violation and cynicism would be stronger when the video was about an out-party politician compared to an in-party politician. This also was not supported.

Hypothesis 3

As predicted, seeing a politician commit a moral violation made people feel stronger negative emotions, such as anger, disgust, and outrage compared to those who did not see a violation.

Hypothesis 4

It was expected that the relationship between violation (versus no violation) and negative emotions would be stronger when the politician was from the out-party compared to the in-party. This hypothesis was not supported.

Hypothesis 5

As hypothesized, people who felt stronger negative emotions were also more cynical about politics.

Hypothesis 6

Consistent with expectations, exposure to a political moral violation (versus no violation) indirectly increased political cynicism. That is, violations triggered stronger negative emotions, which in turn made people more cynical.

Hypothesis 7

It was expected that the chain reaction from moral violation to negative emotion to cynicism would be stronger when the politician was from the out-party compared to the in-party. This hypothesis was not supported.

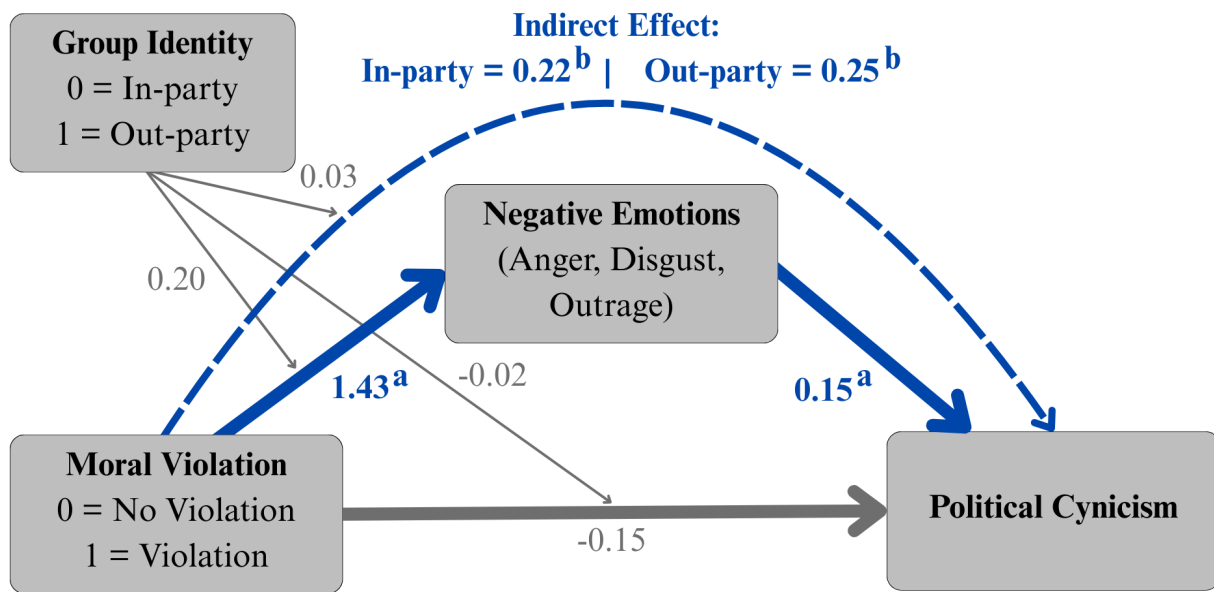


Figure 2. Results of the moderated mediation model examining the relationship between moral violation, negative emotions, group identity, and political cynicism.

Note. Displayed values are unstandardized regression coefficients (B). Analyses were conducted using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 8), a widely used statistical tool for testing relationships between variables. Blue paths and coefficients indicate statistically significant effects ($p < .05$); grey paths indicate non-significant effects. $p^a < .001$; $p^b < .05$.

Discussion

This article presents preliminary evidence that exposure to a moral violation committed by a politician indirectly increases political cynicism through negative emotional reactions. In other words, participants who experienced stronger negative emotions in response to seeing a violation of moral norms also reported intensified political cynicism. However, those who did not report stronger emotions also did not report increased cynicism. Interestingly, no direct link was found between moral violation and political cynicism. That is, the two variables were conditionally linked, such that cynicism only increased if negative emotions had first occurred.

Notably, even a short 60-second video was able to produce a shift in the intensity of political cynicism. This raises concerns in a social media environment where such content is likely to spread across social networks, reaching even those who are not actively seeking out political information. These findings are particularly significant for young adults, who are the most frequent consumers of short-form political content on social media. Young people's political attitudes are still forming, and if their exposure to politics is through morally and emotionally charged content, it could lead to their beliefs about politics being shaped in a way that deepens cynicism. Given cynicism's association with political withdrawal, these findings should be of concern for those who care about democratic stability in a time of democratic backsliding. However, other findings from this study offer a more optimistic takeaway.

It was expected that in-party and out-party dynamics would influence the strength of the relationship between the variables in this study; however, the data did not support this expectation. While it is possible that these null findings may be attributable to a weak experimental manipulation, it is unlikely, given that participants who failed the manipulation check were removed from analysis. That is, regardless of the politician's political affiliation in the video, viewers experienced an emotional reaction and downstream cynicism from exposure.

In America's current political climate, often characterized by strong affective polarization, these results are both surprising and demonstrate a path toward civic cohesion. While it was expected that participants would experience stronger emotional reactions to moral violations committed by the out-party, this expectation was not supported by the data. Instead, the data point toward a unified emotional reaction to political moral failings that spans across partisan lines. While this shared emotional response may contribute to increased cynicism, it has the potential to be redirected towards action. Anger is often motivating, and has the potential to act as a catalyst for action oriented towards holding politicians accountable for their actions. In the current political environment, redirecting emotions in this way could promote government accountability and, in turn, strengthen democratic

stability.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Results for Hypothesis Testing

<i>Effect</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>p</i>
Violation → Negative Emotions	1.43	0.20	[1.04, 1.83]	< .001
Negative Emotions → Political Cynicism	0.15	0.04	[0.08, 0.23]	< .001
Violation → Political Cynicism	-0.15	0.13	[-0.42, 0.12]	.274
Moderation (Violation x Out-party → Negative Emotions)	0.20	0.29	[-0.37, 0.32]	.496
Moderation (Violation x Out-party → Political Cynicism)	-0.02	0.18	[-0.37, 0.32]	.901
Violation → Negative Emotion → Cynicism (<i>In-party</i> = 0)	0.22	0.06	[0.12, 0.34]	CI ≠ 0
Violation → Negative Emotion → Cynicism (<i>Out-party</i> = 1)	0.25	0.07	[0.13, 0.40]	CI ≠ 0
Index of Moderated Mediation	0.03	0.05	[-0.06, 0.13]	CI = 0

Note. B = unstandardized regression coefficient. SE = standard error. CI = confidence interval. Bolded values are statistically significant at $p < .05$. Analyses were conducted using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 8).

Appendix B

Measures

Party Identity

Do you think of yourself as a Democrat or a Republican?

(Democrat, Republican, Other)

Negative Emotions

Please answer the following questions about the politician shown in the video you just watched.

(1 = not at all, 5 = extremely)

- When you think about this politician's behavior, how angry does it make you feel?
- When you think about this politician's behavior, how disgusted does it make you feel?
- When you think about this politician's behavior, how outraged does it make you feel?

Political Cynicism

(1 = not at all, 5 = completely)

- To what extent do you believe that politicians cannot be trusted to do the right thing
- To what extent do you believe that politicians do not care about people like you
- To what extent do you believe that politicians are corrupt and self serving
- To what extent do you believe that politicians will lie or say anything to help themselves
- To what extent do you believe that democratic politicians cannot be trusted to do the right thing
- To what extent do you believe that democratic politicians do not care about people like you
- To what extent do you believe that democratic politicians are corrupt and self serving
- To what extent do you believe that democratic politicians will lie or say anything to help themselves
- To what extent do you believe that republican politicians cannot be trusted to do the right thing
- To what extent do you believe that republican politicians do not care about people like you
- To what extent do you believe that republican politicians are corrupt and self serving
- To what extent do you believe that republican politicians will lie or say anything to help themselves

Demographics

Age

What is your age? (Please type a number here)

- Responses were open ended.

Sex

Please indicate your sex assigned at birth.

- Male
- Female
- Other
- I prefer not to answer this question

Gender Identity

Please indicate your gender identity.

- Woman/Female
- Man/Male
- Another gender identity (open response)
- I prefer not to answer this question

Race/Ethnicity

Please indicate your racial or ethnic identity.

- Caucasian (White/of European ancestry)
- Black American
- Black Non-American (e.g. African, West Indian, etc.)
- East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, etc.)
- South East Asian (Cambodian, Laotian, Vietnamese, etc)
- South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, etc.)
- Pacific Islander (Filipino, Samoan, etc.)
- Hispanic/Latino/Chicano/Puerto Rican
- Bi-racial/Mixed/Multicultural/Multi-racial
- Middle Eastern or North Africa
- None of the above

Religion

What is your present religion, if any? Are you...

- Protestant
- Roman Catholic
- Orthodox Christian (such as Greek or Russian Orthodox
- LK = Latter-Day Saints (LDS)
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Buddhist
- Hindu
- Atheist
- Agnostic
- Something else (open response)

Generation

Please select the generation that best applies to you.

- 1st generation = You were born in a country other than the United States
- 2nd generation = You were born in the United States but one or both of your parents were born in another country
- 3rd generation = You and both of your parents were born in the US but all of your grandparents were born in another country
- 4th generation = You and both your parents were born in the United States and at least one grandparent was born in another country with the remainder born in the U.S.
- 5th generation = You and both your parents were born in the US and all grandparents were born in the US / I prefer not to answer this question

Education

Please select the highest level of education you have completed.

- Less than high school
- Some high school, no diploma
- High school diploma or GED
- Some college, no degree
- Associate's degree (e.g., AA, AS)

- Bachelor's degree (e.g., BA, BS)
- Some graduate school, no degree
- Master's degree (e.g., MA, MS, MBA)
- Doctoral or professional degree (e.g. PhD, JD, MD)
- I prefer not to answer this question