

The role of trust in (behavioural) public policy

High Polarization Makes us Shallow
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SUMMARY

Political Polarization is a critical factor influencing public perception, particularly concerning **trust** in politicians and the acceptance of **public policies**. With increasing polarization, individuals' susceptibility to **misinformation** and their **trust** in various institutions—both political and otherwise—fluctuate significantly. This research explores the relationship between **political polarization** and **trust**, shedding light on how polarization shapes **public policy effectiveness**. Our study builds on previous research (e.g., Gupta et al., 2023; Brady & Kent, 2022) to examine how varying degrees of polarization influence individuals' **trust** in politicians and their responses to public and **bipartisan** policies.

Across three studies, we analyzed how **political polarization** affects perceptions of **trustworthiness** and **policy preferences**. In Study 1, we used a tri-dimensional **trust** model to investigate how polarized individuals perceive politicians' **trustworthiness** and their reactions to negative news. Interestingly, while **polarization** impacts initial **trust** levels, it does not significantly alter individuals' willingness to adjust their views based on new information. Additionally, we observed that in highly polarized contexts, individuals tend to simplify **trust** assessments, reducing a complex model of **trustworthiness** to a single, shallower dimension. This highlights the depth to which **polarization** affects judgment formation in political contexts.

Studies 2 and 3 focused on **policy acceptance**, specifically how **political alignment** influences reactions to **bipartisan** or neutral policies. Study 2 revealed that **co-partisan** endorsement significantly boosts support for neutral policies, underscoring the influence of **political affiliation**. In Study 3, we found that **social desirability** may further drive **policy alignment**, especially when endorsed by a **partisan group** rather than a single representative. These findings have profound implications for **public policy**, emphasizing the need for behavioral strategies that account for **polarization's** impact on **trust** and **policy reception**, paving the way for more effective, psychologically-informed policy-making in today's divided landscape.

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

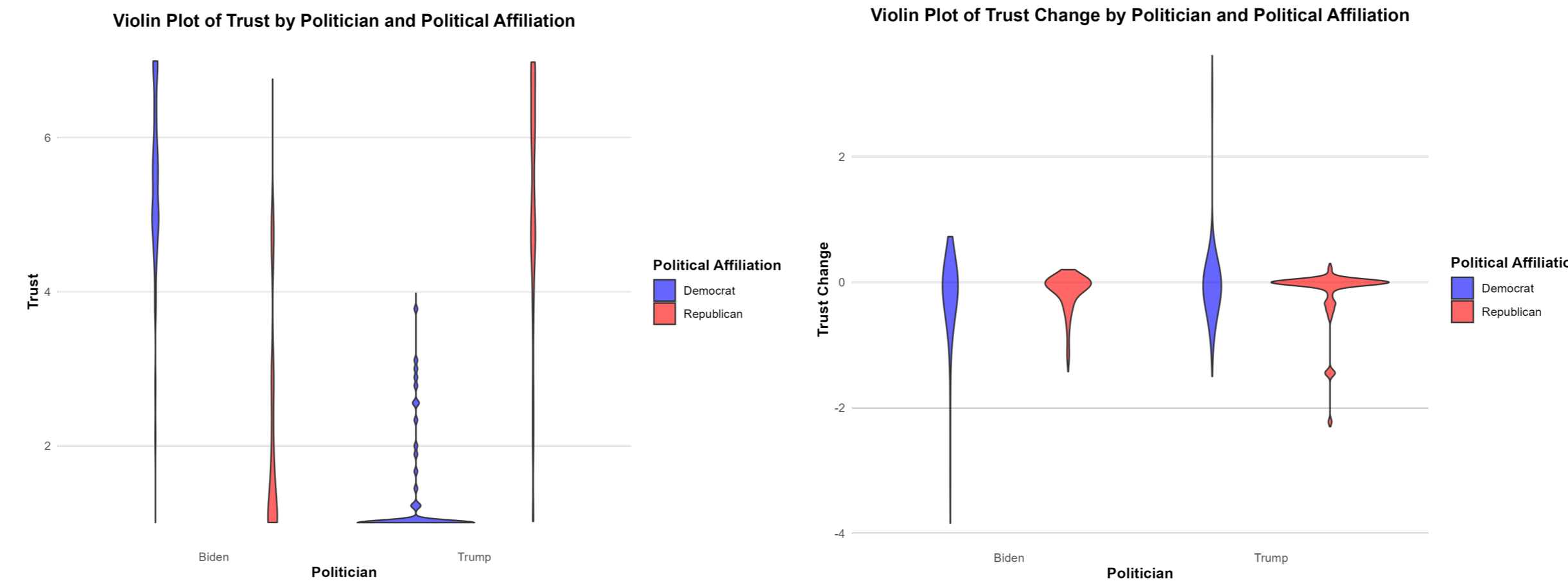
STUDY	SUBJECT POOL	VARIABLE	TOTAL SAMPLE	CONDITIONS				
				Trump v Biden	Politician	Political Group	Affiliation: Republican vs. Democrat	Affiliation Similarity: Same vs. Opposite
1	Prolific (USA)	Trust and Trust Change	200	●			●	
2	Prolific (USA)	Support for Policies	400		●		●	●
3	Prolific (USA)	Support for Policies	400			●	●	●

METHODS

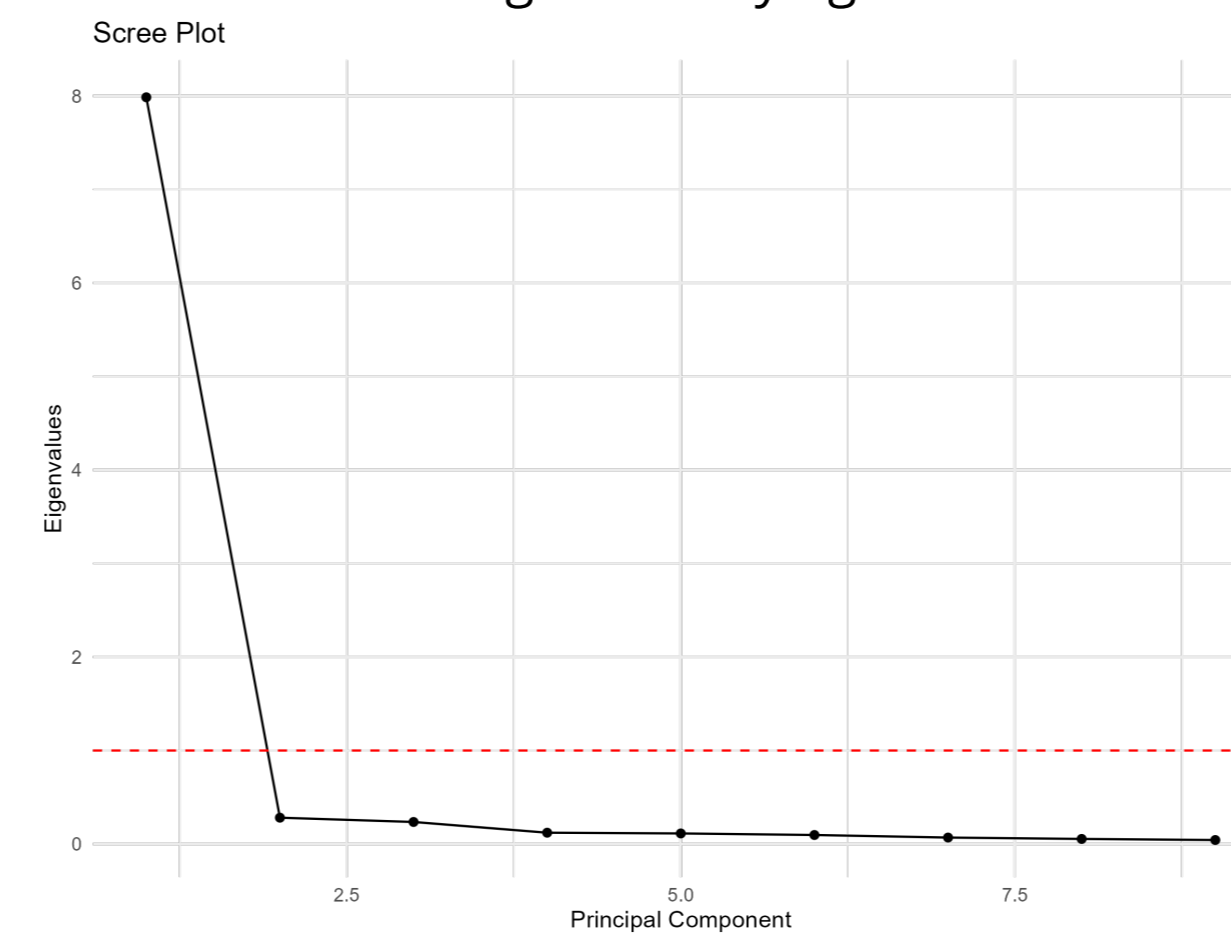
STUDY	PARTICIPANTS	DEPENDENT VARIABLE	STIMULI	ANALYSIS
Study 1: Trust Perception and Change in Trust	N = 200 (balanced between Democrats & Republicans) from Prolific (USA)	Trust (multi-dimensional/multi-item scale) and Trust Change	Biden or Trump with Scandal Exposure	ANOVA and Principal Component Analysis (PCA)
Study 2: Policy Support – Politician	N = 400 (balanced between Democrats & Republicans) from Prolific (USA)	Support for Policies	Politician from Same or Opposite Party	Mixed Effects
Study 3: Policy Support – Affiliation Similarity	N = 400 (balanced between Democrats & Republicans) from Prolific (USA)	Support for Policies	Reference Group Support from Same or Opposite Party	Mixed Effects

RESULTS STUDY 1

- Trust highly polarised for matching political affiliation, particularly strong floor effect for Democrat trust in Trump.
- Trust change after learning about a scandal is consistently negative across all conditions.

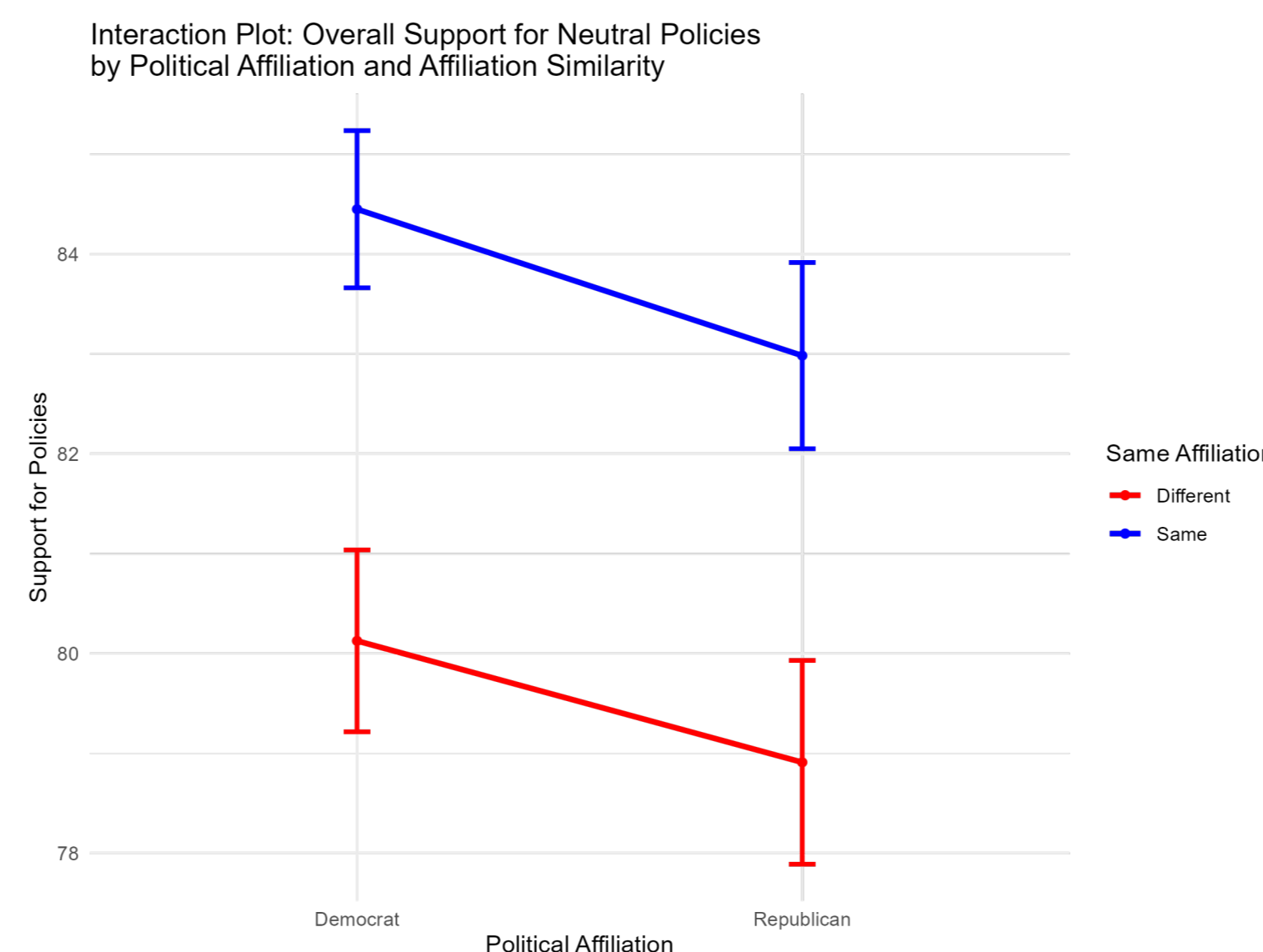


- Dimension reduction analysis shows strong evidence for a single underlying dimension of trust.



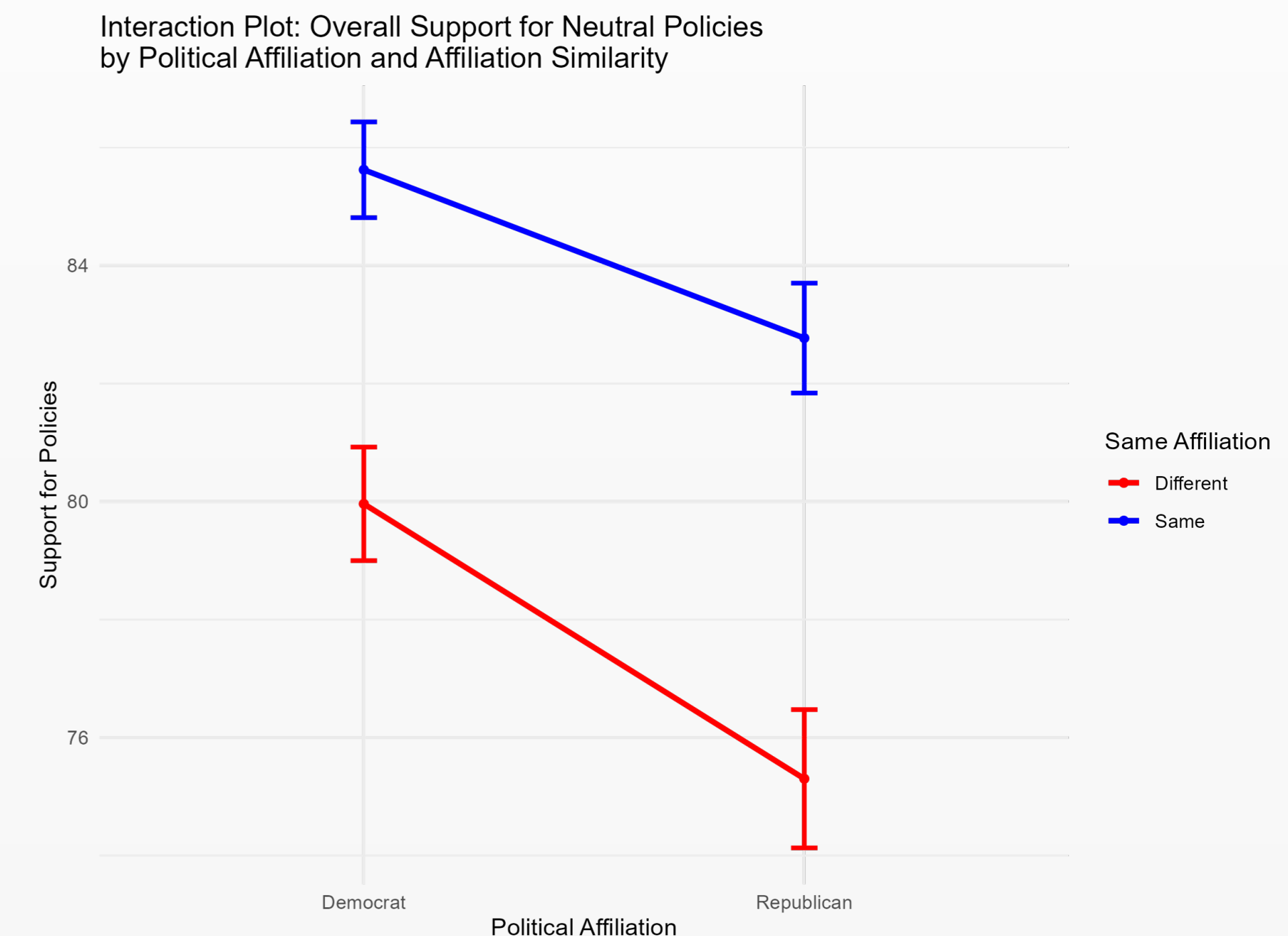
RESULTS STUDY 2

- Acceptance of (neutral) policies is lower when people's affiliation is different from the politician who publicly supported that policy. This holds true for both Democrat and Republican participants.



RESULTS STUDY 3

- Acceptance of (neutral) policies is lower when people's affiliation is different from the reference group. This holds true for both Democrat and Republican participants.



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Polarization impacts trust and policy perception.
- Trustworthiness evaluations become shallow in polarized environments.
- Policy support is influenced by political affiliation and social desirability.

Implications for Public Policy

- Challenges for behavioral public policy effectiveness.
- Strategies to mitigate polarization effects on trust and policy perception.
- Polarization's role in shaping trust and policy acceptance is critical.

Future research directions

Exploring consequences on the effectiveness of public policy and investigating whether these effects are stronger with partisan policies or with less polarized environments.