

Beyond Extremity: Underestimating the Ideological Complexity of Outgroup Members' Opinions Drives Affective Polarization

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Abstract

Ideological complexity

- The extent to which an individual's views vary across different issues and different policies within an issue.
- We document that partisans consistently underestimate each other's ideological complexity and discuss implications for affective polarization.

5 pre-registered experiments (N = 1,945)

- Study 1: Underestimation of out-group complexity
- Study 2: Underestimation of out- and in-group complexity
- Studies 3a/3b: Underestimation of complexity within issue
- Study 4: Perceptions of complexity predict evaluations

Study 1: Underestimation across issues I

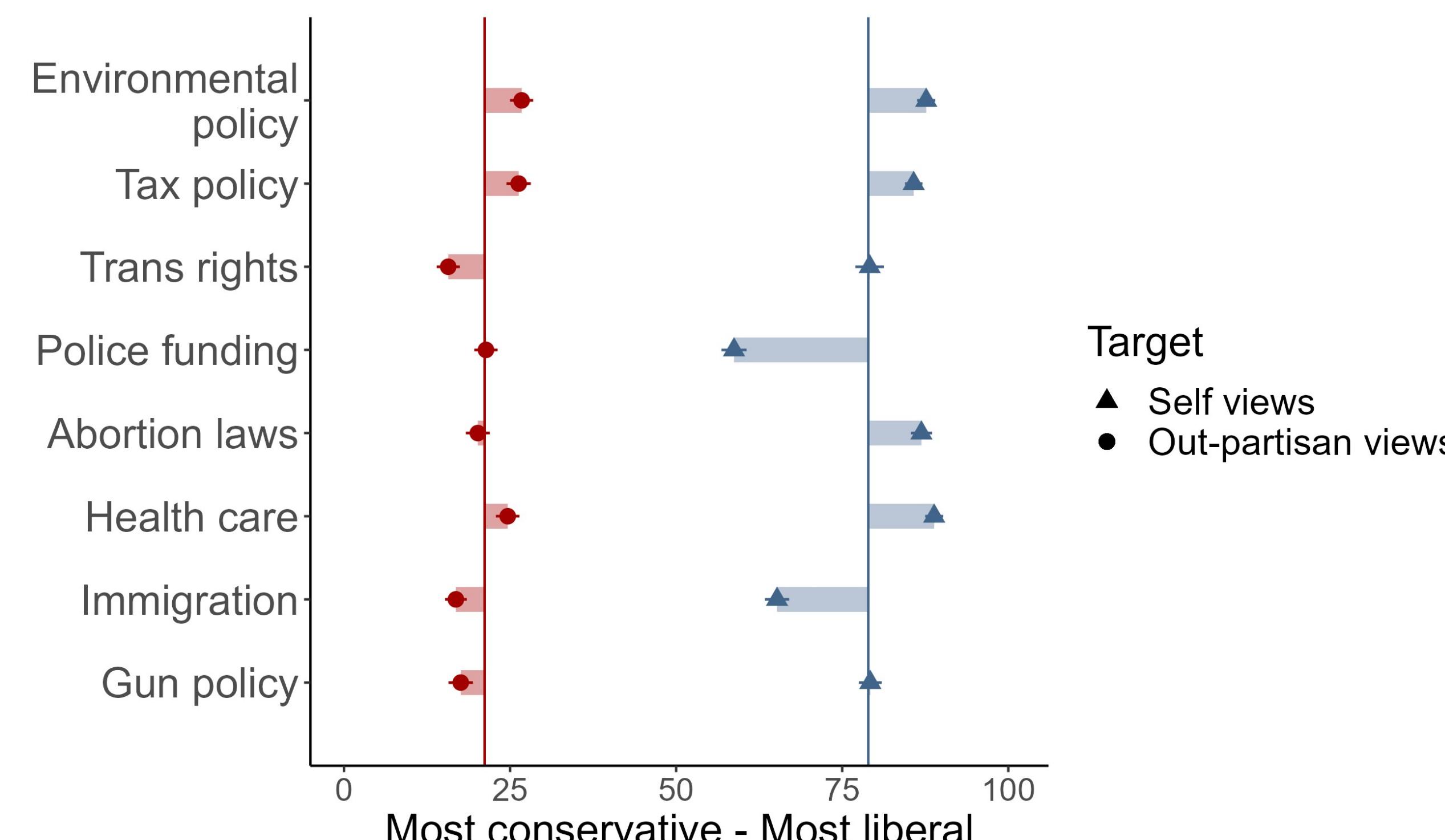
Method

Participants (N = 275) reported their own and a typical out-partisan's views on eight policies, using 100-point scales anchored at extremely liberal or extremely conservative policy positions. We calculated the variance of the eight responses to operationalize ideological complexity.

Results

Participants perceived out-group members as less ideologically complex than themselves ($d = 0.60; p < 0.001$).

Average response - Democrat



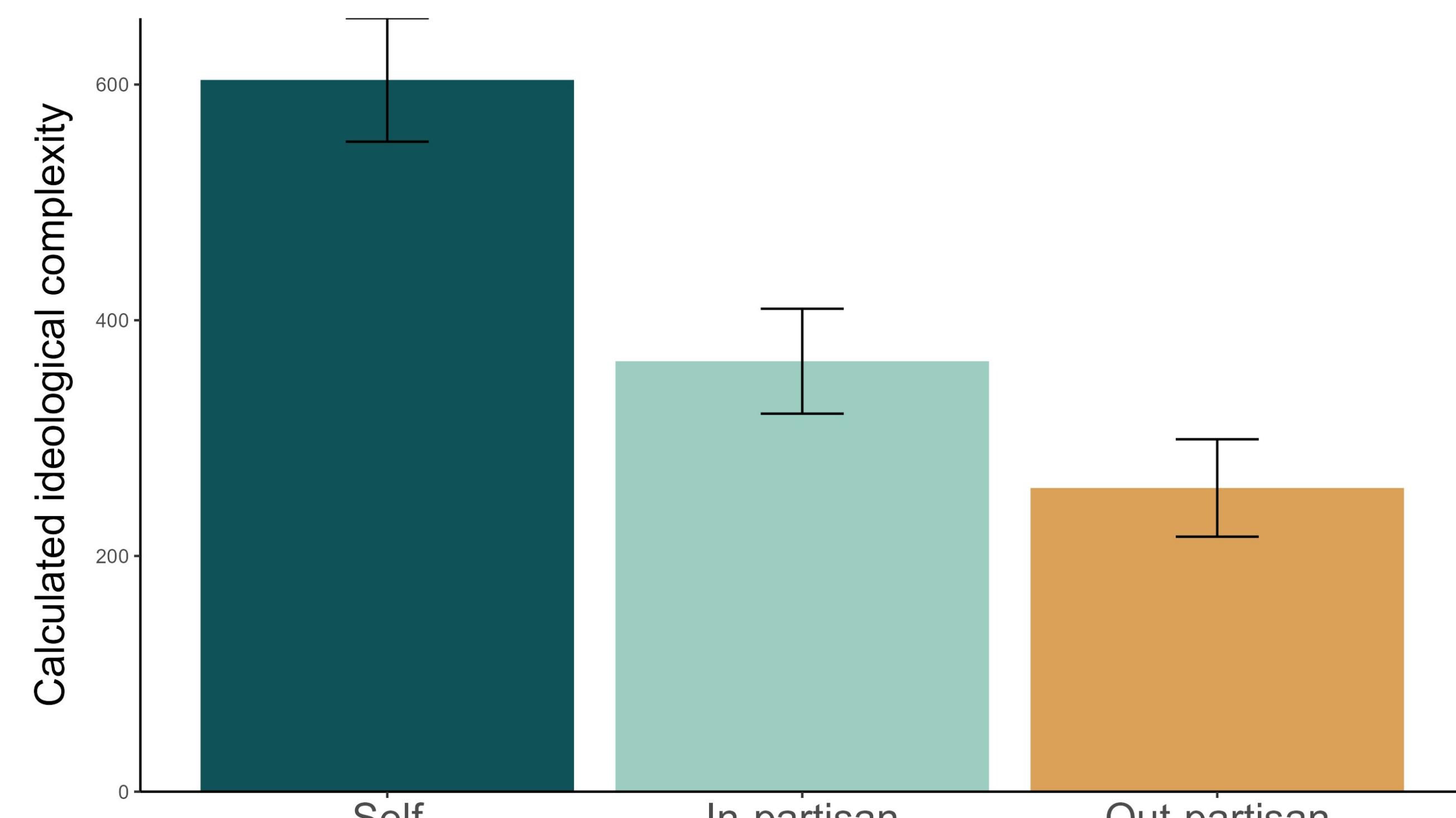
Study 2: Underestimation across issues II

Method

Participants (N = 874) reported their own ideological complexity, or an in-group/out-group member's ideological complexity (3 conditions, between-subjects).

Results

Participants perceived both ingroup members ($d = 0.55; p < 0.001$) and outgroup members ($d = 0.80; p < 0.001$) as less ideologically complex than themselves, even when controlling for misperceptions of ideological extremity. In-group members were also seen as more complex than outgroup members ($d = 0.25; p < 0.001$).



Studies 3a & 3b: Underestimation within issues

Method

Participants (3a: N = 253; 3b: N = 267) reported their own and a typical out partisan's views on eight policies all related to a single policy issue (3a: transgender rights; 3b: gun policy; both within-subjects).

Results

Out-partisans were seen as less ideologically complex, even within multiple policies related to the same issue and when controlling for ideological extremity (3a: $d = 0.86; p < 0.001$; 3b: $d = 0.44; p < 0.001$).

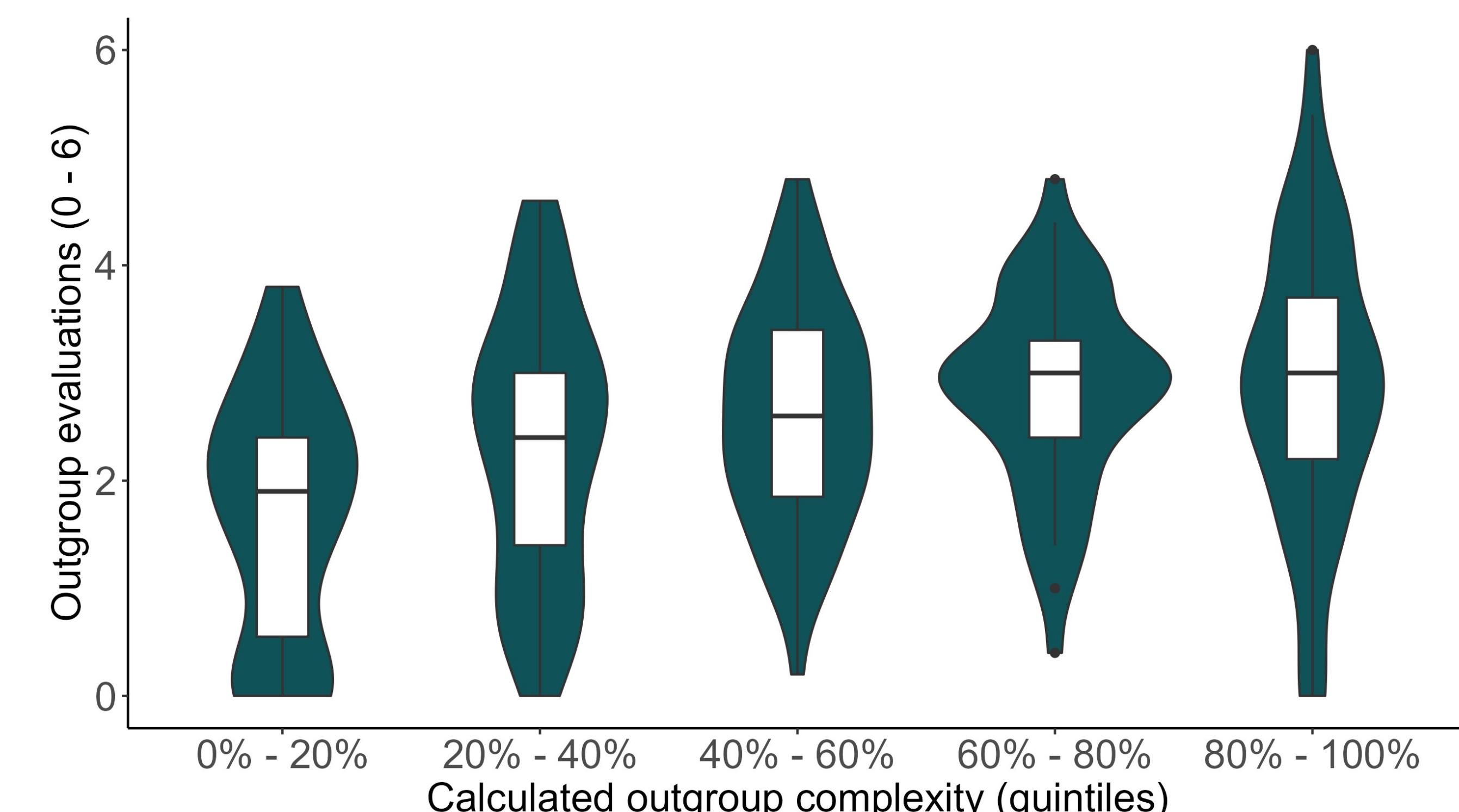
Study 4: Perceived complexity and evaluations

Method

Participants (N = 276) reported outgroup members' ideological complexity. They then evaluated the morality, objectivity, likeability, trustworthiness, and intelligence ($\alpha = 0.90$) of a hypothetical out partisan.

Results

Greater perceived complexity was associated with more favorable evaluations of an out partisan ($d = 0.20; p < 0.001$), even when controlling for perceptions of extremity. Lower perceived extremity was associated with more favorable evaluations of an out-partisan ($d = 0.43; p < 0.001$).



Conclusion

Participants in our studies consistently saw the political views of ideological opponents as less complex and nuanced than their own, both across and within policy areas.

Importantly, perceptions of ideological complexity predicted evaluations of out-group members, above and beyond perceptions of ideological extremity.

Our work adds to the growing literature examining the psychological dynamics driving ideological discord, offering promising avenues for future research.