Political Affiliation and Attitudes about Language

Research Report: SPAS-005 | August 7, 2020

Background

George Orwell is famous for describing how language norms can be used to shape and re-shape political worldviews. In this report, we asked, "do attitudes about language differ by political party affiliation?" To investigate this, we assessed attitudes about language among self-identified Republicans, Democrats, and those who reported no political party identification in particular.

Methodology

Data Source

- Social and Political Attitudes Study (SPAS)
- A nationally representative sample reflecting the U.S. adult population in terms of educational attainment, ethnicity, gender, and household income.

Participants

- 690 adults that identify as members of the Republican Party, Democratic Party, or "no party in particular."
- 49% Male, 51% Female
- Average age = 46.76 years (range 18 to 85 years)

Measures

- *Attitudes about Language:* Participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements. Answers ranged from "strongly disagree" (i.e., -3) to "strongly agree" (i.e., +3):
  1. "Reality is determined by the words we use."
  2. "People can cause severe physical harm with the words they use."
  3. "People should be allowed to say and believe whatever they want, even if others think those words or beliefs are hurtful."
  4. "Not using someone's preferred gendered pronouns leads to physical harm against the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer) community."
- We controlled for participants' religiosity (i.e., how often participants engage in private and public religious practices).

Summary of Findings

1. On average, all three groups *slightly agreed* that:
   a. reality is determined by the words we use
   b. people should say and believe what they want, even if others think it is hurtful

2. All three groups, on average, *agreed* that people can cause severe physical harm with the words they use.
   a. This finding is in line with the work of scholars (e.g., Haslam, 2016; Sunstein, 2018) who have argued that harm-related concepts may be used more often to describe verbal and symbolic actions in rich democracies where rates of actual physical violence are historically low (Pinker, 2011).

3. Meaningful differences emerged regarding the statement: "Not using someone's preferred gendered pronouns leads to physical harm against the LBGTQ community."
   a. Democrats *slightly agreed* with the statement while individuals that identified with the Republican party, or no party in particular, *slightly disagreed* with the statement. This difference is not attributable to differences in religiosity between the groups.
   b. One explanation for why all groups did not agree more strongly with this question, despite agreeing that words cause harm, is that this particular language norm has only recently emerged in Progressive cultural niches; other segments of the population (including moderate Democrats) may have had lower exposure to it.

- Have an interpretation of this you want to share? Email it to research@skeptic.com

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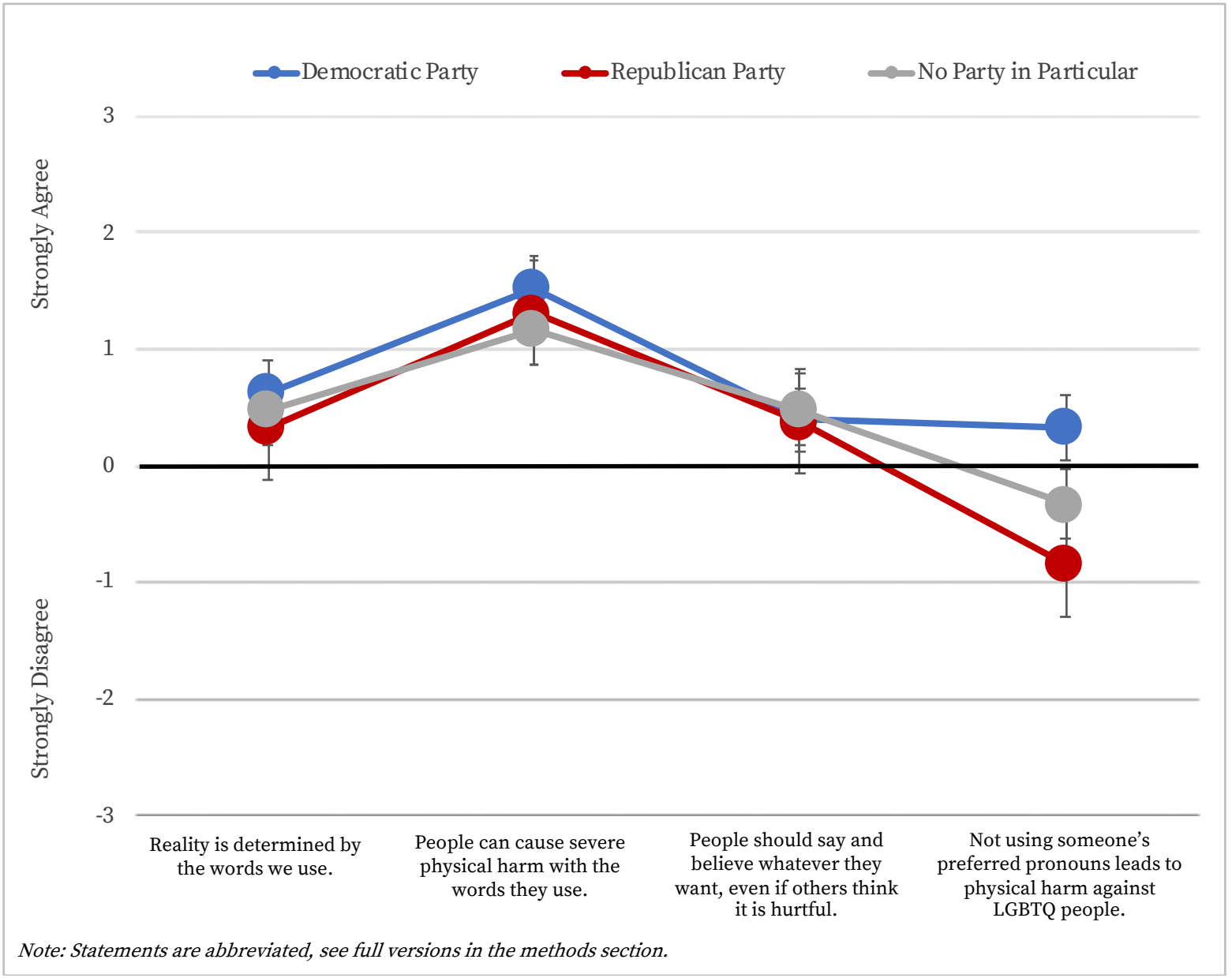
Figure 1. Attitudes about Language



Note: Statements are abbreviated, see full versions in the methods section.

Note: For additional information (e.g., statistical output, full citations) not included in this document, view the supplemental page for this report.

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