The Politics behind Perceptions of Political Bias:

The Intergroup Foundations of Neutrality Invocation and Reaction to Bias[1]

Omer Yair, Raanan Sulitzeanu-Kenan

Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Abstract

Perceptions of political bias are common in many democracies. Still, there are different explanations for these perceptions with the current literature providing findings that are at odds with each other. In this paper we synthesize findings from several intersecting literatures and provide a theoretical framework which situates partisans' perceptions of political bias within a context of an intergroup conflict. We suggest that when evaluating political bias in an action or message of third parties that are expected to be neutral (e.g., journalists), partisans do not simply estimate which side is being favored by that action or message. Rather, they evaluate whether the action/message poses a threat to the in-group, and it is mostly when they believe the action/message threatens the in-group that partisans report disfavorable bias. Moreover, we suggest that as part of an intergroup conflict, partisans also consider disfavorable bias as more serious and warranting a corrective action than favorable bias. After presenting our theoretical framework, we show that findings from several literatures, including the hostile media phenomenon literature and the perceptions of bias literature, support our model. We conclude with the implications of our framework.

Keywords: political bias, perceptions of bias, neutrality, intergroup conflict.

[1] Paper prepared for presentation at the annual WPSA meeting, April 13–15 2017, Vancouver. Omer Yair: Department of Political Science, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem, Israel. E-mail: omer.yair@mail.huji.ac.il. Raanan Sulitzeanu-Kenan: Department of Political Science and the Federmann School of Public Policy and Government, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem, Israel. E-mail: raanan.s-k@mail.huji.ac.il.

Perceptions and accusations of political bias are common in many countries. For instance, in the U.S. many believe that there is "a fair amount" of political bias in news coverage (Pew Research Center 2012, 2013) and accusations of political bias are leveled against the media during practically every presidential campaign in the last couple of decades (e.g., Watts et al. 1999; Smith 2010). In fact, in many cases we see that partisans from rival groups claim that a particular news item was biased against their group (e.g., Vallone et al. 1985; Perloff 2015). In addition, many Americans believe that political bias in academia is "a very serious problem" (Gross and Simmons 2006, p. 11)[2] and we also see accusations of political bias leveled against various government agencies (e.g., Ohlemacher 2013; Clifford 2016). Yet, despite the prevalence of these perceptions, and despite the suggestions that such perceptions have negative social ramifications (e.g., Perloff 2015; Yair and Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2015), it is still not clear what in fact explains perceptions of political bias.

Ever since Vallone et al.'s (1985) seminal paper, myriad of studies, mostly focusing on perceptions of bias in the media, have tried to explain people's perceptions of political bias. These studies have produced many important findings and insights. However, there is still no academic consensus as to the causes of such perceptions; not only that various theoretical accounts have been offered throughout the years to explain these perceptions – including Social Identity Theory (e.g., Hartmann and Tanis 2013), Social Categorization Theory (Reid 2012), Naïve Realism (e.g., Feldman 2011), Social Judgment Theory (e.g., Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1994), and Motivated Reasoning (Yair and Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2015) – but there are also many studies which show findings which are at odds with the findings of other studies in this research domain.

For example, explanations of perceptions of political bias which are congruent with the Social Judgment Theory and attest to the importance of "contrast" and "assimilation" effects (e.g., Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1994; Gunther et al. 2009) seem incompatible with studies emphasizing the effect of the current social status of one's in-group on people's perceptions of bias (Lee 2012; Hartmann and Tanis 2013; Cf. Gunther et al. 2016). Similarly, findings from these latter studies seem incompatible with findings showing that the potential impact or "reach" of a certain news article affects perceptions of bias in that article (e.g., Gunther and Schmitt 2004; Gunther et al.

[2] Of course, perceptions and allegations of political bias in the media (see, e.g., Strömbäck and Kaid 2008) or academia (e.g., Yair and Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2015) are common in many countries.

2009, 2012). In addition, almost all studies explaining perceptions of bias focus on perceptions of bias in the media (either in the media in general or in specific media coverage); yet, perceptions of political bias exist in many other domains and one might wonder whether findings pertaining to the media generalize to other domains.

In this paper we offer a novel theoretical framework that aims at providing a comprehensive explanation of people's, in particular partisans' perceptions of political bias in the actions or messages of neutrality-bound third parties.[3] Our main contention is that partisans' (or group members') evaluations of political bias, as well as partisans' reactions to perceived biases, are not formed in a vacuum or out of context; rather, they can be fruitfully understood as part of an intergroup conflict where partisans mostly aim at winning over the rivals.

In many political contestations (e.g., elections, armed conflicts) political groups are vying for resources, power, status, and eventually triumph over the rivals. Importantly, political groups frequently compete in a surrounding where there are third parties which, like a sports referee or a judge adjudicating disputes between belligerent sides, are expected to be neutral – i.e., not to favor either side – but could nonetheless affect the fortunes of either group. In such a surrounding, we contend, partisans are sensitive to threats to the in-group which are supposedly posed by the actions/messages of these neutrality-bound third parties. A sense of threat to the in-group, we contend, might arise from several features of the case at hand, such as whether the third party's action/message is seen as unfairly disfavoring the group or not, but also the social status of each group and the potential impact of the action/message. Eventually, our framework suggest that if partisans believe that the actions or messages of neutral third parties pose a threat to their in-group, be that a symbolic threat or a threat to the in-group's mere existence, they are much more likely to claim that the third party's actions or messages constitute political bias against their group.

Obviously, partisans do not consider every action/message of a neutrality-bound third-party as biased against their group; in some cases they in fact consider an action/message as neutral, or even as biased in favor of their group. However, in line

[3] There are scholarly works dealing with people's perceptions of political bias in *laypersons*, as these works are mostly based on the theory of "naïve realism" (Ross and Ward 1996). But while this literature is somewhat related to our theoretical framework, below we differentiate between perceptions of political bias in laypersons and in neutrality-bound third parties.

with several literatures (e.g., the motivated reasoning literature, see Kunda 1990), our theoretical framework suggests that partisans are likely to consider favorable bias as less serious and less warranting a corrective action than disfavorable bias. This is since bias against the in-group could hurt the group and block its path to political victory while favorable bias could help the in-group and facilitate a triumph over the rivals. Partisans, we suggest, are much more sensitive to biases they see as hurting the in-group.

We note that several studies have already suggested that perceptions of political bias in neutrality-bound third parties should be understood as an intergroup phenomenon (e.g., Reid 2012; Hartmann and Tanis 2013; also Perloff 2015, pp. 710–711). These studies, however, focused only on media news coverage and basically situated their findings within the relatively narrow hostile media phenomenon literature, according to which partisans tend to perceive ostensibly neutral or "balanced" media coverage as biased against their side (e.g., Vallone et al. 1985; Perloff 2015). This is while there are perceptions of political bias in many domains other than the media. Moreover, these studies also suggested that perceptions of bias are mostly due to partisans' desire to positively differentiate the in-group from the out-group or to decrease symbolic threat (e.g., Perloff 2015, pp. 710–711). In contrast, we suggest that these studies did not fully consider the potential effect of the actions/messages of neutrality-bound third parties on the partisan's in-group. That is, a potential effect on the group's future and its success in the intergroup conflict, *above and beyond* a symbolic threat or a desire for positive distinctiveness. But more importantly, unlike our theoretical framework these studies did not situate partisans' perceptions of political bias within an ongoing intergroup *conflict*.

In this paper we therefore complement and extend on these and other related works in providing a more comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding people's perceptions of political bias. We suggest that this framework applies to various scenarios and to different neutrality-bound third-parties, and that it contributes to an understanding of not only people's evaluations of political bias but also their reactions to these perceived biases.

Before we continue, we should make it clear that our framework is not concerned with strategic allegations of political bias, but rather with what we believe are genuine perceptions of political bias. Indeed, political elites might sometimes claim a

hostile bias, for example in news coverage, even if they do not in fact perceive such a bias, perhaps as a part of a strategy intended to receive favorable treatment from certain neutrality-bound third parties in the future or to depict future harmful actions/messages of neutrality-bound third parties as less credible (e.g., Domke et al. 1999; see also Kressel 1987, pp. 223–224; Smith 2010; Groeling 2013, p. 139). Our contention is that for most parts, partisans' perceptions of bias attest for genuine perceptions and not strategic considerations, a contention which is supported, *inter alia*, by findings showing that partisans sometimes do report bias that are *in favor* of the in-group, that encountering a disfavorable news article increases psychological discomfort and stress levels (Blanton et al. 2012), and that perceptions of political bias have actual consequences, for example, lower trust in an institution considered as biased (e.g., Perloff 2015. pp. 713–714).

Our paper proceeds as follows. We start with presenting our core theoretical framework, including the important distinction between partisans and non-partisans with regard to evaluations of political bias. We then present our main arguments concerning partisans' evaluations of political bias as well as their varied reaction to disfavorable and favorable biases. Earlier findings, from various literatures, provide us with support for each argument. We conclude with discussing the implications of our theoretical framework.

Understanding people's perceptions of political bias

In this section we lay out the core of our theoretical framework regarding partisans' perceptions of political bias. But first, we shortly comment on how people seem to understand the term "political bias". In general, people do not seem to have a clear and exhaustive definition for this somewhat fuzzy term: Several scholars noted that political bias means different things to different people (e.g., Baron 2006, p. 5), and our own experience, based on extent literature as well as interviews with both laypersons and professionals (e.g., journalists, academics, bureaucrats), tells us that many people have difficulties in defining this term and in explaining what they believe political bias is.

Nonetheless, it seems that people quite easily answer questions about bias in whichever news coverage or about the existence of political bias in the academy.[4] This is, we suggest, because most people have an implicit understanding of political bias of a neutrality-bound third party as lack of neutrality or unfair favoritism by that third party. Indeed, one of the few studies that did examine how people understand political bias, specifically in the context of news coverage, showed that different people assign somewhat different (albeit not completely unrelated) meanings to this term, yet "at the core, it seems that the public most commonly defines the foundation of bias as a lack of neutrality" (Urban 1999). The word "bias" denotes some sort of deviation (e.g., Yair 2017), and in a context where third parties are expected to be neutral, lack of neutrality constitutes such a deviation – *political* bias in our case.[5]

Perceptions of political (or ideological, or partisan) bias in news coverage are arguably the most common, or at least the most documented type of perceptions of political bias. Yet, we see accusations of political bias leveled against neutrality-bound third parties in many other institutions, including academia (e.g., Linvill and Havice 2011; Yair and Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2015), various governmental agencies (e.g., Gordon 2009, p. 534; Ohlemacher 2013; Clifford 2016), various international and judicial bodies (e.g., Posner and de Figueiredo 2005, p. 600; Channel 20 2015; Wilkinson 2017), and even a country's police forces (Kubovich and Lis 2017). Recently none other than the popular social network Facebook has been accused of political bias (Herrman and Isaac 2016). Indeed, it seems that we witness such accusations whenever a third party that is expected to be neutral is seen as unfairly favoring one of the competing parties in whichever political conflict.

[4] For example, in many public opinion polls less than 10 percent of respondents have answered "don't know" to questions about political bias in news coverage (e.g., Pew Research Center 2012, 2013). Furthermore, we know of no study of perceptions of political bias that seriously addressed this issue in its empirical analyses.

[5] Some scholars suggested that people sometimes also see other laypersons (as opposed to neutrality-bound third parties) as politically or ideologically biased (e.g., Ross and Ward 1996; Kennedy and Pronin 2008; Yan et al. 2016). A more thorough distinction between political bias of laypersons and of neutrality-bound third parties is beyond that scope of this paper (cf. Yair 2017), yet it seems that political bias of laypersons is not perceived in these studies as lack of neutrality or unfair favoritism on behalf of the other laypersons, but rather as close-mindedness or ideological "rigidity" stemming from laypersons' political (ideological) orientations (Robinson et al. 1995; Kennedy and Pronin 2008; Yan et al. 2016).

A theoretical framework of perceptions of political bias

Our theoretical framework is depicted in Figure 1. As we explain below, this framework aims to explain *partisans*' (but not non-partisans') perceptions of political bias. Our model starts with an action or message of a neutrality-bound third party (Stage 1). We take these actions/messages as given in our model in that they could take place regardless of the actions of either group involved in the conflict, and do not elaborate on the actual actions/messages, but only on partisans' evaluations of, and reactions to these actions/messages. Next, in Stage 2 partisans evaluate these actions/messages according to several factors that have to do with the potential threat that the action/message poses to the in-group. In Stage 3, and following from their Stage 2's evaluations, partisans reach a conclusion with regard to the third party's action/message, i.e., partisans determine whether that action/message is neutral or is it biased in favor of the in-group or against it. Finally, after reaching such a conclusion, in Stage 4 partisans react to the third party's action/message, exhibiting varied reactions to favorable and disfavorable biases. We now turn to present our model's stages in full.

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Perceptions of political bias as an intergroup phenomenon

So what causes people to perceive political bias in the actions or messages of neutrality-bound third parties, and what affects their reactions to these perceived biases? One might expect that in evaluating political bias in third party's actions and messages, as well as in reacting to these actions/messages, no differences between different people – including rival partisans – should emerge; all people are expected to (i) similarly gauge the lack of neutrality and unfair favorability in favor of one group or ideology in a certain action/message, and accordingly report that political bias took place (or not); and (ii) similarly evaluate the seriousness of that bias and whether that bias ought to be addressed and corrected. Yet, since such an action/message could potentially affect the fortunes of the groups involved in an intergroup conflict we suggest that such perceptions among group members are not devoid of their concerns and desires with regard to the conflict. We start with elaborating on partisans' *evaluations* of political bias (Stage 2).

Our core contention with regard to evaluations of political bias is that when partisans,[6] but not non-partisans, assess such actions/messages for political bias, they evaluate not simply which side is being favored by the action/message. Rather, they evaluate whether the action/message poses a threat to the in-group. We suggest that partisans tend to evaluate such actions/messages in a mostly defensive manner (e.g., Lee 2012), fearing these actions/messages would negatively affect their group's future in the context of an on-going conflict; and when they believe that the action/message threatens the in-group, partisans are prone to report a disfavorable bias against the in-group.

Underlying our theoretical model is the contention that partisans and non-partisans differ in the way they evaluate political bias in the actions/messages of neutrality-bound third parties. Indeed, many studies, mostly in the realm of mass media, showed that partisans and non-partisans differ considerably in their bias evaluations (e.g., Vallone et al. 1985; Perloff 1989; Gunther et al. 2012).[7] We suggest that when *non-partisans* evaluate political bias, they simply evaluate which of the sides or groups in question is being favored in a certain action/message of a neutrality-bound third party. Unlike partisans, non-partisans do not personally feel threatened by the action/message; it barely, if at all, affects non-partisans' well-being, and non-partisans have much less to gain or lose from the effects of the action/message in terms of threat to their own self-concept and/or to their group's future. Accordingly, non-partisans' evaluation of bias in the third party's action/message is simply based on an evaluation of which side is being favored, where the common expectation is of neutrality and lack of favoritism (see more below in *the perceived slant* section).[8]

However, this is not the case with regard to *partisans*. To begin with, partisans usually come to the fore with certain attitudes and beliefs according to which their side

[6] Out of convenience, by "partisans" we refer to group members who identify with their group and are emotionally attached to it, or to supporters of whichever policy or platform who hold strong attitudes toward it. Indeed, Klar (2014, p. 687) defined *partisanship* as "an individual's adherence to a particular political party or platform". Obviously, not every group member highly identifies with the in-group, and within practically every political group not all members consider their group membership as an important component of their self-concept (e.g., Huddy 2013) (and similarly, not all supporters of a certain policy or platform strongly support it or consider it as important). Here we simply suggest that the higher the group member's identification with, and attachment to the group (or the stronger his or her attachment to, and involvement with the policy/platform at hand), the more that person is likely to conform to the general pattern suggested here.

[7] For reviews on this consistent difference, see Feldman (2014) and Perloff (2015).

[8] We do not take non-partisans' evaluations of political bias to be necessarily accurate, or even more accurate than those of partisans of either side. Non-partisans usually possess less information regarding the conflict than do partisans, but even if some non-partisans are experts on the matter, we do not believe that non-partisans "have a monopoly on political truth" (Kressel 1987, p. 216).

is more correct and justified in its claims than the other side. Believing their side is correct in most, if not all claims related to the conflict, partisans could potentially treat even a "balanced" action/message of a third party (e.g., a news coverage or an academic lecture presenting the same number of arguments supporting side A and side B) as biased against the in-group since it does not conform to their beliefs,[9] and/or because they are angry since "inferior" claims of the rivals are treated as equivalent to the "superior" claims of the partisan's side (see Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1994, p. 166).

Therefore, we should expect partisans from rival groups to differ from one another, and probably also from non-partisans, in many evaluations of third party's actions and messages. This is since partisans might simply disagree with the third party's actions/messages in terms of how they portrait reality or what should be done in the present time or the future. Indeed, works in the literature on *naïve realism* (Ross and Ward 1996) have suggested that "attributions of bias are born in perceptions of disagreement" (Pronin et al. 2004, p. 789; Feldman 2011), and several studies have found that perceived disagreement or ideological distance increases perceptions of bias in neutrality-bound third parties (e.g., Gunther et al. 2001; Feldman 2011; Yair and Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2015). Thus, it might be that in evaluating political bias in an action/message of a third party partisans simply evaluate whether the action/message is congruent with their own worldview or not, and whether they agree with it or not; that is, if the neutrality-bound third party "got it right" or not (Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2006).[10]

But we suggest there is more to it. After all, non-partisans might also have a priori beliefs that one group is more correct or justified in its conflict-related claims than the other group, even when they are not group members and/or are not highly involved in the intergroup conflict; and this could potentially affect their bias evaluations in a manner similar to partisans' evaluations. In essence, we contend that in answering the question of which side is being favored by a third party's action/message, partisans are much more likely than non-partisans to also take into consideration, most likely not in a conscious or deliberate manner, certain features of the action/message that could

[9] If you believe your side is correct in 90% (or more) of the claims regarding the conflict, a message suggesting your side is correct in "only" 50% of conflict-related claims would likely be seen as incorrect, unfair, and hostile.

[10] A telling example is the response among the American public to the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Bush v. Gore* (2000). Following this ruling, a ruling that buttressed George W. Bush's victory in the 2000 presidential election, 88% of Bush supporters considered that ruling as fair whereas 78% of Gore supporters considered that ruling as unfair (http://www.pollingreport.com/wh2post.htm).

potentially affect their group; in particular, features related to a potential *threat* that the action/message might pose for their group. Essentially, partisans' evaluations of bias are not "sterile" evaluations of which side is being favored by that action/message, one that bears practically nothing on the evaluator in the case that he or she is a non-partisan; partisans are, to a large extent, part of the conflict, and they themselves might be affected by the action/message in question.

Scholars have already suggested that when individuals strongly identify with their group and define themselves in terms of a certain social identity, "threats to the group will be perceived as threats to the individual's self-concept" (Ehrlich and Gramzow 2015, p. 1110). But, importantly, threats from a third party's action or message could present more than just a "symbolic threat" to the partisan's in-group (cf. Hartmann and Tanis 2013; Perloff 2015, p. 710); it could be much more than just partisans' need "to see their group as positively distinct from the outgroup" (Ariyanto et al. 2007, p. 267; Matheson and Dursun 2001) or partisans' desire to believe that the in-group's claims are the truth. Partisans might also fear that unfavorable actions or messages of neutrality-bound third parties (e.g., unfavorable ruling of the International Court of Justice or the U.N. Security Council, swaying of gullible consumers of news media in favor of the political opponents, or indoctrination of the younger generations in the academy's classrooms) could, in fact, threaten the in-group's ability to prevail in the intergroup conflict, perhaps even threaten the group's future.

Stated differently, it might be that threats to the in-group following actions/messages of a neutrality-bound third party are, at least in some cases, more in line with the "realist conflict theory" (e.g., Sherif et al. 1961), according to which "when two groups are in competition for scarce resources, the potential success of one group threaten the well-being of the other" (Riek et al. 2006, p. 336), than with theories such as social identity theory which emphasize group distinctiveness (e.g., Tajfel and Turner 1979; Hartmann and Tanis 2013). And since partisans are potentially much more affected by such third party's actions/messages than non-partisans, it is likely that various characteristics of the action/message (e.g., the potential impact of the action/message) will be taken into consideration by partisans invested in the conflict – but not by non-partisans – when evaluating political bias. After all, such characteristics have the potential to significantly affect the fortunes of the partisan's group and the

result of the entire conflict *above and beyond* the mere agreement with the action/message or the perceived (dis)favorability or neutrality of the action/message.

To sum up, up to this point we have suggested that non-partisans and partisans differ in their evaluations of political bias, and that as part of an intergroup conflict, partisans' evaluation of bias in the actions/messages of neutrality-bound third parties incorporate several features of the action/message that have to do with the threat the action/message poses to their group. We now turn to theorize how several features of the action/message potentially affect partisans' evaluations of political bias and present evidence supporting our suggestions.

Factors affecting partisans' evaluation of bias

Actions and messages of neutrality-bound third parties have many characteristics, and all these characteristics might affect people's evaluations of such actions/messages. Yet, we suggest that in partisans' evaluations of bias in these actions/messages (i.e., Stage 2 of our theoretical framework), three characteristics are most important as it is these features that arguably have the most impact on the amount of threat the actions/messages poses for the partisan's group. These characteristics are (i) whether the action/message is perceived to favor the partisan's group or the rival group (*slant*); (ii) the social status of the partisan's group (*group status*); and (iii) the potential impact of the action/message (*impact*) (see Figure 1). Importantly, we suggest that these factors might interact in partisans' evaluation of political bias, and consequently, in many cases these factors should not be evaluated on their own, i.e., without also considering the presence of other factors. We now elaborate on each factor while also providing evidence documenting the importance of each factors to partisans' perceptions of political bias.

1) <u>The perceived slant of the action/message</u>

An important factor contributing for partisans' threat from third party's actions/messages is the perceived slant or "valence" (e.g., Gunther and Liebhart 2006) of the action/message: whether partisans evaluate the action/message as neutral or as favoring

whichever group. After consolidating an evaluation concerning the slant of the action or message, it is mostly – but, as we show below, not only – when partisans' believe that their side is being disfavored (relative to what they believe should have been the case vis-a-vis their worldview) that they will feel threatened.

In some cases, the evaluation of the slant of a third party's action/message is straightforward, and it is clear from simply observing the action/message which side is being favored and which is being disfavored. For instance, some news items are overwhelmingly one-sided that most partisans, from all sides and parties agree that these items favor one side over the other (e.g., Gunther et al. 2001; Yair and Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2017). Also, publications regarding scandals of politicians are almost always unfavorable for these politicians and most likely also to the party to which they belong (e.g., Puglisi and Snyder 2011). In other cases, however, we might see people, both partisans and non-partisans, disagree on the slant of the action/message simply because, as mentioned above, they come to the fore with different beliefs regarding conflict-related claims.

In addition, people might sometimes evaluate the slant of the action/message in light of certain characteristics of the third parties responsible for it, such as the perceived ideological stand or the ostensible group identification of these third parties. The effect of such a "source heuristic" has been documented in many intergroup and political scenarios (e.g., Maoz et al. 2002; Cohen 2003); and various studies of perceptions of media bias have shown that, for example, news items attributed to sources considered as left-wing were perceived as more favorable to the left, whereas *identical* items attributed to sources considered as right-wing were perceived as more favorable to the right (e.g., Baum and Gussin 2007; Turner 2007; Reid 2012; see also Matheson and Dursun 2001; Ariyanto et al. 2007).

Relatedly, and in accordance with the *naïve realism* literature (Ross and Ward 1996), partisans also tend to evaluate third parties that are seen to favor their side as relatively less politically biased than third parties that are seen to favor the rivals (e.g., Baum and Gussin 2007; Turner 2007; Yair and Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2015). Yet, a clearly favorable (disfavorable) message, even from a third party which is generally seen as disfavorable (favorable) to their side, sometimes would still result in partisans perceiving favorable (disfavorable) bias in that message (Baum and Gussin 2007;

Gunther et al. 2016). Overall, it seems that in evaluating the slant of a third party's action/message, people, partisans and non-partisans alike, consider both the "content" of the action/message and the identity of the relevant neutrality-bound third party (Gunther et al. 2016).[11]

Moreover, people might be affected in their assessment of the slant of the action/message by their prior beliefs about bias in the media (or in certain media outlets) (e.g., Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1994; Perloff 2015, pp. 711–712). Furthermore, people might also assess the slant of the action/message in light of cues from credible sources such as political elites. Indeed, elites' claims of political bias have been shown to affect both partisans' and non-partisans' evaluations of bias (Smith 2010). But regardless of how people in general come to evaluate the slant of a specific action/message, we suggest that when partisans see the action/message as favoring the out-group (relative to what they believe should have been the case), they are more likely to feel threatened and claim that bias against their side took place. Nonetheless, while the perceived slant of the action/message is important for understanding partisans' threat from the action/message and subsequently their evaluations of political bias, it is by no means the only factor that matters.

2) The social status of the partisan's in-group

We suggest that an important contextual factor contributing to partisans' threat from a third party's action/message, and ultimately to perceptions of bias in the action/message, is the current social status of the partisan's in-group. To the extent that partisans' evaluation of bias are driven mostly from assessments of the possible threat the action/message poses to their group, we would expect partisans to be less concerned

[11] We note that Gunther et al. (2016) have suggested that the source of a third party's message should be evaluated distinctly from the actual content of that message since partisans react differently to in-group and out-group sources: An out-group source supposedly poses much more threat to partisans and accordingly partisans are more defensive in evaluating messages from out-group sources. Yet, this suggestion seems incompatible with works showing that non-partisans are also affected by source heuristics (Baum and Gussin 2007; Turner 2007) even though non-partisans are unlikely to feel threatened by either source and are unlikely to evaluate messages from whichever source in a defensive manner. Thus, it seems more likely that "expectations of bias trigger… selective interpretation of message content" (Feldman 2014), where in some cases the actual content can still "override" source (Gunther et al. 2016). Accordingly, we incorporate the source in our *slant* factor, noting that the effect of the source on bias evaluations is similar to partisans and non-partisans – unlike the effect of the other two factors we highlight below.

about perceived non-favorable or even disfavorable actions/messages of third parties – and consequently report less disfavorable bias – when their side enjoys a higher status and more public support than the out-group. When partisans are part of a high-status, winning group there is generally less reason or need for these partisans to demand neutrality in order to counteract disfavorable bias when a third party's action/message does not pose a threat to the in-group. This is true even if that action/message does not strictly conform to partisans' beliefs regarding the conflict as the third-party's action/message is deemed as unlikely to harm the group's future (relatedly, see Duck et al. 1998, p. 12).

In contrast, members of low-status groups are likely be more susceptible to defending their self-concept and self-worth by claiming disfavorable bias when presented with third parties' actions/messages that does not conform to their conflict-related beliefs. Lacking public support, "members of low-status groups in society must manage a permanent threat to their self-worth" and low-status group members with a high identification "are especially likely to respond defensively on an incidental status threat and to downplay the threat" (Hartmann and Tanis 2013, p. 538). This is also likely to transpire when the partisans' group is losing in a direct competition with the rivals, a situation in which partisans are under pressure to maintain positive image of themselves and their group following a loss: They might try to reduce the threat posed by third parties' action/messages and/or account for the group's inferior status by derogating these actions/messages or the neutrality-bound third parties themselves and by claiming disfavorable bias (Duck et al. 1998; Hartmann and Tanis 2013).

Several studies provide evidence supporting these suggestions.[12] Lee's (2012) experimental study showed that respondents who read a news story which was coupled with user-generated comments that were congruent with the respondent's political orientations reported much less disfavorable bias and partiality in the story in comparison to respondents who read an *identical* news story which was coupled with user-generated comments that were incongruent with the respondent's political orientations. Importantly, that affect was evident only among people who were highly

[12] Several panel studies (Duck et al. 1998; Hoffner and Rhekoff 2011) provide evidence in line with our theoretical framework, showing that after an election, partisans from the winning party claim tend to less political bias in the media whereas partisans from the losing party tend to claim more political bias in the media (see also Huge and Glynn 2010). Yet, as explained in the *discussion* section below, we do not incorporate these studies into our theoretical framework.

involved in that issue.[13] Hartmann and Tanis (2013) similarly showed that the social status of the respondents' in-group affects evaluations of bias. In one of their studies (Study 2) they even manipulated the social status of the respondents' in-group and showed that respondents who were assigned to a condition in which the in-group was presented as having almost no public support identified disfavorable bias in an article they read. In contrast, respondents who were assigned to a condition in which the in-group was presented as enjoying an overwhelming public support read an *identical* article but reported a neutral article.

Relatedly, Yair and Sulitzeanu-Kenan (2015) showed that the more students perceived ideological distance from their professors, the more they report politically biased behaviors of these professors. Yet, this phenomenon was restricted only to students who believed their professors hold more leftist stands than themselves. These scholars thus suggested that this is because academia is seen as a mostly leftist institution, where more left-wing stands from professors are seen as threatening while more right-wing stands from professors are not (pp. 502–503). Gunther et al. (2016) also suggested that the group's social status explains differences in perceptions of bias in an op-ed article among rival partisans.

All in all, these studies provide evidence that in evaluating and reporting political bias, partisans are affected by more than simply the slant of a third party's action/message. Partisans' evaluations of bias are also affected by the social status of the in-group, as they seem to exhibit in their bias evaluations what can be considered a "*threat premium*"; being the winning or high-status group reduces partisans' threat from third parties' actions/messages and renders their evaluation of such actions/messages much less defensive. In contrast, partisans from a losing, low-status group respond to threat to the in-group in a defensive manner, reporting disfavorable bias in an effort to alleviate threats to their own self-image and to the in-group status.

3) <u>The potential impact of the action/message</u>

[13] We note that Lee's (2012) main theoretical explanation is focused on the potential impact of the news article on a broad audience and on partisans' "fear of losing ground" (p. 41), which is much more in line with our third factor (i.e., "impact"; see below) than with the "group status" factor. Yet, she does note that "whether the public is with them or against them" and "the belief that they are on the winning side" affects partisans' perceptions of bias (p. 42).

We suggest that another important contextual factor contributing to partisans' threat from a third party's action/message, and ultimately to perceptions of bias in the action/message, is the potential effect of the action/message. Essentially, we suggest that in evaluating political bias, partisans are also affected by the potential impact of a third party's action/message. Again, we contend that they exhibit some sort of a "*threat premium*" in their bias evaluations: The more partisans believe that a certain action/message is influential and/or could reach a wide audience, the more they feel threatened by an action/message, and, consequently, the more they are likely to report disfavorable bias and demand neutrality.

Put differently, an action/message deemed influential could expose the group to a greater threat in comparison to an identical action/message that is deemed as less influential, and therefore an influential action/message is likely to make partisans more fearful and defensive in their bias assessments. Such increased threat is likely to result in partisans' reporting more disfavorable bias, in part to counteract the threat posed to the in-group. Similarly, even if partisans believe that a third party's action/message is disfavorable, they might not feel threatened by it if they believe that the action/message will have no meaningful impact over the course of the conflict.

Evidence supporting this suggestion come from a series of experiments by Gunther and his colleagues (Gunther and Schmitt 2004; Schmitt et al. 2004; Gunther and Liebhart 2006; Gunther et al. 2009, 2012). For example, several of these studies showed that a news story's "reach", or the potential amount of exposure or publicity the story is likely to receive, substantially increases partisans' reports of hostile or disfavorable political bias in a text purportedly published in the media in comparison to an *identical* text presented as a student's essay. In the former case partisans from both rival groups reported hostile bias whereas in the latter they report that the text was overall neutral, sometimes even favorable (Gunther and Schmitt 2004; Schmitt et al. 2004; Gunther and Liebhart 2006). Similar results were obtained when Gunther and his colleagues compared partisans' evaluations of bias in a text purportedly published in a "high" reach newspaper with an identical news story purportedly published in a "low" reach newspaper (Gunther et al. 2009).

Moreover, Gunther et al.'s (2012) study also showed that, in accordance with our theoretical framework, partisans are affected by the potential "reach" of a message

whereas non-partisans are not. Importantly, this "reach" effect among partisans manifested only when the message posed a threat to partisans (i.e., non-favorable messages), but not when the message was clearly *favorable* to their side; indeed, favorably slanted content muted defensive judgment (Gunther et al. 2012, p. 452), resulting in similar (favorable) bias evaluations in both a news article and a student's essay.[14]

Overall, these studies provide experimental evidence suggesting that in evaluating and reporting political bias, partisans also heed the potential impact of a third-party's actions/messages; if partisans feel threatened by the action/message they are more likely claim disfavorable bias and demand neutrality as part of a defensive mechanism, and in order to reduce threat or cope with it. In contrast, seeing the exact same action/message but not being threatened by it results in much less perceptions of hostile bias.

In sum, in this section we have elaborated on partisans' evaluations of political bias (Stage 2 of our theoretical framework). We have suggested that three main factors work together to affect partisans' threat from actions/messages of neutrality-bound third parties, and ultimately their bias evaluations: the slant of the action/message; the partisans' group status; and the possible impact of the action/message. Importantly, there is evidence that these factors sometimes interact when partisans evaluate political bias. Below we elaborate more on this issue, but prior to that we turn to elaborate on partisans' *reactions* to perceived political bias.

[14] We note that Gunther and his colleagues have suggested a different mechanism, incompatible with our "threat premium" account, for this "reach" effect. According to these scholars' "selective categorization" account, partisans assess the text itself differently depending on the text's reach, evaluating relatively more content as disfavorable in broad reach scenarios; i.e., partisan actually evaluate the content differently depending on its perceive reach (Schmitt et al. 2004; Gunther and Liebhart 2006). However, measurement of the selective categorization measure has, thus far, only taken place *after* respondents have already answered question(s) concerning bias in the text, making this measure highly susceptible to rationalization. Also, while partisans tend to see both a newspaper article and a student essay as similarly inaccurate (e.g., Schmitt et al. 2004), it is unlikely that such perceived similar inaccuracy would have a similar effect on partisans: inaccuracy in a newspaper article would likely pose more threat than a similar inaccuracy in a student's essay. Moreover, the finding from Gunther et al.'s (2012) paper concerning the conditional "reach" effect among partisans is also incompatible with the "selective categorization" account insofar as this account's main assertion is that partisans respond differently to a text depending on its reach, which is not the case when the message is deemed – *regardless of its reach* – as favorable. Lastly, evidence in support of the *group status* factor (see above) also contributes to our "threat premium" account.

Partisan varied reaction to favorable and disfavorable political bias

After being exposed to an action or message of neutrality-bound third parties, people in general, and partisans in particular, evaluate the action/message and reach a conclusion (Stage 3 of the theoretical framework): the message/behavior was either neutral, or was it biased against (or in favor of) either group. Yet, our theoretical framework aims at explaining more than just people's evaluations of political bias in the action/message of a third party; it also aim at explaining partisans' *reactions* to perceived political bias (Stage 4). We basically contend that as part of an intergroup conflict, where partisans aim at winning over the rival group, partisans tend to respond differently to situations where they see bias against the in-group and to situations where they see bias in favor of the in-group.

Prior research has already suggested that following what they believe is disfavorable bias, people tend to be more politically active in order to "correct" such bias (e.g., Rojas 2010). We go beyond such findings to suggest that in general, when partisans see a neutrality-bound third party's action/message as biased in favor of the in-group, they tend to consider such bias as much less objectionable and less warranting a corrective action than a bias that is against the in-group, even though political bias is generally considered as normatively wrong. This is since a favorable bias, while presumably inappropriate, is helping the partisans and their group by advancing their cause. In contrast, a disfavorable bias, which hurt partisans and the in-group, would likely be seen as more inappropriate and warranting a corrective action.

A voluminous literature in social psychology has shown that people's motivations affect their judgments (e.g., Kunda 1990), in particular judgments regarding the morality of certain actions (e.g., Ditto et al. 2009). For example, scholars have recently documented self-interest biases in moral evaluation, showing that people tend to evaluate an immoral behavior committed by another person as less immoral when they stand to gain from it than when they do not stand to gain from it (Bocian and Wojciszke 2014).

Importantly, a vast literature suggests that this pattern transpires also in a context where group vie for dominance and political triumph. Scholars have already noted that people "tend to evaluate information and make judgments in a manner that best serves the interests of groups to which they belong" (Ehrlich and Gramzow 2015, p. 1110),

with individuals who are affected by concerns for the in-group holding "attitudes and preferences that benefit the in-group" (Unzueta and Binning 2012, p. 27). Indeed, several studies showed that people sometimes exhibit hypocrisy in politically-relevant evaluations (e.g., Crawford 2012). For example, partisans evaluate elections-related unethical behaviors committed by members of the in-group as less serious and as more justified than identical behaviors committed by members of the out-group (e.g., Claassen and Ensley 2016; relatedly, see also Anduiza et al. 2013; Wagner et al. 2014; Lelkes and Westwood 2017).

More importantly, a recent paper has directly tested the suggestion that disfavorable political bias is seen as more objectionable and more deserving of a correction than favorable bias (Yair and Suliteanu-Kenan 2017). In three separate studies, the authors provide both observational and experimental evidence in support of that suggestion, with partisans being more critical of a disfavorable bias. These results strongly support our theoretical model; not only that partisans' evaluations of political bias in the actions/messages of neutrality-bound third parties are affected by their stand in an intergroup conflict, these partisans are also reacting to these biases in a manner congruent with such a stand.

Discussion

Theoretical implications

Our theoretical framework suggests that several factors are responsible for partisans' sense of threat from a third party's action/message, and subsequently their evaluations of bias in that action/message. While the perceived *slant* of that action/message is an important feature, other contextual factors are also important in determining partisans' bias evaluations. Accordingly, we suggest that these contextual factors should be taken into account when studying partisans' evaluations of political bias.

In this regard, we note that in tapping partisans' perceptions of bias, the seminal Vallone et al.'s (1985) paper which first presented a "hostile media phenomenon" did not take into consideration the specific circumstances surrounding the news stories presented to respondents. It might be, for example, that the notable discrepancies between the bias evaluations of pro-Arab and pro-Israeli students evinced in that paper

are largely because respondents were told that they would be watching news programs from *national* television (Vallone et al. 1985, p. 580) and not from local news (cf. Gunther et al. 2009, 2012). We also might have seen other results had one of the belligerent sides was the uncontested winning side at that time.

Moreover, Vallone et al.'s survey was administered to respondents while the fighting in Lebanon between the rival sides was still persisting. In situations where groups directly confront and tensioned are heightened – for example, an armed conflict or, alternatively, national elections (Michelitch 2015) – partisans are arguably much more likely to be defensive in their reactions to possibly threatening actions/messages of third parties, and much more fearful that a third party's action/message might hurt their group relative to a time where the groups do not directly confront. That said, we know of no studies that have documented such a *conflict status* effect on evaluations of bias.[15] Future research could substantiate such an effect, thereby expanding our present theoretical framework and contributing to our understanding of the factors behind partisans' evaluations of bias.

In this regard, in Stage 2 of our theoretical framework we suggest that partisans' group status affects their bias evaluations. A fertile ground for future research, however, would be to examine the effect of *changes* to the social status of the competing groups on partisans' bias evaluations. For example, it is possible that partisans from a group enjoying a high social status or clearly leading in a direct competition with the rivals will, in fact, feel threatened and will consequently be more defensive in their bias evaluations when they believe that the group starts to lose its high status and/or its safe lead over the rivals. Various studies concerning intergroup relations show that threatened with the loss of their group's high status, group members from high status groups tend to react defensively to such threats (e.g., Rudman et al. 2012; Wilkins and Kaiser 2014; Wilkins et al. 2017). Such scenarios might also manifest in partisans'

[15] Reid (2012, Study 1) provides evidence which indirectly supports such an account. He showed that manipulating people's salience of a particular identity (e.g., national or partisan identity) affects people's bias evaluations. In particular, increasing the salience of a shared identity (i.e., national identity) reduces claims of hostile bias in the media in comparison to a control group, whereas increasing the salience of a conflictual identity (i.e., partisan identity) increases claims of hostile bias in comparison to a control group. That said, in this study people were asked to evaluate bias in the media in general and not in a specific news item (pp. 387–388). More broadly, these results do not clearly attest to a *conflict status* effect. Still, it is not easy to experimentally manipulate the status of a certain ongoing conflict, and to that effect Reid's (2012) results are at the very least suggestive of a *conflict status* effect.

evaluations of political bias in the actions/messages of third parties, and future research could examine such effects.

In addition, we note that related to our theoretical framework are several panel studies which, as mentioned above, documented changes in partisans' evaluations of bias before and after an election (Duck et al. 1998; Hoffner and Rhekoff 2011). These studies show that shortly after the election, partisans' from the party which just won the election claim less bias against the in-group in the media in comparison to just prior to the election; in contrast, partisans from the party which just lost claim more bias against the in-group in comparison to just prior to the election (relatedly, see also Huge and Glynn 2010). These studies generally support our theoretical framework as these findings suggest that bias evaluations can be understood as intergroup phenomenon.

Still, we do not incorporate these studies into our theoretical framework and only regard these studies as complementary evidence to our model. First, our theoretical framework sets to explain partisans' evaluations of *specific* actions/messages of neutrality-bound third parties whereas these studies asked partisans' to evaluate media bias in general. But more importantly, our theoretical framework stresses the importance of the threat that actions/messages of neutrality-bound third parties poses to the in-group. In contrast, the results in these panel studies were probably not caused by a threat to the in-group posed by a certain action/message of third parties. Rather, they were likely caused by *the results of the elections*; following an electoral defeat the status and prestige of the in-group's are threatened, as is the partisan's self-image, and in such cases partisans are likely to claim bias in the media as a way to "explain away" their party's loss (Duck et al. 1998, p. 12; Hartmann and Tanis 2013). In contrast, if their in-group won the election partisans will likely feel "less need to be critical of the media and its potential role in the election outcome" (Duck et al. 1998, p. 12).

Another implication of this paper concerns the reality that most of the academic literature investigating people's perceptions of bias focused on perception of bias in the media. Importantly, we suggest that political bias in the media is but one type of political bias that could affect intergroup conflicts between competing groups. It seems reasonable to suggest that studies of perception of media bias should not be conducted without any references to other literatures concerning perceptions of bias. This refers both to perceptions of bias in other domains in which groups vie, such as academia

(e.g., Linvill and Havice 2011; Yair and Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2015) – and arguably also in seemingly distinct domains such as team sports (cf. Vallone et al. 1985, pp. 584–585) – but also with regard to the potential *reactions* of partisans to various types of perceived political bias. Granted, each domain might have somewhat different characteristics; for example, university professors have a certain type of authority over their students that news journalists do not have over their readers (see, e.g., Linvill and Havice 2011). Still, political bias in each of these domains can be understood as helping one political group while hurting another.

It should also be noted that our theoretical framework does not exclude the possibility that certain personality traits and dispositional factors also affect people's perceptions of bias (e.g., Linvill 2011). Personality traits have been shown to affect political attitudes and behavior (e.g., Gerber et al. 2012a, 2012b), and it might be that a combination of dispositional and situational factors affects people's perceptions of political bias (relatedly, see Yair and Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2015, p 502). Future research could determine the relative importance of dispositional and situational factors in contributing to certain perceptions of bias.

Finally, we note that several scholars have suggested that the "hostile media phenomenon" constitutes a perceptual bias (e.g., Vallone et al. 1985; Gunther and Schmitt 2004; Gunther et al. 2016). This is mostly since scholars find it unlikely (or even impossible) that partisans from both rival sides are correct in reporting that their side is being disfavored in a certain news article (e.g., Perloff 2015, p. 703) – in particular when scholars present partisans with a "balanced" article – and thus partisans' perceptions of bias are, supposedly, biased themselves. In contrast, we are hesitant to describe the "hostile media phenomenon" as a perceptual bias since we believe that partisans' evaluations of bias are not necessarily a matter of being correct or not. Rather, it is a mostly matter of partisans' incorporating a potential threat to the in-group in their bias evaluations. In that sense, the "hostile media phenomenon" constitutes bias only to the extent that we believe that such threats to the in-group should not affect bias evaluations (relatedly, see Yair 2017).

Implications for intergroup conflict and conflict resolution

The evidence presented above concerning partisans' evaluations of political bias, and reactions to perceived biases, does not inspire much optimism with regard to the possibility of conflict resolution following partisans' "interactions" with actions or messages of neutrality-bound third parties. In some cases, partisans from rival sides will both be angry at such a third party, believing that the third party was biased against their side. In such cases, not only that partisans will disagree on which side is being deprived, but partisans are also less likely to trust the pertinent neutrality-bound third party and they might feel as if everybody else – and not "only" their rivals – are against them.

Yet even when it is clear that there has been a bias against one group, we are still likely to see different reactions from each group to that bias; partisans from these rival groups are also likely to evaluate differently the seriousness of that bias as well as to diverge on how best to address it. Such discrepancies are likely to handicap intergroup cooperation in combating these perceived biases (and arguably also actual biases), which might result in elevated tensions between rival groups. And this might be especially true for rival groups whose members are from the same society or country (e.g., left and right parties in Western democracies), since the group that feels deprived might understand a lack of desire among the rival group to correct that bias as a de-facto exploitation of a public arena that is supposed to be neutral (see also Yair and Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2017). Yet, while in an optimistic scenario partisans will reach out to the other side and work together to amend potential biases of neutrality-bound third parties, when tensions are already high and animosities between the factions are deep-seated, it is somewhat hard to imagine such cooperation taking place.

Somewhat relatedly, from our theoretical framework it follows that psychological interventions or "de-biasing" attempts aimed at reducing partisans' perceptions of bias that does not take into account the threat partisans see in the actions and messages of third parties, are likely to fail. To the extent that we believe that perceptions of political bias should be reduced, scholars must come up with ways to tackle this sort of threat.[16] A *self-affirmation* intervention, thereby people affirm a

[16] Several studies claimed to have reduced partisans' perceptions of bias by using various interventions not related to such a threat to the partisan's group (Tsfati and Huino 2014; Vraga and Tully 2015). Yet, in their interventions these studies used the word "bias" to describe the hostile media phenomenon (Tsfati

valued domain of the self that is unrelated to the pertinent threat, and subsequently maintain a positive view of themselves and their group (e.g., Cohen and Sherman 2014; cf. Ehrlich and Gramzow 2015), might prove useful in reducing a threat to the partisans' in-group following exposure to certain actions/messages of third parties. That said, we are unaware of any studies which examined whether a self-affirmation intervention can reduce perceptions of bias in the actions/messages of third parties. Relatedly, Yair and Sulitzeanu-Kenan (2017) suggested that the "consider the opposite" intervention (Lord et al. 1984) could reduce differences between partisans' reactions to favorable and disfavorable biases. Future research could no doubt substantiate these suggestions.

Finally, aside from conflicts between political groups, it might be that our general theoretical framework also applies to intergroup conflicts which are not political *per se* (e.g., ethnic-based or gender-based conflicts). To the extent that the actions/messages of neutrality-bound third parties could affect the conflict between, say, Whites and African-Americans in the US or between men and women in a certain society, we might also see highly identified "partisans" assessing such actions/messages while bearing in mind the possible threat to the in-group emanating from such action/message. Also, it might also be that these groups would react differently to a bias which is unequivocally against one of the groups. For example, even if men would accept that a certain third party (or institution) was biased against women, they might still consider that bias as less serious and less warranting a corrective action than would women. These suggestions, however, await further research.

and Huino 2014) or asked respondents "to move beyond their own biases" in their evaluations of a news article (Vraga and Tully 2015, p. 445), which might increase social desirability among respondents.

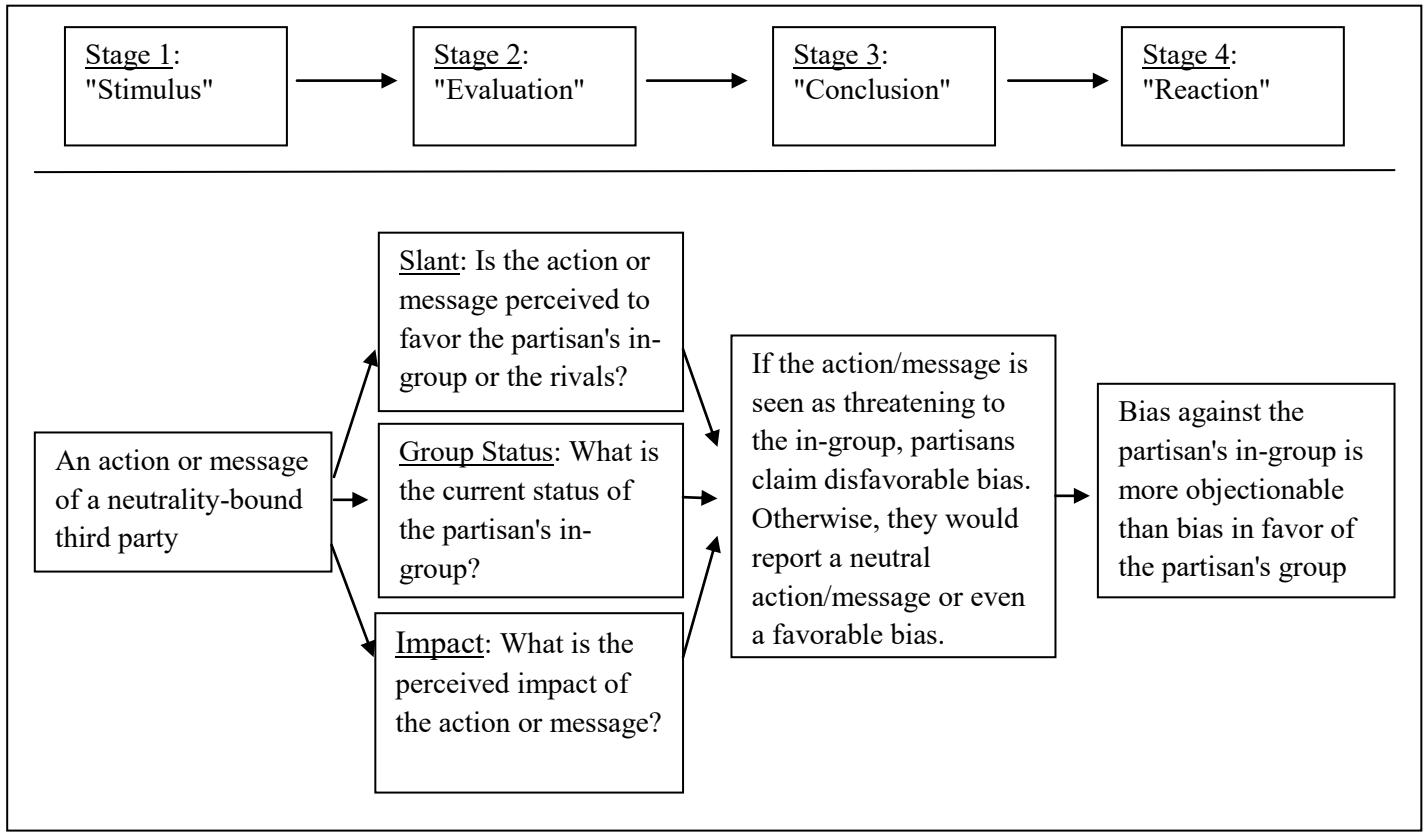

Figure 1. Scheme of Partisans' evaluation of, and reaction to political bias

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