

From Critical to Hypocritical:

Counterfactual Thinking Increases Partisan Disagreement About Media Hypocrisy

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Abstract

Partisans on both sides of the political aisle complain that the mainstream media is hypocritical, but they disagree about whom that hypocrisy benefits. In the present research, we examine how counterfactual thinking contributes to this partisan disagreement about media hypocrisy. In three studies (two pre-registered, $N = 1,342$) of people's reactions to media criticism of politicians, we find that people judged the media's criticism of politicians they support as more hypocritical when they imagined whether the media *would have* criticized a politician from a different party for the same behavior if given the chance. Because this effect only emerged when people judged the media's criticism of politicians they supported, and not politicians they opposed, counterfactual thinking increased partisan division in perceptions of media hypocrisy. We discuss implications for how counterfactual thinking facilitates motivated moral reasoning, contributes to bias in social judgment, and amplifies political polarization.

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In July, 2017, media commentators criticized then-President Donald Trump for giving his seat at the G20 summit to his unelected and politically-inexperienced daughter (Fortin, 2017; Merica, 2017). In response, Trump claimed that the media *would have* praised Hillary Clinton if *she* had been the one to let her daughter sit in at the summit (see Figure 1). Of course, the media never had the chance to praise or condemn Clinton for this action; having lost the Presidential election, Clinton never had a seat at the G20 to offer her daughter. Thus, Trump was attempting to dismiss criticism by inviting people to imagine an alternative to reality – a “counterfactual” – in which the media could have displayed a double-standard. In other words, he may have hoped that the public would condemn the media for *counterfactual hypocrisy*.

The present research examines how counterfactual thinking supports perceptions of hypocrisy. Political partisans, we propose, will perceive the media and their criticism as more hypocritical when prompted to consider whether the media *would have* displayed double-standards if given the chance – but only if the media has criticized a member of partisans’ own party. As a result, we propose that prompting counterfactual thinking can amplify partisan disagreement about media hypocrisy. In this way, stoking politically polarized moral judgments may not require drawing people’s attention to what actually occurred; it may be sufficient to encourage people to imagine what might have been.

Partisans Disagree About Media Hypocrisy

Democrats and Republicans seem to agree that the American media is hypocritical, but disagree about whom this hypocrisy benefits. Apparently, Democrats believe the media is hypocritical for criticizing President Joe Biden more harshly than President Donald Trump,

whereas Republicans believe the media is hypocritical for criticizing Trump more harshly than Biden. One reason partisans disagree about media hypocrisy may be that they disagree about facts (see Vallone et al., 1986). The present research highlights a different reason: Partisans disagree about *counterfactuals*.

Understanding partisan disagreement about media hypocrisy is important because people distrust, condemn, punish, and strive to silence those they find hypocritical (Effron & Miller, 2015; Laurent et al., 2014; Simons et al., 2015). One type of hypocrisy occurs when people criticize someone for wrongdoing despite excusing themselves or a favored group for an identical wrongdoing (Graham et al., 2015; Jordan et al., 2017; Lammers et al., 2010; Polman & Ruttan, 2012; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007). What makes the criticism hypocritical is that it appears disingenuous, motivated by a desire to benefit the self or the favored group rather than by a sincere concern for moral principles (Effron et al., 2018). Thus, people judge a critic as hypocritical when the critic displays *motivated double-standards*.

In the present research, we propose that people will judge a critic as hypocritical not only when the critic displays a motivated double-standard, but also when people imagine that the critic *would have* displayed a motivated double-standard if given the chance (*counterfactual hypocrisy*). Specifically, we predict that people will perceive the media and their criticism of a politician's behavior as more hypocritical if they reflect on how harshly the media would have criticized that politician's opponent for the same behavior.

We further predict that people will only condemn critics for counterfactual hypocrisy when the criticism targets a politician they support. As a result, reflecting on how media critics would have treated different politicians should amplify partisan disagreement about the critics' hypocrisy. Consider again the media's criticism of Donald Trump for inviting his daughter to sit

in at the G20 summit. Because people are motivated to defend ingroup leaders (e.g., Abrams et al., 2013), Trump supporters should be more likely than Clinton supporters to regard this criticism as hypocritical – even without thinking counterfactually about the how the media would have treated Clinton in the same situation. However, prompting such counterfactual thinking should increase these partisan differences – in this case by making Trump supporters, and not Clinton supporters, *even more* convinced of the critics' hypocrisy.

As the next sections explain, we test two interrelated reasons why such counterfactual thinking would amplify partisan differences in hypocrisy: Partisans may both imagine different counterfactuals (the *partisan imagination* mechanism) and differentially weight the same counterfactual in their hypocrisy judgments (the *partisan evidentiary standards* mechanism).

Partisan Imagination Mechanism

A first mechanism could be that, when prompted to think counterfactually, partisans imagine more-lenient media criticism of a politician they support than a politician they oppose. For example, when asked to consider how the media would have reacted if Clinton had let her daughter sit in for her at the G20 summit, Trump supporters – and not Clinton supporters – might imagine that the media would have criticized Clinton less harshly than Trump. In this scenario, Trump supporters would be more likely than Clinton supporters to imagine the media displaying a motivated double-standard against Trump, and thus Trump supporters would be more likely than Clinton supporters to conclude that the media's criticism of Trump was hypocritical. In this way, partisans' tendency to imagine different counterfactuals about media criticism may fuel disagreement about media hypocrisy.

This *partisan imagination* mechanism finds support in prior research. When different people imagine different counterfactuals about the same target, they form different judgments

(Kahneman et al., 1982; Mandel & Lehman, 1996; Miller et al., 1990; Roese & Olson, 1993) – and counterfactuals are easier to imagine when they fit with what we already want and believe (Effron, 2018; Tetlock et al., 2000; Tetlock & Henik, 2007). For example, experts can more easily imagine a counterfactual that implies they were “almost right” than one that implies they were “almost wrong” (Tetlock, 1998), and partisans can more easily imagine counterfactuals that reinforce, rather than weaken, their beliefs about political issues (Tetlock & Visser, 2000). People may be unwilling or unable to imagine counterfactuals that challenge their beliefs, instead generating counter-arguments about why such counterfactuals could *not* have occurred (Tetlock et al., 2000; Tetlock & Visser, 2000).

One common partisan belief is that the media is biased against one’s own political party (Baum & Gussin, 2008; Eveland & Shah, 2003; Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Gunther & Chia, 2001; Vallone et al., 1986). Thus, when prompted to think counterfactually about how harshly the media would have criticized various political figures for the same behavior, partisans should be more likely to imagine a double-standard in media criticism that favors the opposing party as opposed to their own party. And the more of a double-standard they imagine the media would have displayed, the easier it will be to dismiss the media as hypocritical. Thus, prompting this sort of counterfactual thinking should increase partisan disagreement about media hypocrisy.

Partisan Evidentiary Standards Mechanism

A second mechanism could be that people are more likely to treat imagined double-standards as evidence of hypocrisy when the criticism targets a politician they support. Whereas the first mechanism proposes that partisans imagine different counterfactuals, this second mechanism proposes that partisans draw different conclusions from whatever counterfactual they do imagine. For example, even if Trump and Clinton supporters agreed that “the media would

have excused Clinton if had she behaved like Trump at the G20,” Trump supporters might be more likely to view this counterfactual as evidence that the media’s criticism of Trump was hypocritical. In this *partisan evidentiary standards* mechanism, the same counterfactual receives more weight in people’s hypocrisy judgments if it defends a politician they support against criticism.

Consistent with this mechanism, classic research on motivated reasoning shows that people are less skeptical of information that supports desired versus undesired conclusions (Dawson et al., 2002; Ditto et al., 1998, 2003; Gilovich, 2008; Lord et al., 1979). For example, people given a favorable medical diagnosis were less likely to question the validity of their results than those given an unfavorable diagnosis (Ditto & Lopez, 1992). In the political domain, people update their beliefs more when information is consistent, rather than inconsistent, with their desired political party winning an election (Tappin et al., 2017). Most relevant to the present study, people hold more stringent moral standards for those who oppose, versus share, their political convictions (Claassen & Ensley, 2016; Mueller & Skitka, 2018) and are more likely to interpret ambiguous *factual* behavior as evidence of hypocrisy when it allows them to condemn a political outgroup member (Barden et al., 2014).

Extending these ideas, we propose that people may be less skeptical of *counterfactual* evidence of hypocrisy when it allows them to reach partisan conclusions. The same imagined double-standard will seem like better evidence of hypocrisy when it allows people to condemn the media for criticizing a political ingroup member. In this way, we propose, political partisanship not only shapes the counterfactuals that people find plausible (Effron, 2018; Tetlock, 1998); partisanship also influences the weight that people give to these counterfactuals when making subsequent judgments.

Summary of Mechanisms

The two proposed mechanisms are potentially complementary. Even without counterfactual thinking, partisans may find criticism more hypocritical when it targets the behavior of a politician from their own party versus a politician from the other party (Figure 2's top panel). But this partisan difference should be larger when people think counterfactually about how harshly the media would have criticized the targeted politician's opponent for the same behavior because the two mechanisms can now operate (Figure 2's bottom panel). In statistical terms, support for the target of criticism is both an independent variable driving what counterfactuals people imagine (the partisan imagination mechanism illustrated as the "a-path" in Figure 2) and a moderator influencing how much weight people give the counterfactual in their hypocrisy judgment (the partisan evidentiary standards mechanism illustrated as moderating the "b-path" in Figure 2; see Preacher & Hayes, 2008, Model 1).

The Present Research

Three studies ($N = 1,342$) tested our hypotheses. Trump and Obama supporters evaluated media criticism of controversial actions taken by Trump and Obama. Study 1's results showed that people rated media critics of the president they supported as more hypocritical when we asked them to imagine how harshly the media *would have* criticized the other president *if* he had taken the same action. Study 2a and 2b replicated this effect, and also showed it did *not* occur when participants judged criticism of the president they *opposed*. Thus, counterfactual thinking amplified partisan disagreement about media hypocrisy. Studies 2a and 2b also found support for the partisan imagination and partisan evidentiary standards mechanisms. Moreover, Study 2b confirmed that hypocrisy judgments were influenced by counterfactual thoughts about motivated double-standards in particular, rather than by counterfactual thinking in general. Each study also

found evidence of potential downstream consequences of perceiving counterfactual hypocrisy: judging the criticized president as less deserving of criticism, and viewing the media critic as less credible, less entitled to criticize, and more dishonest, corrupt, and disgusting (epithets that Donald Trump has called the media).

Open Practices

We report all measures, conditions, and exclusions, determined sample sizes in advance of data collection, and preregistered Studies 1 and 3. (We did not pre-register Study 2 because we ran it first). Preregistrations and verbatim materials are available on OSF:

<https://osf.io/2ueht/>. Our Research Ethics Committee withheld permission to post data online, but the corresponding author will share data upon request.

Study 1

Method

Study 1's design had 2-cells (counterfactual-motivated-double-standards vs. control: between-participants) with six repeated measures.¹

Participants

We aimed to recruit 600 Americans who supported Donald Trump or Barack Obama. We removed 51 participants per our pre-registration plan (duplicate or non-US IP addresses, duplicate geo-locations, or duplicate MTurk participant IDs), resulting in a final sample of 567 participants (see Table 1 for sample characteristics).

Statistical Power

¹ We also varied whether the criticism participants read was about the target's *competence* or *morality*. This manipulation did not significantly interact with the counterfactual manipulation, so we report the results in the Online Supplement.

A sensitivity analysis using the PANGEA app (see Westfall, 2016) found that our repeated-measures designs provided 80% power at two-tailed $\alpha = .05$ to detect small effects ($d = 0.11$) of the counterfactual manipulation.

Materials

The stimuli were brief descriptions of actions for which the media had criticized Donald Trump or Barack Obama (i.e., *factual criticisms*). For example, participants read that “President Donald Trump recently played golf during the funerals of the victims of the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting. Some commentators criticized him for this action” (for all factual criticisms, see Online Supplement).

Procedure and Manipulation

Before starting the study, participants identified themselves as more of a Trump supporter, more of an Obama supporter, or neither of the above. We used participants’ responses to this question to show them criticism of the politician they supported (e.g., Trump supporters read criticisms of Trump). We prevented people from beginning the study if they said they supported neither politician.

Participants read one of the factual criticisms of the politician they supported. After reading the criticism, participants randomly assigned to the *counterfactual-motivated-double-standard* condition considered how much media commentators *would have* criticized the other president *if* that president had committed the same action. For example, after reading the criticism of Trump’s golfing, participants read:

Suppose Barack Obama had been the one to play golf during funerals for school shooting victims during his presidency. How much would these same commentators have criticized him for this action?

Participants in the counterfactual condition then responded to the imagined double-standard measure (see Measures). Participants randomly assigned to the control condition did not reflect on or rate a counterfactual. After the manipulation, participants completed the measures described below. Participants repeated the entire procedure for the remaining factual criticisms in randomized orders, and finally, reported their age and gender.

Measures

Imagined Double-Standard. Participants rated how much they imagined the media would have criticized the opposing politician on a 7-point scale from -3 = *Much less than Trump [Obama]* to 3 = *Much more than Trump [Obama]*. Before running our analyses, we reverse coded this measure so that higher values indicate greater imagined double-standards (i.e., -3 = *Much more than Trump [Obama]* to 3 = *Much less than Trump [Obama]*). We used this measure to increase engagement with the counterfactual manipulation and to verify that people imagined that the media would have shown a double-standard against their supported politician if given the chance.

Dependent Variable: Perceptions of Hypocrisy. Participants rated how much they agreed the media commentator was a hypocrite, two-faced, phony, genuine (reverse-coded), and insincere (-3 = *Strongly disagree* to 3 = *Strongly agree*; 5-item scale; α s > .88 for each criticism; Effron et al., 2015).

Potential Downstream Consequences of Hypocrisy. Participants rated each critic's right or *standing* to criticize (i.e., how appropriate and legitimate the criticism was, and entitled the critic was to express this view; 1 = *Not at all*; 5 = *Extremely*; α s > .70; Effron & Miller, 2015), and how much they thought the president deserved the factual criticisms (e.g., how much Trump deserved to be criticized for golfing; 1 = *Not at all*; 5 = *Extremely*).

Results

Hypocrisy

As predicted, participants perceived media critics of the president they supported to be more hypocritical when they considered how harshly the media would have criticized a president from a different political party for the same action ($M = 0.53$, $SD = 1.04$) than when they did not consider such a counterfactual ($M = 0.30$, $SD = 1.11$), $d = 0.21$, $z = 2.60$ $p = .009$. These results are from a mixed regression model predicting hypocrisy from fixed effects for condition (1 = counterfactual-motivated-double-standard condition, 0 = control), fixed effects for items², and random intercepts for participants.

Imagined Double-Standard

Consistent with our theorizing, partisans imagined that the media would have shown a double-standard against their supported politician, if given the chance. On average, participants in the *counterfactual-motivated-double-standard* condition imagined that the media would have criticized a different politician “somewhat less” than their supported politician ($M = 1.54$, $SD = 1.58$), a value significantly above the scale midpoint of equal criticism to both politicians (0), $t(1704) = 40.19$, $p < .001$, in a one sample t test.

Downstream Consequences

When participants considered media criticism of a politician they supported, imagining whether the media would have criticized a politician from a different party for the same action made participants perceive the media’s criticism as more hypocritical – and the more hypocrisy participants perceived, the less of a right they thought the critic had to criticize, $b = -0.08$, 95% CI [-0.14, -0.02], and the less they thought the politician deserved the criticism, $b = -0.08$, 95% CI

² Given the relatively small number of items in each study ($k < 8$), we pre-registered fixed effects for item. Modelling random intercepts for item yields the same result.

[-0.13, -0.02] (see Figure 3). We conducted this analysis as a generalized structural equation model with random effects for participants to account for the data's multilevel structure, computing the indirect effect by multiplying the *a*- and *b*-paths together. The manipulation had no significant total effects on these downstream consequences (see Online Supplement), suggesting that perhaps our measures of the downstream consequences were not particularly sensitive (Rucker et al., 2011).

Studies 2a and 2b

Study 1 provides evidence that people rate media critics of a politician they support as more hypocritical when they imagine how harshly the media *would have* criticized a politician from a different political party *if* he had taken the same action. In Study 2a and 2b, we test whether this effect only occurs when the media criticizes a politician people support, rather than oppose. If this *counterfactual hypocrisy* effect only occurs for supported politicians, then counterfactual thinking may exacerbate partisan disagreement about media hypocrisy.

Studies 2a and 2b also tested *why* counterfactual thinking might exacerbate partisan disagreement about hypocrisy (see Figure 2). Specifically, we tested whether partisanship was associated with imagining *different* counterfactuals when prompted (i.e., partisan imagination mechanism), and also associated with giving the *same* counterfactual different weights when judging hypocrisy (i.e., partisan evidentiary standards mechanism).

Studies 2a and 2b followed similar procedures with different control conditions. In Study 2a, as in Study 1, control participants were not prompted to imagine any counterfactual. In Study 2b, participants imagined a counterfactual, but *not* one that reflected a motivated double-standard. Specifically, participants rated how much the relevant president's vice president would have been criticized if he had committed the same action – for example, how much Mike Pence

would have been criticized for the same action as Trump. Like the experimental condition, this control condition requires counterfactual thinking about whether different politicians would be held to different moral standards. However, these different standards should not seem hypocritical because they would not be motivated by a desire to benefit a favored political group (Effron et al., 2018). Thus, Study 2b tests whether counterfactual thoughts about motivated double-standards makes criticism seem hypocritical over and above counterfactual thinking in general.

Method

Study 2a and 2b had a mixed 2 (condition: counterfactual-motivated-double-standards vs. control) by 2 (target of criticism: supported vs. opposed president; within-participants) factorial design with 12 repeated measures in Study 2a and 10 in Study 2b.³

Participants

We aimed to recruit 400 (Study 2a) and 600 (Study 2b) Americans who supported either Donald Trump or Barack Obama. We removed 37 participants (Study 2a) and 13 participants (Study 2b) with non-US IP addresses or duplicate participant IDs, resulting in a final sample of 302 and 473 participants, respectively (see Table 1 for sample characteristics). We pre-registered these exclusions in Study 2b. Study 2a was not pre-registered, so we report results in the Online Supplement showing that the conclusions were the same without participant exclusions. We excluded participants who supported neither politician from analyses involving participants' support for the criticized politician. The sample of participants who supported neither politician was too small to draw meaningful conclusions, but we report analyses of these participants in the Online Supplement.

³ Study 2b included fewer repeated measures than Study 2a to reduce participant fatigue given that Study 2b included additional dependent measures (see Potential Downstream Consequences of Hypocrisy section).

Statistical Power

A sensitivity analysis using the PANGEA app (see Westfall, 2016) found that our repeated-measures designs provided 80% power at two-tailed $\alpha = .05$ to detect small effects of the counterfactual manipulation when participants supported the criticized president: $d = 0.22$ and 0.18 in Studies 2a and 2b, respectively.

Materials

As in Study 1, the stimuli were brief descriptions of actions for which the media had criticized Donald Trump or Barack Obama (i.e., *factual criticisms*). Each study used slightly different criticisms (see Online Supplement).

Procedure and Manipulation

The procedure was similar to Study 1. Participants first read one of the factual criticisms. Then, participants randomly assigned to the *counterfactual-motivated-double-standard* condition reflected on and rated how much media commentators *would have* criticized the other president *if* that president had committed the same action (see Measures). In Study 2a, participants in the control condition did not reflect on or rate a counterfactual. In Study 2b, control participants reflected on and rated how much the relevant president's *vice president* would have been criticized if he had committed the same action (i.e., Donald Trump—Mike Pence, Barack Obama—Joe Biden). Then, participants responded to the dependent measures (see Measures).

Participants repeated the entire procedure for the remaining factual criticism in randomized order. Criticisms of Trump and Obama were mixed together in the randomized presentation order. Finally, participants reported their age, gender, and which of the two politicians they supported (see Support for the Target of Criticism, below).

Measures

Partisanship: Support for the Target of Criticism. At the end of the study, participants identified themselves as more of a Trump or Obama supporter or neither with the same measure as Study 1.⁴ We used participants' responses to this measure to code their support for the target of criticism. If the stimulus was a criticism of the president participants indicated they supported, we coded the target of criticism as a *supported politician*. If the stimulus was a criticism of the president from the opposing party as the politician participants indicated they supported, we coded the target of criticism as an *opposed politician*. If participants indicated that they supported neither Trump nor Obama, we could not code their support for the target of criticism and thus excluded them from analyses that included partisanship.

Imagined Double-Standard. Participants in the counterfactual condition rated how much they imagined the media would have criticized the politician from the opposing party on a 7-point scale from -3 = *Much less than Trump [Obama]* to 3 = *Much more than Trump [Obama]*. Before running our analyses, we reverse coded this measure so that higher values reflect greater imagined double-standards against the criticized politician (i.e., -3 = *Much more than Trump [Obama]* to 3 = *Much less than Trump [Obama]*). We examine this measure as a potential mediator of partisanship on hypocrisy to test the *partisan imagination mechanism*, and we examine the relationship between this measure and the hypocrisy measure to test the *partisan evidentiary standards mechanism* (see Figure 2).

Dependent Variable: Perceptions of Hypocrisy. To reduce study length we used a single-item measure of how hypocritical participants found the criticism (1 = *Not at all* to 5 = *Extremely*; Effron & Monin, 2010).

⁴ We also included two exploratory measures of participants' approval of each president (see Online Supplement).

Potential Downstream Consequences of Hypocrisy. Participants rated the media commentator's *standing* to criticize and how much they thought the president deserved the factual criticisms on the same measures as Study 1. In Study 2b, participants also rated the criticism's *credibility* by indicating how credible, objective, and trustworthy they found the criticism (1 = *Not at all* to 5 = *Extremely*; $\alpha s > .91$ for each criticism) and whether each of three *epithets* described the media commentator: dishonest, corrupt, and disgusting (-3 = *Strongly disagree* to 3 = *Strongly agree*; $\alpha s > .92$ for each criticism). We chose these three epithets because Donald Trump frequently used them to describe media that was critical of him.

Results

Analytic Strategy

We submitted each measure to a mixed regression model with fixed effects for items, random intercepts for participants, fixed effects for condition (1 = counterfactual-motivated-double-standard condition, 0 = control), fixed effects for the target of criticism (1 = supported politician, 0 = opposed politician), and the interaction between condition and target of the criticism. We then examined the simple slope of condition when the target of the criticism was a supported politician to test our hypothesis that considering counterfactual hypocrisy would make media criticism of a supported politician seem more hypocritical.

Hypocrisy

Study 2a and 2b replicated the findings from Study 1. Participants perceived media critics of the president they *supported* to be more hypocritical when they considered how harshly the media would have criticized a president from a different political party for the same action, $d = 0.37, p < .001$ in Study 2a, and $d = 0.22, p = .004$ in Study 2b (see Table 2).

As predicted, this effect was significantly smaller when the media criticized the president they *opposed*, $b = 0.34$, $z = 4.54$, $p < .002$ and $b = 0.20$, $z = 3.53$, $p < .001$ for the interaction between condition and target of the criticism in Study 2a and 2b, respectively (see Figure 4 and Table 3). In fact, the counterfactual manipulation had no significant effect on hypocrisy judgments when the criticism targeted politicians whom a participant opposed, $d = 0.06$, $p = .447$, and $d = 0.05$, $p = .704$, for the simple effect of condition in Study 2a and 2b, respectively (see Table 2).

Decomposing the interaction differently reveals that, as theorized, the counterfactual-moral-double-standards condition increased the partisan divide in perceptions of media hypocrisy. Even in the control condition, participants thought media criticism was more hypocritical when it targeted a politician they supported than when it targeted a politician that they opposed, $d_z = 0.32$, $z = 6.87$, $p < .001$ in Study 2a, and $d_z = 0.73$, $z = 13.77$, $p < .001$ in Study 2b. However, this partisan difference was significantly larger in the counterfactual condition, $d_z = 0.61$, $z = 13.07$, $p < .001$ in Study 2a, and $d_z = 0.86$, $z = 18.45$, $p < .001$ in Study 2b (see Figure 4).

Mechanisms of Partisan Disagreement

Why did the counterfactual manipulation amplify partisan disagreement about the critics' hypocrisy? We found support for the two potential mechanisms discussed earlier: When prompted to think counterfactually about media critics, partisans (a) imagine different counterfactuals, and (b) give different weight to the counterfactual they imagine, depending on whether they support or oppose the politician targeted by the critics. More specifically, if the criticism targets a supported (vs. opposed) politician, people are more likely to (a) imagine the critic would have displayed a motivated double-standard if given the chance (i.e., the partisan-

imagination mechanism), and (b) more likely to treat this double-standard as evidence of hypocrisy (i.e., the partisan evidentiary standards mechanism).

To assess these mechanisms, we tested the statistical model shown in Figure 2's bottom panel (i.e., Model 74 in Hayes, 2017; Model 1 in Hayes & Preacher, 2008; for examples of such models, see Harold & Holtz, 2015; Kim & Kochanska, 2017; Zitek & Vincent, 2015) by computing the following two regression equations using the *gsem* command in Stata:

1. $\text{imagined double-standard} = b_0 + b_1 * \text{target of criticism}$
2. $\text{hypocrisy} = b_2 + b_3 * \text{target of criticism} + b_4 * \text{imagined double-standard} + b_5 * \text{target of criticism} * \text{imagined double-standard}$

To account for the multilevel design, the equations also included fixed effects for item and random intercepts for participants (opposed target-of-criticism coded $-.5$; supported target-of-criticism coded $.5$). We limited the analysis to participants in the counterfactual-motivated-double-standards condition, because the control condition did not ask people to imagine or rate a double-standard against their own political party. Tables 4 and 5 show the results, and Figure 5 illustrates all paths in the model. The next sections highlight the specific results from this analysis that speak to each mechanism.

Partisan Imagination Mechanism. Supporting the partisan imagination mechanism, participants were more likely to imagine the critic displaying a motivated double-standard when participants supported the criticized politician (Study 2a: $M = 0.97$, $SD = 1.63$, Study 2b: $M = 1.16$, $SD = 1.48$) than when they opposed the criticized politician (Study 2a: $M = -1.29$, $SD = 1.52$, Study 2b: $M = -0.72$, $SD = 1.35$), as shown by significant b_1 coefficients in Equation 1, $b = 2.34$, $z = 29.71$, $p < .001$ in Study 2a, and $b = 2.15$, $z = 28.74$, $p < .001$ in Study 2b (see *a* path in Figure 5). In further support, we observed a significant indirect effect from whether participants supported or opposed the criticized politician, to how much of a double standard they imagined,

to hypocrisy perceptions, $b = 0.32$, 95% CI of b [0.25, 0.40] in Study 2a and $b = 0.32$, 95% CI of b [0.26, 0.38] in Study 2b, computed by multiplying the b_1 in equation 1 and b_4 in equation 2 using Stata's *ncom* command. Thus, partisans' tendency to imagine different counterfactuals when prompted may have fueled their disagreement about the media critics' hypocrisy.

Partisan Evidentiary Standards Mechanism. Supporting the *partisan evidentiary standards* mechanism, the double-standards that participants imagined were a better predictor of their hypocrisy judgments when the media had criticized a politician whom participants supported (vs. opposed), as shown by significant interaction term b_5 in equation 2, $b = 0.21$, $z = 5.57$, $p < .001$ in Study 2a, and $b = 0.26$, $z = 9.07$, $p < .001$ in Study 2b (illustrated as a moderation effect on the b path in Figure 5).

Figure 6 plots the simple slopes for this interaction. When the media criticized the president participants supported, participants who imagined more of a motivated double-standard judged the critic as more hypocritical, $b_s = 0.25$ and 0.26 in Studies 2a and 2b, respectively, $z_s > 10$, $p_s < .001$ (see the black lines in Figure 6). In contrast, when the media criticized the president participants opposed, there was not a statistically significant relationship between imagined double standards and hypocrisy judgments, $b = 0.04$, $z = 1.67$, $p = .095$ and $b = -0.001$, $z = -0.04$, $p = .968$ for Studies 2a and 2b respectively (see the gray lines in Figure 6). This finding is consistent with the idea that imagined double-standards received more weight in people's hypocrisy judgments when the media criticized a politician they supported.

Downstream Consequences

When participants considered media criticism of a politician they supported, imagining whether the media would have criticized a politician from a different party for the same action made participants perceive the media's criticism as more hypocritical – and the more hypocrisy

participants perceived, the less of a right they thought the critic had to criticize, the less they perceived the criticism as credible, the more they endorsed epithets about the critic (dishonest, corrupt, and disgusting), and the less they thought the politician deserved the criticism (see Table 6). These indirect effects were significantly weaker and not statistically significant when the criticism targeted a politician whom participants opposed. The manipulation had no significant total effects on these downstream consequences (see Online Supplement), suggesting that perhaps our measures of the downstream consequences were not particularly sensitive (Rucker et al., 2011).

General Discussion

Three studies showed that people will condemn others for counterfactual hypocrisy. Participants judged the media and their criticism of politicians as more hypocritical when prompted to imagine whether the media *would have* criticized a politician from a different political party for the same action. This effect only emerged when participants considered criticism of a politician they supported, and not criticism of a politician they opposed, thereby amplifying partisan disagreement about media hypocrisy. At least when people consider media criticism of political leaders, simply encouraging reflection on a scenario that “might have been” is sufficient to increase the political polarization of moral judgments.

Our data were consistent with two reasons why counterfactual thinking may amplify disagreement about hypocrisy (see Figure 2). First, partisans imagined different counterfactuals (*partisan imagination* mechanism). Specifically, when prompted to consider how much the media would have criticized another politician for the same action, participants were more likely to *imagine that the media would have displayed a double-standard* against a politician they support than a politician they oppose. Second, people were more likely to *treat imagined double-*

standards as evidence of hypocrisy when the criticism targets a politician they support (*partisan evidentiary standards* mechanism). If the media criticizes a politician we oppose, we may require actual evidence of double-standards to conclude the media is hypocritical. If the media criticizes a politician we support, imagined evidence may suffice.

Together, these results suggest that partisans may reach different conclusions about who is a hypocrite not only because they disagree on facts, but also because they disagree about counterfactuals.

Theoretical Contributions

Our findings shed light on the role of counterfactual thinking in moral judgment. Past research shows how counterfactual thinking helps people to make inferences about blame, shame, and guilt (Gaspar et al., 2015; Mandel & Dhami, 2005; Miller et al., 2005; Niedenthal et al., 1995), to regulate their emotions, and to set and pursue goals (Byrne, 2016; Roeser & Epstude, 2017). By contrast, we contribute to a growing appreciation that counterfactual thinking also facilitates motivated moral reasoning (Briazu et al., 2017; Effron, 2018; Shalvi et al., 2011). Prior work shows that, to make themselves feel more virtuous, people imagine how their past behavior “could have been worse” (Effron et al., 2012, 2013); the present work shows that, to make a critic appear *less* virtuous, people rely on imagined evidence of how the critic “would have been hypocritical if given the chance.” In doing so, we demonstrate that motivated moral reasoning need not involve strategically applying moral principles (Bartels et al., 2015; Uhlmann et al., 2009) or selectively remembering facts (Carlson et al., 2020; Kouchaki & Gino, 2016; Reczek et al., 2018). To reach preferred conclusions about whom to condemn for hypocrisy, people can simply rely on their imaginations.

Our findings also shed light on *how* counterfactual thinking can provide a degree of freedom for motivated reasoning. First, people imagine counterfactuals that fit with what they want and believe. In our studies, partisans were more likely to imagine that the media would have shown a moral double-standard when the media criticized a politician they support than when the media criticized a politician they oppose (*partisan imagination* mechanism). Second, people place greater weight on counterfactual evidence when it helps them reach motivated conclusions. We find that partisans were more likely to treat imagined double-standards as evidence of hypocrisy when the media criticized a politician they support (*partisan evidentiary standards* mechanism). In doing so, our findings reveal how ingroup biases can affect judgments of third parties beyond the ingroup or outgroup (i.e., media commentators) and provide insights into the psychological mechanisms contributing to these biases. Whereas past research shows that people hold different moral standards for their political ingroup and outgroup (Abrams et al., 2013; Barden et al., 2014; Mueller & Skitka, 2018), we reveal that people hold different moral standards for critics of their political ingroup and outgroup – a tendency which counterfactual thinking exacerbates.

In this sense, partisans may reveal their own hypocrisy when judging the hypocrisy of others. Overall, partisans were more likely to interpret a criticism as hypocritical when it targeted a leader they supported (vs. opposed) – an apparent double-standard in judgments of hypocrisy. Moreover, when the criticism targeted a leader they supported (vs. opposed), partisans were more likely to imagine that the critic *would have* displayed double standards if given the chance, and to give this imagined double-standard more weight in their hypocrisy judgments. In other words, participants themselves displayed double-standards when imagining counterfactuals about others' double-standards. Ironically, then, partisans may be guilty of “meta-hypocrisy:”

Through the processes we have identified, people may be more likely to identify hypocrisy in those that threaten versus advance the interests of their ingroup (see also Barden et al., 2014).

Our findings also have implications beyond partisan cognition, to the psychological processes that bias social judgment. Classic research suggests that people seek out, attend to, encode, and remember evidence that strengthens their pre-existing beliefs about others (e.g., Bodenhausen, 1988; Darley & Gross, 1983; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Rothbart et al., 1979; Snyder & Swann, 1978; Word et al., 1974). Our findings suggest that people may also *imagine* counterfactual evidence that strengthens their pre-existing beliefs about others. When people are prompted to think counterfactually, they imagine counterfactuals that reinforce their social judgments. This finding raises the possibility, which future research should test, that counterfactual thinking may contribute to bias in judgments based on social identities and group membership outside the realm of politics.

Practical Implications

Our results have implications for scholars across diverse disciplines interested in partisan disagreement and media distrust. First, our studies shed light on how people use accusations of hypocrisy as a cudgel against their political critics. Accusing critics of hypocrisy can be an appealing strategy because it diverts attention from the substance of the criticism to the character of the critic. Our findings suggest that partisans can dismiss criticism of a supported politician as hypocritical based not only on factual—but also on counterfactual—evidence of media double-standards. Partisans' tendency to perceive hypocrisy based on imagined evidence may help to explain why complaints of media hypocrisy seem to outnumber situations in which different politicians actually do receive different media treatment for exactly the same behavior.

Second, our findings show that political leaders can stoke media distrust when they prompt their followers to imagine that the media *would have* criticized an opposing politician less for the same action. Through increased perceptions of hypocrisy, counterfactual thinking also indirectly led our participants to judge media critics as less credible, less entitled to criticize, and more dishonest, corrupt, and disgusting (epithets used by Donald Trump to discredit the media). On the one hand, distrust and hatred of the mainstream media may undermine the media's ability to hold powerful people accountable for wrongdoing and may drive citizens to alternative news sources that spread misinformation (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Fletcher & Park, 2017). Consistent with this possibility, people who distrust the mainstream news media are more likely to hold misperceptions about COVID-19 (Pennycook et al., 2021). Thus, when political leaders defend themselves from criticism by prompting their supporters to imagine the media *would have* shown a double standard if given the chance, they may contribute to rising levels of misinformation and media distrust (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2021) and undermine an important pillar of democracy.

On the other hand, counterfactual hypocrisy may facilitate healthy skepticism about media bias. Rarely does reality provide perfect comparisons between the actions of two politicians that would allow one to conclude that the media has double-standards (e.g., Trump and Obama may never have acted in the same way under the exact same circumstances). Our capacity to infer hypocrisy from counterfactual evidence may help us identify real patterns of unfairness in media coverage by comparing reality to an imaginary but comparable alternative. The problem that we identify in our research is that these imaginary but comparable alternatives are subject to motivated reasoning, favoring biased conclusions over healthy skepticism.

Third, our findings shed light on the psychology of partisan disagreement and animosity, which threaten modern democracies (McCoy et al., 2018; Somer & McCoy, 2018) and thus have captured the attention of political psychologists and political scientists (e.g., Bail et al., 2018; Iyengar et al., 2019; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Kahan et al., 2017; Leeper & Slothuus, 2014; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016; Marks et al., 2019; McConnell et al., 2018; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016; Taber & Lodge, 2006, 2016). Partisanship shapes how people attend to, perceive, and remember basic facts (Castelli & Carraro, 2011; Frenda et al., 2013; Hennessey et al., 2021; Kteily et al., 2016; Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018; Waldfogel et al., 2021). For example, people with different political ideologies perceive different levels of inequality in photographs and cognitive tasks (Waldfogel et al., 2021), perceive different levels of violence in political protests (Hennessey et al., 2021), and show divergent neural responses to media coverage of political issues (Leong et al., 2020). The present research reveals that even when partisans see the same facts, they interpret these facts based on different counterfactuals. When viewing the same media criticism of political leaders, partisans disagreed on how much they imagined the media would have criticized an opposing politician for the same action and they perceived different levels of media criticism based on the counterfactual events they imagined. Our findings thus suggest that encouraging partisans to agree on basic facts, although important, may be insufficient to resolve partisan disagreement.

Limitations and Future Directions

This research has several limitations that provide opportunities for future research. First, our studies focused on how counterfactual thinking affects judgments of media hypocrisy in the context of American partisans judging criticism of Donald Trump and Barack Obama. Consistent with the finding that conservatives and liberals both show politically motivated reasoning (Ditto

et al., 2019; Guay & Johnston, 2021), we found no evidence that either Democrats or Republicans were more inclined than the other party to condemn critics for counterfactual hypocrisy (see Online Supplement). However, future research should examine how these effects generalize to criticisms of other politicians (e.g., Chuck Schumer, Mitch McConnell), as well as to populations in different political eras (e.g., the Biden presidency) and geographies (e.g., the U.K., Germany). Robust cross-national evidence that partisans believe the media is biased against them suggests that our findings may generalize beyond the American context (Feldman, 2014).

Second, future research should also delve deeper into why counterfactual thinking can increase perceptions of hypocrisy. One possibility is that the act of imagining a counterfactual event makes it seem more plausible (e.g., Carroll, 1978). Another possibility is that imagining counterfactual hypocrisy increases the accessibility of memories in which the media acted hypocritically. For example, imagining how much the media would have criticized Obama for taking vacation might bring to mind real instances in which Obama went on vacation and the media did not criticize him for it. In either case, leaders can stoke outrage against the media by prompting their followers to think counterfactually.

Third, although our findings are consistent with motivated reasoning, motivated reasoning is notoriously difficult to differentiate from Bayesian updating (Tetlock & Levi, 1982), especially when studying partisan cognition (Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Kahan, 2016; Little, 2022; Tappin et al., 2020a, 2020b). For example, partisans may disregard evidence that conflicts with their political beliefs not only because they are motivated to do so, but also because this evidence seems less trustworthy. Future research is thus needed to clarify exactly how much motivation and/or Bayesian thinking shape partisan differences in counterfactual thinking.

Fourth, the results of our mediation analyses were consistent with our two proposed mechanisms. However, as in any measurement-of-mediation design, other unmeasured mediators could have played a role in these effects (Bullock et al., 2010). Thus, future research should examine additional mechanisms. One possibility is that partisans have more evidence in memory of the media acting hypocritically against a politician they support (versus oppose); therefore, imagining counterfactual hypocrisy brings to mind more real memories of media hypocrisy when the media criticizes a supported (versus opposed) politician.

Fifth, our research focused on how prompting people to consider certain counterfactual scenarios affected their hypocrisy judgments. The research was inspired by real-world examples of leaders prompting their followers to imagine exactly this type of scenario (e.g., Figure 1), but it does not address whether and when partisans generate these counterfactuals without prompting. Future research should examine whether, for example, partisans are more likely to spontaneously imagine examples of counterfactual hypocrisy when motivated to defend a preferred leader against criticism.

Conclusion

Partisans on both side of the aisle complain that the media is hypocritical, but they disagree about whom that hypocrisy benefits. Whereas past research shows that this disagreement stems from partisans perceiving different facts, the present research suggests that this disagreement also stems from partisans imagining different counterfactuals. In this way, the counterfactual world provides a degree of freedom that can help people reach partisan conclusions. When partisans can imagine the media would have shown a motivated double standard, they may judge the media as not just critical, but hypocritical.

Open Practices

The experiments in this article earned Open Materials and Preregistered badges for open science practices. Materials and preregistrations are available at <https://osf.io/2ueht/>. Our Research Ethics Committee withheld permission to post data online, but the corresponding author will share data upon request.

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Table 1*Participant Characteristics*

	Study 1	Study 2a	Study 2b
Sample (<i>N</i>)	567	302	473
Men	211	155	239
Women	352	145	223
Other	2	1	1
Age			
<i>M</i>	36	39	34
<i>SD</i>	13	12	12
Political affiliation			
“More of an Obama supporter”	404	123	362
“More of a Trump supporter”	163	179	103
“Neither”	-	71	133
Excluded following <i>a priori</i> criteria	51	37	13
Data collection date	Nov 2018	Jul 2018	Sept 2018
Sample source	MTurk	MTurk	Prolific Academic

Note. See Online Supplement for details of participant exclusions. No participants identified as “Neither” in Study 1 because in this study we recruited Democrats and Republicans and prevented people from beginning the study if they said they supported neither politician.

Table 2*Regression Results Predicting Perceived Hypocrisy by Condition*

Target of criticism	Counterfactual-motivated-double-standard condition		Control condition		<i>d</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Study 2a							
Supported politician	3.02	1.12	2.61	1.11	0.37	3.69	< .001
Opposed politician	2.29	1.17	2.22	1.08	0.06	0.76	.447
Study 2b							
Supported politician	2.58	1.06	2.35	1.02	0.22	2.89	.004
Opposed politician	1.68	0.81	1.64	0.89	0.05	0.38	.704

Note. Hypocrisy was measured on a 1 to 5 scale. Values are simple slopes of the effect of condition when the target of criticism was a supported or opposed politician in mixed models with fixed effects for condition (1 = counterfactual-motivated-double-standard, 0 = control), target of criticism (1 = supported politician, 0 = opposed politician), and the interaction between condition and target of the criticism, plus fixed effects for items and random intercepts for participants.

Table 3*Regression Results Predicting Perceived Hypocrisy by Condition and Target of Criticism in**Studies 2a and 2b*

	Main-Effects Model	Interaction Model
Study 2a		
Condition	0.24* (0.11)	0.07 (0.11)
Target of criticism	0.53*** (0.04)	0.36*** (0.05)
Interaction		0.34*** (0.07)
Constant	2.32*** (0.10)	2.41*** (0.10)
Study 2b		
Condition	0.13† (0.07)	0.03 (0.08)
Target of criticism	0.71*** (0.03)	0.61*** (0.04)
Interaction		0.20*** (0.06)
Constant	1.59*** (0.07)	1.64*** (0.07)

Note. Condition coded 1 = counterfactual-motivated-double-standard condition, 0 = control

condition. Target of criticism coded 1 = supported politician, 0 = opposed politician. Standard errors in parentheses. The models also include participant random effects and item fixed effects.

† $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 4*Regression Coefficients and Model Summary for Target of the Criticism Mediation in Study 2a,2b*

	Imagined double-standard				Hypocrisy			
	<i>b</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	<i>b</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Study 2a								
Target of criticism	2.34	29.71	< .001	[2.18, 2.49]	0.35	5.40	< .001	[0.22, 0.47]
Imagined double-standard					0.15	9.32	< .001	[0.12, 0.18]
					<i>b</i>			95% CI
Indirect effect					0.32			[0.25, 0.40]
Direct effect					0.40			[0.28, 0.53]
Total effect					0.73			[0.62, 0.83]
Study 2b								
Target of criticism	2.15	28.74	< .001	[2.00, 2.30]	0.56	10.01	< .001	[0.45, 0.66]
Imagined double-standard					0.13	9.84	< .001	[0.11, 0.16]
					<i>b</i>			95% CI
Indirect effect					0.32			[0.26, 0.38]
Direct effect					0.58			[0.49, 0.68]
Total effect					0.90			[0.82, 0.99]

Note. Model coefficients for the indirect effect of target of the criticism on perceptions of media hypocrisy, mediated by imagined double-standard. Target of the criticism was coded .5 = supported politician, -.5 = opposed politician. Imagined double-standard measure captures how much participants imagined the media would have criticized the politician from the opposing party for the same behavior, from -3 = *Much more than [target politician]* to 3 = *Much less than [target politicians]*. Hypocrisy measured from 1 = *Not at all* to 5 = *Extremely*.

Table 5

Regression Results Predicting Perceived Hypocrisy by Imagined Double-Standard and Target of Criticism in Studies 2a and 2b

	Main-Effects Model	Interaction Model
Study 2a		
Imagined double-standard	0.15*** (0.02)	0.15 (0.02)
Target of criticism	0.35*** (0.06)	0.39*** (0.06)
Interaction		0.21*** (0.04)
Constant	2.90*** (0.12)	2.76*** (0.12)
Study 2b		
Imagined double-standard	0.13*** (0.01)	0.13 (0.01)
Target of criticism	0.56*** (0.06)	0.50*** (0.05)
Interaction		0.26*** (0.03)
Constant	2.00*** (0.08)	1.87*** (0.08)

Note. Target of criticism was coded .5 = supported politician, -.5 = opposed politician. Standard errors in parentheses. The models also include participant random effects and item fixed effects. Analyses limited to participants in the counterfactual-motivated-double-standard condition because only these participants rated relevant counterfactuals.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

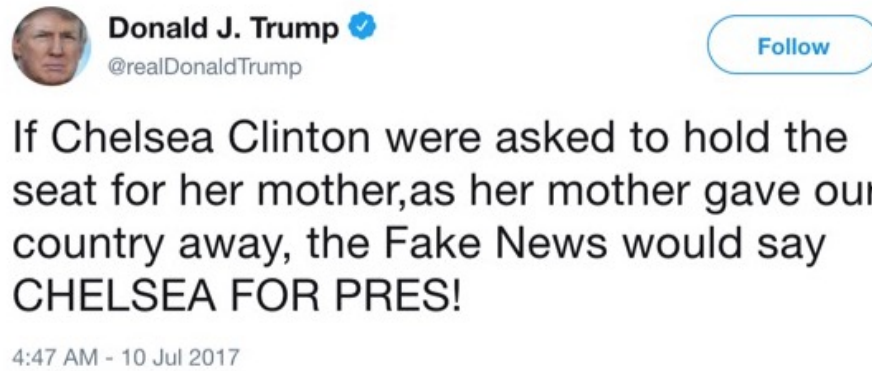
Table 6*Indirect Effects of Condition on Downstream Consequences through Perceived Hypocrisy*

	Psychological Standing		Deservingness of Criticism		Credibility of the Criticism		Endorsing Derogatory Epithets	
	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>b</i>	95% CI
Study 1								
Supported politician	-.08	[-.14, -.02]	-.08	[-.13, -.02]				
Study 2a								
Supported politician	-.06	[-.09, -.02]	-.05	[-.08, -.02]				
Opposed politician	-.01	[-.05, .02]	-.01	[-.05, 0.02]				
Moderated mediation	.04	[.02, .07]	.04	[.01, .06]				
Study 2b								
Supported politician	-.06	[-.10, -.02]	-.07	[-.11, -.02]	-.08	[-.13, -.02]	.14	[.04, .23]
Opposed politician	-.01	[-.06, .04]	-.01	[-.07, .05]	-.01	[-.06, .04]	.02	[-.06, .10]
Moderated mediation	.05	[.02, .09]	.06	[.02, .09]	.07	[.03, .11]	-.12	[-.18, -.06]

Note. We conducted these analyses using the gsem package in Stata, controlling for item fixed effects and random intercepts for participants, specifying perceived hypocrisy as the mediator, and modelling moderation by target of the criticism on both the a and b-path in Studies 2a and 2b. Cells are empty for conditions or variables we did not include in that study. These indirect effects were not pre-registered in Study 1. Coefficients that are statistically significant at $p < .05$ are in bold.

Figure 1

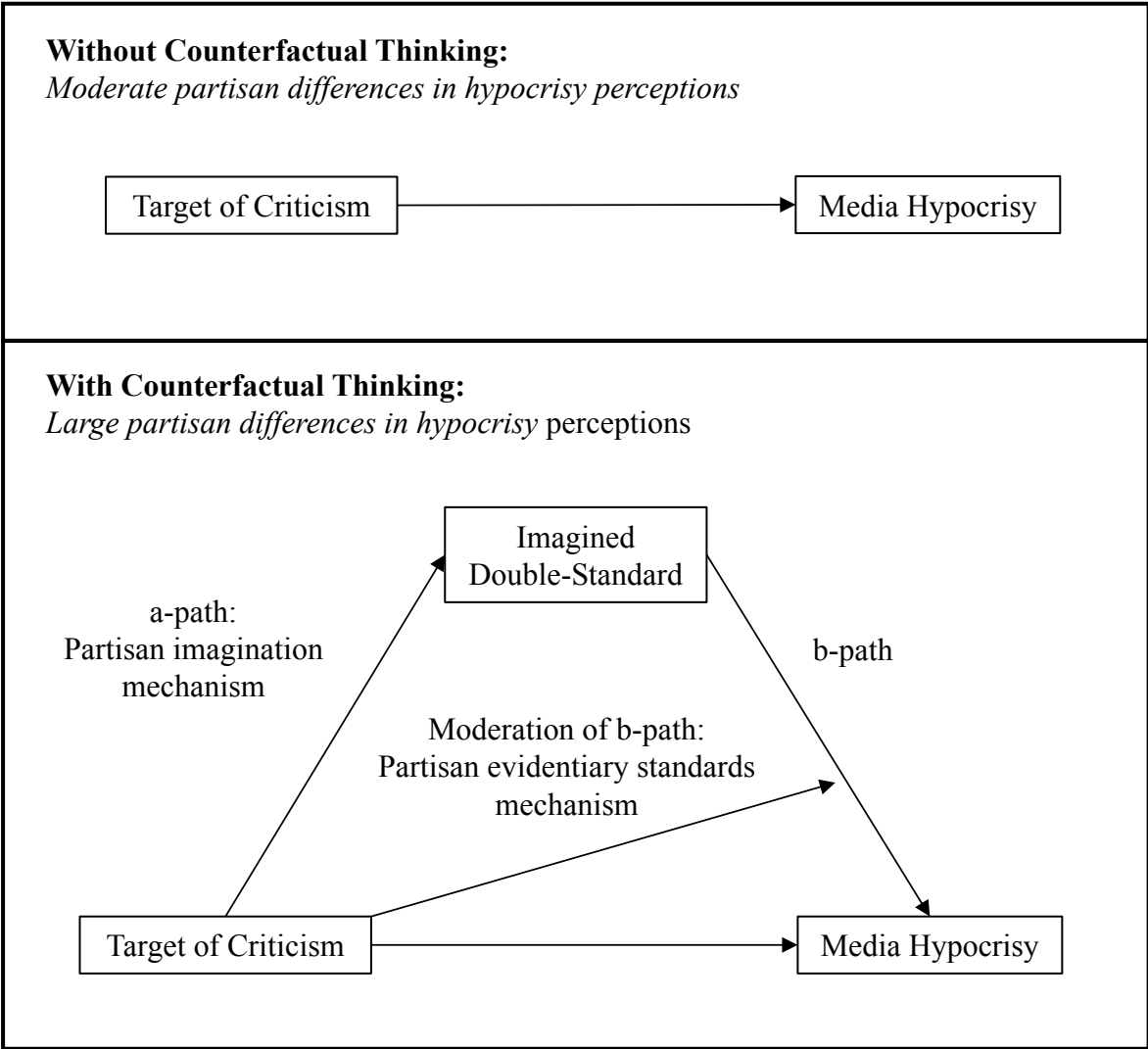
Dismissing Criticism by Condemning the Media for Counterfactual Hypocrisy



Note. When the media criticized Donald Trump for having his daughter sit in for him at the G20 summit, Trump condemned the media for counterfactual hypocrisy, inviting his followers to imagine that the media would have excused Hillary Clinton if she had been elected president, attended the G20 summit, and invited *her* daughter to sit in for her.

Figure 2

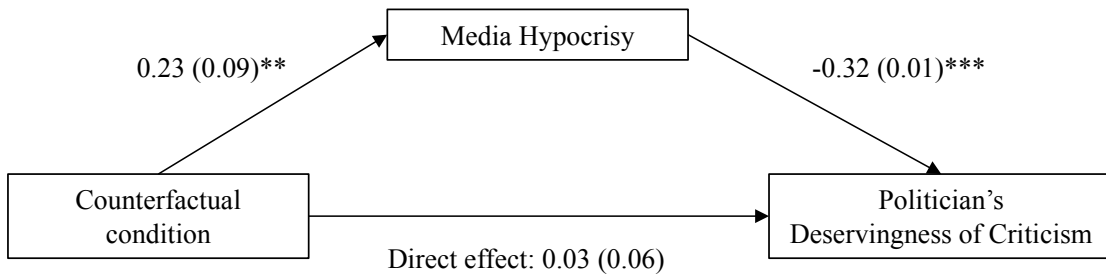
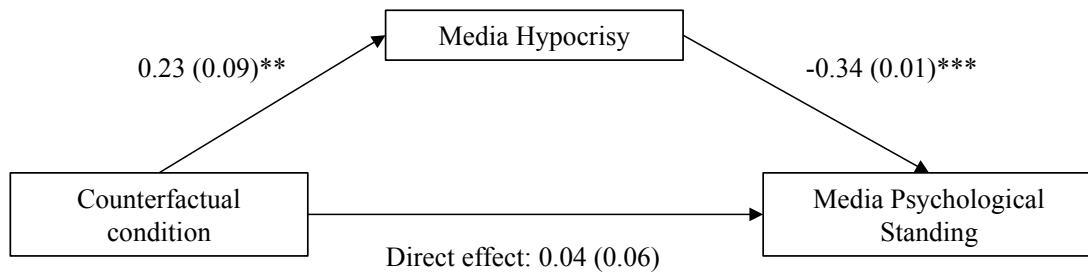
Conceptual Model: Counterfactual Thinking Exacerbates Partisan Disagreement About Media Hypocrisy



Note. “Target of criticism” captures whether the target of the media’s criticism is a politician people support or oppose. The indirect effect of target of criticism on media hypocrisy through imagined double-standard illustrates the *partisan imagination mechanism*. The moderation by target of criticism on the b-path illustrates the *partisan evidentiary standards mechanism*.

Figure 3

Indirect Effect of Counterfactual Condition on Perceived Media Psychological Standing and Politician’s Deservingness of Criticism in Study 1



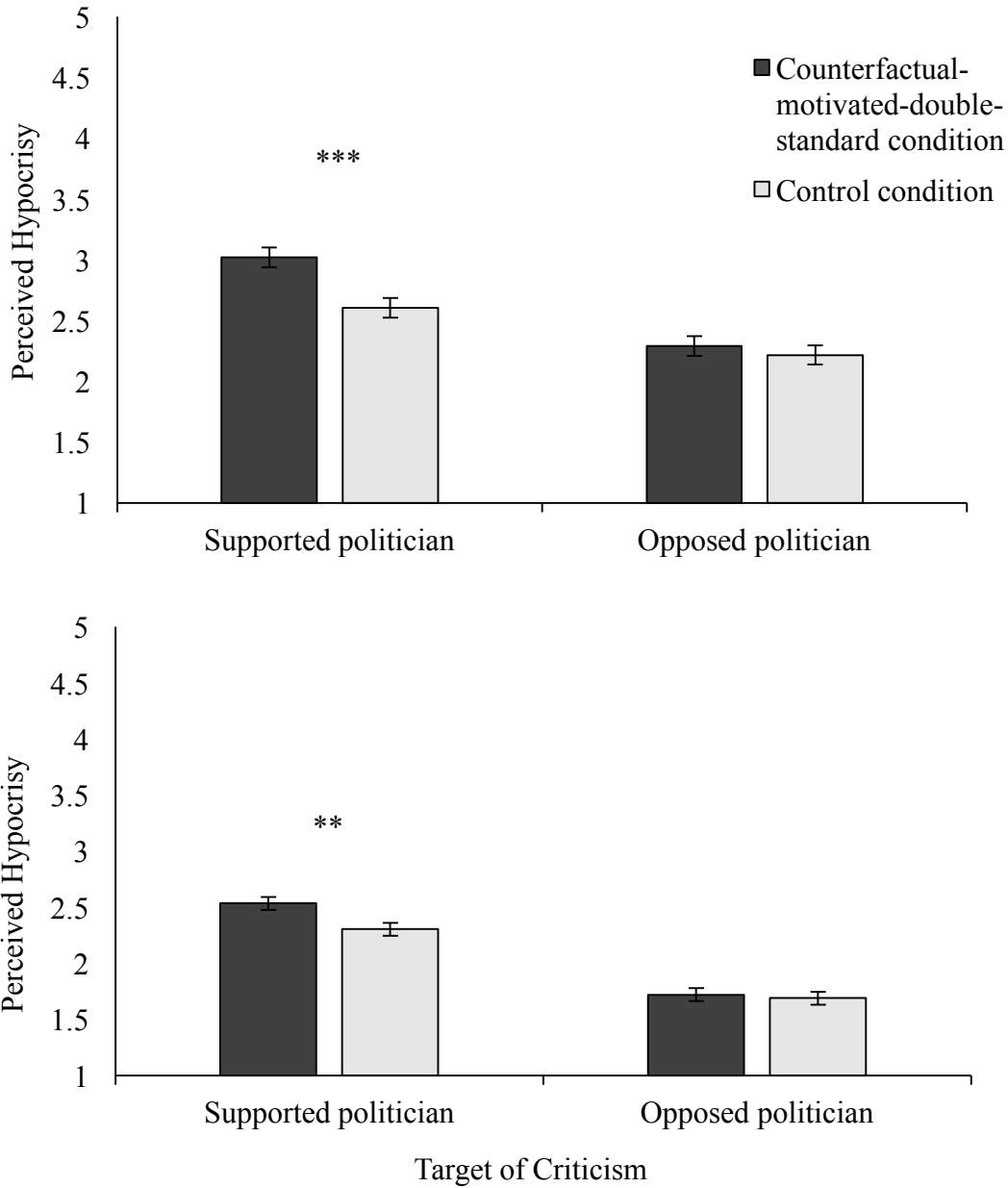
Note. Counterfactual condition coded as 1 = counterfactual, 0 = control. Coefficients are unstandardized.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$

Figure 4

Mean Hypocrisy Ratings ± SE by Condition and Target of Criticism – Top Panel: Study 2a,

Bottom Panel: Study 2b

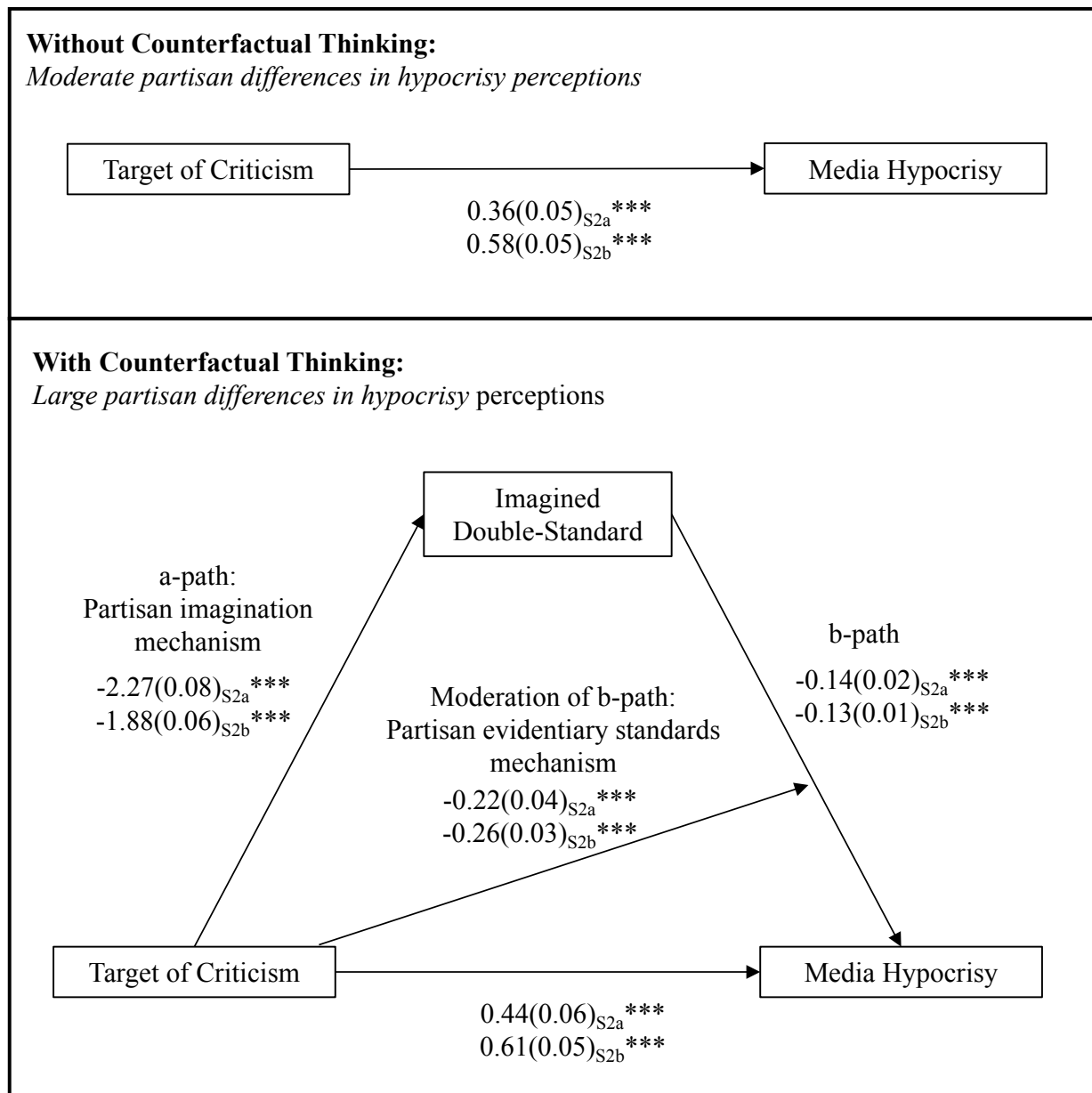


Note. The graph plots estimated marginal means and their standard errors from the mixed regression model described in the main text.

** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Figure 5

Counterfactual Thinking Exacerbates Partisan Disagreement About Media Hypocrisy



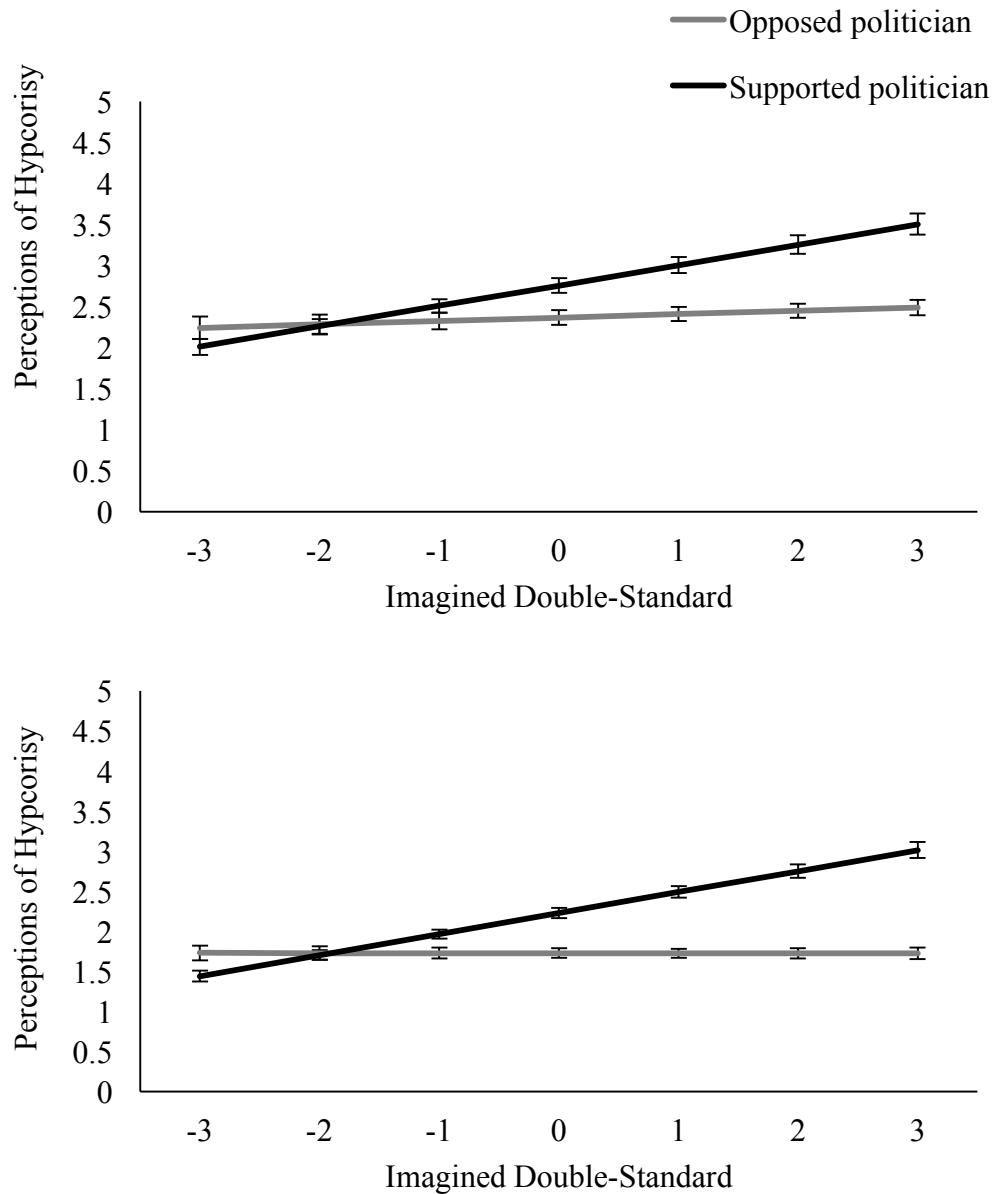
Note. “S2a” and “S2b” subscripts indicate results from Study 2a and 2b, respectively. “Target of criticism” captures whether the target of the media’s criticism is a politician people support or oppose (contrast coded as .5 = supported politician, -.5 = opposed politician). Imagined double-standard measure captures how much participants imagined the media would have criticized the

politician from the opposing party for the same behavior, from $-3 = \textit{Much more than [target politician]}$ to $3 = \textit{Much less than [target politicians]}$. Hypocrisy measured from $1 = \textit{Not at all}$ to $5 = \textit{Extremely}$. Standard errors in parentheses. The models also include participant random effects and item fixed effects. The indirect effect of target of criticism on media hypocrisy through imagined double-standard illustrates the *partisan imagination mechanism*. The moderation by target of criticism on the b-path illustrates the *partisan evidentiary standards mechanism*.

Figure 6

Perceived Hypocrisy by Imagined Double-Standard – Top Panel: Study 2a, Bottom Panel: Study 2b

2b



Note. The graph plots estimated marginal means and their standard errors from the mixed regression model described in the main text. Greater imagined double-standard reflects imagining the media would have criticized an opposing politician less for the same behavior.

Analyses limited to participants in the counterfactual-motivated-double-standard condition because only these participants rated relevant counterfactuals.