

Party-Defiance Ads

Mohamed A. Hussein

Courtney Lee

S. Christian Wheeler

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Mohamed A. Hussein (mh4547@columbia.edu) is an assistant professor of marketing at Columbia Business School, 665 West 130th Street, Henry R. Kravis Hall, New York, NY 10027, USA. Courtney Lee (courtlee@stanford.edu) is a PhD candidate at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, Stanford, CA 94305, USA. S. Christian Wheeler (wheelerc@stanford.edu) is the StrataCom professor of management and professor of marketing at Stanford Graduate School of Business, Stanford, CA 94305, USA. Please address correspondence to Mohamed A. Hussein. Research support was provided by the Behavioral Laboratory at the Stanford Graduate School of Business (RRID: SCR_023228) as well as the Behavioral Laboratory at Columbia Business School. Supplementary materials are included in the web appendix accompanying the online version of this article.

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ABSTRACT

In the United States, spending on political campaigns has surged dramatically. This paper introduces and examines “party-defiance ads,” a novel and increasingly common type of political advertisement in which candidates criticize their own party and take a position typically associated with the opposing party. Given the importance of party loyalty, defiance ads appear counterintuitive and risky. Why would candidates air ads in which they criticize their party? Across eight main studies and eight supplemental studies ($N = 11,473$), including an analysis of voting outcomes in recent elections, we investigate how consumers react to the use of defiance ads. We find that though defiance ads can be risky and trigger backlash, they have the potential to provide benefits to candidates. We identify when and why consumers support, tolerate, and penalize defiance ads in the context of both general elections and primaries. Our findings examine a previously undocumented advertising strategy, contribute to debates about affective polarization by showing that consumers can occasionally set partisan loyalty aside in favor of strategic considerations like electability, introduce electability as an important construct for research on consumer behavior, and provide practical insights for managers interested in using defiance ads.

Keywords: advertising, political identity, polarization, political marketing, electability

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, political candidates have started doing something strange. They have aired ads in which they attack their own party and adopt policy positions typically associated with the opposing party. At first glance, this behavior is perplexing. Party loyalty is a dominant expectation in contemporary politics. For example, in 2024, Republicans and Democrats in Congress voted with their respective parties around 90% of the time (Lesniewski and Kelly 2025). Given the importance of party loyalty, why would candidates air ads in which they defy their own party? How do consumers react to the use of such ads? Do they reward, tolerate, or penalize their use? What are the psychological processes involved? The current research seeks to answer these questions.

In the current research, we term this political advertising strategy “party-defiance ads” (defiance ads for short) and examine how consumers in the United States (U.S.) react to its use. Past research predicts backlash. In the U.S., consumers are increasingly loyal to their own party and hostile toward the opposing party (Gershon and Fridman 2022; Hussein and Wheeler 2024; Siev et al., 2024). According to this view, consumers from the candidate’s party might perceive such ads as a betrayal and abandon candidates who deploy them. Moreover, consumers from the opposing party may resist supporting a candidate who uses defiance ads because, despite criticizing and standing up to their party, these candidates do not belong to the same party as these consumers. In short, past research suggests a negative reaction to the use of defiance ads. In the current research, we explore the possibility that, under specifiable conditions, consumers might tolerate or even reward the use of defiance ads.

DEFIANCE ADS

Defiance ads are ads in which a candidate publicly opposes their political party’s typical position by endorsing a position more commonly associated with the opposing party. For example, a televised ad for Jared Golden (Democrat - ME, 2nd District) stated: “Jared isn’t afraid to stand up to his own party to keep me and you safe, voting for billions of dollars in state and local law enforcement.” Increased funding for law enforcement is typically associated with the Republican party; by emphasizing his willingness to defy his party and support such funding, Golden’s ad exemplifies a party-defiance ad. As another example, consider a recent ad for Marie Perez (Democrat - WA, 3rd District), which proclaimed: “Marie Perez is taking on the Biden administration and her party to secure the southern border and improve public safety ... I will do whatever it takes to secure the border and keep Washington safe.” Likewise, Mike Lawler (Republican - NY, 17th District) asserted: “I stood up to my own party to protect access to IVF treatments.” By bucking their party and endorsing positions typically associated with the opposing party, these ads exemplify defiance ads (see Table 1 for additional examples).

How common are defiance ads? Because we are the first to study this political advertising strategy, information about its prevalence is not readily available. To quantify the prevalence of defiance ads, we examined their use in the 2024 U.S. Senate elections. We also wanted to understand how their use has changed over time, so we examined their use in two U.S. Senate elections from a decade earlier (2012 and 2014). We had human coders analyze the content of 2,458 video ads from Republican and Democratic candidates (see study 1 for details). Our analysis revealed that 19% of candidates used this strategy in 2012 and 17% did so in 2014. A decade later, the percentage of candidates who used defiance ads grew to 28%. This means that

the use of defiance ads has grown by 65% in just one decade (2014-2024). Defiance ads were used by candidates from both parties. Of the candidates who used defiance ads in 2024, 58% were Democrats and 42% were Republicans. Defiance ads were also used most frequently by candidates running in competitive races. In competitive races (where pre-election polls showed the two leading candidates within 10 points), 45% of candidates used defiance ads. Among candidates who were safely ahead in the polls (leading by more than 10 points), only 9% did so. Defiance ads were used in 17 states, including crucial battleground states like Arizona, Nevada, and Pennsylvania. In fact, in the most recent election, defiance ads were used in 52% of states with a Senate race.

TABLE 1
EXAMPLES OF DEFIANCE ADS FROM RECENT ELECTIONS

Candidate	Party	Text from Ad
Jacky Rosen	Democrat	I'm Jacky Rosen, and six years ago, I promised to do what's right for Nevada, not my party leaders. I won't walk the party line, and I never have. ... [I] stood up to my own party to support police officers and get more funding for border security.
Mike Lawler	Republican	That's why I stood up to my own party to protect access to IVF treatments and introduced legislation to create a federal tax credit for women and their partners who are relying on costly fertility treatments to expand their family.
Katie Hobbs	Democrat	When our resources were at risk, I stood up to my own party to get Arizona's fair share of Colorado River water.
Steve Garvey	Republican	If Donald Trump is elected president, he is the gravest threat to our democracy ... I am proud to stand up to him. I think he is a dangerous demagogue ... if he got another chance, it would be even worse.
Colin Allred	Democrat	In Congress, I have stood up to the president and my own party. I condemned our handling of the border, and I have worked hard to secure our border.
Thomas Massie	Republican	I am one of the few Republicans in Washington who stand up to every president including President Trump when it comes to these bills.
Marie Perez	Democrat	Marie Perez is taking on the Biden administration and her party to secure the southern border and improve public safety ... I will do whatever it takes to secure the border and keep Washington safe.
Jared Golden	Democrat	Jared isn't afraid to stand up to his own party to keep me and you safe, voting for billions of dollars in state and local law enforcement.

Defiance ads are different from other common forms of political advertising, such as negative ads. Negative ads seek to undermine competitors or their products (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava 2000; Jain, Agrawal, and Maheswaran 2006). In politics, these ads are typically called “attack ads” and seek to discredit an opponent’s character or policy positions (Lau and Rovner 2009). In contrast, defiance ads criticize the candidate’s own party and highlight how the candidate’s position on an issue departs from that of their party. Defiance ads are also different from “contrast ads,” ads in which a candidate juxtaposes their positive qualities with an opponent’s negatives in the same ad (Lau and Rovner 2009). Unlike contrast ads, the focus of defiance ads is not opponents, but rather how the candidate relates to their own party; specifically, how they defy their party on a particular political issue.

CONSUMER REACTIONS TO DEFIANCE ADS

How do consumers react to defiance ads? Do they reward, tolerate, or penalize such ads? We tackle this question by first examining how consumers are likely to react to defiance ads in the general elections. Next, we consider how consumers are likely to react in party primaries.

General Elections

Reactions among Co-Partisans. How do consumers react to party-defiance ads coming from a candidate from their own party in the general elections? Past research suggests that co-partisans will react negatively to defiance ads. Americans increasingly distrust and dislike members of the opposing party (Pew Research Center 2022a). For example, recent research finds

that consumers punish those who compromise with (Ryan 2017), hold views that agree with (Siev et al. 2024), or even merely listen to members of the opposing party (Hussein and Wheeler 2024; see also Gershon and Fridman 2022). These findings imply that defiance ads will elicit *negative* reactions among co-partisans.

In contrast to this view, we explored the possibility that co-partisans might have a more pragmatic reaction to defiance ads. In general elections, consumers typically choose between their party's nominee and the opposing party's nominee. In that setting, even consumers who dislike a candidate's use of defiance ads may still support that candidate because the alternative (an out-party opponent) is usually a worse ideological fit. Even if defiance ads generate some negative reaction among co-partisans, that reaction may not be strong enough to outweigh the ideological gap and potential animosity toward an out-party opponent. Accordingly, we expect co-partisans to continue to support their party's candidate in general elections even when the candidate has used defiance ads.

H1: In general elections, co-partisans will continue to choose their party's candidate even when the candidate uses defiance ads.

Reactions among Out-Partisans. Next, we turn to examining reactions among out-partisans (members of the opposing party, as well as Independents who typically lean toward the other party). Simply because a candidate uses defiance ads does not mean that out-partisans will vote for them. Most out-partisans will default to their own party's nominee. However, occasionally, out-partisans may feel unsatisfied with their party's nominee, for example, if the nominee was engulfed in a scandal or was seen as holding objectionable and intolerable views. In such cases, dissatisfaction with the nominee may expand out-partisans' consideration set, creating an opening for candidates who use defiance ads. By signaling distance from their own

party and articulating positions that out-partisans may be more likely to agree with, defiance candidates could become a viable alternative when out-partisans are dissatisfied with their nominee. Accordingly, we predict that willingness to vote for an out-party candidate who uses defiance ads will be moderated by satisfaction with the party’s nominee: when satisfaction is high, out-partisans should be less likely to consider alternatives; when satisfaction is low (e.g., because the candidate is tainted by scandal or because the candidate holds objectionable views), candidates running defiance ads should be more likely to be chosen.

To many readers, voting for a member of the opposing party may seem unlikely in today’s polarized environment. Yet both recent election outcomes and research on voter behavior indicate that cross-party voting is not an uncommon feature of U.S. elections. To begin, groups of voters have been shown to change the party they vote for across election cycles. For example, approximately 9% of those who voted for the Democratic presidential nominee (Obama) in 2012 are estimated to have voted for the Republican one (Trump) in 2016 (Reny, Collingwood, and Valenzuela 2019). Additionally, voters have been shown to vote for candidates from different parties within the same election (split-ticket voting). In 2024, several states (e.g., Arizona, Michigan, Nevada, and Wisconsin) backed the Republican nominee for president while simultaneously electing Democratic senators (Pew Research Center 2024; see also Connors 2025). More generally, recent research finds that a meaningful minority of partisans vote for out-partisan candidates when they align with them on key policy issues. This critical minority is estimated to be approximately 5% of the electorate in congressional elections (and up to 48% in local elections; see Kuriwaki 2026). This leads to the following predictions:

H2: In general elections, out-partisans are more likely to support candidates who use defiance ads than those who do not. The increase in support is driven by greater agreement.

H3: In general elections, greater support for the candidate is more likely to materialize when out-partisans are dissatisfied with their party's nominee (e.g., the nominee is embroiled in scandal or holds objectionable views).

Primaries

Primaries are a different decision environment. In primaries, consumers are choosing between candidates from their own party. As a result, it is far less clear whether defiance ads would yield a premium or a penalty in primaries. As we explain below in greater detail, we posit that this will depend on the relative strength of two opposing forces: agreement and electability.

Agreement. All else equal, consumers prefer candidates whose policy positions align with their own. Defiance ads position the candidate as disagreeing with the party on a salient issue. Often, this means that co-partisans will disagree with the candidate's position on the issue. This policy disagreement should reduce candidate support.

Electability. By itself, the agreement pathway implies that co-partisans will penalize the use of defiance ads in primaries. Yet primary choice is not purely about policy agreement. Many co-partisans care about winning. They understand that primaries are a gateway to the general election, and thus they care not only about which candidate best represents them, but also which candidate can *win* in the general elections. Electability refers to consumers' perception of the candidate's likelihood of winning (Abramowitz 1989; Anderson et al. 2025; Bateson 2020). Past research has argued that when deciding whom to vote for, consumers consider not only whether they prefer a candidate but whether their preferred candidate can win (i.e., their electability;

Hassell and Visalvanich 2024; Minozzi and Woon 2023; Simas 2017).¹ In a striking example, Corbett and colleagues (2021) find that voters who prefer female candidates often choose male candidates due to electability concerns. Voters worry that other voters will not support a female candidate. As a result, they end up voting for a male candidate because they want to avoid casting their vote for a candidate whom they believe will lose in the general elections.

If defiance ads are seen as boosting a candidate’s chances of winning in the general elections—for instance, by making them seem more attractive to independents and out-partisans—then co-partisans may be willing to tolerate candidates who use them. Rather than let their ideological disagreement with the candidate running defiance ads take over, many consumers may appreciate that this disagreement offers the candidate (and, by extension, their party) a strategic advantage. Put differently, because defiance ads signal broader appeal, this advertising strategy can increase perceived electability of the candidate, thereby increasing support for the candidate.² In sum, when considering the net effect of defiance ads in primaries, one needs to consider not only policy agreement but also electability perceptions. The net effect of defiance ads among co-partisans in primaries will depend on the relative strength of these two opposing forces.

¹ Note that electability is distinct from authenticity. Authenticity captures whether a candidate is genuine. Electability is a second-order judgment about whether others will vote for the candidate. The 2020 Democratic primary provides an illustration of how these two constructs are orthogonal. Many viewed Elizabeth Warren as highly authentic because of her coherent and consistent progressive views; that same genuine commitment to progressive views, however, undermined her perceived electability, ultimately costing her the nomination (Goldmacher and Herndon 2021).

² Electability is distinct from moderation. Moderation refers to where a candidate sits ideologically on the left-right continuum (e.g., Hussein, Tormala, and Wheeler 2026). In some contexts, being more moderate can reduce, not enhance, electability: for instance, in very conservative electorates, a moderate platform may signal misfit with voters and reduce the likelihood that a candidate wins. In an illustration study (SS1), participants saw two candidates from their party, one moderate and one extreme. They were asked to indicate who is more electable in a swing state and in a state that their party reliably wins. In the swing state condition, the moderate candidate was seen as more electable (91%). In the other condition, the extreme candidate was seen as more electable (71%; $\beta = 3.17$, $SE = 0.29$, $z = 11.04$, $p < .001$). This suggests that people perceive these two constructs as orthogonal. A candidate can be moderate but unelectable.

Agreement and electability should not be equally strong across all contexts. For instance, when the stakes associated with winning are high (e.g., winning a particular election could decide which party controls the Senate), rather than low, consumers should place greater weight on electability. In addition, when the stakes associated with winning are low, consumers should place greater emphasis on agreement compared when the stakes are high. These changes in weights placed on electability and agreement should translate to changes in the net effect of defiance ads on candidate support. More formally:

H4: In primaries, co-partisans will tolerate or support the use of defiance ads when the stakes of winning are high. However, co-partisans will penalize the use of defiance ads if the stakes are low. This is because co-partisans will place greater emphasis on electability when stakes are high rather than low and will place greater emphasis on agreement when the stakes are low rather than high.

Similarly, defiance ads should not always be associated with enhanced electability. Instead, electability perceptions should depend on the competitiveness of the race. In competitive contests, defiance ads are likely to boost a candidate's perceived electability because winning often requires attracting at least some voters from the opposing side. In contrast, in safe races there should be little to no electability benefit from defiance ads, since cross-partisan appeal is less consequential. Indeed, in such settings defiance ads could potentially be seen as reducing electability (e.g., if it is seen as alienating the candidate's own base and dampening turnout).

H5: In primaries, co-partisans will tolerate or support the use of defiance ads in competitive races. However, co-partisans will penalize their use in safe races. This is because defiance ads will boost electability perceptions in competitive races and will have no (or a negative) effect on electability perceptions in safe races.

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

Across eight main studies and eight supplemental studies, we investigated consumers' reactions to the use of defiance ads. Table 2 lists our studies and the main takeaways from each.

Using naturally occurring data in the wild, we found that candidates who use defiance ads tended to outperform their party’s presidential candidate (study 1). Studies 2A and 2B replicated the overall benefits of using defiance ads in carefully controlled experiments. Out-partisans were more likely to choose candidates who used (versus did not use) defiance ads and co-partisans tolerated the use of defiance ads. Study 3 suggested that the added support among out-partisans is driven by increased agreement with the candidate’s policy position. Study 4 found that out-partisans are more likely to choose a candidate who used defiance ads when they are dissatisfied with their own party’s nominee; for example, when the nominee holds objectionable views or is marred by scandal. However, when the party nominee is a typical party member, the use of defiance ads did not affect out-partisans’ candidate choice.

Next, we turned to investigating the use of defiance ads in the context of primaries. Study 5 found that co-partisans did *not* penalize candidates for the use of defiance ads when electability concerns were high. It also ruled out that people prefer candidates who use defiance ads because they come across as more agentic or as more principled. Moreover, study 5 demonstrated that consumers spontaneously think of electability and provided mediation evidence consistent with the role of electability as a mechanism. Studies 6 and 7 built on this process evidence and used a moderation approach to test the electability account. In study 6, consumers tolerated the use of defiance ads when the stakes of losing were high but punished the use of defiance ads when the stakes were low. In study 7, consumers tolerated the use of defiance ads when the race was competitive but punished the use of defiance ads when their party was guaranteed to win.

It is important to note that our results were robust to a variety of procedural variations across studies. These results held when no information was provided about the stance of the control candidate, as well as when the control candidate was described as having a stance on a

different issue than the one mentioned in the defiance ad, as well as when the control candidate was described as having a loyal stance on the same issue as the defiance ad. They held when consumers were evaluating candidates who were running for state (e.g., Governor) or federal offices (e.g., U.S. Senate). They held in both within- and between-participant designs and across different outcome variables such as choice, ratings, donations, and interest in political merchandise. These findings were also symmetric by party: they occurred for Democrats and Republicans for both the general elections and the primaries (e.g., Democratic Primaries: study 5; Republican Primaries: SS2).

Our materials, data, code, and preregistration reports can be found on OSF (https://osf.io/7svmf/?view_only=da45102e3e354b61b28adadffe484cb9). All sample sizes were determined prior to data collection, and we report all manipulations and measures (web appendix for exact stimuli and measures). Studies 2A, 2B, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, SS4, SS5, SS8 were all preregistered. To the extent that there are any deviations from our pre-registration reports, we note such deviations and the rationale behind them in Web Appendix B.

TABLE 2
SUMMARY OF STUDIES

Title	Main takeaway(s)	Context	Hypothesis Tested
Study 1	- In field data, use of defiance ads is associated with overperformance in general elections, controlling for factors such as incumbency, party, gender, and donations.	General Elections	H1, H2
Studies 2A & 2B	- Consumer response to the use of defiance ads replicates in carefully controlled studies. Out-partisans react positively to the use of defiance ads; this is robust to different political issues and is symmetric: similar responses are observed for members of both political parties.	General Elections	H1, H2

Study 3	- Consumer response to defiance ads replicates with a more conservative control condition. - Among out-partisans, favorable responses to the use of defiance ads are driven by increased agreement with the candidate. - Among co-partisans, greater agreement cannot explain the tolerance of defiance ads. Co-partisans agreed less, not more, with the candidate using defiance ads.	General Elections	H1, H2
Study 4	- For out-partisans, whether defiance ads result in greater switching behavior depends on satisfaction with their party's nominee. When out-partisans are dissatisfied with their party's nominee, they become more likely to reward the use of defiance ads. When the nominee is a typical party member, positive reactions to defiance ads do not emerge. - In the context of a primary in a swing state, consumers spontaneously think about candidate electability.	General Elections	H3
Study 5	- Co-partisans do not penalize candidates for defiance ads during primaries (in competitive elections). - Reactions to defiance ads are shaped by the opposing forces of agreement and perceived electability.	Primaries	H4, H5
Study 6	- In primaries, when the stakes are high, co-partisans do not penalize the use of defiance ads. However, when the stakes are low, co-partisans penalize the use of defiance ads. This is because the relative weights consumers place on electability and agreement shift with stakes.	Primaries	H4
Study 7	- In primaries, co-partisans tolerate the use of defiance ads in competitive races but penalize them in safe races. This is because perceptions of electability increase in competitive races but decrease in safe races.	Primaries	H5
SS1	- Electability and moderation are distinct constructs. A candidate can be moderate but unelectable.	Primaries	Discriminant Validity
SS2	- The effects of defiance ads in primaries replicate with Republican candidates in a Republican primary.	Primaries	Robustness
SS3	- Agency and principledness cannot explain the effects of defiance ads. Defiance ads reduced, rather than increased, perceived agency and principledness compared to the control condition. This rules out agency and principledness as alternative mechanisms.	Primaries	Discriminant Validity
SS4	- The lack of penalty extends to other outcomes, such as purchase of political merchandise.	Primaries	Robustness
SS5	- Study 7's moderation replicates in a between-participant design. The results do not hinge on the within-participant nature of the design.	General Elections + Primaries	H5
SS6	- Even when providing participants with the option to vote for neither candidate (i.e., when turnout is accounted for), the general election results do not change.	General Elections	H1, H2
SS7	- Among Pure Independents, there is no detectable effect of defiance ads. This is likely because this group tends to have heterogeneous and sometimes unstable preferences.	General Elections	Robustness
SS8	- Defiance ads are distinct from explicitly embracing the out-party. Compared to defiance ads, embracing the out-party reduces support.	Primaries	Discriminant Validity

CONTRIBUTIONS

Together, our findings make four key contributions. First, we identify and examine a previously undocumented type of political advertising. Spending on political campaigns is at an all-time high. It has surged from \$3.1 billion in 2000 to \$15.9 billion in 2024—a 416% increase (Bryner and Glavin 2024). This surge in spending has inspired managers to experiment with new types of political ads. Whereas existing research in marketing has explored consumer responses to other types of political advertising (Hussein, Lee, and Wheeler, 2025; Klein and Ahluwalia, 2005; Phillips, Urbany, and Reynolds, 2008; see Hussein and Catapano 2026 for a review) and the broader influence of political identity on consumer behavior (Jin, Malkoc, and Fazio 2023; Kyung, Thomas, and Krishna 2022; Lisjak and Ordabayeva 2022; Ordabayeva, Cakanlar, and Fernandes 2023; Ordabayeva and Fernandes 2018), no prior work has examined defiance ads. Examining defiance ads is important given that more and more consumers are exposed to them.

Second, our findings contribute to ongoing debates surrounding the limits of affective polarization. Prior research has often emphasized the power of affect generated by partisan identity in shaping political behavior (e.g., Cohen 2003; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015). Recent research contends that people can reason about politics in pragmatic and strategic ways that are not driven solely by affect (e.g., Cohen and Markovits 2026; Orr, Fowler, and Huber 2023; Tappin, Berinsky, and Rand 2023). Our results build on this latter perspective by finding that when electability is salient, consumers engage in a form of strategic reasoning: they become willing to accept some degree of party defiance as long as it improves their party's chances of winning in the general elections.

Third, our findings highlight electability as a generative construct for consumer behavior research. This construct refers to people's beliefs about how other consumers will support a given political candidate (i.e., second-order beliefs about candidate viability). We believe this

construct can spark new research questions at the intersection of consumer behavior and politics (e.g., purchase of political merchandise), as well as in non-political domains (e.g., how consumers vote for products in crowdsourcing campaigns). We return to this point in the General Discussion. In examining electability, our findings also contribute to research on the role of second-order beliefs in shaping consumer behavior (Costello et al. 2023; Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius 2008), an area which has received limited attention.

Fourth, our findings offer practical guidance for campaign strategists, candidates, and campaign managers. By understanding the psychological reactions consumers have to defiance ads, these stakeholders can better optimize their use of this advertising strategy. For example, we find that in general elections, consumers react positively to defiance ads when the opposing nominee is scandal-tainted or espouses objectionable views but not when the opponent is a typical out-party candidate. As another example, in the context of primaries, we find that consumers respond more favorably to defiance ads when electability is salient. Thus, our findings have implications for how various stakeholders should approach this type of political advertising.

GENERAL ELECTIONS

STUDY 1: DEFIANCE ADS IN THE WILD

Study 1 examined the effect of defiance ads in the wild. We constructed a dataset that combined data from four sources: (1) video ads used by U.S. Senate candidates in the 2024 election from each candidate’s YouTube and Facebook pages, (2) information about each

candidate's demographics from Ballotpedia, (3) the total amount of money each candidate raised from the Federal Election Commission, and (4) each candidate's performance in the elections from the New York Times. We then used this information to examine the association between using defiance ads and ultimate performance in the election.

Data

Video Ads. We began by identifying the list of major-party candidates who ran for U.S. Senate in 2024. For each candidate, we examined the candidate's YouTube channel, which contained the video ads they aired during the campaign. To ensure thoroughness, we also examined each candidate's Facebook page, which contains videos uploaded by the candidate. This approach yielded 549 unique ads aired by candidates during election season. Each ad was then coded by research assistants for whether it was a defiance ad. 27.94% of candidates in our dataset used defiance ads.³

Ballotpedia. Next, we obtained information about each candidate's gender, political party, and incumbency status. This information came from Ballotpedia, a nonpartisan, nonprofit online encyclopedia dedicated to providing comprehensive information on American politics, elections, and governance. The information obtained from Ballotpedia would serve as control variables in our model.

³ We were also interested in how the use of defiance ads has evolved over time. To examine this, we analyzed video ads from the Wesleyan Media Project from the 2012 and 2014 U.S. Senate elections. Using the same coding procedure, research assistants classified each of 1,913 unique ads as either a defiance ad or not. In 2012, 19% of candidates used defiance ads; in 2014, a similar share (17%) did so. Compared with 2024 (27%), these figures suggest that candidates' use of this strategy has increased by about 65% over the last decade.

Donations. We obtained the donations a candidate raised through the Federal Election Commission (FEC). Campaigns are required by law to report contributions to the FEC, which makes these data available online (Bouton et al. 2022; Posner et al. 2023). For each campaign, we summed all contributions received by the candidate’s authorized committees. This number does not include spending done on behalf of the candidate by other committees. It only includes the amount of money the candidate raised. This variable served as another control.

Election Outcomes. We used the New York Times website’s election result tracking tool to obtain two pieces of information related to election performance. The first relates to each Senate candidate’s performance in their state (percent of vote). The second relates to the performance of the *presidential* candidate from the senate candidate’s party. For example, consider Colin Allred, a Democrat who ran for U.S. Senate in Texas. We obtained Colin Allred’s performance (44.6%) and also the performance of Kamala Harris in Texas (42.5%). Taking into account the performance of the presidential candidates helps us better isolate the effect of each Senate candidate’s advertising strategy from the broader partisan dynamics in their state.

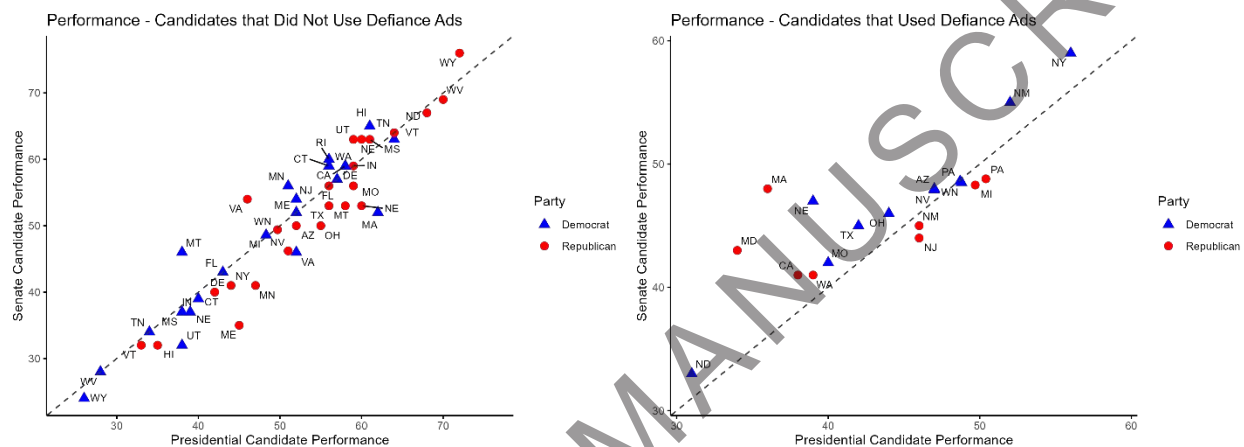
Results

Figure 1 plots each senate candidate’s performance in their state (y-axis) against the performance of the presidential candidate from their party in the same state (x-axis). A candidate falling on the 45-degree line indicates that their performance was the same as their party’s presidential candidate. Falling above (below) the 45-degree line indicates that a candidate

overperformed (underperformed) their party's presidential candidate. The left panel shows candidates that did not use defiance ads; the right panel shows those that used defiance ads.

FIGURE 1

PERFORMANCE OF SENATE CANDIDATES COMPARED TO THE PERFORMANCE OF THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE FROM THEIR PARTY



NOTE.—Among candidates that did not use defiance ads (left panel), some candidates over- and some candidates underperformed their party's presidential candidate. Among candidates that used defiance ads (right panel), most overperformed the presidential candidate.

Among candidates that did not use defiance ads, some candidates overperformed and some candidates underperformed; there appear to be no systematic patterns. However, among candidates that used defiance ads, 68.4% outperformed their party's presidential candidate. Candidates who used defiance ads outperformed their party's presidential candidate by 2.34 percentage points, whereas those who did not use defiance ads underperformed their party's presidential candidates by 1 percentage point ($t(66) = 3.28, p = .002$). These results suggest that consumers supported candidates who used defiance ads more than candidates that did not.

Other factors could contribute to this result. For instance, defiance ads could have been used by incumbent politicians and not newcomers or perhaps candidates who used defiance ads

raised more money and hence were able to afford experimenting with new advertising strategies. To better isolate the effects of defiance ads, we estimated the following model:

$$Performance_i = \alpha + \beta_1 defiance\ ads_i + \beta_2 gender_i + \beta_3 party_i + \beta_4 incumbency_i + \beta_5 donations_i + \epsilon$$

Performance was computed by taking the difference between the candidate’s performance and the performance of the presidential candidate from the same party. This approach helps isolate the candidate’s campaigning strategy from broader partisan dynamics influencing the electorate. By analyzing how a Senate candidate performed relative to the presidential candidate of the same party, we can determine whether the candidate exceeded, matched, or fell short of the expected performance based on party affiliation alone (see Malzahn and Hall 2024). In addition, we controlled for the candidate’s gender, the candidate’s political party, whether the candidate was an incumbent, and the total amount of donations the candidate raised.

We were interested in whether β_1 was positive and significant. A positive and significant coefficient would indicate that using defiance ads is associated with an electoral advantage. Indeed, we found that using defiance ads was associated with higher performance ($\beta_1 = 3.35$, $SE = 1.13$, $t(62) = 2.98$, $p = .004$), even when controlling for the candidate’s party, gender, incumbency status, and campaign resources.⁴ We caution that these results are correlational in nature. Self-selection or omitted variable bias may be at play. These results do not provide a causal estimate for the relationship between defiance ads and performance.

Discussion

⁴ As mentioned in the introduction, candidates in close races were more likely to use defiance ads. We ran an additional model that controls for pre-election polling results (in addition to all other controls included in the main model). The findings remain significant ($\beta_1 = 3.61$, $SE = 1.17$, $t(59) = 3.08$, $p = .003$).

Results from study 1 suggest that use of defiance ads was associated with greater candidate support. Despite illustrating the potential benefits of defiance ads in the wild, study 1 raises some questions: Who drove these results? Was it co-partisans or out-partisans? We were unable to examine this question because more granular voting data were unavailable at the time when this analysis was conducted. We aimed to address this question in the next study. Moreover, these results are correlational. To our knowledge, there was no quasi-experimental variation in our context that could be exploited to provide causal estimates. Including controls helps reduce concerns about confounding, but it does not fully resolve this issue. The remaining studies allow us to speak to causality.

STUDIES 2A & 2B: REPLICATING REACTIONS TO DEFIANCE ADS ACROSS ISSUES AND PARTY

Studies 2A and 2B investigated how consumers react to the use of defiance ads. Specifically, these studies tested whether the net benefits to using defiance ads observed in the wild would replicate in carefully controlled experiments. To test this, we had participants read a short article about a political candidate running for U.S. Senate. Some participants were shown the text of a defiance ad in which the candidate opposed their party and publicly disagreed with its position on a political issue. Our prediction was that consumers from the same party as the candidate (co-partisans) would maintain their support for the candidate even when the candidate used defiance ads (H1). In contrast, consumers from the opposing party as the candidate (out-partisans) would be more likely to express support for the candidate in the Defiance Ad,

compared to the control condition (H2). To ensure robustness across political parties, study 2A tested these predictions with a Democratic candidate and study 2B tested them with a Republican candidate. In each study, we also tested whether the observed effects would hold across different issues. For example, we tested the issues of border security, limited government, and military spending in study 2A, and the issues of climate change, LGBTQ+, and democracy in study 2B.

Method

Study 2A aimed to recruit nine-hundred Democrats and Republicans. Nine-hundred and six responses were recorded, of which 867 identified as Democrats or Republicans, or leaned toward one of the two parties, and constituted the analysis sample (57% female; $M_{age} = 42$, $SD = 14$; 51% Democrats; 49% Republicans). Participants were randomly assigned to a Control or Defiance Ads condition. All participants first read a short biography of a Democratic (study 2A) or Republican (study 2B) candidate running for the U.S. Senate. The candidate’s biography included details on his family and qualifications. Participants read that the candidate had recently launched a variety of ads addressing his views on different issues. Participants first read the text of an ad on corporate taxes in which the candidate agreed with their party’s position on the issue. For example, in study 2A, the Democratic candidate argued for increasing corporate taxes. After reading this information, participants in the Control condition proceeded to the dependent variables. Participants in the Defiance Ads condition further read that the candidate disagreed with their party on one of three issues (border security, military spending, or limited government). These issues were selected because they were representative of the type of issues candidates used in their defiance ads in the wild. The exact text for each issue was:

Border Security: “Even though I’m a Democrat, I’m disappointed with how Democrats are handling border security. As Democrats, we often underestimate the importance of ensuring a secure border. We need to invest more in border security to ensure the safety of our communities.”

Military Spending: “Even though I’m a Democrat, I’m disappointed with how Democrats have been handling military spending. As Democrats, we sometimes lose sight of the importance of ensuring that our military is fully funded and prepared to face modern challenges. We must continue to support and train our military to meet threats from China and North Korea.”

Limited Government: “Even though I’m a Democrat, I’m disappointed with how Democrats are handling fiscal responsibility. As Democrats, we have gotten too caught up in overspending on programs that might not be necessary or helpful in the long run. We shouldn’t always be going over budget or backing every single program. Instead, we should focus on making sure public services are run efficiently, without putting too much of a burden on taxpayers.”

After reading this information, participants completed a choice dependent measure. Specifically, they were given a choice to vote for the candidate they had read about (Sam Wright) or to vote for his opponent, an extremely conservative MAGA Republican called John Baker.⁵ In addition to choice, we asked participants about their willingness to donate to the election campaign of the candidate. Specifically, participants were asked to imagine receiving a hypothetical \$20 bonus and to allocate it between the two candidates.

Study 2B followed a similar procedure. We aimed to recruit nine-hundred Democrats and Republicans on Prolific Academic. Nine-hundred and thirty-seven Democrats and Republicans completed the survey; 903 identified as Democrats or Republicans, or leaned toward one of the two parties, and constituted the analysis sample (57% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 43$, $SD = 14$; 49% Democrats; 51% Republicans). Unlike study 2A, the candidate in study 2B was Republican. Participants were randomly assigned to a Control or Defiance Ads condition. In all conditions, the Republican candidate was described as arguing for lowering corporate taxes. Participants in the Defiance Ads condition also read that the candidate disagreed with the Republican party on

⁵ We chose a more ideologically extreme opponent for realism. The ideological extremity of politicians has recently reached a 50-year high (Pew Research Center 2022b). A recent analysis of more than 84,000 candidates revealed that extreme candidates are running at higher rates than at any time in the last 30 years (Handan-Nader, Myers, and Hall 2025). In study 4, we examine how changing this design choice affects the current results.

one of three issues (democracy, climate change, and LGBTQ+ rights; See Web Appendix A for exact phrasing). For the choice of candidate and donations, participants were choosing between an extremely progressive Democrat or the Republican candidate they read about.

Results

As pre-registered, we estimated a mixed linear effects model with issue-level random effects. The dependent variable was choice of candidate, and the independent variables were ad type (1 = Defiance Ads, 0 = Control) and political party (1 = Republican participants, 0 = Democratic participants). In study 2A, there was a significant main effect of ad type ($\beta = .053$, $SE = .022$, $z = 2.42$, $p = .016$), such that participants were more likely to choose the Democratic candidate when he used defiance ads ($M = .68$, $SD = .47$) compared to when he did not ($M = .62$, $SD = .48$). There was also a main effect of party ($\beta = -.70$, $SE = .022$, $z = -31.64$, $p < .001$), such that Democratic participants were more likely to choose the Democratic candidate ($M = .99$, $SD = .08$) than Republican participants ($M = .30$, $SD = .46$).

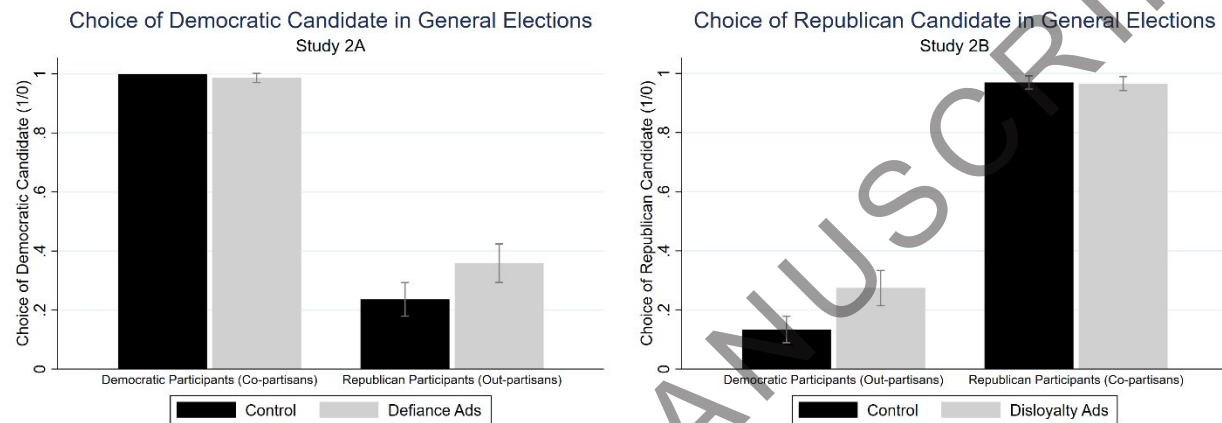
Study 2B showed similar results. There was a significant main effect of ad type ($\beta = .070$, $SE = .020$, $z = 3.53$, $p < .001$), such that participants were more likely to choose the Republican candidate when he used defiance ads ($M = .64$, $SD = .48$) compared to when he did not ($M = .56$, $SD = .50$). There was also a main effect of party ($\beta = .78$, $SE = .02$, $z = 39.31$, $p < .001$), such that Republican participants (co-partisans) were more likely to choose the Republican candidate ($M = .98$, $SD = .13$) than Democratic participants (out-partisans; $M = .20$, $SD = .40$).

Next, we turned to assessing whether these main effects were qualified by interactions. We regressed choice of candidate on condition, political party, and their interaction. The results

revealed a significant interaction for both studies (study 2A: $\beta = .14$, $SE = .044$, $z = 3.12$, $p = .002$; study 2B: $\beta = -.14$, $SE = .039$, $z = -3.59$, $p < .001$; Figure 2).

FIGURE 2

CHOICE IN STUDIES 2A AND 2B



NOTE.—Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

In study 2A, we found that among Republican participants (out-partisans), the defiance ad resulted in a significant increase in choice for the Democratic candidate ($\beta = .12$, $SE = .044$, $z = 2.80$, $p = .005$). However, among Democrats (co-partisans), there was no significant difference in choice between the two conditions ($\beta = -.014$, $SE = .017$, $z = -.80$, $p = .42$). These results held for all three issues (border security, military spending, and limited government).

In study 2B, we found similar results. Among Democratic participants (out-partisans), the defiance ad resulted in a significant increase in choice for the Republican candidate ($\beta = .14$, $SE = .038$, $z = 3.75$, $p < .001$). However, among Republicans (co-partisans), there was no significant difference in choice between the two conditions ($\beta = .0002$, $SE = .012$, $z = .02$, $p = .98$). These results held for all three issues (democracy, climate change, LGBTQ+ rights).

Donation amount showed similar results. In study 2A, there was a main effect of defiance ads ($\beta = 1.27$, $SE = .38$, $z = 3.31$, $p = .001$), qualified by a significant interaction ($\beta = 2.88$, $SE = 0.76$, $z = 3.78$, $p < .001$), such that using defiance ads increased donations toward the Democratic candidate among out-partisans ($\beta = 2.74$, $SE = .76$, $z = 3.61$, $p < .001$) without lowering donations among co-partisans ($\beta = -.14$, $SE = .16$, $z = -.89$, $p = .38$). Likewise, in study 2B, we found a main effect of defiance ads ($\beta = 1.25$, $SE = .34$, $z = 3.66$, $p < .001$), qualified by a significant interaction ($\beta = -2.53$, $SE = .68$, $z = -3.72$, $p < .001$), such that using defiance ads increased donations toward the Republican candidate among out-partisans ($\beta = 2.53$, $SE = .60$, $z = 4.20$, $p < .001$) without lowering donations among co-partisans ($\beta = .005$, $SE = .32$, $z = .02$, $p = .99$).

Discussion

The results of studies 2A and 2B replicate the correlational results we obtained in the wild. Importantly, these results were robust to multiple social issues (e.g., border security, military spending, and limited government). They were also robust to the candidate’s party. Both Democratic and Republican candidates appear to benefit from defiance ads. In addition, these results were robust to the measure used to solicit support. Across choice and donations, we obtained similar results.

STUDY 3: AGREEMENT AMONG OUT-PARTISANS

Study 3 investigated whether positive reactions to defiance ads among out-partisans were driven by agreement (H2). To do this, we asked participants to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the policy of the focal candidate. Moreover, the current study tested whether the results were robust to a different control. In prior studies, participants in the defiance ads condition read more information about the candidate. Because more information can increase liking (Cacioppo, Gardner, and Berntson 1997), we held information quantity constant by adding comparable policy content to the control condition. Thus, participants across conditions read the same number of issue positions. Lastly, these studies tested an alternative explanation among co-partisans. The lack of a penalty among co-partisans could be driven by increased agreement with the defiance ad content. Perhaps topics chosen by politicians for defiance ads reflect popular policy positions. If so, then defiance ads should increase agreement among co-partisans (not only among out-partisans).

Method

Study 3 recruited one thousand thirteen Democrats and Republicans (50% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 44$, $SD = 14$; 49% Democrats; 51% Republicans). This study followed the same procedure as study 2A, with two changes. The number of issues discussed in the Control condition was the same as those discussed in the Defiance Ads condition. Additionally, after indicating their choice between the focal candidate and an opponent, participants were asked about their agreement with the policy positions of the focal candidate: "Putting aside how much you like or dislike Sam Wright, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the candidate on their policy positions?" Participants reported their answers on a seven-point bipolar scale ranging from 1 (strongly

disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Because choice and donation showed similar results in the previous studies, we only asked participants about their choice of candidate.

Results

Choice. We estimated a mixed linear effects model with issue-level random effects. There was a significant main effect of ad type ($\beta = .086$, $SE = .021$, $z = 4.11$, $p < .001$), such that participants were more likely to choose the Democratic candidate when he used defiance ads ($M = .71$, $SD = .45$) compared to when he did not ($M = .61$, $SD = .49$). There was also a main effect of party ($\beta = -.67$, $SE = .021$, $z = -32.33$, $p < .001$; Figure 3), such that Democratic participants were more likely to choose the Democratic candidate (all Democrats chose the Democratic candidate in both conditions) than Republican participants ($M = .33$, $SD = .47$). Importantly, these main effects were qualified by a significant interaction ($\beta = .17$, $SE = .041$, $z = 4.1$, $p < .001$). Among Republican participants (out-partisans), the defiance ad resulted in a significant increase in choice for the Democratic candidate ($\beta = .17$, $SE = .041$, $z = 4.15$, $p < .001$). However, among Democrats (co-partisans), there was no significant difference in choice between the two conditions. In both conditions, all Democrats chose the Democratic candidate.⁶

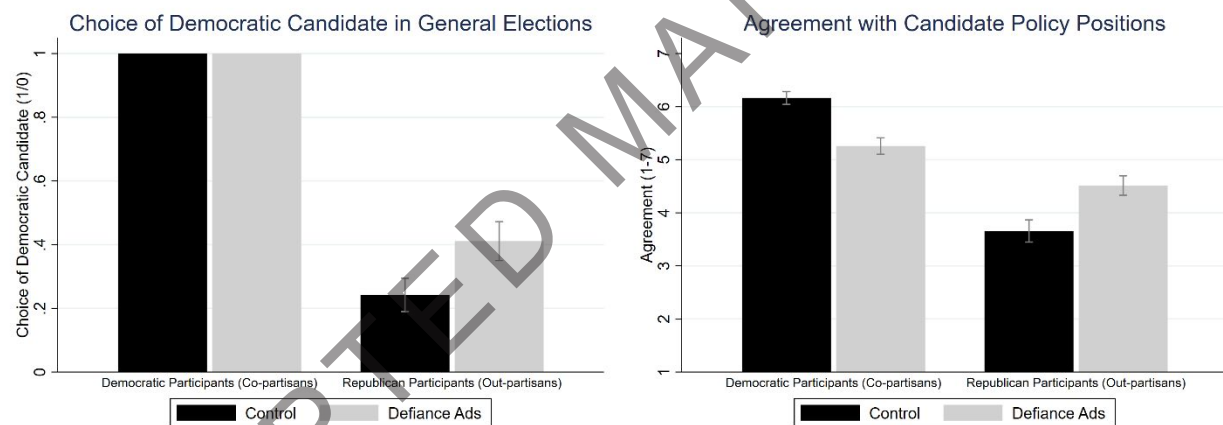
Agreement. Next, we turn to analyzing the agreement results. We begin by examining the main effects in the model. There was no significant main effect of ad type ($\beta = -.012$, $SE = .16$, $z = -.08$, $p = .94$). There was, however, a main effect of party ($\beta = -1.61$, $SE = .091$, $z = -17.61$, p

⁶ Note that, because one hundred percent of Democrats chose the Democratic candidate across both conditions, one cannot estimate a regression, as there is no variation in the data to be explained. This pattern speaks to how disinterested Democratic participants were in voting for a MAGA Republican candidate in this study.

< .001), such that Democratic participants expressed higher agreement ($M = 5.69$, $SD = 1.22$) than Republicans ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.66$). We then tested whether these effects were qualified by a significant interaction. We found that they were ($\beta = 1.76$, $SE = .174$, $z = 10.12$, $p < .001$). Among Democratic participants, defiance ads reduced agreement ($\beta = -.91$, $SE = .32$, $z = -2.85$, $p = .004$). However, among Republican participants, defiance ads increased agreement ($\beta = .86$, $SE = .14$, $z = 6.04$, $p < .001$). This increase in agreement among out-partisans is consistent with H2.

FIGURE 3

CHOICE AND AGREEMENT IN STUDY 3



NOTE.—Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Mediation Analysis. While defiance ads significantly reduced agreement among co-partisan participants, their vote choice did not vary. Accordingly, mediation analyses were restricted to out-partisans (i.e., Republicans). We estimated a bootstrapped mediation model in R using 5,000 iterations. The independent variable was advertising strategy, the mediator was agreement, and the dependent variable was choice. Among out-partisans, defiance ads boosted

agreement ($\beta = 0.86$, $SE = 0.14$, $p < .001$). Agreement, in turn, was a positive predictor of vote choice ($\beta = 0.12$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .001$). Consistent with mediation, there was a significant positive indirect effect of defiance ads on vote choice through agreement (indirect effect = 0.11, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.15]).

Discussion

The results of study 3 replicate those of studies 2A and 2B. These results were robust to using a more conservative control condition that held constant the amount of information disclosed by the candidate. The results also indicate that agreement drove the positive reactions among out-partisans. Lastly, these results rule out an alternative explanation for the lack of a penalty among co-partisans. Co-partisans agreed less, not more, with the candidate who used defiance ads. This suggests that their tolerance of defiance ads occurs *despite* lower agreement, not because of greater agreement.

STUDY 4: PARTY NOMINEE SATISFACTION

Study 4 tested whether the favorable responses to the use of defiance ads among out-partisans depended on their satisfaction with their party’s nominee (H3). We reasoned that, when out-partisans are satisfied with their party’s nominee, they will have little incentive to vote for the focal candidate, even if they used defiance ads. However, if out-partisans are dissatisfied with their party’s nominee, defiance ads can create an opening, allowing the focal candidate to be considered. As described in the introduction, out-partisans can be dissatisfied with their

nominee for a variety of reasons, including when the nominee is engulfed in a scandal and when the nominee holds untenable views.

Method

Study 4 recruited one thousand five-hundred Republicans and Independents who leaned Republican (54.8% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 44$, $SD = 14$). An additional 192 recorded responses were not assigned to a condition and contained no outcome data. All participants read about a Democratic candidate running for U.S. Senate in Arizona, including the candidate's bio and an ad on raising taxes on corporations. Participants in the Defiance Ads condition read the text of an additional ad in which the candidate defied their party's stance on immigration (same text from study 2A).

Next, participants read some information about the Republican nominee running against the focal candidate. In the Typical Nominee condition, the nominee was simply described as "a Republican candidate." In the Objectionable Views Nominee condition, the nominee was described as "an extreme far-right candidate firmly committed to the values and policies that go beyond typical conservative stances." In the Scandal Nominee condition, the nominee was described as "a moderate Republican candidate who has been part of a scandal. John Baker has been found to stalk one of his ex-girlfriends. Specifically, he has repeatedly shown up at her place of work and threatened her with violence if she did not get back with him." Next, participants chose between the Democratic and Republican candidates they read about.

Lastly, participants indicated their satisfaction with their party's nominee on a seven-point bipolar scale ranging from extremely dissatisfied (1) to extremely satisfied (7). As intended by our manipulations, participants in the Objectionable Views Nominee condition reported less

satisfaction with their party’s nominee than participants in the Typical Nominee condition ($\beta = -.41$, $SE = .083$, $t(994) = -4.97$, $p < .001$, $d = .32$). Similarly, participants in the Scandal Nominee condition reported less satisfaction with the nominee than participants in the Typical Nominee condition ($\beta = -2.23$, $SE = .079$, $t(1002) = -28.32$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.79$).

Results

Choice. We estimated an ANOVA with choice as the dependent variable, ad type, nominee type, and their interaction as the explanatory variables. There was a significant main effect of ad type ($F(1, 1494) = 20.23$, $p < .001$) and nominee type ($F(2, 1494) = 106.22$, $p < .001$). Importantly, these were qualified by a significant interaction ($F(2, 1494) = 3.17$, $p = .042$). Defiance ads resulted in a significant increase in choice for the Democratic candidate when the Republican nominee held objectionable views ($\beta = .18$, $SE = .044$, $t(494) = 4.09$, $p < .001$, $d = .37$) or was engulfed in a scandal ($\beta = .11$, $SE = .038$, $t(502) = 2.90$, $p = .004$, $d = .26$). However, defiance ads had no effect on choice when the Republican nominee was a typical nominee ($\beta = .03$, $SE = .042$, $t(498) = .76$, $p = .45$, $d = .068$). This pattern of results is consistent with H3.

Discussion

Results from study 4 demonstrate that the positive response to the use of defiance ads emerges when out-partisans are dissatisfied with their party nominee—for example, when the nominee holds objectionable views that go beyond what is acceptable or when the nominee is marred by scandal. However, when the party nominee is typical, no positive responses among

out-partisans were detected. These results help provide an important boundary condition on when defiance ads are expected to translate to gains for candidates in the context of general elections. Next, we turn to examining the effects of defiance ads in the context of primaries, which allows us to test H4-5.

PRIMARIES

STUDY 5: SPONTANEOUS MENTIONS OF ELECTABILITY AND MECHANISM EVIDENCE

Studies 1-4 examined the consequences of using defiance ads in general elections. However, the potential benefits documented in these studies cannot be realized unless the candidate first wins their party's primary. Without securing the nomination, candidates typically never appear on the general-election ballot, rendering any prospective general-election advantage moot. Studies 5-7 therefore examined whether consumers rewarded or penalized defiance ads in primaries.

Recall that prior studies showed lower co-partisan agreement with candidates who use defiance ads. To win the primaries, defiance ad candidates must gain some other form of benefit. Study 5 tested whether the lower agreement with candidates using defiance ads would be counteracted by greater perceived electability. Relatedly, we tested an important assumption underlying our theorizing around the role of electability, namely that consumers spontaneously think of electability concerns. We had participants share with us the factors they considered when choosing a candidate in their party's primary. If participants naturally mentioned electability, this would suggest that electability is a factor consumers consider on their own.

Additionally, study 5 used a more conservative control condition. In the previous studies, participants in the control condition did not read any information about the candidate’s views on the defiance issue. In study 5, the control condition described an ad in which the candidate expressed the typical party-consistent opinion on the defiance issue. Thus, we compared candidates who launched defiance ads with candidates who launched ads on the exact same topic but expressed the traditional party-consistent view.

Method

Five-hundred thirty-three Democrats and Independents who leaned Democratic completed the survey, after exclusions specified in our pre-registration (60% female; $M_{age} = 43$, $SD = 14$).⁷ This study followed a two-cell between-participant design. Participants were asked to consider the upcoming federal elections and were told they would be answering questions about a competitive U.S. Senate race in Arizona. Specifically, they were asked to imagine deciding which Democratic candidate to support in the primary election.

Spontaneous Mentions of Electability. Participants were then asked: “In this scenario, what matters most to you when choosing a primary candidate?” Responses were collected via an open-ended text box. Our primary dependent variable was the percent of participants who spontaneously mentioned electability in their answer to this question.

⁷ Study 5 was conducted with only democratic participants in order to streamline the stimuli generation process and to facilitate participant recruitment, as there are more Democrats than Republicans on online samples. This decision is consistent with how more Democratic candidates used defiance ads in the 2024 than Republicans. Nonetheless, we wanted to ensure that these effects would be symmetric by party. Thus, SS2 tested whether Republican participants showed similar effects in the context of primaries. The results indicated that they did. That is, the observed effects are symmetric by party.

Importance of Electability. As a complement to this approach, on the next screen, participants were presented with a menu of five choices, each related to a different potential reason why participants might support a primary candidate. They were asked to select the option that mattered the most to them. The five options were related to (1) policy alignment, (2) personality, (3) relevant political experience, (4) demographic background, and (5) electability. We were interested in the percent of participants who chose electability as the most important factor to them and whether this was significantly different from chance.

Conditions. Next, participants read about a Democratic candidate who is running for U.S. Senate in Arizona. Like previous studies, participants read a brief article about the candidate. The article highlighted their upbringing and previous accomplishments. It also included the text of the candidate's ad on immigration. In the Defiance Ads condition, we used language inspired by real defiance ads identified in study 1. In the Control condition, we used language taken from the Democratic party's official party manifesto (a document that political parties publish articulating their views on different issues). The manipulations used in our study read:

Defiance Ads Condition: In an ad on immigration, Sam says: "I'm a proud Democrat, but I'm not afraid to call out my party when we get it wrong. We have not done enough to secure our border, and that has real consequences for our communities. We need more resources and better technology. I won't follow my party's talking points blindly. Our border agents need more resources, and I will work to get them those resources."

Control Condition: In an ad on immigration, Sam says: "As a Democrat, I believe in a humane border that upholds dignity and justice. 'Border security' has too often been a cover for cruelty and xenophobia. Instead of militarization, we need expanded legal pathways and an end to the inhumane policies on our border. I will fight for true immigration justice."

Voting Intentions. After reading this information, participants were asked about how they would vote in the Arizona Senate primaries. Participants could choose between the candidate

they read about or other Democratic candidates. Participants indicated their choice on a 101-point scale, ranging from 0 (Another Democratic candidate) to 100 (Sam Wright).

Electability. After participants indicated their voting intentions, they reported their electability perceptions. Specifically, participants were asked: “How likely is Sam Wright to win the general election in Arizona?” Participants indicated their answer on a 101-point scale, ranging from 0 (Not at all likely) to 100 (Extremely likely).

Agreement. Participants were also asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the candidate on the topic of immigration. Participants could indicate their agreement on a seven-point scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). After completing the agreement questions, participants were debriefed and their participation in the survey concluded.

Results

Spontaneous Mentions of Electability. As pre-registered, we had research assistants blind to the hypothesis code each open-ended response for whether it contained mentions of electability (see pre-registration report for instructions). 37.03% of respondents mentioned electability naturally in their response. Some participants mentioned electability verbatim, others discussed the importance of winning against the opposing party’s nominee, the ability to win over independents, or the ability to win over moderate members of the out-party. Table 3 displays examples of the language used by participants to describe electability.⁸

⁸ As a robustness check, we had a Large Language Model (LLM) classify whether each comment mentioned electability. Chat-GPT 4.5 was provided with the same instruction provided to the human coders in a chat session

TABLE 3

EXAMPLES OF SPONTANEOUS MENTIONS OF ELECTABILITY

A Democratic candidate that can get the most votes in the general election	Who's most likely to win, even if I don't agree with everything they say	Needs to be a fighter, but also likable to centrists
Can win over independents and moderates	The ability to win over swing voters	Popular enough to build a broad coalition
We need someone who can win swing states	Can beat the Republican nominee in the general	The candidate has to be winnable [sic], not just ideologically pure
I want someone who is electable and not too far left or right	I'm voting for the person who can win, not necessarily the one I love	Someone who will appeal to moderate Republicans
They must be competitive in the general election	Electability, resisting the Trump Admin	We need someone with cross-party appeal

NOTE.—Participants were responding to the question: "... what matters most to you when choosing a primary candidate?"

Importance of Electability. Next, we examined the percent of respondents who chose electability as their most important factor from the predetermined list of options. 50.66% of participants chose electability as their most important factor. This made electability the most popular choice (policy alignment came second, with 37.52% choosing it as the most important factor). The percent of participants who selected electability was significantly different from chance (One-sample test of proportion against .20: $p < .001$). These results imply that electability is an important factor for a substantial proportion of participants.

Voting Intentions. We regressed voting intentions on condition (1 = Defiance Ads, 0 = Control). We replicated results from our previous studies. The candidate who used defiance ads did not suffer any backlash effect. Participants were equally likely to indicate their preference for

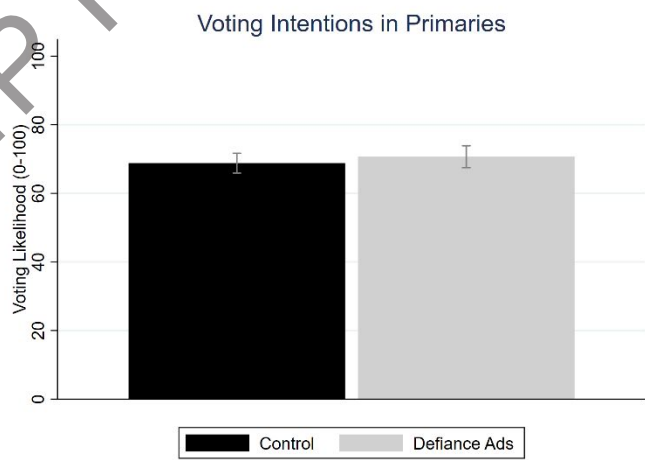
and asked to indicate whether each comment mentioned electability. This analysis revealed that 39.5% of respondents spontaneously mentioned electability as the most important factor in their choice of a primary candidate. This provides convergent evidence that electability naturally comes up for consumers when considering whom to support.

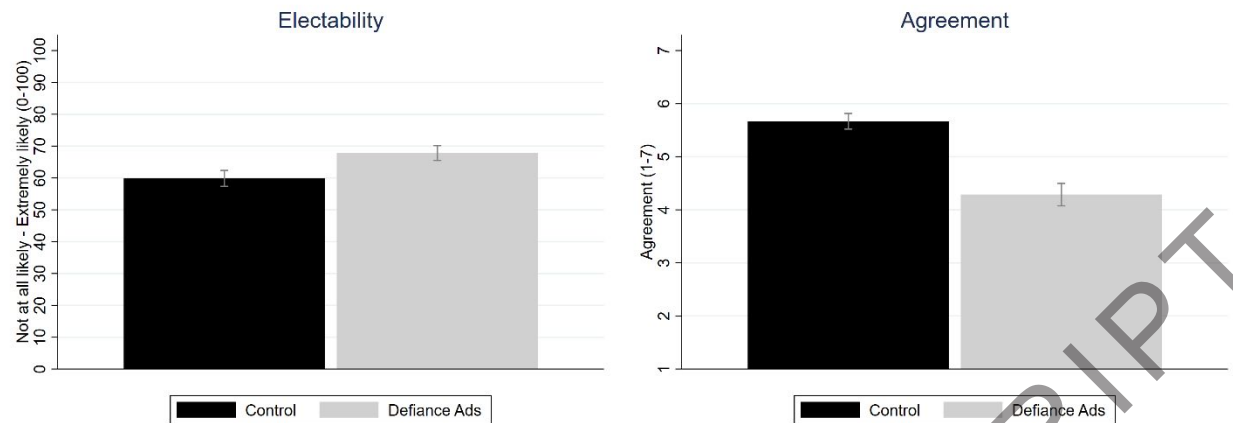
the candidate in the Control ($M = 68.79$, $SD = 24.05$) and Defiance Ads ($M = 70.69$, $SD = 26.43$) conditions ($\beta = 1.9$, $SE = 2.19$, $t(531) = .87$, $p = .39$; Figure 4).

Electability. Next, we examined how the use of defiance ads influenced perceptions of electability using the same analytic strategy described above. Participants in the Defiance Ads condition rated the candidate as *more* electable ($M = 67.84$, $SD = 19.34$) than participants in the Control condition ($M = 59.86$, $SD = 20.88$; $\beta = 7.98$, $SE = 1.74$, $t(531) = 4.58$, $p < .001$, $d = .40$).

Agreement. Participants indicated lower agreement with the candidate in the Defiance Ads condition ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 1.75$) compared to the Control condition ($M = 5.67$, $SD = 1.23$; $\beta = -1.38$, $SE = .13$, $t(531) = -10.56$, $p < .001$, $d = .92$).

FIGURE 4
CONSUMERS' VOTING INTENTIONS, ELECTABILITY PERCEPTIONS, AND
AGREEMENT IN STUDY 5





NOTE.—Error Bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Mediation Analysis. Next, we estimated a bootstrapped mediation model (Model 4; Hayes and Preacher 2014). The independent variable was advertising strategy, the mediators were electability and agreement, and the dependent variable was voting intentions. Use of defiance ads increased electability ($\beta = 7.98$, $SE = 1.73$, $p < .001$) and decreased agreement ($\beta = -1.38$, $SE = .13$, $p < .001$). Both electability ($\beta = .61$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$) and agreement ($\beta = 6.93$, $SE = .60$, $p < .001$) were positively correlated with voting intentions. There was a positive indirect effect through electability (indirect = 4.84, $SE = 1.13$, 95% CI [2.73, 7.11]) and a negative one through agreement (indirect = -9.58, $SE = 1.27$, 95% CI [-12.14, -7.25]).

Discussion

Study 5 revealed that electability is spontaneously considered by consumers. Nearly 40% of participants mentioned electability unprompted, and it was the most frequently selected reason for candidate support when participants chose from a predefined list. Moreover, results from study 5 shed light on the psychological process underlying how co-partisans react to the use of defiance ads in primaries. Participants agreed less with the candidate's position when the

candidate used defiance ads. However, this difference in disagreement was counteracted by an increase in perceptions of electability. Candidates who used defiance ads were seen as more likely to win in the general election. We extended these results to another outcome variable (interest in political merchandise) in supplemental study 4.

One question this study raises is whether our manipulation of defiance ads manipulated other constructs. For instance, the candidate using defiance ads could have come across as more agentic or more principled. We view this alternative as unlikely to explain the results because the control ad also portrayed the candidate as decisive and conviction-driven (e.g., “I will fight for true immigration justice”). Nonetheless, we conducted a post-test to assess this possibility (SS3). We used established measures of agency (Schwarzer and Jerusalem 1995; e.g., “it is easy for this candidate to stick to their aims and accomplish their goals through their own decisions”) and principledness (Aquino and Reed 2002; e.g., “this candidate seems to take pride in upholding their ethical principles”). The results rule out this alternative explanation. We found that defiance ads *reduced* perceptions of agency ($\beta = -.47$, $SE = .12$, $t(296) = -3.83$, $p < .001$, $d = .44$) and principledness ($\beta = -1.12$, $SE = .13$, $t(296) = -8.67$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.00$). That is, participants saw the candidate in the defiance ads condition as less agentic ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 1.14$) and less principled ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.34$) compared to the candidate in the control condition (Agency: $M = 5.39$, $SD = .96$; Principledness: $M = 5.95$, $SD = 0.84$). Thus, these factors cannot account for our effects.

STUDY 6: MODERATION BY STAKES

Study 6 tested our theoretical model through a moderation approach. We propose that the relative weights consumers assign to agreement and electability depend on the stakes of the race (H4). When defiance ads are perceived to boost electability and when the outcome of the race carries important consequences for one's party, co-partisans should be willing to tolerate defiance ads, prioritizing electability even at the expense of agreement. However, if the race is less consequential, the incentive to overlook disagreement diminishes and agreement is likely to loom large. In other words, we expected stakes to moderate the b-link in our theoretical model.

Study 6 also addressed another potential concern with the previous study. In study 5, participants reported their perceptions of electability by specifying the likelihood that a candidate will win. Here, we defined the construct of electability for participants and included more subjective measures of electability. Rather than ask for an exact probability estimate, these measures asked participants to report the extent to which they thought the candidate they read about could appeal to a broad array of voters. This allowed us to test for robustness across different ways of soliciting electability perceptions. Relatedly, study 5 might have inadvertently made electability salient by first asking participants to reflect on the factors that influence their choice of candidate. In the current study, we did not ask participants to reflect on the factors that influenced their choice of candidate. Thus, the current study provides a stronger test for the role of electability perceptions.

Method

We recruited eight hundred Democrats on Prolific Academic (53% female; $M_{age} = 39$, $SD = 12$). This study followed a 2 (Defiance Ads vs. Control) x 2 (High Stakes vs. Low Stakes)

between-participant design. All participants either read about a Democratic candidate who used defiance ads or one who did not (same manipulation from before). Next, participants were provided with more context about the race. In all conditions, participants read that the race was taking place in Arizona. In the High Stakes condition, they were further reminded that Arizona is a highly competitive swing state, and that Republicans won it by a thin margin in the last elections. Moreover, they were informed that the stakes associated with the race were high. For instance, participants read that “in the upcoming U.S. Senate election in Arizona, the stakes couldn’t be higher. Control of the entire Senate could come down to this one race. Every vote in Arizona could shape the national agenda for years to come. That’s why this race in Arizona is seen by many as the tipping point for the country’s future.” In contrast, the Low Stakes condition attempted to make this race seem inconsequential. For instance, participants read: “In the upcoming U.S. Senate election in Arizona, the stakes are relatively low. The balance of power in the Senate is not expected to change based on this seat.”

Next, participants indicated the extent to which they would vote for the candidate they read about in their party’s primary. Moreover, participants expressed their agreement with the positions of the candidate and reported their subjective electability perceptions. They read, “Putting aside how much you like or dislike Sam Wright, we would like to ask you about his electability in the General Election in Arizona,” and indicated their assessment of the candidate’s electability on two items: (1) How much do you think Sam Wright could appeal to Arizona voters? (2) In your opinion, how well does Sam Wright align with the values and priorities of Arizona voters? Both items were measured using a 101-point scale, ranging from not at all (0) to extremely (100). These two items were combined into a composite ($r = .83, p < .001$).

Participants were then debriefed, which concluded their participation in the study. At the end of

the study, participants filled out a manipulation check. The manipulation check read: “Think back to the Arizona race you read about. How high were the stakes for this race?” Participants reported their answer on a seven-point scale, ranging from not at all high to extremely high. Consistent with our expectations, participants in the high stakes condition perceived higher stakes ($M = 6.49$, $SD = .89$) than participants in the Low Stakes condition ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 1.77$; $\beta = -4.13$, $t(797) = -41.61$, $p < .001$).

Results

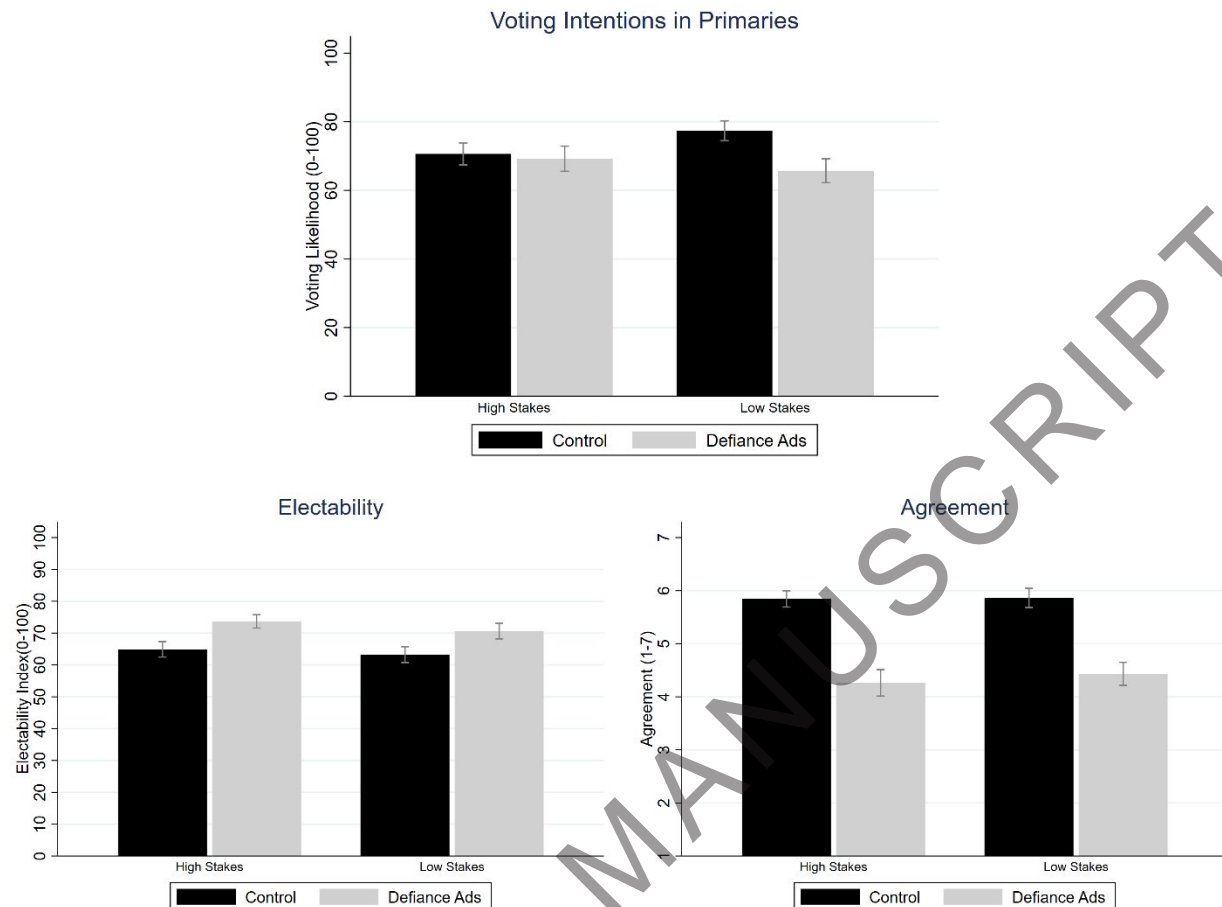
Voting Intentions. As pre-registered, we regressed voting intentions on ad type (1 = Defiance Ads, 0 = Control), stakes (1 = High Stakes, 0 = Low Stakes), and their interaction. This analysis revealed a significant interaction ($\beta = 10.3$, $t(796) = 3.04$, $p = .002$). As Figure 5 shows, when the race was viewed as low stakes, participants in the Defiance Ads condition reported lower intentions to vote for the candidate ($M = 65.69$, $SD = 25.36$) than participants in the Control condition ($M = 77.36$, $SD = 20.72$; $\beta = -11.67$, $t(399) = -5.04$, $p < .001$, $d = .50$). However, when stakes were high, we did not detect evidence of backlash against defiance ads. There was no significant difference between the Defiance Ads condition ($M = 69.22$, $SD = 26.08$) and the Control condition ($M = 70.59$, $SD = 23.34$; $\beta = -1.37$, $t(397) = -.56$, $p = .58$, $d = .06$).⁹

⁹ One question in interpreting Study 6 is whether the effect reflects a backlash against defiance ads under low stakes. To probe this issue, we examined the contrast between the Low Stakes/Defiance Ads cell and the High Stakes cells. Consistent with our theorizing, voting intentions were lower in the Low Stakes/Defiance Ads cell than in the High Stakes cells ($\beta = -4.23$, $SE = 2.14$, $t(601) = -1.97$, $p = .049$). This pattern is consistent with the interpretation that low stakes increase the penalty associated with defiance ads, rather than merely boosting support for the conventional candidate.

Electability. We expected defiance ads to boost perceptions of electability regardless of the stakes associated with the race. Consistent with this, we found no significant interaction ($\beta = -1.41, t(796) = -.58, p = .56$). In the Low Stakes condition, participants in the Defiance Ads condition reported greater electability perceptions ($M = 70.62, SD = 17.91$) than participants in the Control condition ($M = 63.24, SD = 17.73; \beta = 7.38, t(399) = 4.14, p < .001, d = .41$). Similarly, in the High Stakes condition, participants in the Defiance Ads condition reported greater electability perceptions ($M = 73.68, SD = 14.91$) than participants in the Control condition ($M = 64.89, SD = 17.58; \beta = 8.79, t(397) = 5.37, p < .001, d = .54$).

Agreement. Similarly, we expected defiance ads to lower agreement regardless of the stakes associated with the race. Consistent with this, we found no significant interaction ($\beta = .15, t(796) = .72, p = .47$). In the Low Stakes condition, participants in the Defiance Ads condition reported lower agreement ($M = 4.43, SD = 1.59$) compared to participants in the Control condition ($M = 5.86, SD = 1.30; \beta = -1.43, t(399) = -9.88, p < .001, d = .99$). Similarly, in the High Stakes condition, participants in the Defiance Ads condition reported lower agreement ($M = 4.26, SD = 1.77$) compared to participants in the Control condition ($M = 5.84, SD = 1.11; \beta = -1.58, t(397) = -10.73, p < .001, d = 1.08$).

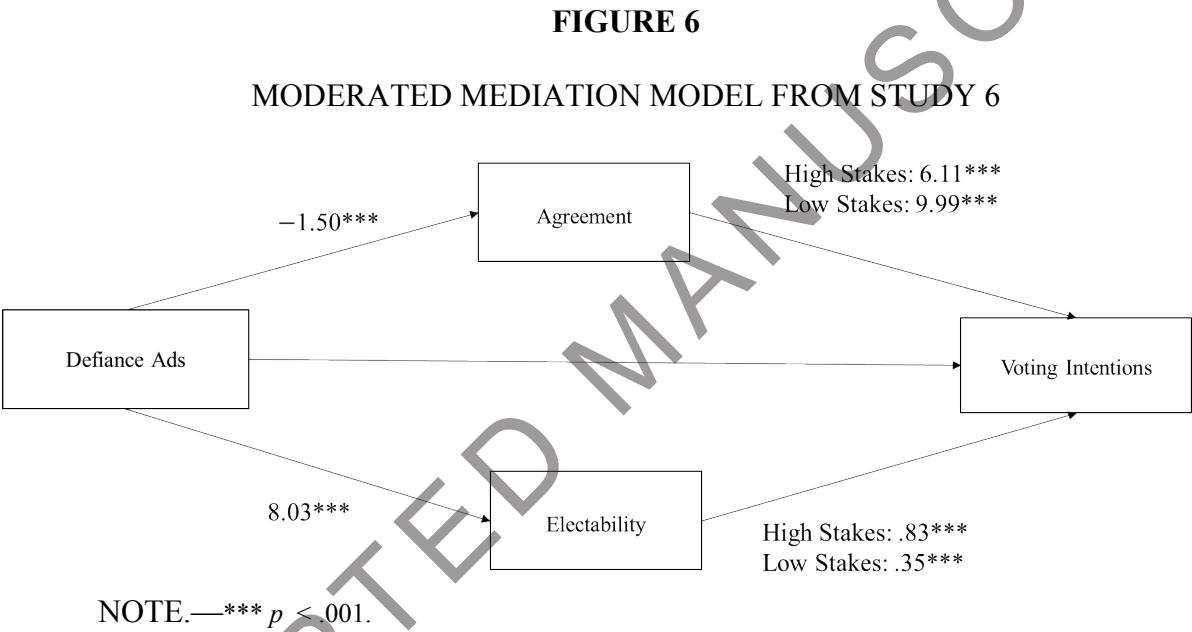
FIGURE 5
CONSUMERS' VOTING INTENTIONS FOR THE CANDIDATE, ELECTABILITY PERCEPTIONS, AND AGREEMENT IN STUDY 6



NOTE.—Error Bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Moderated Mediation. We ran a bootstrapped mediation analysis using (model 14; note that the results do not change if model 15 is used). The independent variable was advertising strategy (1 = Defiance Ads, 0 = Control), the mediators were electability and agreement, the b-link moderator was stakes (1 = High Stakes, 0 = Low Stakes), and the dependent variable was voting intentions. Consistent with our expectations, there was a positive indirect effect through electability when the stakes were high (indirect effect = 6.69, SE = 1.15, 95% CI [4.51, 9.04]). However, this indirect effect became smaller when the stakes were low (indirect effect = 2.80, SE = .60, 95% CI [1.75, 4.07]; index of moderated mediation = 3.89, SE = .89, 95% CI [2.3, 5.77]). There was a negative indirect effect through agreement when the stakes were high

(indirect effect = -9.19 , $SE = 1.31$, 95% CI $[-11.85, -6.73]$). However, this negative indirect effect became *larger* when the stakes were low (indirect effect = -15.02 , $SE = 1.37$, 95% CI $[-17.81, -12.43]$; index of moderated mediation = 5.83 , $SE = 1.34$, 95% CI $[3.2, 8.5]$; Figure 6). Put simply, when stakes changed from high to low, the weight people placed on electability decreased and the weight they placed on agreement increased. In other words, stakes moderated the b-path in our model.



Discussion

Study 6 tested the role of electability and agreement by varying the perceived stakes of the election. When the consequences of losing were high, co-partisans were tolerant of defiance ads in the primaries. In contrast, when the consequences of losing were framed as low, defiance ads triggered backlash. These results provide evidence that consumers calibrate the weight they

place on agreement and electability based on the broader dynamics of the election. In the next study, we further tested our model by moderating the link between defiance ads and electability.

STUDY 7: MODERATION BY RACE COMPETITIVENESS

Study 7 further tested our model by moderating the a-link; that is, the relationship between defiance ads and electability (H5). We reasoned that race competitiveness should influence perceived electability because defiance ads are likely to enhance a candidate's electability in competitive races (where appealing to voters from the opposing side is essential) but have no effect on (or actively reduce) perceived electability in safe races.

Method

We aimed to recruit six-hundred Democrats on Prolific Academic. Six-hundred and twenty-four Democrats (and Independents who leaned Democrats) completed the survey (60% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 41$, $SD = 15$). This study followed a 2 (between: Defiance Ads vs. Control) x 2 (within: Competitive Race vs. Safe Race) mixed design. All participants read about a Democratic candidate who either used defiance ads or did not (same manipulation from study 5). Next, participants evaluated the candidate in two race contexts presented in counterbalanced order: a competitive race (Arizona) and a safe race (California). In the Competitive Race condition, participants were told that this race was taking place in Arizona. They were further reminded that Arizona is a highly competitive swing state, and that Republicans won it by a thin margin in the last election. In the Safe Race condition participants were told that this race was taking place in

California. They were further reminded that California is a Democratic state, and that Democrats won it by a large margin in the last election. All participants saw both conditions, but the order was counterbalanced across participants. The exact manipulation was:

Competitive Race. As you may know, Arizona is a swing state. It's a very competitive state. In the last election, Republicans won it by one of the smallest margins in the country (2% points). Arizonans are generally moderate on key issues like climate change, LGBTQ+ rights, and immigration. For a Democrat to win in Arizona, they have to appeal to moderate voters. A successful candidate would need to win over some Republicans.

Safe Race. As you may know, California is one of the most Democratic states. In the last presidential elections, Democrats won it by one of the highest margins in the country. Californians are progressive on key issues like climate change, LGBTQ+ rights, and immigration. For a Democrat to win in California, they have to energize and appeal to the most progressive Democratic voters.

After each race scenario, participants completed the same set of measures. Specifically, for both the competitive-race (Arizona) and safe-race (California) contexts, participants reported the likelihood of voting for the candidate in their party's primary (same item as study 5). They also reported their agreement with the candidate's positions (same measures as study 5) and the candidate's perceived electability (same items as study 6).

Results

Voting Intentions. We regressed voting intentions on ad type (1 = Defiance Ads, 0 = Control), race competitiveness (1 = Competitive, 0 = Safe), and their interaction. To account for repeated measures, we cluster standard errors on the participant level. This analysis revealed a significant interaction ($\beta = 14.21, t(610) = 8.00, p < .001$; Figure 7). For safe races, participants reported lower intentions to vote for the target candidate in the Defiance Ads condition ($M = 57.28, SD = 30$), relative to the Control condition ($M = 75.34, SD = 22.04$; $\beta = -18.06, t(609) = -8.48, p < .001, d = .69$). However, for competitive races, the backlash against defiance ads was eliminated. There was no significant difference in voting intentions between participants in

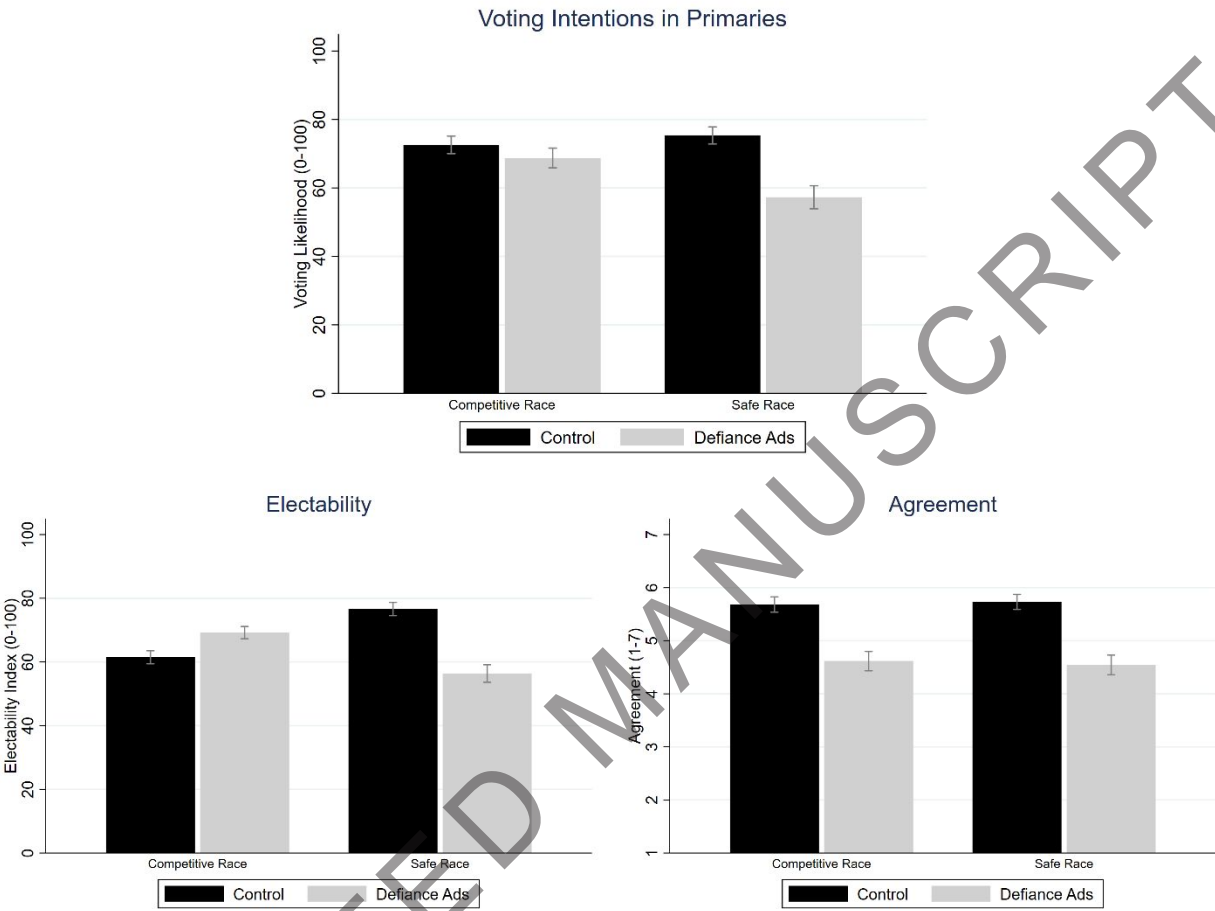
the Defiance Ads ($M = 68.74$, $SD = 25.75$) and the Control conditions ($M = 72.59$, $SD = 22.57$) at conventional levels of statistical significance ($\beta = -3.85$, $t(605) = -1.96$, $p = .051$, $d = .16$).

Electability. We used the same analytic approach to analyze perceptions of electability. We expected defiance ads to boost perceptions of electability in the competitive race, and to suppress (or at least have no positive effect on) perceptions of electability in the safe race. Consistent with this, we found a significant interaction ($\beta = -27.96$, $t(605) = -14.37$, $p < .001$). Replicating results from study 5, for competitive races, participants reported *greater* perceptions of electability in the Defiance Ads condition ($M = 69.19$, $SD = 17.15$) relative to the Control condition ($M = 61.48$, $SD = 17.99$; $\beta = 7.70$, $t(602) = 5.38$, $p < .001$, $d = .44$). However, for safe races, participants reported *lower* perceptions of electability in the Defiance Ads condition ($M = 56.38$, $SD = 24.50$) relative to the Control condition ($M = 76.64$, $SD = 18.33$; $\beta = -20.26$, $t(603) = -11.52$, $p < .001$, $d = .93$).

Agreement. For agreement, we found a significant interaction ($\beta = -.12$, $t(608) = -2.40$, $p = .017$). Across both the Competitive Race condition and the Safe Race condition, defiance ads lowered agreement. However, the difference in agreement between defiance ads and control conditions was slightly greater in the safe race condition ($\beta = -1.19$, $t(606) = -9.99$, $p < .001$, $d = .81$) compared to the competitive race condition ($\beta = -1.07$, $t(603) = -9.03$, $p < .001$, $d = .73$).

FIGURE 7

CONSUMERS' VOTING INTENTIONS FOR THE CANDIDATE, ELECTABILITY PERCEPTIONS, AND AGREEMENT IN STUDY 7



NOTE.—Error Bars represent 95% confidence intervals, clustered on the participant-level.

Discussion

Study 7 provided evidence in support of H5. We found that race competitiveness moderated support for candidates who used defiance ads: in safe races, defiance ads triggered backlash, reducing vote intentions; in competitive races, this backlash was eliminated. Electability perceptions tracked these results. Participants in the Defiance Ads (vs. Control) condition perceived the candidate as more electable when the race was competitive, and less

electable when the race was safe. Note that, due to the mixed nature of our experimental design, we were unable to run mediation analyses (see Web Appendix B for details).

One question this study raises relates to whether these results would replicate in a between-participant design. The concern is that by forcing participants to see both the safe and competitive races, race competitiveness was a more salient factor in consumers' choice than it would normally be. To address this concern, we ran a high-powered between-participant replication of this study (supplemental study 5; see Web Appendix C). The results observed here replicated in a between-participant design. There was a significant interaction between ad type and race competitiveness ($\beta = -10.79$, $SE = 3.11$, $t(944) = -3.47$, $p = .001$). In competitive races, there was no difference between defiance ads and control conditions ($\beta = -.59$, $SE = 2.3$, $t(460) = -.26$, $p = .80$). In safe races, defiance ads led to lower support compared to the control condition ($\beta = -11.38$, $SE = 2.10$, $t(484) = -5.41$, $p < .001$). This suggests that the results are robust to the nature of the design used (between- versus within-participant design).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In recent years, political candidates have started airing ads in which they attacked their own party. At first glance, this behavior is perplexing, given rising levels of polarization and party loyalty. Past research suggests that this behavior would lead to negative consequences for candidates. Contrary to this, we uncovered that consumers tolerated or even supported the use of defiance ads under specifiable conditions. Positive reactions toward the use of defiance ads were detected both correlationally in the wild (study 1) and in carefully controlled experiments (studies 2A-7). Among out-partisans, the positive reactions observed appear to be driven by

increased agreement. These positive reactions were especially likely to materialize when out-partisans were dissatisfied with their party’s nominee. In addition, we explored the consequences of using defiance ads in primaries, where candidates may be concerned about potential backlash effects. We found that consumers have dual responses to the use of defiance ads: on the one hand, they tended to agree less with candidates who used them, thereby reducing their support for such candidates. On the other hand, they tended to see such candidates as more electable, thereby increasing their support for such candidates. Depending on the context, the net effect of using defiance ads could be positive, neutral, or negative.

Our results were robust to various procedural variations. First, they emerged across different measures, including real voting behavior in the wild in the 2024 elections (study 1), choice (studies 2A-4), donations (studies 2A and 2B), and continuous measures of preference (studies 5-7). Second, these results emerged across different control conditions. They emerged when participants received no information about the candidate’s stance on the focal issue (studies 2A and 2B); when participants were provided with information about a party-consistent stance that the control candidate held on a different issue (study 3); and when the candidate used an ad that contained language taken from the party manifesto on the same issue as the one used in the defiance ad (studies 5-7). Moreover, the results held when participants were choosing between two candidates (e.g., studies 2A and 2B), and, crucially, when they were given the option to vote for neither candidate (SS6). Moreover, the results emerged across different types of political races. Furthermore, the effects we uncovered were symmetric by party. In general elections, both Democratic and Republican candidates stand to benefit from the use of this advertising strategy (e.g., study 2A and 2B). Similarly, the lack of a penalty in the primaries held for both Democratic (e.g., study 5) and Republican (e.g., SS2) candidates.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The current research makes several theoretical and practical contributions. This research is the first to investigate defiance ads. We coin the term “defiance ads,” describe their use in recent elections, and document an increase in their deployment over time. Moreover, we examine how consumers react to their use both in the wild and in carefully controlled experiments. Naming and studying defiance ads opens up exciting new research questions. For example, how does exposure to defiance ads influence consumers’ political advocacy behaviors, such as volunteering to knock on doors or phonebank for their party (Hussein and Tormala 2023)? On one hand, consumers might increase their advocacy efforts to compensate for what they perceive as a betrayal of their party’s ideals. On the other hand, they might disengage from the party altogether after seeing candidates violate their expectations of the party’s position. Understanding the consequences of defiance ads for other players, such as political parties, would be an exciting direction. As another example, what role does authenticity (Nunes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani 2021) play in influencing the effectiveness of defiance ads? Voters may respond more favorably when defiance appears rooted in genuine conviction rather than political opportunism. If so, how do consumers infer whether a candidate’s defiance is authentic or not?

Second, our findings contribute to ongoing debates surrounding the limits of affective polarization. Some work has painted consumers as driven predominantly by emotions generated by their partisan affiliation (e.g., Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015). Other work has suggested that consumers care about substantive issues and can be pragmatic in their reasoning (e.g., Orr,

Fowler, and Huber 2023; Tappin, Berinsky, and Rand 2023). Indeed, an emerging literature has begun documenting the ways everyday voters engage in sophisticated and strategic voting choices, such as switching their party registration to influence the nominee of the opposing party (Cohen and Markovits 2026). Our results build on this latter perspective by finding that when electability is salient, consumers engage in a form of strategic reasoning: they become more willing to accept some degree of party defiance as long as it improves their chances of winning in the general elections. More research testing the boundaries of affective polarization and the conditions needed for consumers to approach politics more strategically would be worthwhile.

Third, our results highlight electability as a promising construct. To start, researchers can investigate how electability perceptions shape the consumption of political products, such as political merchandise. Moreover, educating people about the construct of electability could change their willingness to behave in strategic ways, thereby impacting election results. Beyond politics, the construct of electability opens new avenues for research in consumer behavior. At its core, electability involves setting aside one’s preferences and choosing the option one believes that others will choose in order to realize a payoff that depends on coordination. That is, it involves taking into consideration the “coordination viability” of an option— the perceived likelihood that it will attract enough collective support to “win” and enable coordination. This dynamic is familiar in everyday consumption decisions. For example, when a department votes on where to order food for a seminar, a faculty member may forgo their favorite cuisine and instead vote for a second option they like less, if they believe that this second option is more broadly liked and therefore more likely to prevail. Similarly, in crowdsourcing campaigns where consumers submit product ideas and others vote on them, voters may consider not only which idea they personally prefer but also which idea has a realistic chance of winning. Under what

conditions do consumers focus on coordination viability rather than simply express their own preferences? Relatedly, what cues do consumers treat as diagnostic of the coordination viability of different options? Studying the intersection of electability and consumption would be a worthwhile direction for future research particularly because research on second-order beliefs remains scant.

Fourth, our findings have important practical implications for campaign managers and strategists. Our research sheds light on when and why defiance ads can beget a positive reaction from consumers. For example, in general elections, we found that out-partisans were especially likely to respond favorably to defiance ads when the opposing candidate holds objectionable views or is marred by scandal but not when they are a typical out-party member. In the latter case, there is no incentive for out-partisans to defect from their party and consider the candidate of the opposing party. We believe these results provide valuable insights to managers interested in applying this advertising strategy.

Open Questions

In this section, we turn to remaining questions related to defiance ads.

Embracing the Out-Party. One question relates to whether defiance ads are the same as political communications in which the candidate signals their willingness to cooperate and vote with members of the opposing party. Supplemental study 8 suggests that they are not. We randomly assigned participants to read about a Democratic candidate who used defiance ads or one who promised to vote with Republicans on the focal issue. (“I am a proud Democrat, but

Republicans are right. We have not done enough to secure our border. We need more resources, better technology, and much more. I will vote with Republicans to secure our border”). We found that embracing the out-party led to lower candidate support ($\beta = -7.01$, $SE = 2.62$, $t(498) = -2.68$, $p = .008$, $d = .24$). This suggests that defiance ads are distinct from simply promising to collaborate with the opposing party.

Issues and Frames. When using defiance ads, candidates need to decide on which issue to signal defiance. In our studies, we relied on topics that candidates had organically adopted in the wild (e.g., border security and military spending). However, an open question remains: how should candidates decide which topics to be defiant on? Advances in Natural Language Processing techniques such as semantic embeddings have made it increasingly feasible to study topic-level variation. Exploring how topic-level characteristics (e.g., popularity, salience, or associations with the out-party) interact with the effectiveness of defiance ads represents a promising avenue for future research.

Sub-Group Analysis. Readers might wonder, among those who switch in response to defiance ads, which subgroups are most likely to do so. We examine this across political independence, partisan strength, and swing state residency. Past research on political identity typically distinguishes between different groups, such as pure independents, weak partisans, and strong partisans (Ordabayeva et al. 2025). Pure independents comprise a small segment of the U.S. population (approximately 7%) and tend to be less politically engaged, more heterogeneous, and less predictable in their attitudes (Pew Research Center 2019). Consistent with these

characteristics, we find no effect of defiance ads among Pure Independents (SS7), suggesting that their responses are less systematic.

In addition, we find suggestive evidence that responses to defiance ads differ by partisan strength (see Web Appendix D). In Study 4, where partisan strength was measured, there was a marginally significant interaction between ad condition and partisan strength ($\beta = .10$, $SE = .05$, $t(1349) = 1.86$, $p = .064$). Follow-up contrasts show that defiance ads significantly increased support among weak partisans ($\beta = .15$, $SE = .04$, $t(1349) = 4.11$, $p < .001$) but not among strong partisans ($\beta = .05$, $SE = .04$, $t(1349) = 1.32$, $p = .19$). This pattern suggests that defiance ads may be more effective among weaker partisan identifiers.

By contrast, we find no evidence that responses differ by swing state residency (Web Appendix D). Because we had asked participants to indicate the state in which they currently resided across a variety of studies, we pooled data from across studies. We then regressed choice of candidate on ad condition, swing state status, and their interaction. This analysis revealed that the interaction was not significant ($\beta = .04$, $SE = .04$, $t(2876) = .82$, $p = .41$). Defiance ads increased support among out-partisans regardless of whether they resided in swing or non-swing states. It is important to stress that this and other sub-group analyses are preliminary. Our studies were not designed to test for heterogeneity by sub-group and hence these results should be taken as exploratory. Further research is needed to assess the robustness of these findings.

Defiance Ads and Turnout. In most of our studies, we focused on modeling how consumers choose between candidates when defiance ads are used. A reasonable question relates to how turnout affects our results. Consumers are not restricted to choosing between two candidates; they often have other options, such as not voting at all. To test whether our results

are robust to including a no-choice option, we launched supplemental study 6. This study followed the same procedure as study 2A, except that the dependent variable included a third option: choosing not to vote for either candidate. Supplemental study 6 replicated our results: we found a significant interaction between ad type and party membership ($\beta = .14$, $SE = .051$, $t(799) = 2.70$, $p = .007$), such that using defiance ads increased choice of the Democratic candidate among out-partisans ($\beta = .13$, $SE = .048$, $t(392) = 2.68$, $p = .008$) without lowering it among co-partisans ($\beta = -.008$, $SE = .019$, $t(407) = -.45$, $p = .66$). Whereas these results suggest that the current findings might be robust to turnout consideration, we hasten to add that turnout measures used in online studies are susceptible to social desirability bias. Participants may wish to avoid coming across as the type of person who does not vote. Thus, an important direction for future research is to examine how defiance ads shape turnout decisions and, in turn, election outcomes. It is possible that modeling turnout would change the net effect of defiance ads, and if so, that would be an important finding.

Reasons for Increase in Defiance Ads Over Time. Another question has to do with why defiance ads have increased over time. One straightforward possibility is learning. As political consultants learned that this strategy can be effective, more and more campaigns started adopting it. Another possibility might relate to other hidden benefits of this advertising strategy. In the current research, we have focused on how defiance ads impact choice. However, could defiance ads have other positive consequences, such as attracting attention (see Hussein and Catapano 2026)? In a fragmented media environment, defiance ads may be especially likely to cut through the noise. By going against their party, candidates who use this strategy may stand out in consumers' feeds and thus receive greater online engagement (e.g., shares, comments, follows,

longer watch times). More campaigns could be adopting defiance ads for this reason. More research on how defiance ads affect outcomes beyond choice (e.g., online engagement) is thus needed.

Effectiveness of Defiance Ads over Time. Another question has to do with the use of defiance ads over time. As defiance ads get used by more candidates, how will their impact change? One possibility is that their effectiveness will diminish. As more candidates use defiance ads, consumers' perceptions of where the party stands might change on a focal issue. Therefore, consumers may discount the message as routine positioning rather than a meaningful departure from the party line. A second possibility is *issue migration*. As defiance ads become saturated on a focal issue (e.g., immigration), candidates may shift to new issues (e.g., military spending) where breaking away from the party line remains diagnostic. Ultimately, the answer to this question requires more research on defiance ads over time.

Defiance Ads across Countries. Lastly, one might wonder about the effectiveness of defiance ads across countries. The present research focused on how consumers react to defiance ads in the U.S. The U.S. has a unique combination of features that could lead to the tolerance, or even support, of the use of defiance ads. The U.S. suffers from high levels of polarization, the dominance of two political parties, and a two-stage election process with party primaries and general elections. Research assessing the prevalence of defiance ads and consumers' reactions to them in political systems other than the U.S. would be worthwhile

CONCLUSION

Party-defiance ads—ads in which candidates criticize their own party and endorse a position typically associated with the opposing party—are becoming an increasingly prominent feature of U.S. campaigns, yet they appear counterintuitive in an era of strong partisan loyalty. Across eight main studies and eight supplemental studies that combine evidence from real elections with preregistered experiments, we document that consumers can sometimes tolerate or even reward the use of defiance ads: in general elections, consumers continue to choose the candidate from their party even when they used defiance ads over a candidate from the other party. Moreover, out-partisans seem willing to consider candidates who use defiance ads at higher rates than candidates who did not use defiance ads, particularly when they are dissatisfied with their own party’s nominee. In primaries, consumers have dual responses to the use of defiance ads: on the one hand, they tend to agree less with candidates who use them, thereby reducing their support for such candidates. On the other hand, they tend to see such candidates as more electable, thereby increasing their support for such candidates. Depending on the context, the net effect could be positive, neutral, or negative. That said, defiance ads produce a reliable backlash in contexts in which electability is less central; for example, in low-stakes or safe races. Together, these findings identify and explore a novel and increasingly common political advertising strategy, contribute to debates about the limits of affective polarization, introduce electability as a consequential second-order belief that shapes consumer behavior, and offer practical guidance to campaign strategists about when and why consumers are likely to respond favorably to the use of defiance ads.

DATA COLLECTION STATEMENT

Study 1 draws on archival data from YouTube, the Federal Election Commission, and New York Times election results that was collected under the supervision of the first and second authors with assistance from the behavioral labs at Stanford Graduate School of Business and Columbia Business School. Data for the experimental studies were collected using the online panels Prolific Academic and CloudResearch Connect by the Stanford Graduate School of Business and Columbia Business School behavioral labs under the supervision of the first and second authors. Study 2A was collected in September 2024; Study 2B in March 2025; Studies 5, 6, and 7 in May 2025; Study 3 in December 2025; and Study 4 in January 2026. The supplemental studies were likewise collected via Prolific Academic and CloudResearch Connect between 2025 and 2026. Data were analyzed by the first and second authors under the supervision of the third author. The materials, data, code, and preregistration reports can be found in a project folder on the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/7svmf/?view_only=da45102e3e354b61b28adadffe484cb9.

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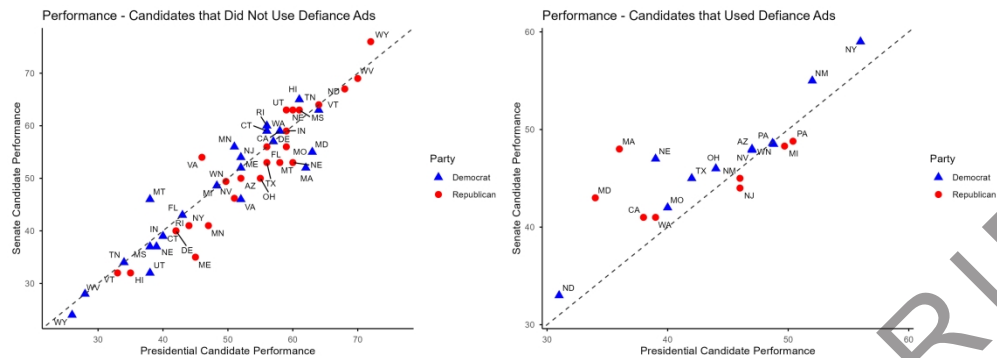
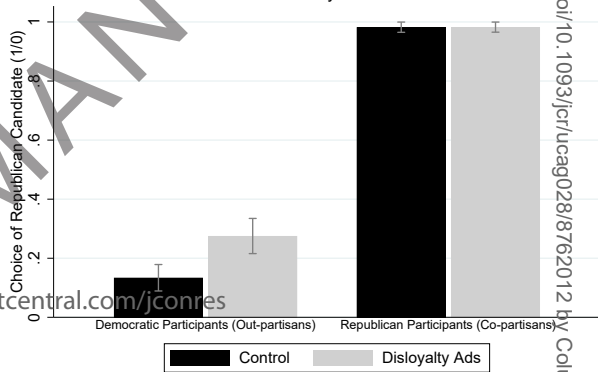
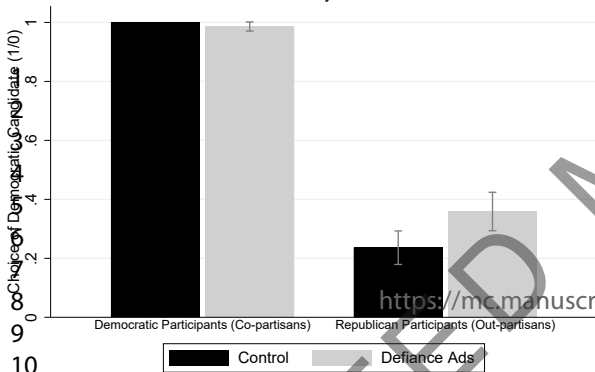
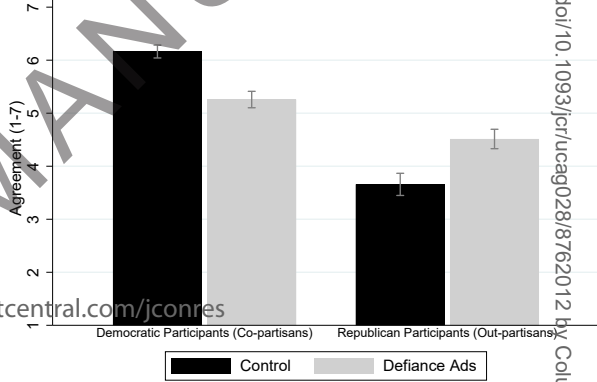
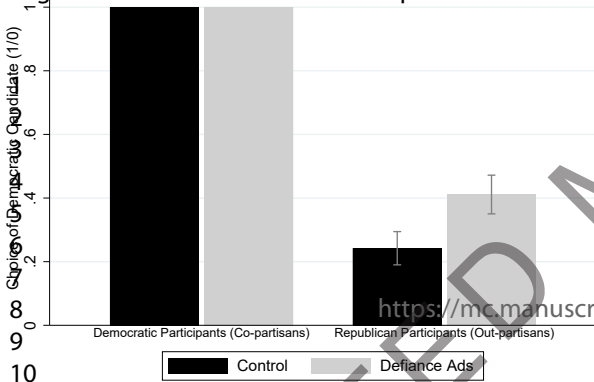


FIGURE 1 - PERFORMANCE OF SENATE CANDIDATES COMPARED TO THE PERFORMANCE OF THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE FROM THEIR PARTY
NOTE.—Among candidates that did not use defiance ads (left panel), some candidates over- and some candidates underperformed their party's presidential candidate. Among candidates that used defiance ads (right panel), most overperformed the presidential candidate

165x58mm (600 x 600 DPI)

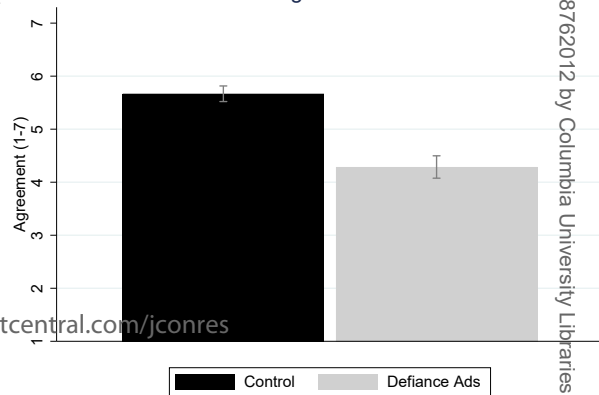




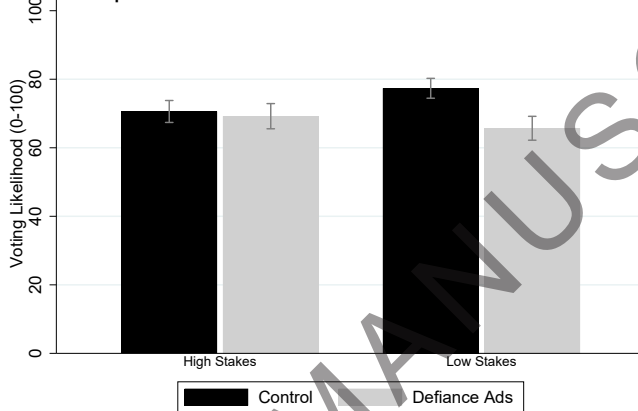


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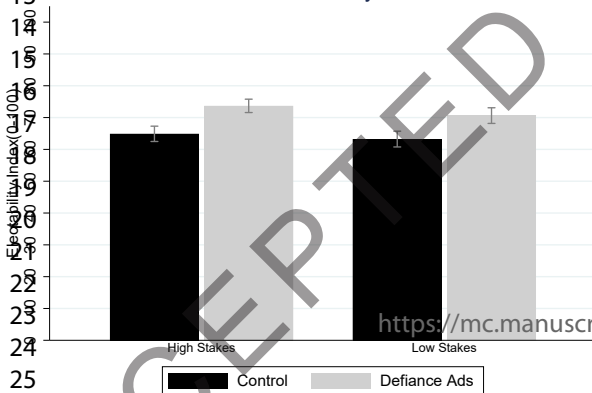
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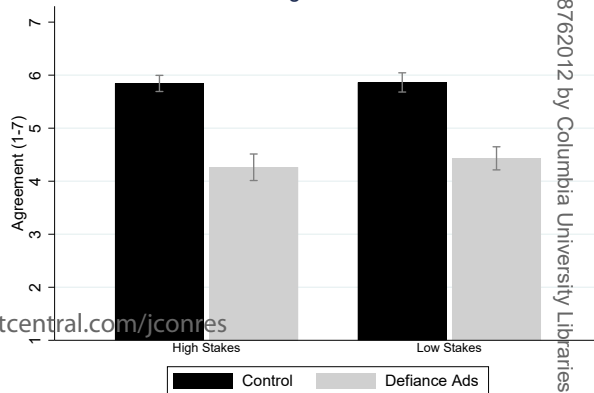
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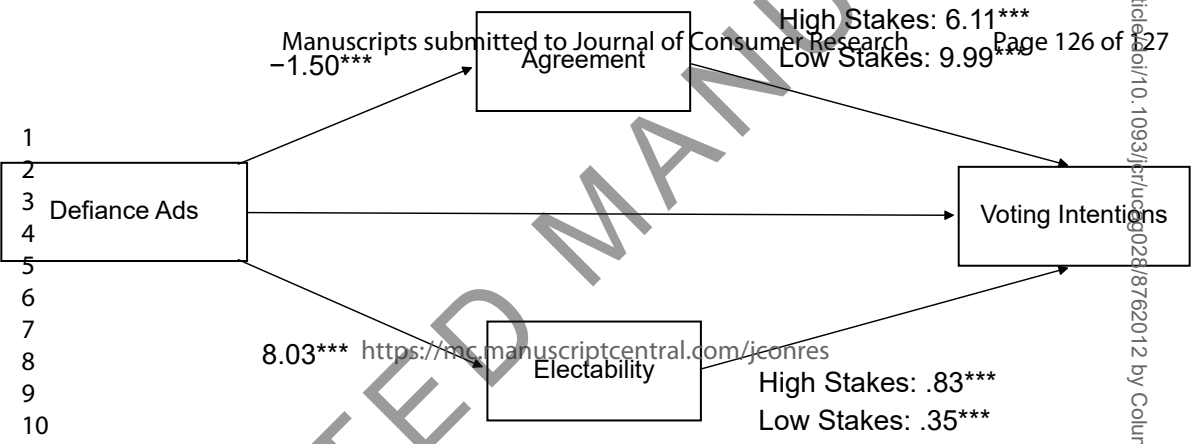
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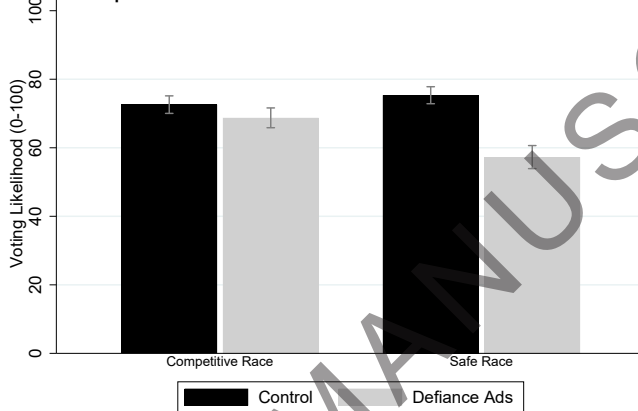


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