**Tweeting Others with Respect:
Historicist Thinking can Reduce Blame and Hostile Retaliation to
Nasty Communications from Partisan Opponents**

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Abstract

Hostile partisan communication pervades social media. Partisan hostility often takes the form of reciprocal blaming, where one feels blamed by an out-party member (“She said my beliefs are stupid!”) and then reciprocates with blame-fueled verbal hostility. Here, we examine whether historicist narratives, story-like descriptions of how someone developed her beliefs, can reduce such hostile verbal retaliation. In three experiments, strongly liberal or strongly conservative participants were presented with “tweets” that criticized their views. They replied with a “tweet” of their own. Experiments 1 and 2 showed that historicist narratives regarding their criticizer reduced hostile verbal retaliation by both liberals and conservatives. Experiment 3 showed that an abstract historicist reminder—a general message about how life history shapes people—reduced hostile verbal retaliation by liberals. Across experiments, reductions in verbal retaliation were mediated by reduced blame of the criticizer.

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The degree of partisan hostility on various social media platforms is disheartening. Indeed, most Democrats and Republicans report that on-line interactions with the out-party are hostile, increasing partisan divisions (Duggan & Smith, 2016). Much on-line hostility involves cycles of tit-for-tat retaliation. That is, one person criticizes the out-party (their opponent) for being heartless, stupid, unethical, and so on, and then a member of the out-party lashes out with a “revenge response” that reciprocates the hostility. We are interested in understanding how to disrupt this dysfunctional dynamic: Following the receipt of hostile criticism from an out-party member, how can the tendency toward hostile verbal retaliation be reduced?

Our approach is rooted in work on the psychology of blame. We conceptualize on-line hostility as a case of reciprocal blaming: One person feels blamed (*She said my beliefs are disgusting!*) and reciprocates by blaming the person who initially criticized her (*She is an idiot...like most conservatives!*). We propose that hostile retaliation is most likely when the recipient strongly blames the out-party communicator (*Her beliefs and behavior disgust me!*) and is less likely when blame is tempered (*Well, her beliefs and behavior are not entirely her fault.*). In the present article, we build upon prior work on historicist narratives and their role in blame mitigation (Gill & Cerce, 2017; Gill & Ungson, 2018; Gill & Thalla, 2020; Gill et al. 2021). In particular, we will test whether historicist narratives regarding nasty partisan communicators—narratives that explain the development of their fervent beliefs in terms of formative life experiences—can reduce hostile verbal retaliation among those targeted by the nasty communication.

Blame and Its Potentially Destructive Role in Social Relations

We define *blame* as “a negative affective response—characterized by *other-condemning emotions* (anger, contempt, disgust; Haidt, 2003)—that is triggered by a norm violation and which targets the violator” (Gill & Cerce, 2021, pg. 2). Because of the hostile flavor of blame, it is unpleasant to be its target. Indeed, blamed individuals often feel “attacked.” And, they often respond by launching a defensive “counter-attack” of blame. This *reciprocal blaming* is a key dynamic of on-line partisan hostilities.

In fact, reciprocal blaming can be found in a variety of contexts. For example, studies of workplace behavior show that subordinates who are harshly criticized by their superiors retaliate both verbally and non-verbally (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Pearson, 1999). Other work has shown how reciprocal blaming weakens the marital bond (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992). Finally, negative reciprocation has been found previously in the domain that interests us here: Political communication. Abelson and Miller (1967) found that people became more polarized in their political beliefs—which can be viewed as a form of retaliation (*I’ll show you!*)—after a confederate made critical, blaming remarks about those beliefs (*That’s ridiculous!*).

Mitigating Partisan Nastiness

Our goal is to illuminate a mechanism for reducing the reciprocation of partisan verbal hostility. We join a large number of scholars who have published work on this issue. Although prior research does not examine *verbal* retaliation (as we do), we assume that reductions in hostile attitudes (which prior work does examine) would translate into more respectful verbal communication (Zungu, 2020).

One relevant mechanism for reducing partisan hostility was uncovered by Stanley et al. (2020), who showed that derogatory ratings of the out-party were reduced when participants were presented with compelling arguments for out-party beliefs. Waytz et al. (2014) showed that hostility toward the out-party is reduced if opponents are encouraged to

see that the out-party is motivated by love for their ingroup rather than by hatred of opponents. Ahler & Sood (2018) showed that people hold wildly inaccurate views of the composition of the out-party, believing, for example, that 39% of Democrats work in organized labor (actually 11%) or that 38% of Republicans earn over \$250,000 per year (actually 2.2%). They showed that correcting these misconceptions reduced hostility toward the out-party.

In short, prior work highlights an array of mechanisms for reducing partisan hostility. Now, we offer our conceptual approach, which focuses on a different mechanism.

Historicist Narratives and the Mitigation of Blame

Historicist narratives provide a story-like description of a person's development, explaining how she became who she is via important formative experiences (Gill & Cerce 2017). Historicist narratives can have a powerful mitigating effect on blame when they create the sense that an offender lacked *control of self-formation*, or the capacity to construct her own self freely and autonomously (Gill & Cerce, 2017). Because the offender did not self-create, she deserves reduced blame for who she is. Prior work on historicist narratives has focused on blame mitigation in response to bad actions such as bullying and homicide (Gill & Cerce, 2017), arrogance (Gill & Thalla, 2020), and low conscientiousness (Gill et al., 2021).

The experiments below examine whether historicist narratives can reduce blame and verbal hostility directed toward nasty out-party members. To our knowledge, no prior work has explored the effectiveness of historicist narratives for mitigating blame of an outgroup with whom one is in ongoing ideological conflict or blame expressed in the form of verbal hostility (vs. scale ratings).

The Present Experiments

Below, we present three experiments. In each experiment, participants were pre-selected to be strongly liberal or strongly conservative. This was to ensure that participants

would feel attacked by criticism of their ideology. In all experiments, participants received a (fake) tweet—critical of their ideology—ostensibly from an out-party member. Participants were invited to tweet a response. These responses were coded for hostility (verbal retaliation), which was our primary dependent variable. We also tested whether any ameliorative effects of historicist narratives on verbal retaliation can be understood in terms of the mediational model supported by prior work on historicist narratives. For all experiments, data files and SPSS code for primary analyses are available at:

https://osf.io/qx4z3/?view_only=d43e2782e6104a719ae10e39915fe073

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 focused on liberal participants and utilized a 2(harshness of received tweet: gentle, harsh) X 2(historicist narrative regarding the tweeter: no, yes) design. We manipulated tweet harshness to confirm our assumption that partisan hostility is often reciprocal: Participants will send nastier replies to a harsh as opposed to a gentle tweet, even if both are critical of their beliefs. Our key prediction is that the historicist narrative manipulation will reduce verbal retaliation.

Method

Participants

We utilized Prolific's prescreening feature to recruit 400 participants who self-categorized as liberal. We planned to delete participants who missed the majority of our three attention checks, but none did so. We deleted participants who missed at least one memory check ($N = 11$). A memory check failure reveals an inability to remember very basic facts about the information one read. See the Supplemental Materials for examples of our attention and memory checks. To confirm the effectiveness of Prolific's political ideology screen, at the end of our survey we had participants rate their ideology on a scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Liberal*) to 7 (*Strongly Conservative*). We deleted participants who selected the

scale midpoint ($N = 5$) as well as those who selected just one point above or below the scale midpoint ($N = 68$). Our goal, as stated above, was to ensure that participants were highly partisan. All data deletion was done on *a priori* grounds and resulted in a final sample of 316 strongly liberal participants (179 female, 7 non-binary). Based on a sensitivity analysis computed via G*Power (Faul et al., 2007), this sample size provided us with 80% power to detect an effect size of $\eta^2 = .02$ (small effect). For all our experiments, we utilize Prolific's prescreening feature to ensure that participants who complete the experiment were not previously in similar studies from our lab.

Procedure

Participants provided informed consent and then learned that they would read and respond to a “political tweet.” Unbeknownst to participants, the (fake) tweeter would send a message that was critical of their ideology. Participants were then randomly assigned to the *no narrative* condition or the *historicist narrative* condition. In both conditions, participants were told that they would learn a bit more about the tweeter before reading the tweet. In the no narrative condition ($N = 155$), participants read a paragraph of non-diagnostic information (*Sabrina is 19 years old. She lives in Denver, Colorado and is the youngest of 3 siblings...*). In the historicist narrative condition, ($N = 161$), participants read a paragraph that explained the development of the tweeter's conservative worldview (*Sabrina is 19 years old. She grew up in an Evangelical Christian home...*). All materials for all experiments are in the Supplemental Materials file. To save space, we will not repeat this fact for each experiment.

Following the historicist narrative manipulation, all participants received a tweet from “Sabrina.” The presentation format was made to look similar to Twitter. Participants were randomly assigned to receive a tweet that reflected *gentle criticism* ($N = 162$) or *harsh criticism* ($N = 154$). The gentle criticism stated: *Liberals tend to support lots of government spending on the poor and this often results in higher taxes. I say: Let's control spending and*

keep taxes low! The harsh criticism stated: *Liberals are ignorant socialists who want to take more and more money from good, hard-working people and give it away to lazy people who do not deserve it. Disgusting!*

Participants were invited to tweet a response. Following data collection, two independent coders who were blind to condition coded participants' tweets for hostility on a five-point scale ranging from *Very Gentle* (1) to *Very Harsh* (5). Four participants failed to write a tweet and another eleven wrote difficult to code nonsense. Coders showed a high level of agreement, $r(299) = .77, p < .001$, and we averaged their ratings to form a measure of *verbal retaliation* ($M = 3.30, SD = .73$).

Participants then completed a variety of dependent measures on five-point scales with endpoints labeled *Strongly Disagree* (1) and *Strongly Agree* (5). We will focus on two key variables whose relevance to historicist narratives is well-supported (Gill & Cerce, 2017). Analyses involving all dependent variables can be seen in the Supplemental Materials. Our two key variables are *blame* (e.g., *I feel anger toward Sabrina based on her tweet*; $M = 3.41, SD = 1.04, \alpha = .86$) and *control of self-formation* (e.g., *Throughout her life, Sabrina was always in control of the development of her political views*; $M = 3.12, SD = 1.05, \alpha = .83$). Gill and Cerce showed that historicist narratives reduce blame because they reduce perceived control of self-formation. Here, we extend their work by testing whether this reduced blame can be achieved when the target is an insulting ideological foe and whether the blame reduction carries over into reductions in verbal hostility.

Finally, participants completed demographic items and were then fully debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Results

We used the General Linear Model (GLM) procedure in SPSS to compute a 2 (harshness of received tweet: gentle, harsh) x 2 (historicist narrative: absent, present)

ANOVA. We started with our key dependent variable: Verbal retaliation, or the hostility of tweets sent in reply to “Sabrina.” The analysis revealed a main effect of the harshness of the received tweet, $F(1, 297) = 14.03, p < .001$ ($M_{Gentle} = 3.16, M_{Harsh} = 3.47; \eta^2 = .05, 90\% CI: .02, .09$). Supporting our assumption of reciprocal blaming, participants sent nastier tweets to Sabrina when her tweet was harsh rather than gentle. There was also a main effect of historicist narratives, $F(1, 297) = 5.34, p = .022$, ($M_{No-Narrative} = 3.41, M_{Narrative} = 3.22; \eta^2 = .02, 90\% CI: .003, .06$). Supporting our key prediction, verbal retaliation was reduced by the historicist narrative. The interaction was not significant, $F(1, 297) = 1.78, p = .18$ ($\eta^2 = .01, 90\% CI: 0, .02$).

Next, we analyzed blame. There was a main effect of the harshness of the received tweet, $F(1, 312) = 34.06, p < .001$ ($M_{Gentle} = 3.10, M_{Harsh} = 3.75; \eta^2 = .10, 90\% CI: .05, .15$). The critical tweeter was blamed more when her criticism was harsh than when it was gentle (again, suggesting reciprocity). There was also a main effect of historicist narratives, $F(1, 312) = 7.79, p = .005$ ($M_{No-Narrative} = 3.59, M_{Narrative} = 3.27; \eta^2 = .03, 90\% CI: .002, .05$). Blame was reduced following a historicist narrative. The interaction was not significant, $F(1, 323) = .63, p = .43$ ($\eta^2 = .00, 90\% CI: .00, .02$).

Finally, we analyzed control of self-formation. Here, there was no effect of the harshness of the received tweet, $F(1, 312) = 2.24, p = .13$ ($M_{Gentle} = 3.05, M_{Harsh} = 3.22; \eta^2 = .01, 90\% CI: .00, .03$). There was, however, the expected main effect of historicist narratives, $F(1, 312) = 38.72, p < .001$ ($M_{No-Narrative} = 3.48, M_{Narrative} = 2.79; \eta^2 = .11, 90\% CI: .06, .17$). In the presence of a historicist narrative, the critical tweeter was seen as having less control over the development of her ideology. The interaction was not significant $F(1, 323) = .00, p = .99$ ($\eta^2 = .00, 90\% CI: .00, .02$).

We computed a test of mediation to examine whether the reduction in verbal retaliation achieved by the historicist narrative was mediated by shifts in control of self-

formation and blame. We used Model 6 from Hayes's PROCESS program (Hayes, 2018) to test the core model supported by Gill and Cerce (2017)—*Narrative* $\rightarrow$ *Control of Self-Formation* $\rightarrow$ *Blame*—with the addition of verbal retaliation as a downstream consequence of blame. The model can be seen in Figure 1:

Coefficients are standardized in all our mediation models in this article. Not depicted in Figure 1 is the fact that the harshness of the received tweet was included as a covariate, as it had a significant effect on both blame and verbal retaliation. As can be seen in Figure 1, results revealed a significant indirect effect (according to a bias-corrected bootstrap test) suggesting that historicist narratives reduce blame by reducing perceived control of self-formation, and that these reductions in blame are associated with reduced levels of hostile verbal retaliation toward one's criticizer.

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 examines whether historicist narratives have similar effects among conservatives. Henceforth, we drop the *harshness of received tweet* manipulation. All participants receive harsh tweets. That manipulation served its purpose in Experiment 1, showing the reciprocal nature of partisan blaming (people are harsher after being treated harshly). The manipulation did not interact with our historicist narratives manipulation. Thus, we see no reason to continue using it.

Please see our Supplemental Materials for an earlier, under-powered version of Experiment 2 that provides some additional support (albeit sometimes marginal) for our predictions.

Method

Participants

We utilized Prolific's prescreening feature to recruit 627 participants who self-categorized as conservative. We deleted participants who missed a majority of our attention checks ($N = 5$) and those who missed at least one memory check ($N = 21$). As above, next we deleted participants who selected the scale midpoint of our ideology scale ($N = 17$), those who scored on the liberal side of the scale midpoint ($N = 5$), and those who selected just one point above the scale midpoint indicating weak conservative beliefs ($N = 192$). All data deletion was done on *a priori* grounds and resulted in a final sample size of 387 strongly conservative participants (164 male, 1 non-binary). Based on a sensitivity analysis computed via G*Power (Faul et al., 2007), this sample size provided us with 80% power to detect an effect size of $\eta^2 = .02$ (small effect).

Procedure

The procedure was identical to Experiment 1, although the content of the historicist narrative was changed to explain the formation of Sabrina's liberal (rather than conservative, as in Experiment 1) worldview. Following the historicist narrative manipulation, all participants received a harsh tweet from Sabrina: *Oh, the inhumanity of conservatives! They are more than willing to let more and more innocent civilians die in mass shootings just so they can have the freedom to own high-powered murder weapons that have no place any decent society. Disgusting!*

Participants were invited to tweet a response. Following data collection, two independent coders who were blind to condition coded participants' tweets on a five-point scale ranging from *Very Gentle* (1) to *Very Harsh* (5). Seven participants provided no tweet or a nonsensical tweet. Coders showed a high level of agreement, $r(378) = .69$, $p < .001$, and we averaged their ratings to form a measure of *verbal retaliation* ($M = 2.88$, $SD = .77$).

Participants then completed the same dependent measures as in Experiment 1 (*blame*, $M = 2.95$, $SD = 1.16$, $\alpha = .88$; *control of self-formation*, $M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.17$, $\alpha = .85$).

Finally, participants completed demographic items and were then fully debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Results

We computed a one-way ANOVA (narrative absent vs. present) analyzing our key dependent variable: Verbal retaliation. The analysis revealed a main effect of the historicist narrative manipulation, $F(1, 379) = 6.79$, $p = .01$ ($M_{No-Narrative} = 2.99$, $M_{Narrative} = 2.78$; $\eta^2 = .02$, 90% *CI*: .002, .05). In line with our key prediction, verbal retaliation was reduced following a historicist narrative. Experiment 2, then, replicates the key effect of Experiment 1 with conservative rather than liberal participants.

Next, we analyzed blame. Results revealed a main effect of historicist narratives, $F(1, 385) = 10.04$, $p = .002$ ($M_{No-Narrative} = 3.14$, $M_{Narrative} = 2.77$; $\eta^2 = .03$, 90% *CI*: .01, .06). Finally, the historicist narrative also significantly reduced perceived control of self-formation, $F(1, 385) = 114.78$, $p < .001$ ($M_{No-Narrative} = 3.91$, $M_{Narrative} = 2.79$; $\eta^2 = .23$, 90% *CI*: .17, .29).

We computed the same mediational model as in Experiment 1. See Figure 2. As can be seen there, replicating Experiment 1, there was a significant indirect effect (according to a bias-corrected bootstrap test) suggesting that historicist narratives reduced blame by reducing perceived control of self-formation, and these reductions in blame were associated with lower levels of verbal retaliation against one's critic.

Bootstrap test for the indirect effect (95% CI): (-.07, -.02)

Experiment 3

Experiments 1 and 2 provided evidence that historicist narratives regarding nasty ideological critics can temper verbal retaliation. Although these results are promising, one limitation is that the historicist narrative intervention is not easily exportable to real-world settings. A Twitter user is not going to read a paragraph about the life history of every nasty tweeter she encounters! So, in Experiment 3 we altered our manipulation to make it more exportable. In particular, we created a brief *historicist reminder* manipulation, which made the general point that individual minds are shaped by the families, communities, and geographical regions in which they develop. This manipulation is inspired by work on *lay historicism* (Gill et al., 2021), which focuses on historicism as a general belief about the social world rather than on particular concrete narratives regarding particular individuals. We tested whether this brief, abstract reminder about the formative influence of life history is capable of reducing verbal retaliation.

Method

Participants

We utilized Prolific's prescreening feature to recruit 400 participants who self-categorized as liberal. We planned to delete participants who missed the majority of our three attention checks, but none did so. Similarly, no one was deleted for missing memory checks. As above, we deleted participants who selected the midpoint of the ideology scale ($N = 9$), those who scored on the conservative side of the scale ($N = 1$), and those who selected just one point below the scale midpoint indicating weak liberal beliefs ($N = 49$). All data deletion was done on *a priori* grounds and resulted in a final sample size of 341 strongly liberal participants (175 female, 8 non-binary). Based on a sensitivity analysis computed via G*Power (Faul et al., 2007), this sample size provided us with 80% power to detect a small effect size ($\eta^2 = .02$).

Procedure

After providing informed consent, participants learned that they would read a “political tweet” and then respond with a tweet of their own. All participants received Sabrina’s harsh tweet from Experiment 1, which targeted liberals. When they clicked a button to reply to Sabrina, they received a message that said: *Before you reply, please read this message from the platform.* They were randomly assigned to a *control condition* (neutral message; $N = 174$) or to the *historicist reminder condition* ($N = 162$). Both messages were situated within graphics that created the appearance of being from Twitter. Whereas the control condition invited participants to provide feedback to improve platform functionality, the historicist narrative condition read as follows:

Before you interact with people on our platform, remember this: Every individual's beliefs and attitudes are created in the context of his or her family, personal upbringing, geography, media exposure, spiritual and religious background, educational background, class, etc. No one becomes who they are all by themselves, but rather each person is forged by their surroundings and life experiences.

Following this manipulation, participants composed their tweets to Sabrina.

Participants’ tweets were coded as in Experiments 1 and 2 (five participants wrote nothing or wrote difficult to code nonsense). Coders showed a very high level of agreement, $r(334) = .77$, $p < .001$, and their ratings were averaged to form an index of *verbal retaliation* ($M = 2.93$, $SD = .93$).

Participants then completed a variety of dependent measures as above and we will focus on two (*blame*, $M = 3.85$, $SD = .91$, $\alpha = .82$; *control of self-formation*, $M = 3.35$, $SD = .99$, $\alpha = .78$).

Finally, participants completed demographic items and were then fully debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Results

We computed a one-way ANOVA (neutral control vs. historicist reminder) analyzing our key dependent variable: Verbal retaliation. The analysis revealed a main effect of the historicist reminder, $F(1, 334) = 4.25, p = .04$ ($M_{Control} = 3.03, M_{Historicist} = 2.83; \eta^2 = .01, 90\% CI: .0002, .04$). Importantly, this shows that a brief historicist reminder—which could plausibly be presented via a social media platform—can reduce verbal retaliation just like the more concrete and specific-to-the-target-person narratives used in Experiments 1 and 2.

Next, we analyzed blame. The effect of the historicist reminder on blame was not significant, $F(1, 334) = 2.08, p = .15$ ($M_{Control} = 3.92, M_{Historicist} = 3.78; \eta^2 = .01, 90\% CI: .00, .03$). But, the effect on control of self-formation was significant, $F(1, 334) = 6.37, p = .01$ ($M_{Control} = 3.48, M_{Historicist} = 3.21; \eta^2 = .02, 90\% CI: .002, .05$).

Finally, we computed the same mediational model as in Experiments 1 and 2. Results can be seen in Figure 3:

Bootstrap test for the indirect effect (95% CI): $(-.01, -.0002)$

As can be seen there, replicating Experiments 1 and 2, there was a significant indirect effect (according to a bias-corrected bootstrap test) suggesting that the historicist reminder reduced blame by reducing perceived control of self-formation, and these reductions in blame were associated with reduced verbal retaliation. Clearly, a similar process is going on here as in Experiments 1 and 2, although the brief, abstract historicist reminder has (unsurprisingly) a weaker effect than the lengthy, concrete narratives of those prior studies. Although the mediational model showed a significant indirect effect consistent with the prior studies, future research should consider measuring the mediators at the “group level” (i.e. “Do *people* control the development of their own beliefs?” rather than “Did *Sabrina*...?”). It might be

that the mediated effect would be more powerful if the mediators referenced the same target (*people* rather than *Sabrina*) as the historicist reminder manipulation.

General Discussion

Political conversations in the U.S. are suffused with partisan hostility. Much of the hostility involves reciprocal blaming. Our goal in this paper has been to investigate ways of interrupting such reciprocal blaming. Our focal concept is historicist narratives, which provide a story-like description of how a person became who she is under the influence of significant formative experiences. Such narratives mitigate blame because they create the sense that the morally offensive target lacked control of self-formation and thus deserves reduced blame for her (ostensibly) defective self.

Experiments 1 and 2 involved strongly liberal and strongly conservative participants, respectively, receiving a tweet from an apparent out-party member who criticized their ideology. Prior to this criticism, some participants received a historicist narrative detailing how the nasty tweeter's upbringing led her to form her fervent views. Other participants received non-diagnostic information about her. Results revealed that, for both liberals and conservatives, historicist narratives reduced verbal retaliation against the nasty tweeter. This was mediated by the fact that the narrative lowered perceptions of the tweeter's control of self-formation, these reductions were associated with reduced blame, which, in turn, was associated with more civil replies to her criticism.

Although Experiments 1 and 2 show how historicist thinking can temper partisan hostility, the manipulation of historicist thinking in those studies would be impractical in a real-world context. To test a more scalable intervention, in Experiment 3 we exposed strongly liberal participants to an abstract historicist reminder—activating a lay historicist theory (Gill et al., 2021)—which was barely longer than a tweet. The historicist reminder prompted participants to reflect on the fact that “Each person is forged by their surroundings and life

experiences.” They received the reminder after being criticized by the out-party member but before replying to her. Results revealed that the historicist reminder functioned like the concrete, target-specific narratives from Experiments 1 and 2: It reduced perceptions of the nasty tweeter’s control of self-formation, these reductions were associated with reduced blame, which, in turn, was associated with more civil replies to her criticism.

In an experiment not presented here, we tested the impact of the historicist reminder on conservatives ($N = 449$) using the same design as for liberals. The historicist reminder had no effect on verbal retaliation, $F(1, 447) = .03, p = .86$ ($M_{control} = 2.49, M_{reminder} = 2.51; \eta^2 = .00, 90\% CI: .00, .005$). Although this suggests that conservatives were unaffected by historicist thinking, this finding must be interpreted in light of the fact that conservatives in this study tended to be relatively non-harsh even in the absence of any intervention. Indeed, their tweets here were substantially less harsh than liberals in Experiment 3, $t(788) = 6.32, p < .0001$ ($d = .45; 95\% CI: .31, .60$). This raises the possibility that these conservatives were unaffected by historicist thinking because they had little hostility to remove in the first place. Although this might seem far-fetched with the verbal hostility of Donald Trump still poisoning our memories, it is consistent with prior work on conservatism and politeness (Hirsh et al., 2010).

One limitation of our mediational approach is that we did not establish causality at each link in our model (Spencer et al., 2005). In particular, we failed to provide causal evidence for two links: *Control of self-formation* $\rightarrow$ *Blame* and *Blame* $\rightarrow$ *Verbal retaliation*. With regard to the *control of self-formation* $\rightarrow$ *blame* link, however, existing experimental evidence strongly supports a causal link. For example, whether control of self-formation is undermined by learning that evil neuroscientists changed the offender’s personality while she slept (Taylor & Maranges, 2020), by reminders of biological determinism (Shariff et al., 2014), or by reminders of determinism in general (Hannikainen et al., 2019), these reductions

in perceived control of self-formation mitigate blame. Although a causal link between blame and verbal hostility might seem too obvious to merit its own study (verbal hostility is simply the outward expression of blame), we present a study in our Supplemental Materials showing such a causal link.

A second limitation of our mediational evidence is that we did not consider alternative models. We note that Gill and Cerce (2017) considered a rich set of mediational models and found evidence that control of self-formation was the only consistent mediator of the blame mitigating impacts of historicist narratives. In the present studies, compassion stands out as a plausible alternative mediator of the effect of historicist narratives (see univariate analyses of compassion in the Supplemental Materials). Accordingly, in our Supplemental Materials we present models pitting blame against compassion as predictors of verbal retaliation. In every case, blame is the superior predictor of verbal retaliation.

The present experiments add to a growing literature on historicist narratives. However, the effect sizes in the present experiments ($\eta^2 \approx .02$) are smaller than those found in prior studies ($\eta^2 \approx .15$ in Gill & Cerce). This presumably reflects the stubbornness of partisan animosity. Indeed, in their studies that focused on highly partisan issues, Stanley et al. (2020) also found small effect sizes for their intervention of presenting the persuasive arguments behind out-party beliefs ($\eta^2 \approx .02$). Furthermore, Voelkel et al. (2021) found even smaller effect sizes ($\eta^2 < .01$) for interventions that involved thinking of a friendship with an out-party member or correcting misperceptions about out-party composition. Thus, reducing partisan animosity is difficult. But, historicist thinking appears to be as effective or more effective than other approaches.

Conclusion

Partisan hostility is rampant. Historicist thinking about political opponents can temper partisan hostility. Future work should explore novel interventions that prompt historicist

thinking, which produce relatively large reductions of partisan hostility, and which are exportable to real-world settings. The political culture of democratic societies could benefit from such interventions.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Among liberals, a historicist narrative regarding a partisan critic lowers perceived control of self-formation, thereby mitigating blame and reducing hostile verbal retaliation. Coefficients are standardized.

Figure 2. Among conservatives, a historicist narrative regarding a partisan critic lowers perceived control of self-formation, thereby mitigating blame and reducing hostile verbal retaliation. Coefficients are standardized.

Figure 3. Among liberals, an abstract historicist reminder lowers perceived control of self-formation of a partisan critic, thereby mitigating blame and reducing hostile verbal retaliation. Coefficients are standardized.