Pressing Politics: Measuring Political Approach & Avoidance Behavior

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LITERATURE

Much of politics is about effort. Preference for candidates, parties, or policies mean little if these preferences do not translate into effortful actions. We introduce and demonstrate a lab-based measure of political effort, as we attempt to answer the question:

How much effort are people willing to expend in order to approach or avoid exposure to politicians and causes that they find either favorable or unfavorable?

Previous research would suggest that individuals would approach positive (appetitive) and avoid negative (aversive) stimuli (Feltman & Elliot, 2012; Elliot & Covington, 2001). Individuals who engage in approach and avoidant behaviors (typically based on approach and avoidance temperaments) are likely to do so to promote overall psychological health and well-being (Burkley & Burkley, 2018).
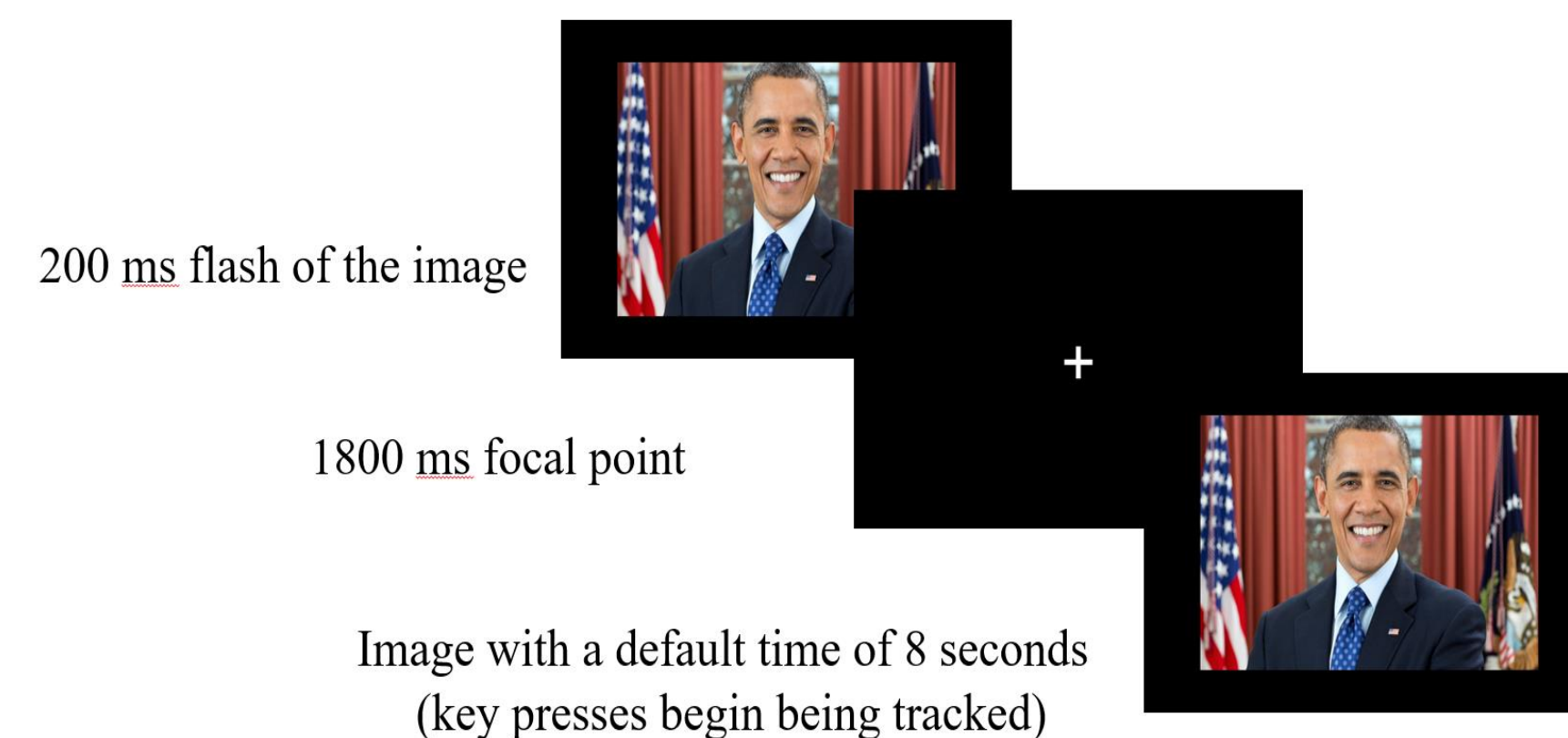
HYPOTHESES

H1: Participants are expected to exert more effort to avoid negative generic (non-political) images than approach positive generic (non-political) images.

H2: Patterns of effort for political stimuli will parallel patterns of effort for non-political stimuli. Partisans will approach politicians of their same party and avoid politicians of the opposing party.

H3: As political issue extremity increases, the desire to make the politically undesirable (other party) go away will increase at a faster rate than the desire to make the politically desirable (own party) stay around longer.

KEYPRESS TASK

Modified from Lee et al., 2015 & Kim et al., 2010

200 ms flash of the image

1800 ms focal point

Image with a default time of 8 seconds (key presses begin being tracked)

Participants determined what would happen with each image. They could:

Do nothing = view time of 8 seconds

Press S and K (repeatedly) to add time
- Maximum view time of 12 seconds

Press X and M (repeatedly) to remove time
- Minimum view time of 4 seconds

Standardized time of 20 minutes for task.

Pictures presented in random order within randomized blocks. There were 4 blocks:

Appetitive & Aversive

Political Actors

Political Issues *

Faces *

*Not analyzed for this presentation

SAMPLE

University Students (N=130)

86% white   59% female

55 Republicans   74 Democrats

Partisanship collected via self-report, as was ideology and support of various political issues.

RESULTS

Figure 1: Keypress Activity during Viewing of Positive and Negative Generic Images
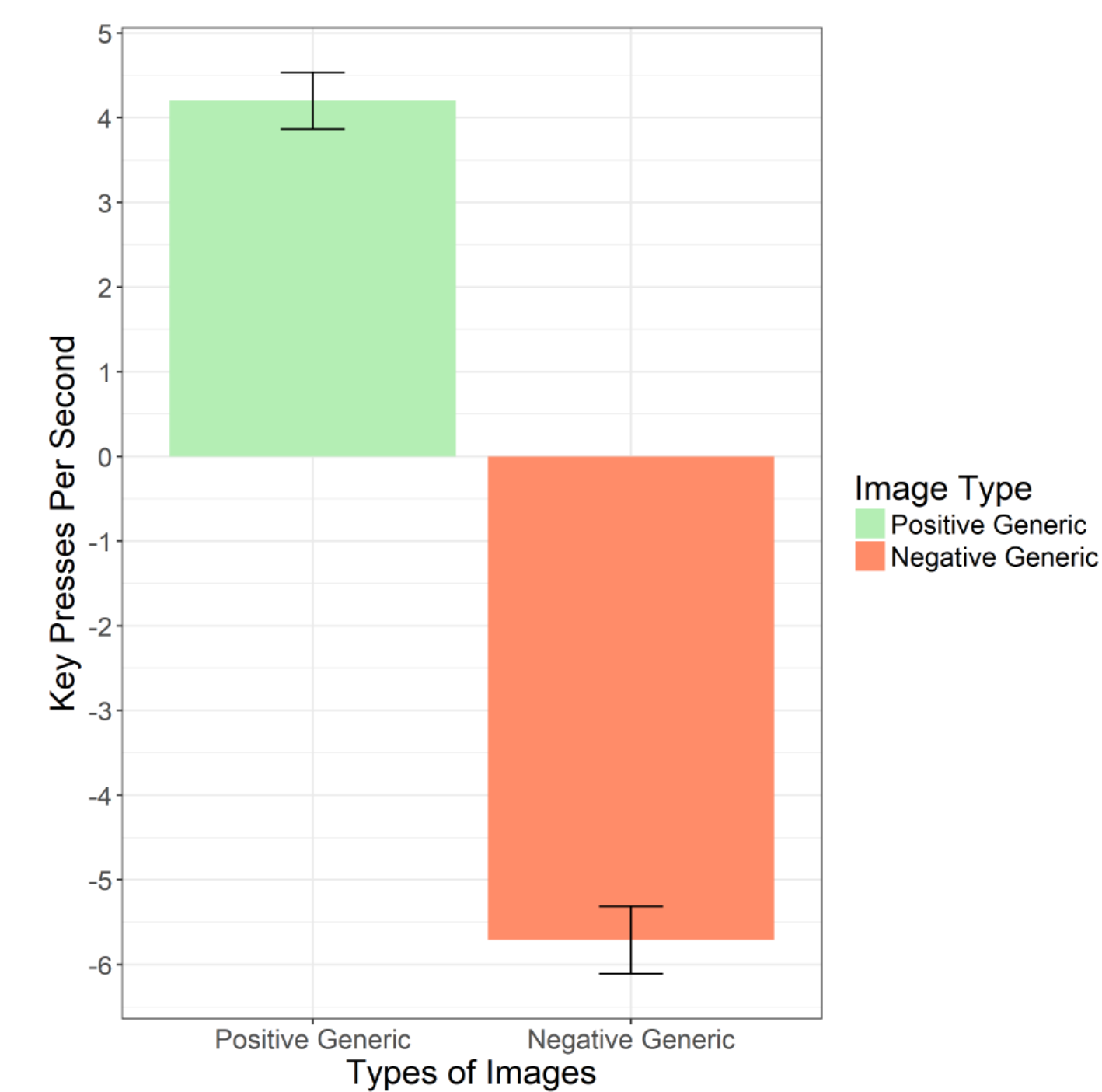

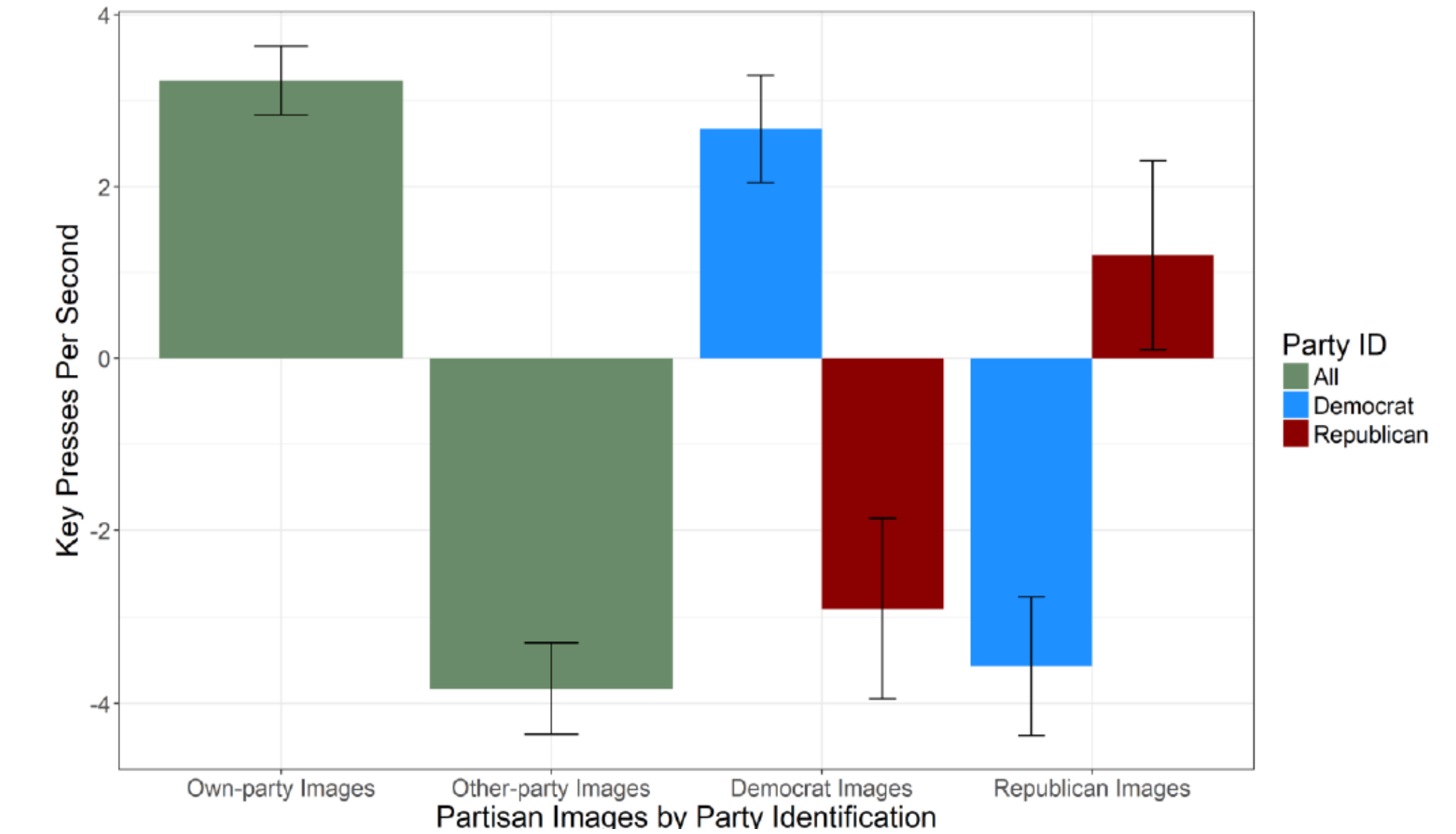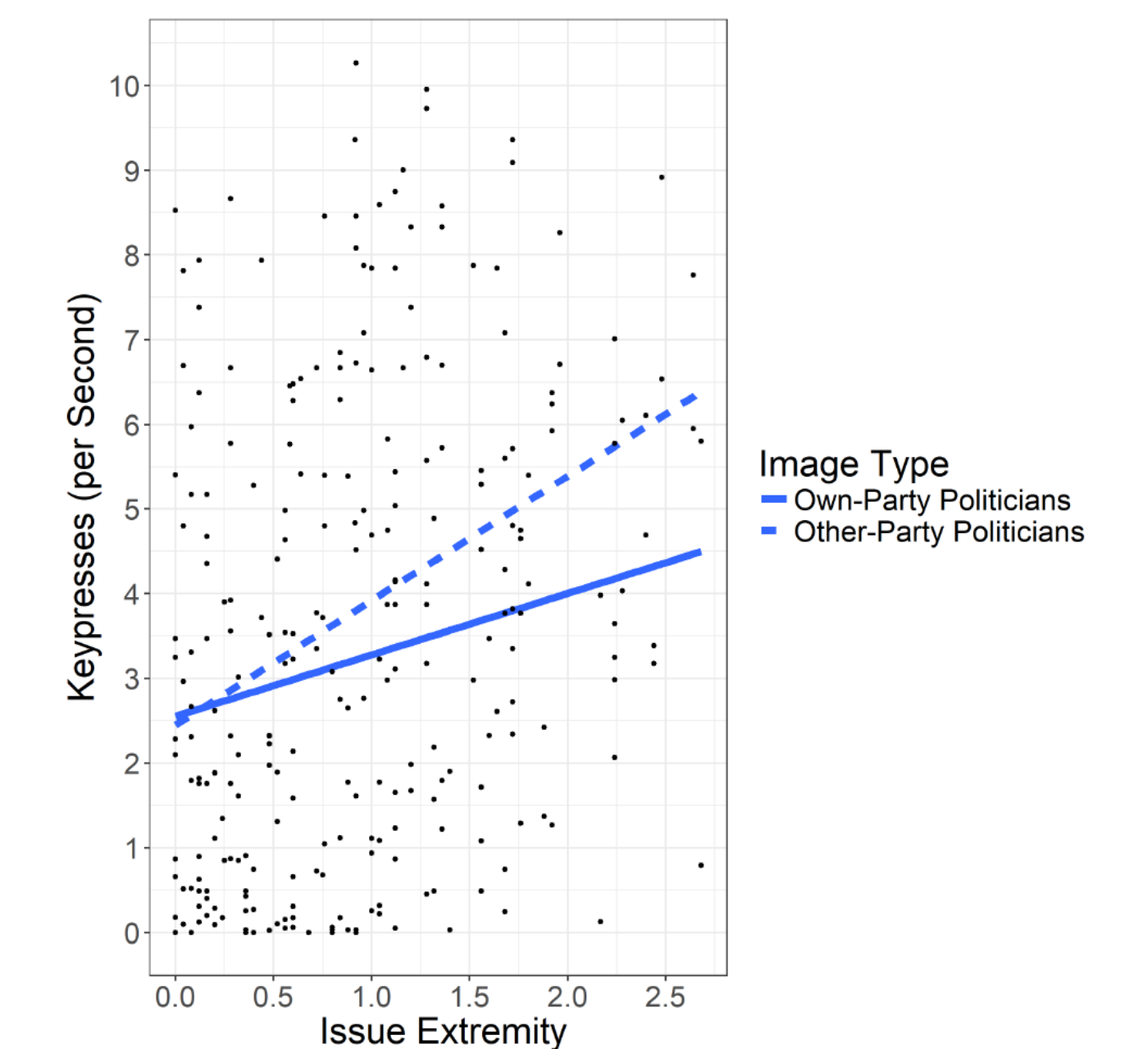Figure 2: Keypress Activity during Viewing Images of Politicians

Table 1: Mean Keypresses to Prolong (Positive Valence) or Shorten (Negative Valence) Exposures to Images of Politicians by Participant Partisanship

Political Actor	Republican	Democrat	Recognition (%)
Hillary Clinton2 (D)	-32.273	12.667	99%
Hillary Clinton1 (D)	-31.618	16.693	99%
Bill Clinton (D)	-20.873	0.013	93%
Bernie Sanders (D)	-17.927	37.133	94%
Nancy Pelosi (D)	-13.418	6.853	51%
Mitch McConnell (R)	-1.982	-14.347	33%
Joe Biden (D)	-1.927	24.493	80%
Barack Obama (D)	1.745	53.760	100%
Michelle Obama (D)	4.109	55.013	99%
Melania Trump (R)	13.473	-10.547	99%
John McCain (R)	15.418	-2.293	84%
Ted Cruz (R)	15.800	-23.520	90%
Donald Trump2 (R)	16.291	-27.747	99%
Donald Trump1 (R)	19.200	-29.707	100%
Mike Pence (R)	20.000	-25.133	86%
GW Bush (R)	25.436	-6.627	97%
Paul Ryan (R)	33.927	-13.347	80%
	N = 55	N = 75	N = 130

Figure 3: Keypress Activity by Issue Extremity for Own-Party and Other-Party Politicians

CONCLUSION

As expected, people are likely to exert more effort to remove (avoid) negative images than keep up (approach) positive images, for both political and non-political stimuli. This supports what is known about negativity bias and placing more weight on negative stimuli than on positive.. For political actors, participants (regardless of party identification) worked harder to avoid the other-party images than own-party images. Finally, the more extreme individuals were their issue positions, the more likely they were to exert effort overall, but they exerted the most effort to remove (avoid) other-party political actors.