Orwell's Collapse: Partisan Polarization and Its Effect on Language Use

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ABSTRACT:

An experiment was conducted on undergraduate students to test the effect of partisanship upon written communication. Students exposed to a partisan prime who were then asked to respond to a political article wrote, on average, at readability levels three grade levels less than those exposed to a non-partisan prime. The potential implications of this result are briefly discussed.

INTRODUCTION:

Orwell, in his essay *Politics and the English Language*, argues that political extremism should be associated with an increase in linguistical complexity. Taking the

position that the English language as a whole is in decline, as represented by selection of over-complicated and stuffy writing, he goes on to place the blame for said decline in quality on politics. Political writing by an adherent of a strong political position is, in his view, more an act of political signaling than of detailed content communication. This leads to an environment in which the repetition of various accepted phrases can serve as a sort of marker of allegiance ("speaking their language"). The need for writers on the end of the political spectrum to avoid sharing language with their opponents as well as the need to refer obliquely to ("write around") topics that your political faction would prefer to avoid, either for ideological or practical political reasons, leads to the growth and adoption of trite, overcomplicated language when political times are more in conflict. Therefore, a growth in linguistical complexity should be associated with political extremism, and serve as a potential warning sign of societal collapse. Some of these conclusions have been supported, in whole or in part, by modern political science research. For example, Benoit, (2014) finds that presidential debate participants, in line with Orwell's ideas, tend to avoid topics and phrases used by their opponent in favor of repeating their own language.

On the other hand, a good deal of research points to a relationship between partisanship and linguistical simplicity. One explanation for this focuses on the relationship between political partisanship and emotion. Multiple researchers have found a relationship between anger or anxiety and increased political partisanship, as well as a corresponding decrease in linguistical complexity (Hayakawa et al., 2017; Van't Riet et al., 2018; Weeks, 2015). Schoonvelde et al. (2019) find a strong association between political partisanship and linguistical simplicity, though they identify a strong

correlation between political conservatism and increasing political simplicity, in line with work that suggests support for conservative politicians is heavily emotion driven. Thomas et al. (2012), for example, suggest that conservative politicians favor emotional appeals in their campaigns, even finding that they are more likely to present the left side of their face in advertisements.

Since, of course, linguistical complexity in communication is correlated with any number of factors which also correlate with political partisanship, this research note (made possible by generous support from the Ladies' Giving Circle of Taylor University, and through the mentorship of and with assistance by my undergraduate student Caleb Harlan) focuses on an experimental investigation of this question. Does increasing political partisanship in subjects (using priming effects) cause them to change the way in which they communicate about a political topic? If so, does it lead to increasing or decreasing linguistical complexity?

METHODS:

Undergraduate students at Taylor University were invited to complete a questionnaire through a regular campus e-mail newsletter, with a chance of receiving a small gift card to a local coffee shop as an incentive. The response rate was high, with 397 students in total responding. As a small faith-based private Midwestern university, students should be representative of groups that are highly active in national elections. Forty-seven percent of the sample was female. The modal response for political partisanship was "weakly Republican" (4 on a five-point Likert scale) with 57 strong Republicans, 72 weak Democrats, and 71 strong Democrats, with the remainder

identifying themselves as political neutral. Neutral respondents were included under the assumption that most were "leaners" that possessed partisan affiliations that could be affected by priming. Results remain robust to their exclusion.

The questionnaire, administered online, asked students to respond, in writing, to a what appeared to be a social media post advocating for a reduction in emergency response personnel including police officers, firefighters, and emergency medical technicians. Pre-tests of this prompt showed that neither side reliably identified it as taking a conservative or liberal point of view, while still finding it engaging and worthy of comment. Half the sample (randomly determined) was shown a neutral set of images before viewing the prompt, while the other group was shown images designed to produce a partisan reaction. Pre-testing of these images showed that students were significantly more likely to describe themselves as "Strongly Liberal" or "Strongly Conservative" on a standard five-point Likert scale than when exposed to neutral images. This approach was based on the International Affective Picture System (IAPS) and Open Affective Standardized Image Set (OASIS) in terms of methodology.

Following the image exposure and prompt, students were asked to briefly respond in the manner of a social media comment giving their evaluation of the idea expressed in the prompt. Their responses were examined and responses that consisted of non-linguistic content (ex, emojis), blank responses, or one-word responses were dropped. This left 380 usable responses. Testing showed no differences in results if these responses were included. The responses were then tested for linguistic complexity using the Coleman-Liau readability formula. This formula was chosen as it tests for characters per word and characters per sentence, which is more suitable for the small

amount of text collected in this experiment and for electronic processing than other evaluation methods based on syllable counts or word indices. It is also more robust to grammatical and spelling errors, which is helpful for evaluating content similar to that of most social media comments (Coleman & Liau, 1975).

Following this, students were asked basic demographic data about themselves (age, gender, major, year in school, partisan affiliation on a standard five-point Likert scale), debriefed as to the nature and purpose of the experiment, and thanked.

As in other research (Schoonvelde et al., 2019) there was a correlation between conservatism and lack of complexity. For each step higher on a 1 to 5 liberal to conservative Likert scale, there was an expected average reduction of 1.6 grade levels on the Coleman-Liau readability score ($P<.001$)

RESULTS:

Students who received the partisan image cue scored, on average, 2.6 grade levels lower on the Coleman-Liau analysis of their written response to the prompt than students in the neutral image condition ($P<.003$). This effect was strengthened when controlling for political liberalism/conservatism on the part of the student, becoming an average reduction of 3.05 grade levels ($P<.009$). This effect remained significant and near the three grade-level mark when controls were added for gender, enrollment in a political science major, or use of social media, all of which were suggested in various feedback session as potential explanations for the effect. This means that we would expect the average comment response by an individual exposed to a partisan prime to be

appropriate for a third-grade level reader, while a comment by an individual not
exposed to a partisan prime would be roughly appropriate for a sixth-grade reader.
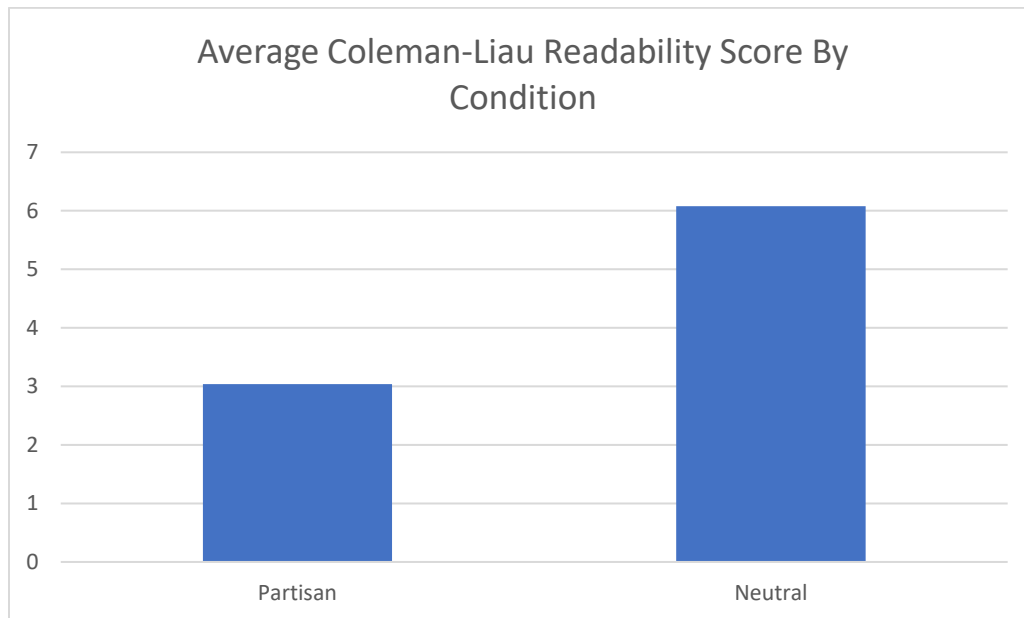
CONCLUSION:

The results of this research are firmly in line with the modern line of research
that expects partisan extremism to result in simpler language use in communication.
Orwell's idea that political strife/extremism would result in more complicated language
use does not seem to be borne out by these results. While in line with previous research
that finds strong relationships between partisanship and linguistic complexity
(Schoonvelde et al., 2019), it is important to note that this research focuses on the effect
of being closer towards the ends of the political spectrum in both directions, and not

simply the effect of increasing or decreasing conservatism. The seeming disagreement between this research and research that finds increasing levels of partisan liberalism to be associated with increasing linguistic complexity is likely the result of this being experimental research, rather than the observational research present in most of the literature. There are good reasons to expect that liberal politicians would have incentives based on their target populations, education level, and other potential correlative variables to use more complex language in their political addresses than their conservative counterparts. However, when examining an increase in partisanship in its own right as a causal agent, it appears that increasing partisanship leads to more simple language use regardless of its orientation. While I do not have the data to speculate as to the mechanism of this effect, this is consistent with theories that tie increased partisanship to increased levels of emotional affect. It is also intuitively appealing and consistent with observations that strong partisans would be able to rely on simply expressed positive or negative slogans, while political moderates would have to spend more and more complex words to express nuances in their less easily consumed political platforms.

This suggests that moderate citizens in American politics may be at a disadvantage, as their strong partisan counterparts may be able to reach a broader audience, including those reading at levels below that of the moderate audience. Further research on the persuasive potential of different complexity levels of speech to determine how audiences react, and thereby the efficacy of the differing conservative/liberal strategies on this topic, is needed. Additionally, this research needs to be expanded to more diverse population groups and be repeated on a variety of

topics, as well as expanded to a variety of partisan cues and writing measures in order to both verify these results and examine whether these trends are observable to the larger population or a unique characteristic of the population under study. Measure of complexity aside from formula-based scoring, which would be able to examine the use of difficult political concepts and ideas as well as simple linguistic complexity would be a welcome addition. The effect of the subjects' habitual means of political self-expression, such as whether they are more accustomed to using social media or in-person communication, on the complexity of their responses and the potential of learned reflexes is also of interest for future research.

Increasing the strength of partisan attachment seems to increase the simplicity of partisan communication, and may be one part of the reason we have witnessed an increase in strongly partisan communication both online and elsewhere.

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