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Moderate versus extreme interpretations of political slogans

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Abstract

This paper surveys 451 Americans about how they view and interpret three semantically indeterminate progressive political slogans: *#BelieveWomen, #DefundThePolice*, and *#FreePalestine*. In each case, most people who agree with the slogan interpret it to express a moderate position, while most people who disagree take it to describe a more extreme position – which is indeed endorsed by a minority of those who agree with the slogan. These results show that online political discourse can foment both false controversy and false consensus. Because liberals tend to interpret these slogans moderately, while conservatives are more likely to interpret them as extreme, these results further suggest that people may choose their interpretation of a slogan to foreground the issues that they see as problems, and/or to justify their preexisting attitude towards the movement it champions. This paper brings together linguistics and political science to illuminate miscommunication in public discourse.

Keywords: Slogans, hashtags, miscommunication, survey data, language and politics

1 Introduction

Political slogans, often circulated as hashtags on social media, can be interpreted differently by different people. This paper analyzes varying interpretations of three slogans associated with progressive movements in the Anglophone world: *#BelieveWomen, #DefundThePolice*, and *#FreePalestine*. All three slogans have sparked debate not just about whether the actions that they describe are desirable, but also what actions they call for in the first place.

After synthesizing the multidisciplinary literature on miscommunication (Section 2) and the semantic indeterminacy of political slogans (Section 3), this paper sets out a series of hypotheses (Section 4) to be tested in a survey (Section 5) of 451 Americans, who are asked what they think each slogan means and whether they agree with it. As hypothesized, the results

show (Sections 6–7) that many people who agree with a slogan take it to express a moderate position, while most people who disagree with the slogan interpret it as more extreme. This situation represents a false controversy, in that people who agree versus disagree with the slogan do not interpret it in the same way.

On the other hand, a minority of people who agree with each slogan actually do assign the extreme interpretation, yielding a false consensus in that not everyone who agrees with the slogan understands it the same way. Moreover, one's interpretation of a slogan is predicted by one's overall political orientation: liberals tend to interpret these slogans moderately while conservatives favor the extreme interpretation. These results are consistent with the hypothesis that people choose their interpretation of a slogan to foreground the issues that they already see as problems, and/or to justify their preexisting attitude towards the movement championed by the slogan.

More broadly (Section 8), the paper joins Acton & Potts (2014); Acton (2019), and Beaver & Stanley (2023), among others, in aiming to use linguistic pragmatics to illuminate public discourse and vice versa.

2 Communication and miscommunication

Conversation partners aim to exchange information, building up the stock of mutually shared information known as the Common Ground (Stalnaker, 1978; Grice, 1989; Roberts, 2012). To do so, people reason about what their interlocutor meant given what they said (Grice, 1989; Frank & Goodman, 2012). Communication is therefore a "noisy channel" (Shannon, 1949) with a risk of misfire. Language can be vague and ambiguous (Piantadosi et al., 2012); referents (*she; the circle*) can be mistaken (Frank & Goodman, 2012); and utterances are enriched by many forms of pragmatic inference and knowledge of the world (Fillmore, 1976; Schank & Abelson, 1977; Searle, 1978; Grice, 1989; Levinson, 2000), all of which risk misalignment between speaker and hearer. As a result, communication entails the potential for miscommunication (Keysar & Henly, 2002; Keysar, 2007; Kecskes, 2010; Mustajoki, 2012). People are particularly likely to miscommunicate through digital media, without body cues and physical co-presence (Kruger et al., 2005); in emotionally charged situations where the hearer is unwilling to empathize with a disliked speaker (Mustajoki, 2012); and in "overheard" situations, where the speaker can't monitor the hearer's uptake and the hearer can't request clarification (Garrod & Clark, 1993; Branigan, 2006) – all relevant to online political discourse.

People can miscommunicate if they imagine different meanings for words. Garrod & Clark (1993) study dyads of children who converge on a linguistic convention to describe their location in a maze, but misalign on the reference points therein, thus miscommunicating by assigning different meanings to their shared lexicon. People can also miscommunicate by imagining different ways to satisfy an under-determined description of the world. Inspired by an example from Searle (1978) about unstated expectations at restaurants, we may consider an American who orders water at a restaurant in China, expecting a glass of ice water, surprised to be served a pot of hot water. Although the diner and the waiter agree on the meaning of *water*,

they imagine different customs and thus different ways that this under-specified request should be fulfilled.

When people miscommunicate, they mistake the conversational Common Ground. Such a “Common Ground fallacy” (Mustajoki, 2012) is linked by Clark (1996) to the “false consensus effect” studied in political science and economics (Kuran, 1998). In the Common Ground fallacy, people imagine that their beliefs are shared by others when they are not; in a false consensus, people overestimate the extent to which others agree with their own beliefs, or the extent to which others agree with beliefs that they privately reject.

Conversely, people can also miscommunicate by overestimating disagreement. Hume (1748) observed centuries ago that some philosophical controversies arise not from substantive disagreements, but because “disputants affix different ideas to the terms employed in the controversy” (Section 8, part 1), thus believing that they disagree when they do not. Parallel to false consensus, this situation can be described as a false controversy.

These abstract definitions are concretized in the varying interpretations of political slogans to be explored next.

3 Multiple interpretations of slogans

Often framed as imperative statements (Bowers & Ochs, 1971), slogans such as *#BelieveWomen, #DefundThePolice*, and *#FreePalestine* encapsulate the goals of political movements. By compressing complex policy-making into a handful of words, slogans leave a great deal of information unsaid. Thus, Denton (1980) notes, slogans describe ends rather than means for a social movement. Even regarding end goals, he says, different people may interpret them differently.

Aberbach & Walker (1970) interview 855 Black and White residents of Detroit, Michigan, in the wake of the 1967 Detroit race riot, about whether they approve of *Black Power* and what they think it means. Most Black people say that *Black Power* means Black people should be unified and should get their “fair share” of power. On the other hand, 39% of White people – versus only 9% of Black people – say it means Black people should have power over White people. The people who interpret *Black Power* in this way, both White and Black, tend to disapprove of it. In other words, those who endorse *Black Power* take it to express a moderate position, while those who reject it take it to express an extreme position. This situation implies a false controversy, in that the people who endorse *Black Power* interpret it differently from those who reject it.

These varying interpretations may be rooted in the word *power*: it seems that 39% of White people interpret *power* as relational (power over someone else) and zero-sum, so that more power for Black people means less power for White people. In contrast, a majority of Black people seem to interpret *power* as non-relational and unbounded, so that Black people should have more power than they currently have, without implying domination over White people. Towards Denton’s point that slogans do not specify the means by which the goal should be achieved (and the broader point above that people may imagine different ways to fulfill an

under-determined description of the world), 57% of White people but only 4% of Black people think that *Black Power* calls for violence and rioting (Aberbach & Walker, 1970).

As for why Black and White people interpret this slogan so differently, perhaps one's interpretation of *Black Power* emerges, chicken-and-egg, in tandem with one's overall orientation towards the movement for Black rights. Those who notice the vast racial inequality of the 1960s may take *Black Power* as a call for greater equality, while those who ignore such inequality may favor the extreme interpretation of *Black Power* because they do not see the problem that the moderate interpretation calls to rectify. Instead, if such people see lawlessness as a larger concern than racism, then they may interpret *Black Power* to champion lawlessness because the slogan was used in the context of riots. Moreover, those who are sympathetic to the anti-racism movement may choose to interpret *Black Power* to champion a moderate and worthy goal to explain their endorsement of it, while those who are unsympathetic to it may choose to interpret *Black Power* to entail violent extremism to give themselves license to reject it.

The disputed meaning of *Black Power* is echoed in the recent slogan *#BlackLivesMatter*. *#BlackLivesMatter* began circulating in 2013, after an unarmed Black teenager named Trayvon Martin was shot by an unofficial neighborhood patrolman, and continues to be used in the context of violence by law enforcement towards Black people. Famously, some people have responded to *Black lives matter* by claiming that *all lives matter*. As explained by Keiser (2021), *all lives matter* disputes a conversational implicature (Grice, 1989) of *Black lives matter* – the exhaustive interpretation, that *only* Black lives matter – which arises if *Black lives matter* is taken as a response to the question, "Which lives matter?"

More generally, an utterance may trigger different pragmatic inferences depending on what question it responds to, known as the Question Under Discussion (Roberts, 2012). The exhaustive implicature that *only* Black lives matter – disputed by *all lives matter* – does not arise if *Black lives matter* is taken to respond to the question "Do Black lives matter?" This question is more salient to people who see a pattern of oppression towards Black people. In sum, the varying interpretations of *#BlackLivesMatter* are shaped by what people take as the implicit question it responds to, in turn grounded in the extent to which they see racial inequality as a pressing problem.

Like *Black Power* and *#BlackLivesMatter*, the slogans studied here – *#BelieveWomen, #DefundThePolice*, and *#FreePalestine* – are associated with progressive movements in the Anglophone world. Conservative movements have slogans too, such as *#MAGA* (*Make America Great Again*, used by Republican presidents Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump), but slogans that call for change may be particularly salient to progressive movements seeking to disrupt the status quo. As we have seen with *Black Power* and *#BlackLivesMatter*, opponents of such movements may coalesce around the rejection of a progressive slogan rather than a positive message of their own.

Like many modern slogans, these slogans circulate on social media as hashtags. Hashtags emerged as a form of searchable metadata for content generated by users on sites such as Twitter/X (Scott, 2015; Zappavigna, 2015), and can add information about the context or

emotion surrounding the text. Whereas foundational work in pragmatics focuses on two-person face-to-face conversations (Grice, 1989), social media creates a massive multi-party conversation in which people do not even know who they may be speaking to. The writer of a public tweet addresses a potentially "infinite and ambiguous" imagined audience (Scott, 2015) across space and time who may encounter their utterance without any knowledge of the preceding discourse or physical context in which it was written. The short length of tweets further limits the amount of information that can be shared in them, requiring supplemental inferences from the reader to interpret the full import of an utterance. As a result, social media amplifies not just the potential for slogans to go viral, but also the potential for different people to interpret them differently.

The slogans studied in this paper are all imperatives, telling the hearer to do something (Jary & Kissine, 2014; Charlow, 2014). The imperative form can be used for various speech acts in the sense of Searle (1975), such as offers, advice, requests, and commands, but such illocutionary distinctions depend to a large extent on the relationship between the speaker and the hearer in context, which is lost in the case of viral slogans online. Across all imperatives, the speaker expresses a preference for the hearer to carry out the action that they describe (Condoravdi & Lauer, 2012), implying that the speaker sees this action as desirable.

3.1 *#BelieveWomen*

The slogan *#BelieveWomen* took hold in 2018 when then-President Donald Trump's Supreme Court nominee, Brett Kavanaugh, was accused of sexual assault by Christine Blasey Ford, a woman from Kavanaugh's hometown. It still circulates regularly in public discourse about allegations of sexual violence alongside the slogan *#MeToo*. In popular media and academic writing, those who endorse the slogan often say that it means that a woman's testimonial of being assaulted should be taken seriously as evidence that she was indeed assaulted (Bolinger, 2021), sparking further investigation. Those who question the slogan, on the other hand, often take it to mean that women's allegations of assault should be taken as uncritically true (Ferzan, 2021). The logically stronger universal variant *#BelieveAllWomen* is favored by those mocking the slogan on its extreme interpretation (Bolinger, 2021), pointing out cases where certain women's allegations may be questioned.

Turning its semantics, *#BelieveWomen* uses a bare plural (*women*), which lends itself to being interpreted as generic (Carlson, 1977; Krifka et al., 1995; Leslie & Lerner, 2021). Famously (Krifka et al., 1995), generic statements with bare plural subjects overlap to some degree with universally quantified statements: (1a)–(1b) are both true. But these two forms come apart, because generic statements allow for exceptions: (2a) is true while (2b) is false, because penguins and ostriches do not fly.

(1)
  (a) Lions are mammals.
  (b) All lions are mammals.

(2)

(a) Birds fly.
(b) All birds fly.

Thus, *#BelieveWomen* may admit multiple interpretations because different people imagine greater or fewer exceptions to the generic object of this imperative. By treating *#BelieveWomen* as synonymous to *#BelieveAllWomen*, opponents of the slogan treat the generic object as exceptionless like (1a), ignoring the potential for exceptions to generics shown in (2a).

The verb *believe* usually takes full propositions as its complement (*believe that it's raining*; Hintikka 1962). When it combines with a noun that does not denote a proposition (*#BelieveWomen*), that noun is interpreted as the source of some contextually salient claim (Anscombe, 1979; Djärv, 2019), for example of being assaulted. *Believe* can describe both uncertain and deeply-held beliefs (Lauer, 2017), so *#BelieveWomen* may further allow multiple interpretations because different people interpret *believe* to describe different levels of credence and thus different requirements for corroborating evidence.

3.2 *#DefundThePolice*

Growing out of the *#BlackLivesMatter* movement, the slogan *#DefundThePolice* circulated in 2020, after an unarmed Black man named George Floyd was murdered on camera by a White police officer. *#DefundThePolice* can be interpreted to call for different levels of change to policing (Cobbina-Dungy et al., 2022), from training police in conflict de-escalation to abolishing all policing on the grounds that it is inherently racist and oppressive.

Similar to Aberbach & Walker (1970), Cobbina-Dungy et al. (2022) interviewed 28 participants in the 2020 March on Washington, which protested racist police violence. Twenty interviewees endorsed *#DefundThePolice* on a moderate interpretation where it calls to reallocate some funding towards social services rather than heavily militarized police. Five interviewees said they were hesitant to use the slogan *#DefundThePolice* because they realized that it could be (mis)interpreted to mean that the police should be abolished, which they did not support. On the other hand, four interviewees actually did want to abolish the police. Therefore, among people who agree with the slogan *#DefundThePolice*, there is evidence of a false consensus in that different people interpret it differently.

Semantically, *defund* uses the prefix *de*-, which can combine with nouns to describe the removal of the referent of that noun (to *debone a fish* is to remove its bones), or can combine with verbs to describe the reversal of the action denoted by the verb (to *de-populate a forest* is to reverse the process of populating it; Andrews 1986). *Fund* can be a noun or a verb, so *defund* means the removal of funds (noun) or the reversal of a process of funding (verb).

Because *fund* describes an unbounded quantity of money which in principle lies along a scale, *defund* patterns with "degree achievement" verbs associated with scalar properties such as *(to) cool*, associated with a temperature scale (Hay et al., 1999), in allowing different interpretations depending on the implied degree of change along that scale. Hay et al. (1999) observe that *cool* can be interpreted as either telic or atelic (3), indicated by its compatibility with

in and *for* (Vendler, 1967): telic if the soup is taken to reach a specific degree of coolness (e.g., room temperature, providing an endpoint to the event), and atelic if it is simply taken to become somewhat cooler throughout an event that could continue indefinitely.

(3) The soup cooled {in/for} five minutes.

Along the same lines, *defund* can describe a reduction in the quantity of funds culminating in the minimum degree possible (zero dollars), or a reduction that just ends somewhere below where it started (less money than before). Moreover, *#DefundThePolice* does not specify what happens to the funds removed from police, so some people may imagine these funds to be redirected to other purposes (social services, other forms of public safety), while others may have no such plan in mind. A poll from USA Today/Ipsos (2021) found that most Americans support police reform, but only one in five supported the movement to "defund the police," suggesting that people interpret do not interpret defunding as synonymous with reform.

3.3 *#FreePalestine*

The phrase *#FreePalestine* has been used in many contexts since the mid-twentieth century, but became widespread in the Anglophone world in response to the Israel/Hamas war that began in October 2023. The phrase *free Palestine* can be interpreted as shorthand for a longer rhyming couplet dating back at least to the 1980s – *from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free* (Colla, 2023). In Arabic, the rhyme is sometimes phrased as *min al-nahr ila al-bahr, Filastin satatharrar* ('from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free'); other times as *min al-mayyeh li-mayyeh, Filastin 'arabiyyeh* ('from the water to the water, Palestine is Arab'; Colla 2023).

Whether it is a verb or an adjective, *free* evokes multiple syntactic arguments: something is free(d) of or from something else. In the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, it could be taken to mean free of/from the trials suffered by Palestinian Arabs: military occupation, security checkpoints, restrictions on movement, blockades, settlements, displacement, bombing, hunger, corrupt governance, invasion, and so on. More abstractly, it could be taken as a call for a flourishing society free from all oppression and conflict.

The word *Palestine* has multiple meanings too (Baumgarten, 2005). In a narrow sense, it can refer to Gaza and the West Bank, known as the Palestinian territories – two disconnected regions neighboring the state of Israel. These two regions are sometimes collectively known as the state of Palestine, which is recognized as a country by 75% of the member states of the United Nations, but not by Israel, the United States, nor the United Kingdom. More broadly, *Palestine* can refer to the entire region between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River: the aquatic borders described in the English and Arabic rhymes mentioned above. This region includes Gaza, the West Bank, and the state of Israel, which was established in 1948 – after forcibly displacing Palestinian Arabs – by survivors of the Nazi genocide as a Jewish-majority country in the region that the Jewish religion has claimed for millennia as its homeland.

Figure 1: A map of Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel. The original is from Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kvish_HaHof_map.svg, with a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license); labels of land and water were added by the author. Gaza and the West Bank constitute the Palestinian territories. Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel together make up the region of Palestine. The original figure is in color.

Putting these words together, *#FreePalestine* can be taken as a call for a state free of oppression and conflict in Gaza and the West Bank, alongside Israel (i.e., a "two-state solution"); or for the entire region to form a single state where people of all religions live together as compatriots (a "bi-national one-state solution"). Attending an American protest where people chanted *#FreePalestine* and *From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free*, Colla (2023) says that in context, he took these slogans to advocate such ideals of peace and harmony.

Alternatively, *#FreePalestine* can be taken as a call for the entire region to be free from perceived invasion by Jews. If *#FreePalestine* is taken to evoke the Arabic rhyme translated as 'from the water to the water, Palestine is Arab,' then it may convey that the region should be for Arabs *rather than* Jews, thus threatening the existence of Israel and its citizens. After Hamas's brutal attack on Israel in October 2023, it was evident that the "Palestinian liberation" endorsed in the Hamas charter (Hroub, 2017) – using similar verbiage to *#FreePalestine* – included the

massacre of Jewish civilians. So while some people interpret *#FreePalestine* to support peace and harmony, others take it to advocate anti-Semitic violence (Colla, 2023).

Reflecting on the multiple meanings of *#FreePalestine*, Colla (2023) argues that slogans constitute “fragments of an ongoing, contentious debate or conversation [. . .] To take a slogan out of such a context is to mistake it for a monologue rather than what it is: a snippet of dialogue.” He says the meaning of *#FreePalestine* depends on who is saying it and why. When onlookers use *#FreePalestine* to plea for Palestinian civilians being bombed and starved, it calls for peace; when militants use it to cheer a massacre of Israeli civilians, it calls for violence. These varying interpretations of *#FreePalestine* are rooted in the multiple meanings of *free* and *Palestine*; the extent to which the phrase is taken as shorthand for longer phrases in English and Arabic; and the differing means imagined to achieve this goal.

4 Hypotheses

We have seen that each of these slogans can be interpreted in multiple ways. Each slogan also elicits contentious reactions from people who agree or disagree with the message that they take it to express. This situation raises a series of research questions about how a person’s interpretation of a slogan may be related to whether they agree with it.

In the literature reviewed above, some researchers take a prescriptive approach; Keiser (2021) claims that it is an “epistemic injustice” to interpret *#BlackLivesMatter* to convey that *only* Black lives matter; Bolinger (2021) argues for one interpretation of *#BelieveWomen* over others. Here, following longstanding goals in linguistics, I aim instead to describe the variation in how different people interpret such slogans.

The discussion above can be synthesized into a series of hypotheses to be tested in a web survey. Expanding the idea from Aberbach & Walker (1970) that the people who endorse *Black Power* take it to call for equality while those who reject it take it to call for domination, I predict (4):

(4) <u>The False Controversy Hypothesis:</u> Overall, those who endorse a slogan favor a moderate interpretation of it, while those who reject the slogan favor an extreme interpretation.

If so, (4) would imply a false controversy between those who endorse versus reject the slogan. Of course, we would expect a moderate interpretation of a slogan to elicit greater endorsement than an extreme interpretation, so (4) would be unsurprising.

Drawing on the finding from Cobbina-Dungy et al. (2022) that a few people who endorse *#DefundThePolice* actually do want to abolish all police, I further predict (5):

(5) <u>The False Consensus Hypothesis:</u> Among those who endorse a slogan, a small minority favor its extreme interpretation.

If so, (5) would reflect a false consensus among those who endorse the slogan, and a true controversy between those who endorse versus reject it on this extreme interpretation.

If (4) is manifested, then one might wonder about its causal direction: does a person endorse a slogan because they interpret it moderately, or do they interpret it moderately because they are already inclined to endorse it? Above, I suggested that a person's interpretation of *Black Power* might flow downstream from their orientation towards the Detroit race riots. People who attribute the riots to racial inequality may interpret *Black Power* as a moderate call for equality because they see inequality as a problem; and/or may choose the moderate interpretation to validate their preexisting sympathy towards the movement. On the other hand, those worried about lawlessness may take *Black Power* to champion a violent uprising because they are focused on the problem of lawlessness, and/or may choose the extreme interpretation to justify themselves in dismissing a movement which they already view with contempt. Expanding these suggestions, I hypothesize:

(6) The Ideology-Drives-Interpretation Hypothesis: A person's interpretation of a slogan is predicted by their overall political ideology.

If so, (6) would imply that one's interpretation of a slogan is not an accident of how one happens to interpret underspecified words, but is chosen strategically to foreground the issues that one is already inclined to see as problems, and/or to justify one's preexisting orientation towards the movement associated with that slogan. Statistically, (6) predicts that one's interpretation of a slogan should *mediate* (Baron & Kenny, 1986) the effect of political orientation on agreement with the slogan.

To preview, all three hypotheses (4)–(6) are consistent with the data reported below.

5 Survey design

These hypotheses were tested in a web survey administered through the Qualtrics platform with IRB approval from the author's institution.

5.1 Materials

The first page of the survey asks for informed consent. Then the survey goes through all three slogans, each one in its own block of questions (i.e., all questions about *#BelieveWomen* are completed before any questions about *#DefundThePolice*). For each slogan, the survey states its context of use:

(7)
- (a) The hashtag *#BelieveWomen* has been used in the context of women who make allegations of sexual violence.
- (b) The hashtag *#DefundThePolice* has been used in the context of police violence against Black citizens.

(c) The hashtag *#FreePalestine* has been used in the context of the conflict between Israel and Palestine.

Next, for each slogan, the participant is asked:

(8) To what extent have you encountered the hashtag {HASHTAG}?
   (a) I've never seen it.
   (b) I may have seen it.
   (c) I've definitely seen it.

Then, for each slogan, the participant is asked:

(9) Do you agree with the idea expressed by the hashtag {HASHTAG}?
   (a) Strongly disagree
   (b) Somewhat disagree
   (c) Somewhat agree
   (d) Strongly agree

Then the participant is asked what they think the slogan means. In each case, the interpretations are ordered from most moderate to most extreme, ending with a free-text option for participants to supply their own meaning.

(10) How would you summarize what *#BelieveWomen* means?
   (a) Take allegations as important evidence, and investigate them.
   (b) Take allegations as true, without needing to investigate them.
   (c) Other [text box]

(11) How would you summarize what *#DefundThePolice* means?
   (a) Reduce funding for militarized policing; increase funding to social services instead.
   (b) Abolish policing; reimagine new, community-engaged ways to keep order and help those in need.
   (c) Other [text box]

To ensure that all participants understood the geographic context, the question for *#FreePalestine* used the map from Figure 1 and a sentence explaining the polysemy of Palestine.

(12) "Palestine" may describe the Palestinian territories of Gaza and the West Bank; or may describe the entire region between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, including Gaza and the West Bank as well as the majority-Jewish state of Israel. How would you summarize what *#FreePalestine* means?

(a) Palestine (Gaza + West Bank) should be a free independent country, alongside Israel.
(b) Palestine (the entire region: Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel) should be a single free country where Arabs and Jews live together.
(c) Palestine (the entire region: Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel) should be a single free country for Arabs, not Jews.
(d) Other [text box]

In the final block, participants are asked about demographics – gender (Male, Female, Other); age range (under 20; 20s; 30s; 40s; 50s; 60s or older); religion, if any (Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Other, None); ethnicity (White, Black/African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern/North African, Hispanic/Latino, Other; with the option to select more than one) – and overall political orientation:

(13) How would you place yourself on a political spectrum?
(a) Very liberal
(b) Somewhat liberal
(c) Moderate
(d) Somewhat conservative
(e) Very conservative

Throughout, all multiple-choice questions require a response to continue. The survey concludes with an optional text box for comments; an attention check asking for the typical number of fingers on a person's left hand (half of twenty, half of ten, two times ten, half of five); and a message thanking participants for their contribution to research.

5.2 Data collection

This Qualtrics survey was posted to the Prolific recruitment platform, using Prolific's "representative sample" criteria to recruit participants in the United States (purportedly filtering out bots and spammers) balanced for sex, age, and political affiliation.

Overall, 461 participants completed the study in September 2024 (460 were recruited; one submitted the survey late after Prolific had already found a replacement for them). The survey's median duration was 2.6 minutes. Participants were originally recruited at a cost of 43 cents per survey, but were assigned a bonus for a total pay of 52 cents (thus $12/hour, as promised in the consent form). Ten were excluded for failing the attention check about the typical number of fingers on a person's left hand, leaving 451 for analysis.

6 Survey results

All data and code are shared through the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/c2pyb/.

6.1 Participant demographics

As promised by Prolific's balanced sampling, participants were equally split by gender (228/451 = 50.5% women, 223/451 = 49.5% men) and relatively balanced for age (Table 1) and political orientation (Table 2). As for race/ethnicity (Table 3), they are mostly White. Regarding religion (Table 4), the two largest groups are Christians (59%) and those with no religion (34%).

Under 20	**20s**	**30s**	**40s**	**50s**	**60s or older**
6 (1%)	82 (18%)	85 (19%)	69 (15%)	99 (22%)	110 (24%)

Table 1: Participants by age group.

Very liberal	**Somewhat liberal**	**Moderate**	**Somewhat conservative**	**Very conservative**
64 (14%)	126 (28%)	115 (25%)	98 (22%)	48 (11%)

Table 2: Participants by political orientation.

White	**Black**	**Asian**	**Hispanic/Latino**	**Mixed race/Other**
347 (77%)	40 (9%)	22 (5%)	14 (3%)	28 (6%)

Table 3: Participants by race/ethnicity.

Christian	**Jewish**	**Muslim**	**Other religion**	**No religion**
265 (59%)	10 (2%)	2 (<1%)	21 (5%)	153 (34%)

Table 4: Participants by religion.

Having introduced the participants, I turn to their responses about the three slogans.

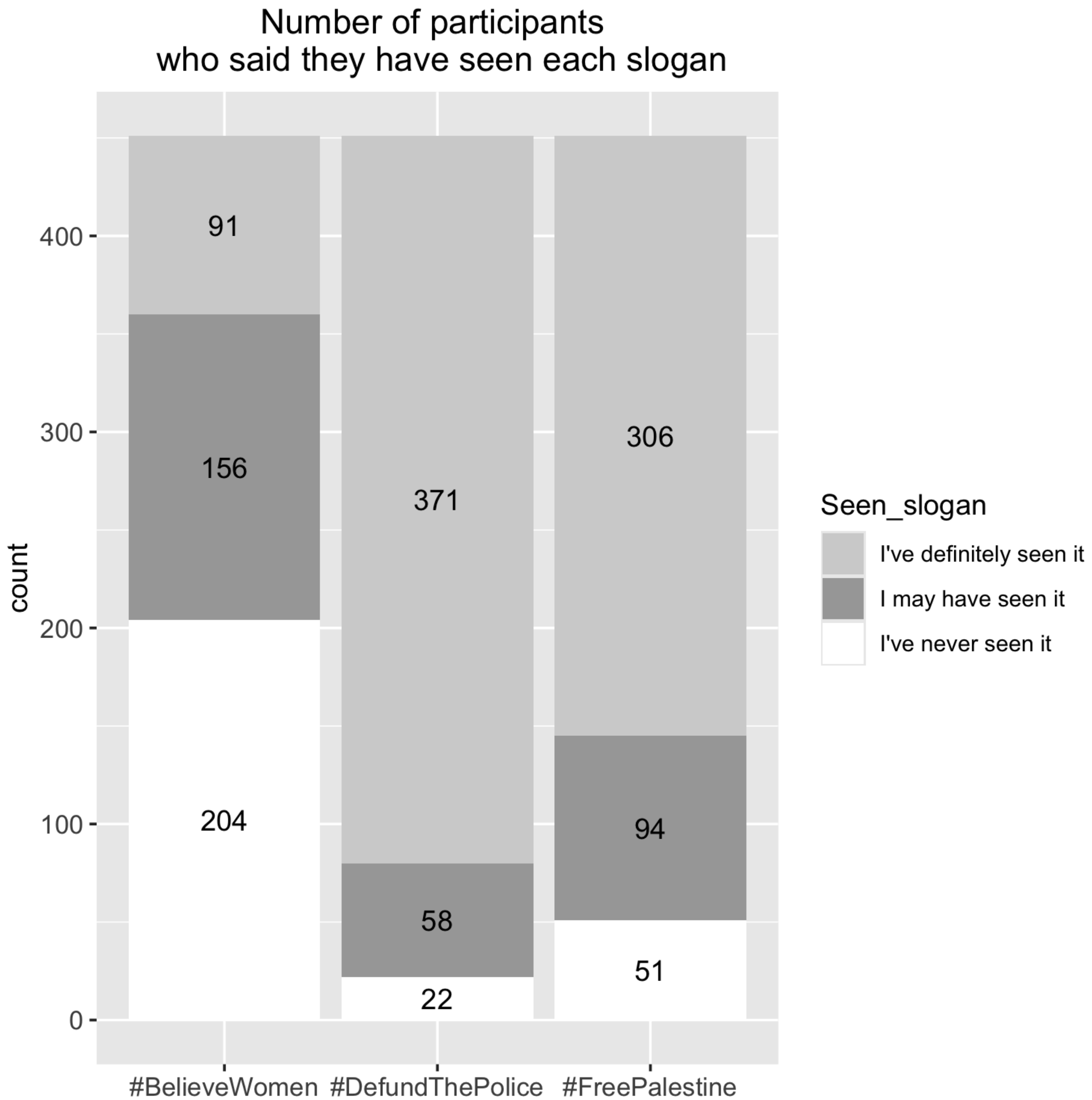

Figure 2: Number of participants who said they have seen each slogan..

6.2 *#BelieveWomen*

Asked whether they have seen the slogan *#BelieveWomen*, 204/451 = 45% of participants said they had "never seen it" (Figure 2), perhaps because its heyday coincided with the confirmation of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh in 2018. I analyzed data only from participants who said they "may have seen it" or have "definitely seen it." Moreover, for each slogan, I exclude participants who selected "Other" as its interpretation, focusing on those who selected one of the pre-written options. For *#BelieveWomen*, this procedure leaves 242 participants for analysis.

Most participants say that they “somewhat agree” (99/242 = 41%) or “strongly agree” (103/242= 43%) with the idea expressed by *#BelieveWomen*. Most (184/242 = 76%) would summarize *#BelieveWomen* on the moderate interpretation (“Take allegations as important evidence, and investigate them”), while a sizable minority (58/242 = 24%) use the extreme interpretation (“Take allegations as true, without needing to investigate them”).

Among those who agree with *#BelieveWomen*, the moderate interpretation is most common (Figure 3). The extreme interpretation is more prevalent among those who disagree with the slogan. These results are consistent with the False Controversy Hypothesis (4): those who endorse the slogan interpret its meaning as moderate, while those who disagree interpret it as extreme. This situation constitutes a false controversy because those who agree versus disagree with the slogan interpret it differently.

On the other hand, some people who agree with *#BelieveWomen* assign it the extreme interpretation (Figure 3). These findings are consistent with the False Consensus Hypothesis (5): not everyone who agrees with the slogan interprets it in the same way. This situation also represents a true controversy between those who agree versus disagree with the slogan on its extreme interpretation.

To test the hypothesis (6) that one’s interpretation of *#BelieveWomen* is predicted by one’s political orientation, I conducted a binomial logistic regression in R (R Core Team, 2012) predicting interpretation (moderate versus extreme) as a function of political orientation (an ordered factor). Gender was included as another additive predictor because *#BelieveWomen* describes gender-based violence. Because political orientation is an ordered factor with five levels (Very liberal, Somewhat Liberal, Moderate, Somewhat Conservative, Very Conservative), the statistical analysis tests for polynomial effects (quadratic, cubic, and quartic), but I focus on the linear effect because it is most interpretable. In this model, political orientation has a strong linear effect on one’s interpretation of *#BelieveWomen* ($\beta = 1.79$, $z = 3.85$, $p < 0.001$), meaning that conservatives are more likely to favor the extreme interpretation of *#BelieveWomen*. The model finds no effect of gender. In a cumulative link model from the *clm* package (Christiansen, 2012) predicting agreement (an ordered factor) as a function of political orientation (ordered factor), political orientation has a strong linear effect on agreement ($\beta = -2.70$, $z = -6.61$, $p < 0.001$), meaning that conservatives are less likely to agree with *#BelieveWomen*. A mediation analysis (described further in the Appendix) shows that this relationship between political orientation and agreement is partially mediated by one’s interpretation of *#BelieveWomen*.

6.3 *#DefundThePolice*

For *#DefundThePolice*, only 22/451=5% participants said that they had “never seen” the slogan. Of those who “may have seen it” or “have definitely seen it,” I analyze data from the 405 participants who chose one of the pre-written interpretations rather than “other.”

Most participants say that they “somewhat disagree” (99/405 = 24%) or “strongly disagree” (181/405 = 45%) with the idea expressed by *#DefundThePolice*. Most (254/405 = 63%) would summarize *#DefundThePolice* on the moderate interpretation (“Reduce funding for

militarized policing; increase funding to social services instead”), while a large minority (151/405 = 37%) assign the extreme interpretation (“Abolish policing; reimagine new, community-engaged ways to keep order and help those in need”).

Among those who agree with *#DefundThePolice*, the moderate interpretation is most common (Figure 3). The extreme interpretation is most prevalent among those who “strongly disagree.” These results are consistent with the False Controversy Hypothesis (4): those who agree with the slogan interpret its meaning as moderate, while those who “strongly disagree” interpret it as extreme.

On the other hand, a sizable minority of those who agree with *#DefundThePolice* understand it on the extreme interpretation, consistent with the False Consensus Hypothesis (5): not everyone who agrees with the slogan interprets it the same way.

A binomial logistic regression tested the effect of political orientation (ordered factor) on interpretation (binary). Ethnicity was included as an additive predictor because *#DefundThePolice* evokes police violence towards Black people. Political orientation has a strong linear effect on one’s interpretation of *#DefundThePolice* ($\beta = 1.42$, $z = 4.611$, $p < 0.001$), meaning that conservatives are more likely to assign the extreme interpretation. No effect is found for ethnicity.

In a cumulative link model predicting agreement (ordered factor) as a function of political orientation (ordered factor), political orientation has a strong linear effect on agreement ($\beta = -4.11$, $z = -9.33$, $p < 0.001$), meaning that conservatives are less likely to agree with *#DefundThePolice*. A mediation analysis (see the Appendix) shows that this relationship between political orientation and agreement is partially mediated by one’s interpretation of *#DefundThePolice*.

6.4 *#FreePalestine*

For *#FreePalestine*, 400 participants said they “may have seen it” or have “definitely seen it.” Of those, 385 chose one of the pre-written interpretations rather than “Other.”

Most participants say that they “somewhat agree” (135/385 = 35%) or “strongly agree” (109/385 = 28%) with the idea expressed by *#FreePalestine*. Most (229/385 = 59%) would summarize it on the moderate two-state interpretation (“Palestine – Gaza and the West Bank – should be a free independent country, alongside Israel”). Only 73/385 = 19% favor the moderate one-state interpretation (“Palestine – the entire region: Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel – should be a single free country where Arabs and Jews live together”). Some (83/385 = 22%) use the extreme interpretation (“Palestine – the entire region: Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel – should be a single free country for Arabs, not Jews”).

Among those who agree with *#FreePalestine*, the moderate two-state interpretation is most prevalent, followed by the moderate one-state interpretation (Figure 3). The extreme interpretation is more common among those who disagree with *#FreePalestine*. These results are consistent with the False Controversy Hypothesis (5): those who agree with the slogan interpret its meaning as moderate, while those who disagree interpret it as extreme.

On the other hand, at least some of those who agree with *#FreePalestine* do assign the extreme interpretation (Figure 3), consistent with the False Consensus Hypothesis (5): not everyone who agrees with the slogan interprets it the same way.

A cumulative link model tested the effect of political orientation (ordered factor) on interpretation (also an ordered factor, from most moderate to most extreme). Religion was included as an additive predictor because *#FreePalestine* evokes a conflict between majority-Muslim Arabs and majority-Jewish Israelis[1]. Political orientation has a strong linear effect on one's interpretation ($\beta = 1.38$, $z = 4.42$, $p < 0.001$), meaning that conservatives are more likely to assign the extreme interpretation. The extreme interpretation is also more likely to be chosen by Jewish people ($\beta = 1.95$, $z = 2.63$, $p < 0.01$), who largely disagree with the slogan.

In a cumulative link model predicting agreement (ordered factor) as a function of political orientation (ordered factor), political orientation has a strong linear effect on agreement ($\beta = -2.62$, $z = -8.99$, $p < 0.001$), meaning that conservatives are less likely to agree with *#FreePalestine*. A mediation analysis (see the Appendix) shows that this relationship between political orientation and agreement is partially mediated by one's interpretation of *#FreePalestine*.

[1] About 81% of Israelis are Jewish (https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/03/08/key-findings-religion-politics-israel/); about 98% of Palestinians are Muslim (https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/palestinian-culture/palestinian-culture-population-statistics).

7 Discussion

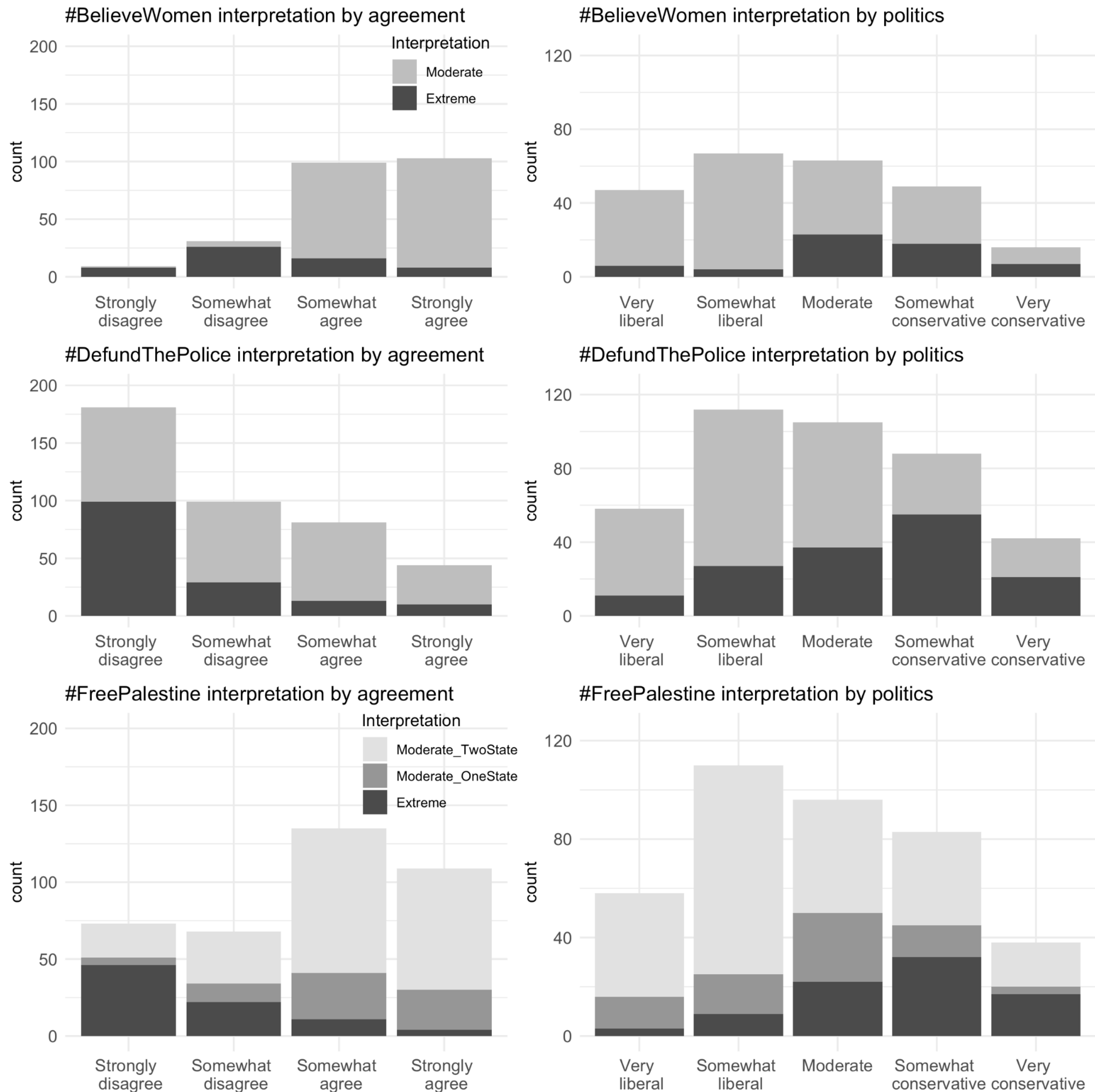

Figure 3: Interpretation of each slogan split by agreement and by political orientation.

Figure 3 visualizes the interpretations of each slogan split by agreement and by political orientation. As Figure 3 shows, these slogans vary in popularity: most participants agree with *#BelieveWomen*, although many have never seen it. The plurality of participants “strongly disagree” with *#DefundThePolice*, but “somewhat agree” with *#FreePalestine*.

Across all three slogans, these results are consistent with the hypotheses set forth above. Consistent with the False Controversy Hypothesis (14), most people who agree with each slogan

interpret it as moderate, while those who disagree tend to interpret it as extreme. This situation constitutes a false controversy because the people who agree versus disagree with the slogan interpret it differently.

(14) The False Controversy Hypothesis (=4): Overall, those who endorse a slogan favor a moderate interpretation of it, while those who reject the slogan favor an extreme interpretation.

Consistent with the False Consensus Hypothesis (15), among those who agree with each slogan, a small minority do assign the extreme interpretation. This situation reflects a false consensus because not everyone who agrees with the slogan interprets it the same way. One might argue that those who disagree with a slogan on its extreme interpretation are disagreeing with a misrepresentative "straw man" interpretation of it, not used by the majority of people who agree with the slogan. But at least some people who agree with the slogan actually do favor this extreme interpretation. Thus, those who agree versus disagree with the slogan on its extreme interpretation are engaged in a true controversy: they agree on its meaning while disagreeing about whether the action that it calls for is desirable.

(15) The False Consensus Hypothesis (=5): Among those who endorse a slogan, a small minority of them favor its extreme interpretation.

Consistent with (16), participants who are more conservative (and, for *#FreePalestine*, those who are Jewish) are more likely to assign the extreme interpretation of each slogan, and also more likely to disagree with the slogan. Analyses of statistical mediation (see the Appendix) show that the relation between political orientation and agreement (i.e., the finding that conservatives are more likely to disagree with each slogan) is partially mediated by their interpretation of that slogan.

(16) The Ideology-Drives-Interpretation Hypothesis (=6): A person's interpretation of a slogan is predicted by their overall political ideology.

As for why these results arise, perhaps liberals believe that women's allegations of assault are systematically doubted; that the police have too much unchecked power and military equipment; and that Palestinians are oppressed as second-class citizens in the Palestinian territories partially controlled by Israel. Liberals may therefore choose the moderate interpretation of these slogans because they are focused on the problems that the moderate interpretation aims to rectify. Alternatively, perhaps liberals choose the agreeable moderate interpretation because they are already inclined to agree with slogans associated with the progressive movement.

In contrast, conservatives may believe that men deserve due process when accused of sexual violence; that the government should enforce laws; and that Israel should be able to defend itself after being invaded. Conservatives may choose the extreme interpretation of these slogans because they are focused on the problems that the extreme interpretation would amplify. Or perhaps conservatives choose the disagreeable extreme interpretation to justify themselves in rejecting a slogan associated with progressives.

In sum, these results suggest that online public discourse is contentious not just because people disagree about policy goals, but because they disagree about what policies or actions are actually championed by viral slogans.

These findings are articulated by participants themselves in their free-text responses, both among those who selected the meaning of "Other" for a given slogan (elaborated in a text box) and those who supplied comments at the end. Some participants verbalize with dismay the misunderstandings caused by the varying interpretations of these slogans.

(17) "For each of these hashtags I think there is an acceptable/reasonable way to interpret them, but I'm skeptical of whether the majority of those who use them interpret them along those lines."

(18) "I very much agree with the meaning of *#DefundThePolice* but absolutely hate the hashtag as I strongly believe it caused a tremendous loss of support simply due to the poor phrasing."

(19) "I feel these hashtags are controversial and carry perceptions that are not entirely what the user intends. They can be very polarizing."

(20) "Very interesting study. The sooner hashtags and 280 character tweets are done away with, the better for us all."

Since the survey was conducted during the Israel/Hamas war, *#FreePalestine* elicits the most polarized reactions. We have seen that liberals calling to *#FreePalestine* largely endorse a moderate two-state solution to the Israel/Palestine conflict, and intend this slogan to call for peace, as one participant wrote in their "Other" text box (21). On the other hand, conservatives and Jews understand them to demand the destruction of Israel and its Jewish citizens, as another participant wrote (22): calamitously opposed ideas of who represents the victim or perpetrator of genocide.

(21) "*#FreePalestine means* 'Opposing genocide'" [of Palestinians during Israel's invasion of Gaza]

(22) "*#FreePalestine* means 'Kill the Jews'"

Without assigning blame to one side or another, this paper suggests that people might find more common ground if they realized what others really meant or understood by what they said.

8 Conclusion

This paper finds in a large-scale survey that most people who agree with given slogan interpret its meaning as moderate, while most who disagree (and a few who agree) interpret it as extreme. Such variable interpretations of slogans contribute to misunderstandings (false controversy, false consensus) in public discourse.

Within semantics/pragmatics, this paper echoes Acton & Potts (2014); Acton (2019); Beaver & Stanley (2023), among others, in studying public discourse. This paper emphasizes the importance of variability, pursuing goals from sociolinguistics in identifying patterns within variation. We cannot speak of *the* meaning of a slogan or *the* Common Ground of online public discourse. Instead, we must confront how the multiple meanings of slogans vary across individuals (as a function of their political orientation) to create confusion about what is in the Common Ground of those who agree or disagree with a slogan, as well as the Common Ground of the larger contentious discourse. For those who participate in public discourse, this paper suggests that our discourse might be less polarized if people would reflect metalinguistically on the multiple meanings of slogans: if those who agree with a slogan on its moderate interpretation would clarify that they disavow its more extreme interpretation, and if those who disagree with a slogan on its extreme interpretation would acknowledge that they are more sympathetic to its moderate interpretation. Such clarification could build common ground across coalitions, not just about the actions that people see as desirable, but also about the meaning of what they say.

Appendix

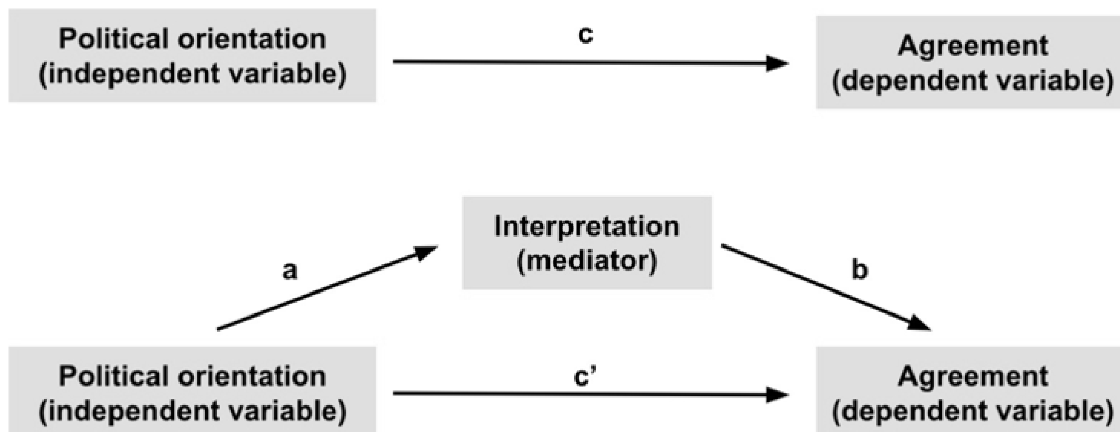

Figure 4: Elements of a mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

To show that one’s interpretation of a slogan mediates the relation between political orientation and agreement with the slogan, a mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986) would show the following elements (Figure 4). This Appendix lays out the mediation analysis for all three slogans explored above. In the estimation of a, coefficients vary slightly from those presented above because I do not include any demographic predictors (gender, ethnicity, religion) here.

1. Political orientation predicts agreement with the slogan [c].
    - clm(Agree_or_disagree ~ Political_orientation)
    - (both ordered categorical variables; focusing on linear effect of political orientation)
        i. *#BelieveWomen*: $\beta = -2.69$, $z = -6.61$, $p < 0.001$
        ii. *#DefundThePolice*: $\beta = -4.11$, $z = -9.33$, $p < 0.001$
        iii. *#FreePalestine*: $\beta = -2.62$, $z = -8.99$, $p < 0.001$
2. Political orientation predicts one's interpretation of the slogan [*a*].
    - *#BelieveWomen*: (binomial logistic regression, because there are two interpretations, moderate and extreme)
        i. glm(Interpretation ~ Political_orientation, family = "binomial") Interpretation is binary (moderate/extreme), political orientation is ordered categorical; focusing on linear effect
        ii. $\beta = 1.76$, $z = 3.80$, $p < 0.001$
    - *#DefundThePolice*: (binomial logistic regression, because there are two interpretations, moderate and extreme)
        i. glm(Interpretation ~ Political_orientation, family = "binomial") Interpretation is binary (moderate/extreme), political orientation is ordered categorical; focusing on linear effect
        ii. $\beta = 1.44$, $z = 4.74$, $p < 0.001$
    - *#FreePalestine*: (ordered categorical regression, because there are three interpretations, moderate two-state, moderate one-state, and extreme)
        i. clm(Interpretation ~ Political_orientation)
        ii. Interpretation is ordered categorical (moderate two-state, moderate one-state, extreme), political orientation is ordered categorical; focusing on linear effect
        iii. $\beta = 1.44$, $z = 4.94$, $p < 0.001$
3. Even controlling for political orientation [*c'*], one's interpretation of the slogan should predict agreement with it [*b*].
    - clm(Agree_or_disagree ~ Political_orientation + Interpretation)
    - Coefficients reflect the effect of interpretation [*b*]
        i. *#BelieveWomen*: $\beta = -1.82$, $z = -6.79$, $p < 0.001$
        ii. *#DefundThePolice*: $\beta = -0.57$, $z = 3.49$, $p < 0.001$
        iii. *#FreePalestine*: $\beta = -1.46$, $z = -7.35$, $p < 0.001$
4. The effect of political orientation on agreement should be smaller when interpretation is included as a predictor (versus when interpretation is not included) [$|c'| < |c|$].
    - Comparing coefficient for political orientation from (3) to its effect in (1)
        i. *#BelieveWomen*: $c' = -2.43$, $c = -2.69$
        ii. *#DefundThePolice*: $c' = -3.96$, $c = -4.11$
        iii. *#FreePalestine*: $c' = -2.14$, $c = -2.62$

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