



INTRODUCTION

Background:

- 42% of Americans believe in human-caused climate change (Pew, 2013). Who might climate change skeptics consider to be credible?
- Berkeley physicist Richard Muller was once a prominent climate change skeptic, but changed his opinion after his own research found strong evidence that anthropogenic climate change is real. He now calls himself a **“converted skeptic”** (Muller, 2012).
- In persuasion research, Muller could be considered an *unexpected source* (person who advocates a surprising position). Unexpected sources can increase message scrutiny and attitude change (e.g., Baker & Petty, 1994).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Influential sources of climate change information.

- Are former skeptics such as Muller perceived as more credible – and are they more persuasive – than people who were never skeptics? Is this especially true for those who do not believe that climate change is happening?
- Does ‘former skepticism’ increase perceived credibility of other types of influential sources, such as politicians?
- Because political ideology predicts belief in human-caused warming (19% of conservatives/Republicans, 57% of liberals/Dems, 43% of independents), does political ideology moderate persuasiveness of skeptics?

Source credibility and persuasiveness

- **We hypothesized that an expert source (scientist, politician) who is a former skeptic will be perceived as highly credible and thus more effective than typical sources in changing skeptical individuals’ attitudes toward climate change.**

What makes a climate change communicator credible to a skeptical audience?

- This study investigates whether people who used to be skeptical of climate change are more credible communicators than those who were never skeptical.
- The results suggest that politically conservative individuals perceive formerly-skeptical communicators as more credible than long-term believers (people who were never skeptics).

METHOD

Study Design

- 3 × 2 × 2 between-subjects experimental design
 - 3(type of source: avg. person, Congressman, scientist)
 - 2(skeptic status: former skeptic, never skeptic)
 - 2(type of costs: high personal cost, low personal cost)
- Participants read an article describing a person who either used to be a skeptic (but changed his mind) or was never a skeptic, and incurred either high or low personal costs for the sake of that belief.

Participants

- The final sample consists of 614 respondents on Mturk
- 286 Men, 324 women, *M* age = 36.3 years
- Political Ideology: 146 conservative, 138 neutral/moderate, 327 liberal

DISCUSSION

Summary

- Support for hypothesis: Conservative individuals differed significantly in their perceptions of sources’ credibility and responded most favorably to former skeptics (scientist, Congressman).
 - Notably, conservatives did not penalize the Congressman for switching positions on climate change – in fact, they viewed him as more credible.

- Despite the observed pattern for credibility, this pattern did not emerge for opinion change (measured pre- and post-manipulation) – future work can determine whether this reflects a disconnect between source credibility and persuasiveness vs. methodological challenges.

- Because of possible lack of power to detect some effects, this study should be replicated with a larger sample of conservative participants.

Implications

- Scientific and activist communities may communicate more effectively to skeptics by highlighting scientists and other communicators who have changed their position on climate change.

- Politicians won’t necessarily be penalized for switching positions, depending on the circumstances.

- Future research should investigate whether the persuasiveness of skeptics applies to other issues – e.g., genetically modified foods (GMOs), nuclear power, and other issues that liberals tend to be skeptical of – to see if this kind of pattern holds across political ideologies.

References

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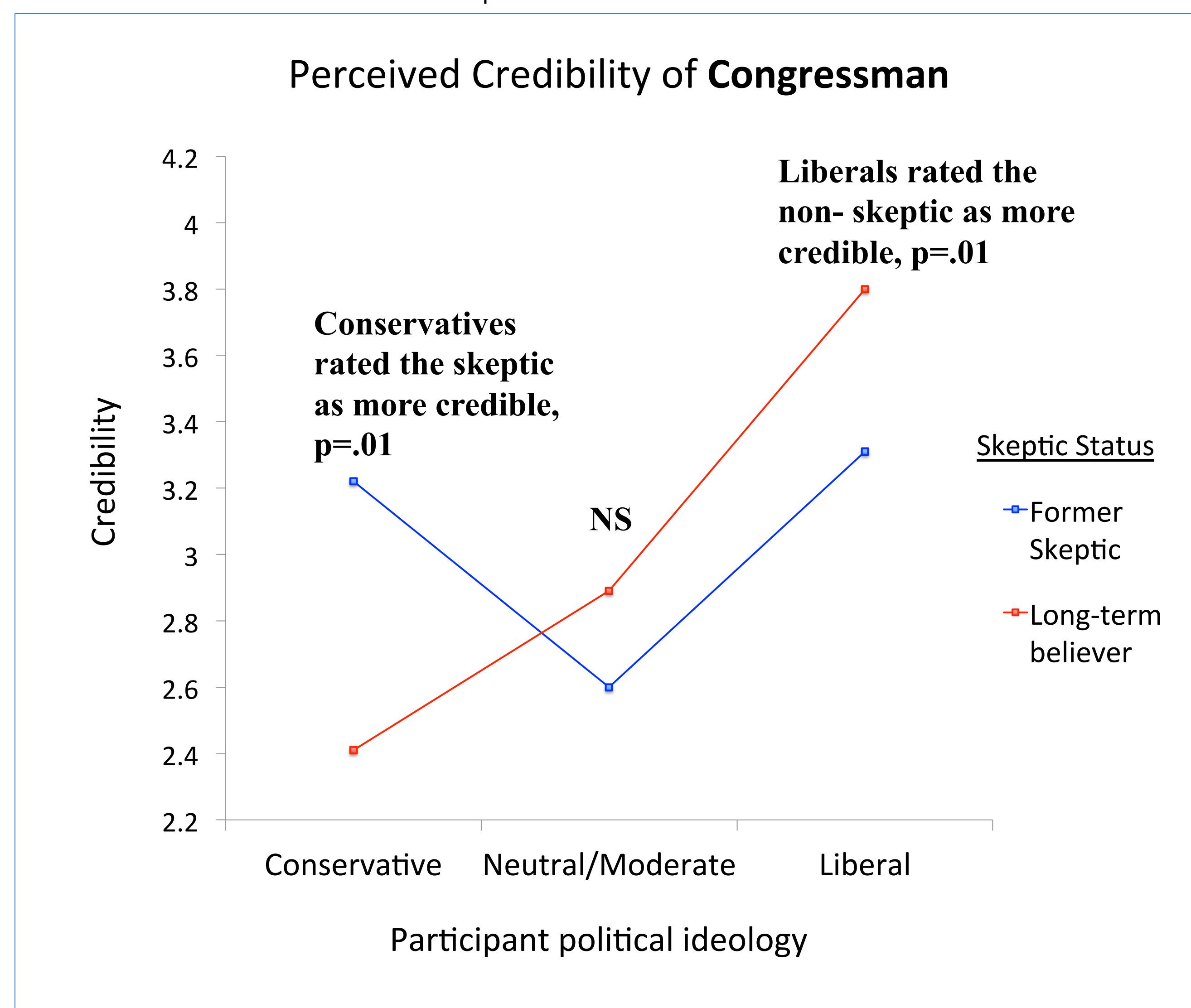
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RESULTS

Political orientation affects perceptions of a communicator’s credibility

The effect of skeptic status on the Congressman’s perceived credibility depended on participant political ideology, $F(2, 195) = 5.973, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .058$.



The effect of skeptic status on the Scientist’s perceived credibility trended toward depending on participant political ideology, but was not significant, $F(2, 198) = 2.156, p = .116, \eta_p^2 = .021$.

