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Article

Social Psychological and Personality Science
1–11
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Depoliticizing Language Improves Attitudes Toward Diversity Training

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Abstract

Political debates about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and internal workplace communication about DEI tend to use a common language. We examine whether decoupling workplace DEI terminology from that used in the political sphere might improve attitudes toward diversity training. Across three experiments and two supplemental studies (total $N = 3{,}209$) sampling employed Democrats and Republicans, replacing common DEI terminology (e.g., "diversity") with carefully matched alternative terminology (e.g., "differences") in initial framings of diversity training increased Republicans' pre- and post-training enthusiasm. We identify a mechanism underlying this effect: Alternative framing reduced Republicans' perceptions of the training's political bias. Critically, Republicans' expectations about whether the training would facilitate typical diversity-training goals did not differ by framing, and effects persisted when training content was held constant and only framing varied. These findings suggest that separating training content from politically coded DEI language can improve attitudes toward diversity training.

Keywords

diversity training, language, political bias, attitudes

Handling Editor: Shenel Husnu

Introduction

For decades, U.S. organizations have invested in diversity training (Paluck, 2006; Roberson et al., 2024). However, recently, diversity training has come under scrutiny, drawn into broader political debates in the United States about the value of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in general. The increased politicization of DEI outside work has created new challenges for organizations wishing to continue offering diversity training, as employees, particularly those identifying as politically conservative, are adopting increasingly negative views of workplace DEI initiatives (Edelman Trust Institute, 2024; Minkin, 2024).

Drawing from research on affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019), we examine a potential intervention to reduce resistance to diversity training. Specifically, we test whether decoupling the language used to frame diversity training from that used in political debates about the value of DEI might enhance conservatives' (i.e., Republicans') receptivity to such training. Using controlled experiments sampling employed Democrats and Republicans, we show that replacing commonly used DEI-related terminology (e.g., "diversity") with carefully matched alternative terminology (e.g., "differences") in initial framings of diversity training increases Republicans' enthusiasm for DEI-related training content.

Our research contributes new insight into the factors that shape diversity training attitudes. Research suggests that conservatives respond more negatively than liberals to the content of diversity training (Federico & Sidanius, 2002; Harrison et al., 2006). By contrast, we show that conservatives—specifically, Republicans—evaluate identical diversity training content more favorably when that content is initially framed using language distinct from that used in DEI-related debates in the U.S. political sphere. Critically, we provide evidence of psychological mechanism: Altering framing language reduces perceptions of how politically biased diversity training is, which improves Republicans' training attitudes. As such, our work complements previous research suggesting that diversity training attitudes may be influenced by factors other than training content, such as whether the training is voluntary versus mandatory or whether a business versus moral rationale is provided for the training (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Kidder et al., 2004). Our findings suggest that Republicans' reactions to diversity training content are shaped, in part, by the extent to which they interpret diversity training, itself, as politically motivated (Cohen, 2003).

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The Politicization of Diversity Training

Diversity training emerged in U.S. organizations in the 1960s and has been widely adopted, typically focusing on facilitating positive intergroup interactions, reducing prejudice and discrimination, and teaching dissimilar others how to work together effectively (Bezrukova et al., 2012; Lindsey et al., 2015). Notably, although organizations sometimes adopt moral rationales for diversity training, organizations have typically invested in diversity training for business-related reasons (Devine & Ash, 2022). Although this training has existed in U.S. organizations for decades, in recent years, it has become entangled with broader political debates about the societal value of DEI efforts in general (Goldberg, 2025; Mosley, 2025; Palumbo, 2025). Many U.S. organizations responded to progressive social justice movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter by emphasizing and/or strengthening their internal DEI-related efforts (Guynn, 2024a; Ingram, 2025). In response, conservative politicians and activists construed such organizations as engaging in DEI efforts to promote a progressive political agenda rather than support business-related goals (Pisani & Cutter, 2024).

Given this context, it is notable that recent polling data shows that employees, particularly those identifying as politically conservative (i.e., Republicans), have adopted increasingly negative views of workplace DEI efforts, such as diversity training (Edelman Trust Institute, 2024; Minkin, 2024). What explains these negative attitudes? Previous research suggests they stem from value-based opposition to typical diversity training content. Conservatism is associated with more negative attitudes toward social policies and organizational initiatives that reduce inequality and support disadvantaged groups, such as racial minorities and women (Federico & Sidanius, 2002; Harrison et al., 2006; Nishii et al., 2018; Swigart et al., 2020). Conservatism is also associated with a preference for tradition over change (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Jost et al., 2003). As such, previous research suggests that Republicans' resistance to diversity training may result from the fact that diversity training typically addresses race and gender disparities at work and proposes changes to the status quo (e.g., reducing divisions between groups of employees).

However, we suggest that Republicans' current negative attitudes toward diversity training may also stem, in part, from affective polarization (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Research on affective polarization shows that members of opposing political groups' differing attitudes toward social policies are explained not only by differences in their political ideologies but also by individuals' tendency to support issues favored by their political ingroup and oppose issues favored by their political outgroup (Cohen, 2003). As such, Republicans may construe diversity training as primarily focused on promoting a progressive ideology rather than improving workplace dynamics and, relatedly, as serving the interests of those on the political left (vs. the organization) (as conservative critics argue; Guynn, 2024b; Pisani & Cutter, 2024), reducing training enthusiasm. If Republicans' negative diversity training attitudes stem, in part, from interpreting diversity training through the left-right political conflict over DEI, reducing the salience of this conflict may improve Republicans' attitudes. Research on affective polarization points to the importance of language cues in shaping partisans' attitudes toward politicized social issues. For instance, in a study conducted during the Obama administration, Republicans were less likely to sign up for health insurance when language in the signup website's URL highlighted connections to the Democrat-led government (Lerman et al., 2017).

Notably, language that is frequently present in conservative elites' critiques of DEI—terms like "diversity," "inclusion," and "belonging" (Yourish et al., 2025)—is also commonly used by U.S. companies to describe their DEI-related efforts (Leslie et al., 2024). That is, the typical vocabulary used in workplace DEI—which we refer to as "common DEI language"—is not inherently political but has acquired political connotations through its prominent use in partisan debates over DEI. Thus, diversity training initially framed, introduced, or proposed to employees using this common DEI language likely cues political divisions and critiques of DEI in employees' minds—bringing to mind their political identities outside work and their political party's position and messaging on DEI. As such, we expect that replacing such terminology with alternative terminology that holds similar definitional meaning but lacks the political connotations of the language used in the political sphere may lessen Republicans' negative attitudes. If we are correct, this effect should be partially explained by perceived political bias—beliefs about the extent to which the training is politically motivated rather than objective and fact-based (Wallace et al., 2020). That is, we predict that, for Republicans, diversity training initially framed using alternative language may be perceived as less politically biased compared to training framed using common DEI language and thus should improve training attitudes. We expect that this effect should be attenuated for Democrats, given ideological overlap between the values of the Democratic Party and progressive social movements (Druckman et al., 2013).

Overview of Studies

To test our predictions, we conducted three experiments and two supplemental studies, sampling employed Democrats and Republicans. Data were collected between December 9, 2024, and April 14, 2026, a period of intense DEI politicization spanning the 2024 U.S. presidential election and subsequent federal actions on DEI (Goldberg, 2025; Guynn, 2026; Mosley, 2025). Across studies, we varied the language used to initially frame DEI content. See Table 1 for an overview of studies.

Table 1. Overview of Pilot Study, Studies 1, S1, S2, and 2.

Study	Location	Sample source	Effect of language framing on …	Political bias mediator
Pilot	Main text	CloudResearch Connect	Opt-in to read DEI educational material	No
Study 1	Main text	CloudResearch Connect	Training enthusiasm before completing training	Yes
Study S1	Supplement	CloudResearch Connect	Training enthusiasm before completing training	Yes
Study S2	Supplement	CloudResearch Connect	Training enthusiasm before completing training	Yes
Study 2	Main text	Prolific	Training enthusiasm after completing training	Yes

Note. DEI = diversity, equity and inclusion.

Table 2. Participants, Sample Size Justification, and Statistical Power (Pilot Study, Studies 1 and 2).

Study	Dem	Rep	Complete	Dem/Rep/Other	Final N	Sensitivity power analysis	Sample size justification
Pilot	200	200	402	196/193/13	389	OR = 3.3 (R simulation)	Set to detect a medium effect size (Chen et al., 2010)
Study 1	310	310	620	313/285/22	598	$f = .11$ (G*Power)	Set to detect the effect size observed in Study S1
Study 2	600	600	1,205	602/591/12	1,193	$f = .08$ (G*Power)	Set to approximately double Study 1's, given a smaller expected effect with training content held constant

Note. Dem and Rep show the numbers of Democrats and Republicans the survey was opened to. Complete is the number of participants who finished the survey. As preregistered, participants who identified their political affiliation as "Other" at the end of the survey were excluded from all analyses; Final N is the resulting analytic sample of Democrats and Republicans. Sensitivity analyses used a .05 alpha level and 80% power.

To avoid making political party identity artificially salient prior to our manipulation, all studies quota-sampled employed Democrats and Republicans using the survey platform's pre-screening questions. Participants confirmed their political affiliation at the end of the survey. For all studies, all variables and conditions are reported. We report *p*-values, effect sizes, and, where possible, 95% confidence intervals for key results. For our pilot study and Studies 1 and 2, sample size, predictions, exclusion criteria, and analysis plans were preregistered at AsPredicted.org. Exact study materials, preregistrations, data, and code are available at: https://osf.io/wpk2z/overview?view_only=5a7a6cbdf8c342d3a30023a6de1ff644.

Our studies focus on common DEI language—the typical vocabulary used in workplace DEI communications. We drew terminology from Harvard University's Glossary of Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging (DIB) Terms, a compilation of common DEI language. We then conducted a pretest with a separate sample of Democrats and Republicans ($N = 195$) to rule out a potential confound: that our predicted effects could be driven by negative attitudes toward jargon, that is, unfamiliar or difficult-to-understand terms. From the Harvard Glossary terms, we retained only those terms rated as familiar by both groups in the pretest (see Supplemental Material). Further supporting the familiarity of the terms we used, Studies 1, S1, and S2 also measured self-reported language understandability and found no evidence that our reported effects were driven by this variable (see Supplemental Material).

Pilot Study

Our pilot study provided an initial test of whether alternative DEI language increases participants'—particularly Republicans'—behavioral engagement with DEI-related content.

Table 2 reports details on participant recruitment, sample size justification, and statistical power for the pilot study and Studies 1 and 2. Table 3 reports participant demographics for the pilot study and Studies 1 and 2.

Method

Participants were told they would read an article related to human resources issues at work and that they could either choose to read the option initially presented or see other options. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of two conditions, which varied whether one of the common DEI terms identified in our pretest was used (i.e., "diversity") or a definitionally similar term was used (i.e., "differences"). Participants in the *common DEI language* condition were shown the article title, "'How to Make the Most out of Employee Diversity at Work' by T. Fleming (hrinfo.org)." Participants in the *alternative DEI language* condition were shown the article title, "'How to Make the

Table 3. Participant Demographics (Pilot Study, Studies 1 and 2).

Variable	Pilot study	Study 1	Study 2
Gender			
Woman	46%	57%	58%
Man	53%	43%	41%
Other identity	1%		
Age			
M_{age}	41.62	41.47	41.01
SD_{age}	12.28	12.90	12.99
Race/ethnicity			
White	77%	74%	73%
Asian	4%	7%	6%
Black	13%	10%	14%
Hispanic	5%	6%	5%
Other	1%	2%	1%

Table 4. Logistic Regression Predicting Choice of the DEI-Related Article (Pilot Study).

Predictor	*B*	*SE*	Wald	*p*	*OR*
Language Condition	−0.21	0.10	4.07	.044	0.81
Political Affiliation	−0.08	0.10	0.68	.409	0.92
Language Condition × Political Affiliation	−0.23	0.10	4.79	.029	0.80
Constant	0.06	0.10	0.32	.574	1.06

Note. $N = 389$. The outcome measure was the choice of the focal article (1 = chose focal article, 0 = requested other options). Both predictors were effect-coded (language: −1 = alternative, 1 = common; political affiliation: −1 = Democrat, 1 = Republican). *SE* = standard error.

Most out of Employee Differences at Work' by T. Fleming (hrinfo.org)."

In both conditions, participants were given a choice between reading the focal article and seeing the other options. Participants who chose the focal article were shown an article on workplace diversity (the same article was used across conditions). Participants who opted to see the other options were shown the article title, "How will Demand for Workforce Skills Change with Automation?" and were only given the option to select this article to read.

Results

In a binary logistic regression, we found a Language Condition × Participant Political Affiliation interaction on article choice (see Table 4).

Chi-square tests revealed that, for Republicans, language condition shifted participants' choice to read the focal article: In the *alternative DEI language* condition, 60.0% of Republicans chose to read the focal article; in the *common DEI language* condition, 38.7% of Republicans chose to read the focal article, $\chi^2(1, N = 193) = 8.74$, $p = .003$, $w = .21$. For Democrats, there was no effect of language condition on focal article choice, $\chi^2(1, N = 196) = .015$, $p = .902$, $w = .01$. In total, 53.1% chose to read the focal article in the *alternative DEI language* condition versus 54.0% in the *common DEI language* condition (see Figure 1).[1]

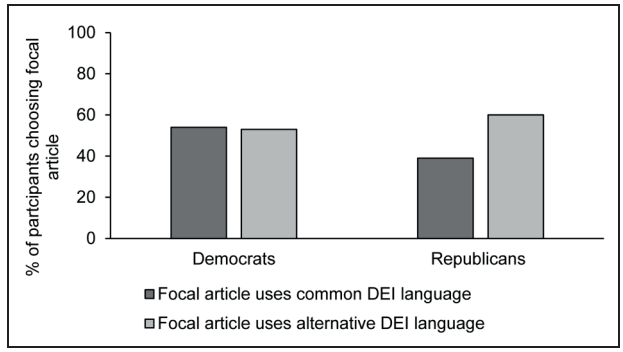


Figure 1. Effects of language condition and political affiliation on focal article choice.

In addition, fewer than 50% of Republicans (38.7%) chose to read the focal article in the *common DEI language* condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 93) = 4.74$, $p = .029$, $w = .23$, whereas more than 50% of Republicans (60.0%) chose to read the focal article in the *alternative DEI language* condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 4.00$, $p = .046$, $w = .20$, indicating that the majority of Republican participants actively opted *into* reading DEI-related content when it was presented using alternative language. For Democrats, focal article choice did noiffer from 50/50 within the alternative language condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 96) = .375$, $p = .540$, $w = .06$, or the common language condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = .640$, $p = .424$, $w = .08$.

Study 1

Building on the results of our pilot study, Study 1 examined whether participants, particularly Republicans, were more enthusiastic about diversity training described using alternative DEI language (vs. common language) and whether this effect was partially explained by the expected political bias of the training. This study also sought to address an alternative—that diversity training using common DEI language could more strongly signal a focus on race and gender issues (content covered by typical diversity training in the United States, Onyeador et al., 2024), explaining Republicans' more negative attitudes.

Method

Participants imagined receiving an email about voluntary training at their organization and were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Participants in the *common DEI language* condition read a training description that included five DEI terms identified as familiar in our pretest (Diversity, Inclusion, Belonging, Equity, and Privilege). Participants in the *alternative DEI language* condition read

Common DEI Language Condition	Alternative DEI Language Condition
In this training, you will learn about…	***In this training, you will learn about…***
• How to manage employee diversity • How to enhance employees' sense of inclusion • How to foster employees' sense of belonging in the workplace • How to promote equity for different groups of employees at work so that no-one's work outcomes are driven by privilege	• How to manage employee differences • How to enhance employees' sense of being visible, heard, and considered in the workplace • How to foster employees' sense of being treated like a full member of the organization • How to remove barriers for different groups of employees at work so that no-one's work outcomes are driven by unfair advantages

Figure 2. Study 1 manipulation stimuli.

Table 5. 2×2 ANOVA Results for Training Enthusiasm and Perceived Political Bias (Study 1).

Variable	*df*	*F*	*p*	η_p^2
Training enthusiasm				
Language Condition	1	11.58	<.001	.019
Political affiliation	1	109.94	<.001	.156
Language Condition × Political affiliation	1	12.09	<.001	.020
Error	594			
Perceived political bias				
Language Condition	1	18.46	<.001	.030
Political affiliation	1	84.86	<.001	.125
Language Condition × Political affiliation	1	13.99	<.001	.023
Error	594			

Note. $N = 598$. Language Condition was coded 0 = alternative DEI language, 1 = common DEI language. Political affiliation was coded 0 = Democrat, 1 = Republican.

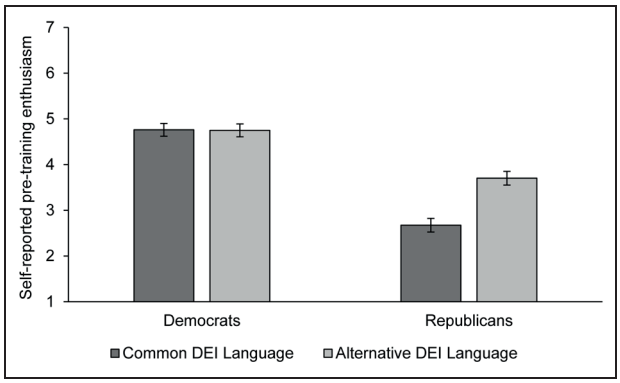


Figure 3. Effects of language condition and participant political affiliation on pre-training enthusiasm (Study 1).

a training description using carefully matched alternative terms, taken directly from the definitions provided by Harvard University's "Glossary of Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging (DIB) Terms" to explain each of the five terms used in our *common DEI language* condition (see Figure 2).

Next, participants rated the training's expected political bias (adapted from Wallace et al., 2020): "This training will be based more on political opinions than objective facts" (1 "Strongly Disagree" to 7 "Strongly Agree"), enthusiasm (adapted from Kulik et al., 2007): "How enthusiastic would you be to take part in this training?" (1 "Not enthusiastic at all" to 7 "Very enthusiastic"), and understandability: "I have a clear understanding of what this training is about" (1 "Strongly Disagree" to 7 "Strongly Agree"). We also asked participants, "Do you think this course will likely cover issues related to race and gender?" (Yes/No).

Results

There was a Condition × Political Affiliation interaction on enthusiasm (see Table 5). We tested the simple effect of condition within each political affiliation using estimated marginal means and the pooled error term from the full model. Republicans reported higher enthusiasm for the training with alternative DEI language ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.79$) compared with the training with common DEI language ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.82$), $F(1, 594) = 22.60$, $p < .001$, $d = .57$, 95% CI of mean difference [0.60, 1.45]. There was no effect of condition on enthusiasm for Democrats ($M_{alternative} = 4.75$, $SD = 1.79$ vs. $M_{common} = 4.76$, $SD = 1.90$), $F(1, 594) = .003$, $p = .957$, $d = .01$, 95% CI of mean difference [−0.42, 0.39] (see Figure 3).

There was also a Condition × Political Affiliation interaction on perceived political bias (see Table 5). Republicans expected the training with alternative DEI language to be less politically biased ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.94$) compared with the training with common DEI language ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 2.00$), $F(1, 594) = 30.84$, $p < .001$, $d = .61$, 95% CI of mean difference [−1.62, −0.77]. There was no effect of condition on perceived political bias for Democrats ($M_{alternative} = 2.65$, $SD = 1.66$ vs. $M_{common} = 2.73$, $SD = 1.66$), $F(1, 594) = .162$, $p = .687$, $d = .05$, 95% CI of mean difference [−0.48, 0.32].

We tested for moderated mediation using Hayes' (2017) PROCESS macro (Model 8). We examined whether for Republicans (compared to Democrats), there was a stronger indirect effect of condition (X) on enthusiasm (Y) through perceived political bias (M), with political affiliation moderating the X to M link. The index of moderated mediation was significant, *index* = −.36, *SE* = 0.11, 95% CI [−0.59, −0.16]. There was an indirect effect of condition on enthusiasm through political bias for Republicans, *ab* = −.38, *SE* = 0.09, 95% CI [−0.58, −0.21], suggesting one reason Republicans were more enthusiastic about the training with alternative DEI language (vs. common DEI language) was that they expected the training with alternative language to be less politically biased. The indirect effect for Democrats was non-significant, *ab* = −.03, *SE* = 0.06, 95% CI [−0.15, 0.10] (Supplement reports path models for indirect effects).[2]

While the proportion of participants who believed the training related to race and gender was high across conditions, the proportion was greater in the *common DEI language* condition (98.3%) than in the *alternative DEI language* condition (90.6%), $\chi^2(1, N = 598) = 16.97$, $p < .001$, $w = .17$. However, all results reported above remained robust when controlling for this variable and when analyzing only participants who believed the training related to race and gender ($n = 565$, see Supplemental Material). These results suggest the above effects are not reducible to Republicans assuming that the training with alternative language omitted discussion of race and gender. In addition, we observed no impact of condition on language understandability (see Supplemental Material).

Supplemental Data

Post-Test Examining Robustness Across Terms. To rule out the possibility that Study 1's effects were driven by some common DEI terms and not others, we conducted a separate study with employed Democrats and Republicans ($N = 492$). Participants were randomly presented two educational article titles, one including one of Study 1's five common DEI terms and one including the matched, alternative terminology from Study 1. Participants chose one of the two articles to read. Republicans' preference for articles with alternative language over common language was not moderated by which common DEI term they saw, suggesting our effects were not driven by specific terms (see Supplemental Material).

Studies S1 and S2. We conducted two additional studies examining the effects of framing language and political affiliation on pre-training enthusiasm (see Supplemental Material). Study S1 ($N = 393$) was conducted prior to Study 1 and used Study 1's exact materials but omitted the question asking whether participants expected the training to cover race and gender. Study S2 ($N = 636$) was also conducted prior to Study 1 and used Study 1's design and measures but, where possible, drew different alternative terminology from the diversity literature while keeping text length similar across conditions. Both studies replicated the Language Condition × Participant Political Affiliation interaction on training enthusiasm reported in Study 1. Replicating Study 1, Study S2's results were robust controlling for whether participants believed the training related to race and gender and when restricted to those who did ($n = 586$). However, inconsistent with our theorizing and unlike in Study 1, in Studies S1 and S2, political affiliation did not moderate the effect of language on political bias—Republicans and Democrats both expected the training with common (vs. alternative) language to be more politically biased. All three studies showed moderated mediation: For Republicans, there was an indirect effect of language condition on training enthusiasm through perceived political bias, and this indirect effect was attenuated for Democrats. However, we observed different patterns of moderated mediation across studies. Given the differing political bias results, Study 1 tested whether political affiliation moderated the language condition to political bias link (consistent with our original theorizing), whereas Studies S1 and S2 tested whether political affiliation moderated the political bias to training enthusiasm link.

Post-Tests Examining Perceived DEI Goals of Training. Study 1 and Study S2's results suggest that the effects observed were not driven by Republicans assuming that training framed using alternative language was less focused on race and gender issues compared to training framed using common DEI language. However, Republicans may still have perceived diversity training described using alternative language as less focused on achieving DEI-related goals in general than training described using common language. To address this, we conducted two post-tests with employed Republicans ($N = 191$; $N = 185$), using Study 1's and Study S2's exact language manipulations, respectively. Drawing on Bezrukova et al.'s (2012) definition of diversity training, we measured perceptions of the extent to which the training was designed with the goals of (a) facilitating positive intergroup interactions, (b) reducing prejudice and discrimination, and (c) teaching dissimilar others how to work together effectively. Neither study's manipulation affected Republicans' perceptions of the training's DEI goals (see Supplemental Material), indicating that the effects of the language manipulations used in Studies 1, S1, and S2 on Republicans' pre-training enthusiasm were not driven by our manipulation altering Republicans' understanding of the extent to which the training was designed to achieve typical diversity training goals.

Table 6. 2×2 ANOVA Results for Training Enthusiasm and Perceived Political Bias (Study 2).

Variable	*df*	*F*	*p*	η_p^2
Training enthusiasm				
Language Condition	1	0.994	.319	.001
Political affiliation	1	37.97	<.001	.031
Language Condition × Political affiliation	1	14.56	<.001	.012
Error	1,189			
Perceived political bias				
Language Condition	1	3.58	.059	.003
Political affiliation	1	41.71	<.001	.034
Language Condition × Political affiliation	1	5.08	.024	.004
Error	1,189			

Note. $N = 1{,}193$. Condition was coded 0 = alternative DEI language, 1 = common DEI language. Political affiliation was coded 0 = Democrat, 1 = Republican.

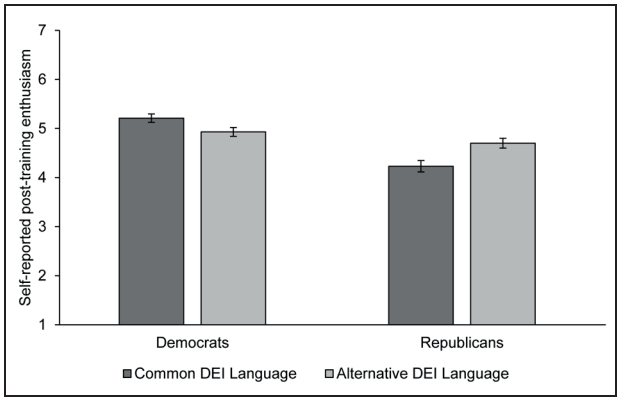


Figure 4. Effects of language condition and participant political affiliation on post-training enthusiasm (Study 2).

Study 2

Study 1 (and S1 and S2) demonstrated that introducing diversity training using alternative (vs. common) DEI language improved Republicans' pre-training enthusiasm and that this effect was partially mediated by reduced perceptions of the training's political bias. Our results thus far also provided initial evidence that these pre-training effects on attitudes were not driven by alternative mechanisms—our effects were robust after accounting for expectations concerning whether the training covered race and gender issues and were not explained by our manipulation altering expectations of the training's DEI goals. To provide further evidence of our theoretical account—that altering language improves Republicans' diversity training enthusiasm by making political debates about DEI less salient (rather than changing expectations of the training's content)—Study 2 examined whether our predicted effects persisted after participants engaged with actual training content. We varied the language used to introduce the training, while keeping the training content identical across conditions, and then measured participants' enthusiasm and perceived political bias after completing the training.

Method

Participants imagined their current employer had asked them to complete an online training module created by an outside consulting group. We used Study 1's language manipulation to introduce the training, but participants in both conditions then completed an identical training module—a 5-min slide deck presentation on ingroup bias. The training covered what ingroup bias is (with explicit reference to gender, race, sexual orientation, age, nationality, and religion), the negative effects of ingroup bias in the workplace (e.g., unfair distribution of resources), and how to reduce ingroup bias. See Open Science Framework link for exact training materials. After the module, participants responded to two items. Building on Studies 1, S1, and S2, we updated our measure of political bias to directly assess the extent participants perceived the training as politically motivated (Cohen, 2003). Participants rated perceived political bias (adapted from Wallace et al., 2020): "To what extent were the creators of this training motivated by their political beliefs when creating the training?" (1 "Not at all motivated by their political beliefs" to 7 "Very much motivated by their political beliefs"), and enthusiasm: "How enthusiastic do you feel about this training?" (1 "Not enthusiastic at all" to 7 "Very enthusiastic").

Results

There was a Condition × Political Affiliation Interaction on enthusiasm (see Table 6). Republicans reported higher enthusiasm for the training with alternative language ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.72$) compared with the training with common language ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 2.00$), $F(1, 1189) = 11.48$, $p < .001$, $d = .25$, 95% CI of mean difference [0.20, 0.75]. Inconsistent with Studies 1, S1, and S2, Democrats reported higher enthusiasm for the training with common language ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.47$) compared with the training with alternative language ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 1.56$), $F(1, 1189) = 4.01$, $p = .045$, $d = .18$, 95% CI of mean difference [0.01, 0.55] (see Figure 4).

There was also a Condition × Political Affiliation interaction on perceived political bias (see Table 6). Republicans perceived the training with alternative language to be less politically biased ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.94$) compared with the training with common language ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 2.19$), $F(1, 1{,}189) = 8.51$, $p = .004$, $d = .22$, 95% CI of mean difference [−0.76, −0.15]. Condition did not impact perceived political bias for Democrats ($M_{alternative} = 2.56$, $SD = 1.65$ vs. $M_{common} = 2.52$, $SD = 1.73$), $F(1, 1{,}189) = 0.066$, $p = .798$, $d = .02$, 95% CI of mean difference [−0.26, 0.34].

Table 7. Summary of Moderated Mediation Tests Across Studies.

Study	Analytic model tested (PROCESS)	Stage of moderation observed	Consistent with theoretical model
Study 1	Model 8	First-stage	Yes
Study S1	Model 15	Second-stage	No
Study S2	Model 15	Second-stage	No
Study 2	Model 8	First-stage	Yes

Note. First-stage moderation indicates that participant political affiliation moderated the X → M link (i.e., the effect of language condition on perceived political bias). Second-stage moderation indicates that affiliation moderated the M → Y link (i.e., the effect of perceived political bias on training enthusiasm). Moderated mediation analyses used the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2017).

We tested for moderated mediation using Hayes' (2017) PROCESS macro (Model 8), examining if there was a stronger indirect effect of condition (X) on enthusiasm (Y) through perceived political bias (M) for Republicans than Democrats, with political affiliation moderating the X to M link. The index of moderated mediation was significant, $index = -.13$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [−0.25, −0.02]. There was an indirect effect of condition on enthusiasm through political bias for Republicans, $ab = -.12$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [−0.22, −0.03], suggesting Republicans were more enthusiastic about training with alternative language partly because they perceived it as less politically biased. The indirect effect for Democrats was non-significant, $ab = .01$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [−0.06, 0.08] (see Supplemental Material for path models for indirect effects).

To summarize the moderated mediation results across studies: we predicted first-stage moderation, with political affiliation moderating the effect of language condition on perceived political bias. Studies 1 and 2 showed this first-stage pattern, whereas Studies S1 and S2 showed second-stage moderation (see Table 7).

General Discussion

Our studies reveal that replacing common DEI language with matched alternatives—vocabulary with similar meaning but without the political connotations of common DEI language—can improve Republicans' training attitudes. Alternative language enhanced Republicans' behavioral engagement with DEI-related content (Pilot Study) and their pre-training attitudes (Studies 1, S1, and S2), in part by reducing the training's expected political bias. Supplemental data suggest these effects were not reducible to framing language impacting assumptions about training goals. Study 2 replicated these effects holding training content constant. Across studies, Democrats showed null effects in four studies (Pilot Study, Study 1, S1, and S2), but greater enthusiasm for common (vs. alternative) language in Study 2.

Contributions and Implications

Our research offers a new perspective on one of the major challenges of diversity training—gaining trainee buy-in (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Nishii et al., 2018; Roberson et al., 2024). Prior research suggests that conservatives may oppose diversity training due to its content (Federico & Sidanius, 2002; Harrison et al., 2006). We show that in the current U.S. political climate, in which DEI is criticized by conservative elites (Guynn, 2024b), avoiding politically coded language may improve Republicans' training attitudes—both before and after the training. Our findings align with research on affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019), suggesting that Republicans' diversity training attitudes are driven not only by ideology but also by the salience of current political debates about the value of DEI.

Practically, we offer initial experimental evidence that alternative framing language may improve employees' receptivity to diversity training, particularly among employees most resistant to it, with potentially limited downsides (Minkin, 2024). Across our pilot study, Studies 1, 2, S1, and S2, participant race and gender did not moderate the impact of framing language on training enthusiasm (see Supplemental Material). We also conducted a study sampling employed Black participants ($N = 399$), as U.S. workplace DEI interventions often specifically seek to improve inclusion for this group (Onyeador et al., 2021). This study used Study 1's materials and additionally measured inclusion and belonging. We found no effect of our language manipulation on Black participants' training enthusiasm, belonging, or inclusion (see Supplemental Material). The majority of our studies also showed no backlash from Democrats. While Study 2 found that Democrats were slightly more favorable toward training framed using common (vs. alternative) language, Democrats were highly favorable toward the training across both language framing conditions.

It is worth noting that some organizations may not wish to avoid common DEI terminology in communications with employees. Some may argue that doing so constitutes a politically conservative approach to DEI (Keenan, 2025). Our research does not aim to offer a prescription, but rather to illuminate the potential role of language in shaping diversity training attitudes and suggest an evidence-based tool to those wishing to improve buy-in to diversity training among conservatives.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our studies are limited in that they were brief, vignette-based experiments conducted with online participants. We also used single-item dependent measures. Future research should test our predictions in real-world settings with richer training content, using validated multi-item measures. Our studies show that changing language can impact training enthusiasm, but it remains unknown whether our findings extend to organizational settings. Our studies also

examined participants' attitudes toward diversity training before and after participating in the training. Pre-training attitudes are important because they impact motivation to engage with training content and are particularly relevant to diversity training, which is often optional rather than mandatory (Bezrukova et al., 2016; Roberson et al., 2024). Post-training reactions are important because they predict trainees' willingness to apply takeaways (Roberson et al., 2024). Future research should examine other outcomes, such as post-training learning (Bell et al., 2017). Also, while we found that our language manipulation did not reduce Black participants' felt inclusion and belonging, future research should examine whether our manipulation impacts inclusion and belonging for other marginalized groups, including other racial/ethnic minorities, LGBTQ + individuals, and women. Our effects are also necessarily specific to a particular cultural context (the United States) at a particular moment in time. Future studies examining the impact of framing language on diversity training attitudes should situate their language manipulation within the sociopolitical context of their studies.

In addition, while our predicted effect of training framing on enthusiasm emerged more strongly for Republicans than Democrats across studies, Democrats' responses were mixed: they showed a small preference for common DEI language in Study 2 but null effects in all other studies. We cannot know from our data exactly why we observed these mixed effects given that Study 2 differed from our other studies in multiple ways. One possible explanation is that Study 2's sample was recruited from Prolific rather than Connect (which was used in all other studies). Prolific's Democrats may skew more ideologically liberal and identify more with the progressive movements championing DEI—and, as such, the language typically associated with DEI—than Democrats on Connect (Stagnaro et al., 2026). Future work should directly test whether sample differences or other differences across our study paradigms moderate the effect of training framing on Democrats' enthusiasm.

Finally, we note that, in line with our theorizing, Republicans in Studies 1 and 2 viewed training with common language as more politically biased than Democrats, partially explaining why our language manipulation exerted stronger effects on enthusiasm for Republicans. However, in Studies S1 and S2, both Republicans and Democrats viewed training with common (vs. alternative) language as more politically biased, but this belief exerted a stronger effect on Republicans' training enthusiasm than Democrats'. Future work should clarify the precise mediating role of political bias.

Conclusion

We provide experimental evidence that separating diversity training content from politically coded DEI language may improve Republicans' favorability toward such training. Our research suggests that altering language may be a pragmatic way to mitigate resistance to diversity training in contexts where DEI is highly politicized.

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Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by funds from the School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University, including a grant from ILR Workplace Inclusion and Diversity Education.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available in the online version of the article.

Notes

1. While we preregistered using chi-square tests to decompose the interaction, results were unchanged in terms of direction and significance when we instead used dummy codes in a binary logistic regression. For Republicans, more participants chose to read the focal article in the *alternative (vs. common) DEI language* condition, $B = .87$, $SE = 0.29$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 8.60$, $p = .003$, OR = 2.37. For Democrats, the effect of language condition on article choice was nonsignificant, $B = .04$, $SE = 0.29$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = .015$, $p = .902$, OR = 1.04.
2. Our analyses deviated from Study 1's preregistration. Our original theorizing (see Introduction) predicted first-stage moderation—that participant political affiliation would moderate the language condition (X) → political bias (M) link. However, Studies S1 and S2 (conducted prior to Study 1) instead showed second-stage moderation: both Democrats and Republicans viewed the common-language training as more politically biased, but perceived political bias more strongly reduced enthusiasm for Republicans than Democrats (affiliation moderated the M → Y link). We used Study 1 as a confirmatory test of this unexpected S1/S2 pattern and, as such, we preregistered a moderated-mediation model with affiliation moderating the M → Y link (Model 15; Hayes, 2017) rather than the X → M link (Model 8). However, consistent with our original theorizing, Study 1 showed first-stage moderation; we therefore report Model 8 in the main text. Fitting the preregistered Model 15 to the Study 1 data also yielded a significant index of moderated mediation; however, we report Model 8 because it more directly maps onto the first-stage interaction we observed on the mediator. The second-stage pattern observed in Studies S1 and S2 remains inconsistent with our original theorizing, which predicts first-stage moderation.

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