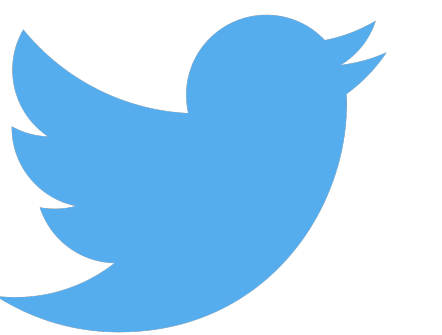


# Ghosts of Tweets Past: Personal Growth and Judgements of Long-Past Offensive Tweets



## Background

In the age of the internet, long-past misdeeds and inappropriate comments are preserved for posterity. It is not uncommon for public figure to be harshly scrutinized for their long-past statements that resurface online. Research on how judgements are made in these online situations remains sparse. What factors are most important in people's judgements of these figures?

### Personal Growth

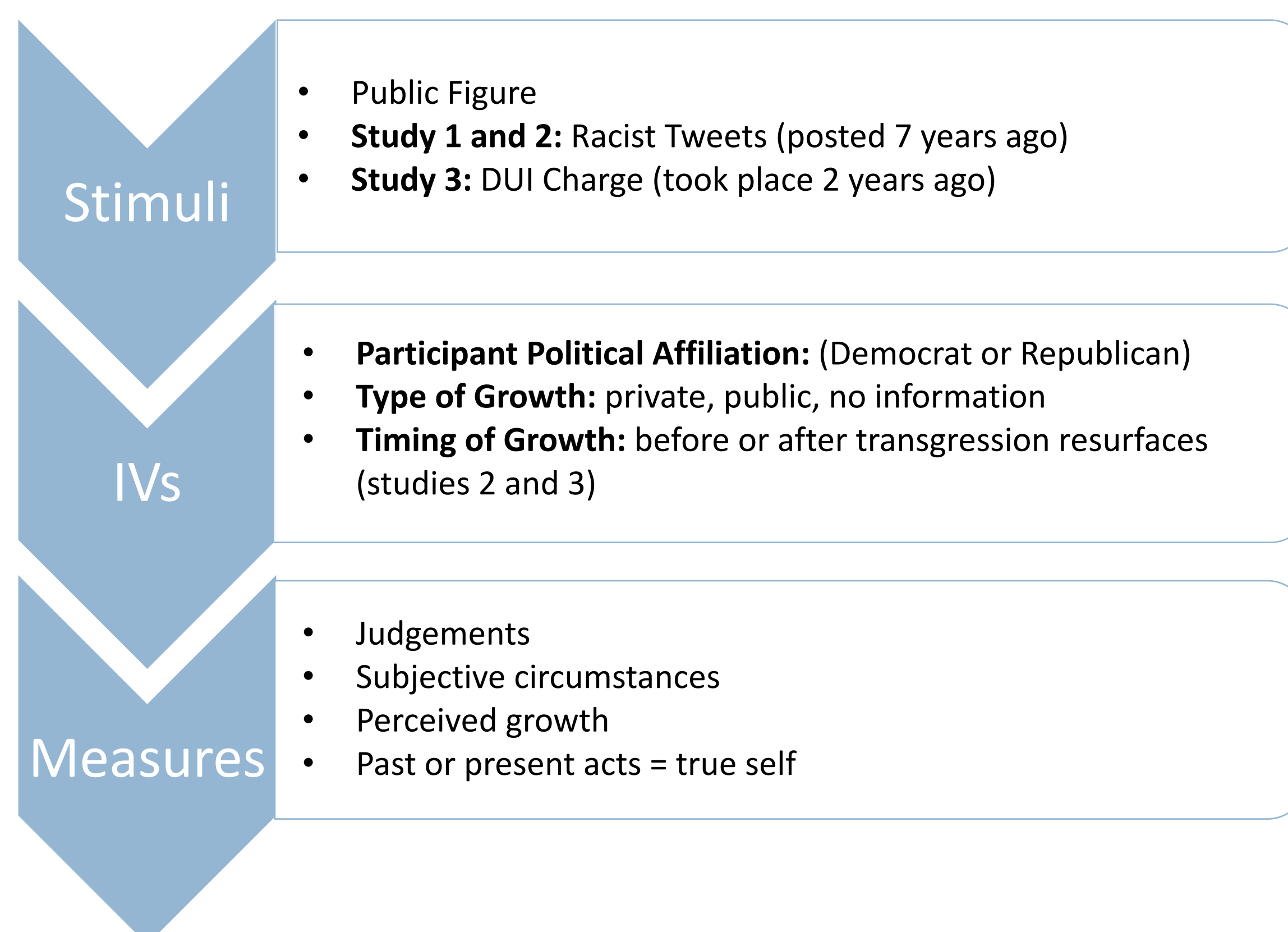
We expected that people may take personal growth into account in judging past misdeeds. Past research reveals that people attend to reparative actions in forgiveness decisions (Schumann & Dragotta, 2020), and that such actions help to rebuild trust and prevent further offence (Karp & Conrad, 2005).

### Political Affiliation

Moral reasoning theory suggests that political affiliations are powerful influences on people's pre-existing beliefs (Taber & Lodge, 2006). Thus, it is likely that they shape people's reactions toward a public figure who is facing criticism for their past offensive statements. For example, in the US, Democrats are more concerned about racism than Republicans, so a racist offense would likely be judged more harshly by Democrats than Republicans (Dawson, 2021, Romano, 2020).

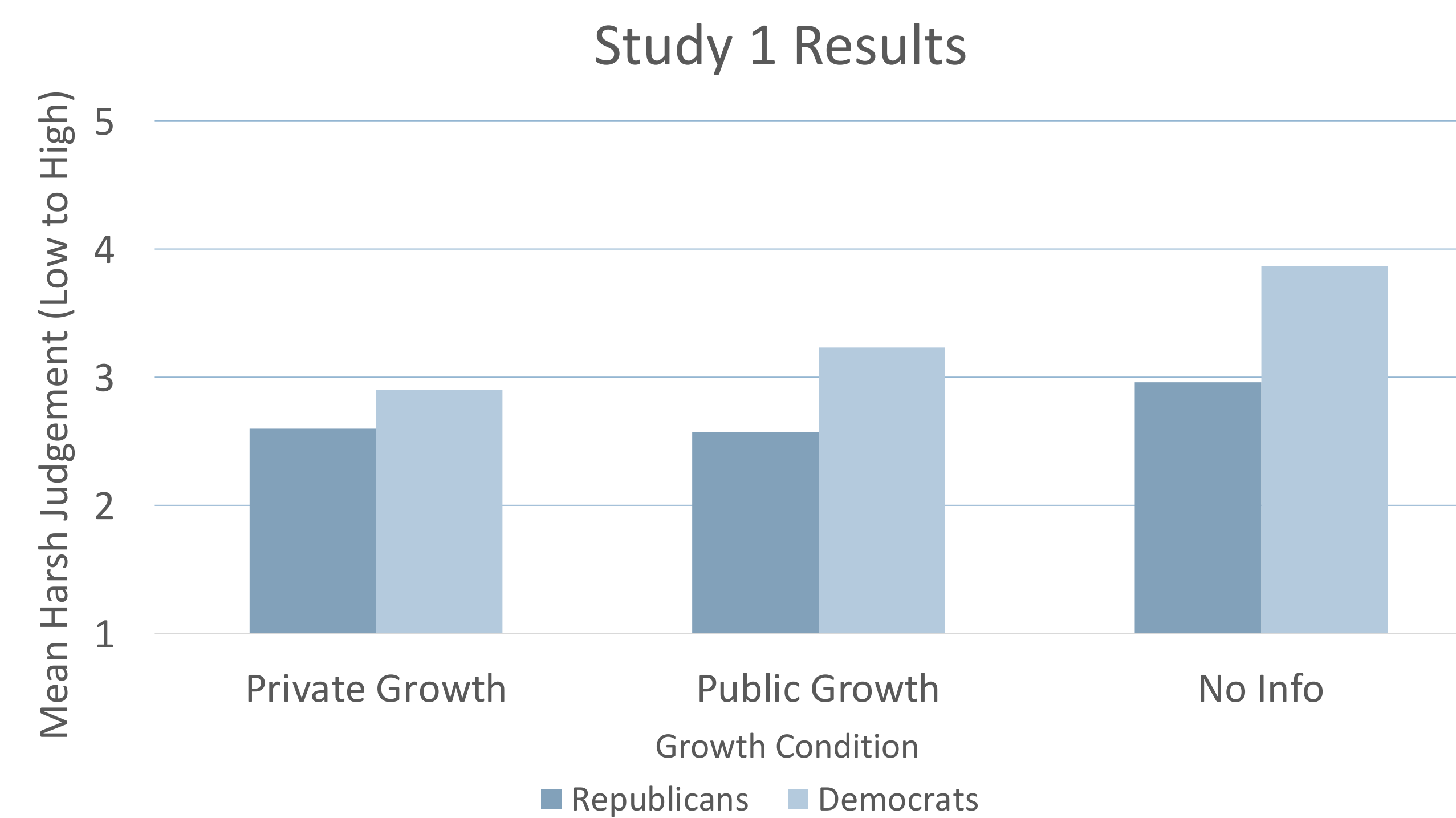
## Method

- Participants were presented with a vignette scenario describing a local news reporter receiving backlash due to current revelations of his past behaviour



## Study 1

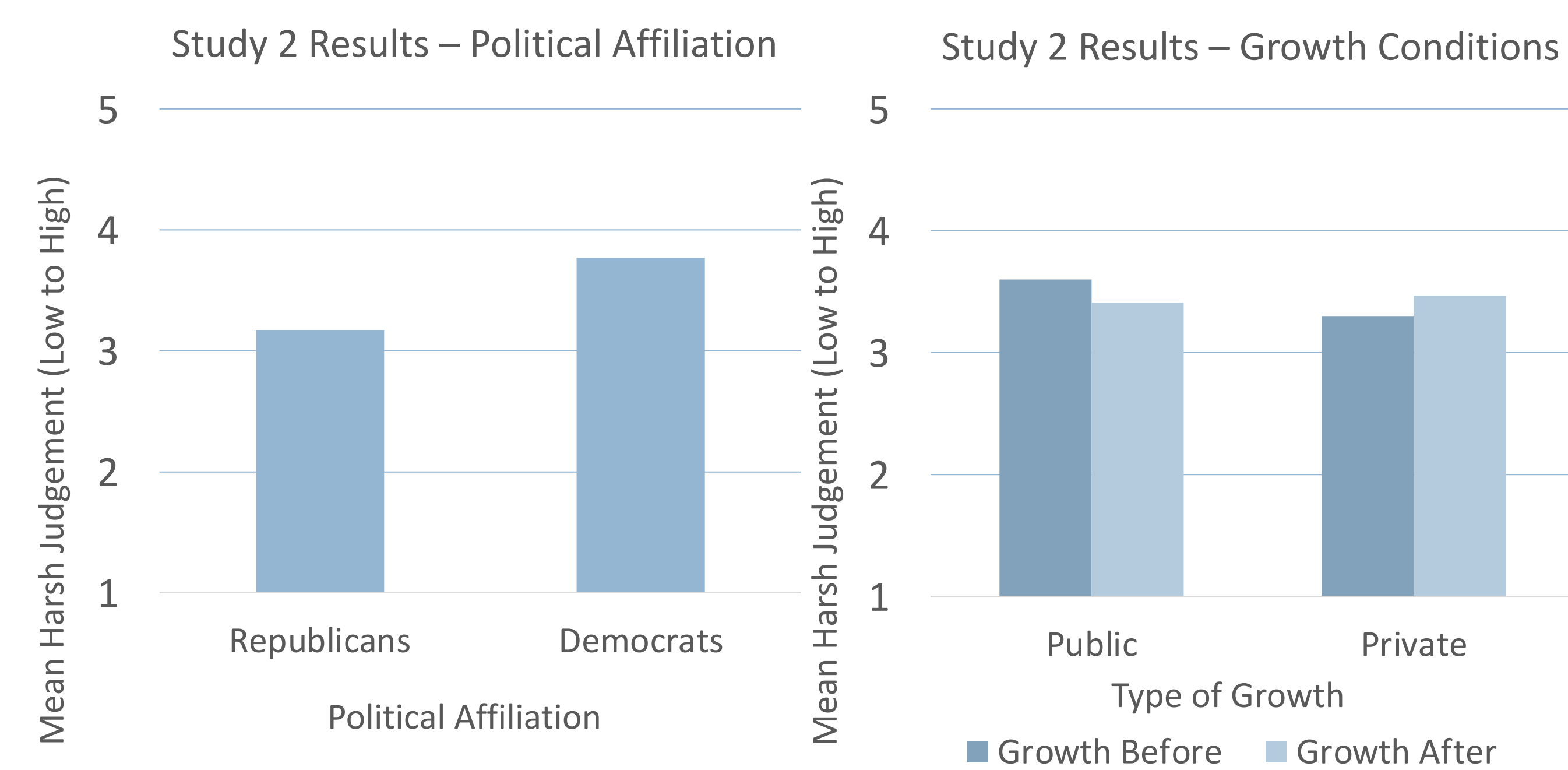
**Stimuli**  
Racist Tweets  
Posted 7 years prior  
**Growth**  
Public  
Private  
No information  
**Participants**  
N = 895  
Republicans = 426  
Democrats = 469



**Democrats** rated the offender more harshly than **Republicans**. There were no differences between ratings of **public** and **private** growth, while both were rated more positively than **no growth**, indicating that what matters most is that some growth is demonstrated.

## Study 2

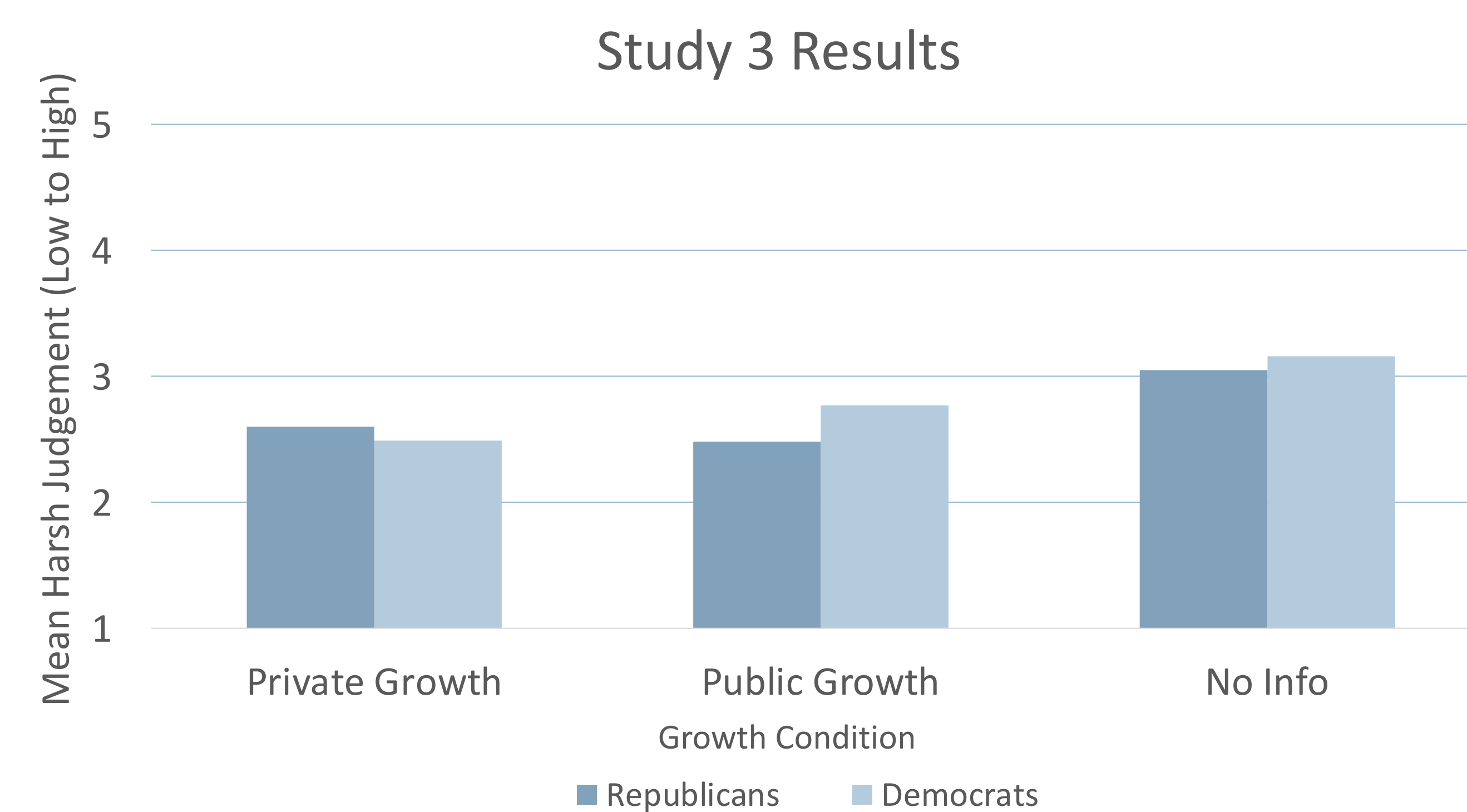
**Stimuli**  
Racist Tweets  
Posted 7 years prior  
**Growth**  
Public or Private  
Before or after tweets resurfaced  
**Participants**  
N = 1522  
Republicans = 752  
Democrats = 776



**Democrats** were harsher in judgement than **Republicans**. Growth timing had little influence on judgements - however, there was an interaction between **growth** and **timing** condition, where **private** growth was judged more positively than **public** growth when taking place **before** the tweets resurfaced.

## Study 3

**Stimuli**  
DUI Charge  
2 years prior  
**Growth**  
Public or Private  
Before or after tweets resurfaced  
**Participants**  
N = 1190  
Republicans = 261  
Democrats = 629



**Democrats** did not have different judgements than **Republicans**. Judgements were more positive for **private** and **public** growth compared to **no growth**. Growth timing had little impact on judgements.

## Main Findings

- As expected, **Democrats** were significantly more faultfinding of the figure compared to **Republicans** for racism, but not for the DUI (a transgression that was not expected to differ by politics)
- Respondents judged the offender less harshly if they had demonstrated **growth** (vs **no growth**) since the incident.
- However, whether the growth was **public** or **private** and it's timing (**before** or **after** the offense came to light) made surprisingly little difference.

We observed the following patterns across other exploratory dependent variables:

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Republicans perceived more growth than Democrats	✓	✓	
Republicans perceived less relevance than Democrats	✓	✓	
Republicans had a shorter statute of limitations than Democrats	✓	✓	✓
Republicans perceived the offense as more distant than Democrats	✓	✓	✓
Republicans perceived offender as younger than Democrats	✓	✓	✓
Republicans perceived the past act as less reflective of true self than Democrats	✓	✓	
Republicans perceived present acts as more reflective of true self than Democrats	✓	✓	
Democrats perceived the growth as more performative than Republicans	✓	✓	

- Although harsh judgment was the central dependent variable, there were similar patterns on most exploratory variables. For instance, in **growth** (compared to **no growth**) conditions, the offender was seen as having shown more growth and seeming younger at the time of offense, the offense was less currently relevant, it seemed further away, and the past act was seen as less reflective of true self.

## Additional Findings

- In some cases, private growth is seen as better than public growth:**
- In study 1, there was an interaction between **political party** and **type of growth** condition, where **Democrats** preferred **private** growth over **public** growth for some DVs (judgement, current relevance, subjective age, perceived growth, past and present true self)

**Unexpectedly, there were little differences in judgement for growth timing:**

- One exception was that in study 2, growth seemed more performative when taking place **after** the incident resurfaced compared to **before**.