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Republicans value agency, Democrats value communion*

KIMMO ERIKSSON

Stockholm University and Mälardalen University

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*Corresponding author: Kimmo Eriksson, Centre for the Study of Cultural Evolution, Stockholm University, SE-10691 Stockholm, Sweden. Email: kieri@ark.su.se. This research was partly funded by the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation [grant number 2015.0005].

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Abstract

Drawing on the theory of two fundamental content dimensions of social judgment – agency and communion – I propose that a range of previous findings about partisan differences in the United States can be integrated into one hypothesis: Republicans tend to put a higher value on agency while Democrats put a higher value on communion. Moreover, based on these values Republicans and Democrats should judge their own group as particularly superior on agency and communion, respectively. These hypotheses gained support in three studies on partisan values and ingroup bias, suggesting that the agency-communion framework may be useful for researchers studying how political groups differ in their worldviews, biases, and attitudes.

Keywords: ingroup bias; political values; social judgment; motivation; dehumanization

Republicans value agency, Democrats value communion

Democrats and Republicans obviously tend to hold different opinions on a wide range of issues and various attempts have been made to identify underlying psychological characteristics to explain this pattern. One meta-study concluded that conservatives are more sensitive to uncertainty and threat, leading to an ideology characterized by endorsement of inequality and resistance to change (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway 2003). A more recent complementary theory holds that conservatives and liberals are characterized by reliance on different sets of moral foundations, with conservatives relying relatively more on concerns for loyalty, authority, and purity (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009). Political scientists studying attitudes to social welfare have found that Americans tend to be internally conflicted due to the clash between the core values of humanitarianism, which says that those who are needy should be assisted and is emphasized more among liberals, and (economic) individualism, which says that people should be responsible for themselves and is emphasized more among conservatives (Feldman and Steenbergen 2001; Feldman and Zaller 1992). A moralized version of this argument is that conservatives oppose social welfare programs because they equate self-reliance and self-discipline with moral strength (Lakoff 1996). Indeed, conservatives seem to be more likely to attribute poverty to laziness than to external circumstances (Skitka and Tetlock 1993). Liberals also value compassion and caring in political candidates higher, and strong leadership lower, than conservatives do (Hayes 2005, 2011; Laustsen 2017).

I propose that the conservative preference for self-reliance and the liberal preference for compassion and caring can be integrated with theories of how people make social judgments along two content dimensions, *agency* and *communion*, which have been described as self-oriented vs. other-oriented motivation (Abele and Wojciszke 2007). Examples of agency traits include being ambitious and self-confident, which are aligned with

the conservative ideal of self-reliance. Communion traits include being helpful and understanding, connected to the liberal ideal of assisting the needy. Thus, a central psychological difference between the political camps may be that Republicans tend to put a higher value on agency whereas Democrats put a higher value on communion. This hypothesis allows researchers of political differences to draw on the rich literature on social judgment.

Which personality traits does a good society require of its members? The above hypothesis suggests that Republicans and Democrats should give different answers, emphasizing the societal importance of agentic and communal traits, respectively. This prediction, which seems to be previously unexplored, is the topic of Study 1 below.

According to social identity theory (Turner 1975), ingroups strive for positive distinctiveness on characteristics they value. According to my hypothesis, Republicans and Democrats should then see agency and communion, respectively, as the important characteristic on which they are superior to the opposing party. Before I discuss extant data on this prediction, I need to discuss how the agency-communion framework relates to an alternative framework of social judgment content.

Distinguishing Between Agency and Competence

An alternative, highly influential, framework of social judgment content was developed by Fiske and colleagues. They identified two dimensions called *competence* and *warmth* as fundamental to social judgments (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, and Xu 2002). According to comparisons between the competence-warmth framework and the agency-communion framework, communion and warmth are essentially synonymous concepts while the concepts of competence and agency have different foci (Abele, Cuddy, Judd, and Yzerbyt 2008). Specifically, the competence dimension focuses on ability (such as intelligence), whereas the agency dimension emphasizes self-oriented motivation (such as ambition). A recent study

validated a refined framework consisting of three dimensions of social judgment – communion/warmth, agency, and competence – and found social status to be more strongly related to agency than to competence (Carrier, Louvet, Chauvin, and Rohmer 2014). Note that in Lakoff's (1996) moral terms it is motivation, not intelligence, that shows the moral strength that conservatives value. Thus, the hypothesis that conservatives value agency higher than liberals do should not extend to intelligence and similar competence traits.

Previous Studies of Partisan Ingroup Bias in Trait Attribution

A recent survey asked Americans to attribute a few positive and negative traits to Republicans and Democrats (Pew Research Center, 2016). Both parties' supporters exhibited strong ingroup bias. Republicans' ingroup bias was strongest with respect to the trait hard-working, which belongs to the agency dimension. In contrast, Democrats' ingroup bias was strongest on the trait open-minded, which belongs to the communion dimension. The Pew survey found no party difference in ingroup bias with respect to the trait intelligent, which belongs to the competence dimension. Thus, the Pew data are consistent with my hypothesis. Data consistent with the hypothesis are also found in a paper on trait attribution that otherwise focused on the above-average effect (Eriksson and Funcke 2015: Table 2). In Study 2, I conduct a stronger test of the agency-communion hypothesis of partisan ingroup-bias.

An Alternative Framework

Dehumanization theory (Haslam 2006) was recently put forward as an alternative theoretical perspective for the study of partisan ingroup bias (Crawford, Modri, and Motyl 2013). This theory uses two dimensions labeled "human nature" (HN) and "human uniqueness" (HU). The HN dimension distinguishes humans from machines whereas the HU dimension distinguishes humans from animals. Crawford and colleagues conceived of partisan ingroup bias in trait attribution as expressing two different kinds of dehumanization,

based on the assumption that liberals value human nature more while conservatives value human uniqueness more. Liberals should then be less willing to attribute HN traits to conservatives and would thereby be subjecting conservatives to "mechanistic dehumanization", that is, likening them to rigid and unemotional robots. Conservatives should instead be less willing to attribute HU traits to liberals and would thereby be subjecting liberals to "animalistic dehumanization", that is, likening them to instinctual and overly emotional animals or children. To test this hypothesis, Crawford and colleagues had conservative and liberal participants rate the extent to which conservatives and liberals are characterized by ten HN traits and ten HU traits, see Table 1, taken from previous work on dehumanization (Loughnan, Haslam and Kashima 2009).

Table 1. Human nature (HN) and human uniqueness (HU) traits from Crawford et al. (2013).

Valence	HN traits	AC-coding	HU traits	AC-coding
Positive	Passionate	C	Humble	C
	Fun-loving	C	Thorough	A
	Curious	C	Organized	A
	Sociable	C	Polite	-
	Trusting	C	Broadminded	C
Negative	Jealous	-	Cold	C
	Nervous	-	Shallow	-
	Impatient	-	Stingy	C
	Distractible	A	Hard-hearted	C
	Aggressive	C	Impersonal	C

Note: AC-coding: An A or a C indicates that the trait belongs to the agency or communion dimension, respectively. A dash indicates that the trait does not obviously belong to either dimension.

Based on the motivational definitions of communion and agency, an inspection of the traits in Table 1 suggested that twelve of them belong to the communion dimension and another three belong to the agency dimension (whereas five traits do not obviously belong to either dimension). The two frameworks then make different predictions for three traits.

First consider the positive valence traits *humble* and *broadminded*. As these are HU traits, conservatives should value them especially high and be unwilling to acknowledge that liberals have them too. Now consider the negative valence trait *aggressive*. As it is a HN trait, liberals should be more willing to admit to being aggressive than conservatives. In other words, the dehumanization framework predicts that on these three traits *ingroup bias should be strongest among conservatives*. However, as the traits humble, broadminded and aggressive all belong to the communion dimension, which liberals are assumed to value especially high, the agency-communion framework instead predicts that *ingroup bias should be strongest among liberals*. Study 3 below was designed to test these competing predictions of the agency-communion and dehumanization frameworks.

Study 1: Partisan Valuations of Traits

Design

The objective of this study was to test the hypothesis that the agency-communion framework captures fundamental partisan differences in which personal characteristics people see as most important for society. Moreover, I expected no fundamental partisan difference in the valuation of competence. Following previous work on the three dimensions of agency,

communion/warmth, and competence (Carrier et al., 2014), three traits per dimension were used: hardworking, ambitious, determined (*agency*); broadminded, sociable, warm (*communion*); competent, intelligent, skillful (*competence*).

Participants

Four hundred participants were recruited through advertising two parallel studies on the Amazon Mechanical Turk[1] for which I explicitly advertised either for participants that identified as Democrats or Republicans, respectively. In the study, 60 participants nonetheless identified as Independents (54) or did not disclose their party preference (6). These were excluded from the analysis, as the aim of the study was to measure the difference between Democrats and Republicans in their valuation of various traits. After exclusion of another 22 participants (12 Democrats, 10 Republicans) who did not complete all measures, a sample of 318 participants was retained for analysis, ages 20-83, roughly evenly distributed with respect to gender (48.4% female) and party (46.2% Republicans, 53.8% Democrats).

Procedure

After filling in demographics, participants were told the researcher was interested in which traits are most important to promote for a better society. Each of the nine traits were presented with a statement on the format *Society would be better if the average person were more **hardworking***, to which participants indicated their level of agreement on a seven-point scale from *Strongly Disagree* (coded -3) to *Strongly Agree* (coded 3).

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[1] All studies reported in this paper used anonymous surveys to adults who gave informed consent to their participation. In accordance with the Swedish Act concerning the Ethical Review of Research Involving Humans (2003:460), such research does not need ethical approval. Studies with human subjects need approval only if they use a method intended to physically or mentally influence a person or if they involve sensitive information that can be traced back to individual persons.

Results and Discussion

The responses were averaged into three indices for valuation of agency (α = .74), communion (α = .61), and competence (α = .68). Table 2 reports mean valuations on each dimension, with 95% confidence intervals, among Democrats and Republicans. I performed a 3 × 2 (dimension [agency, communion, competence] × party [Democrat, Republican]) mixed ANOVA on valuations. Effect sizes are reported in terms of partial eta squared (η_p^2), which is a measure of explained variance (Cohen 1973). This analysis revealed no significant main effect of dimension, $F(2, 632) = 0.18$, $p = .84$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$, and no significant main effect of party, $F(1, 316) = 0.57$, $p = .45$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$, but as expected there was a significant interaction between dimension and party, $F(2, 632) = 51.19$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$, a large effect size. The nature of the interaction is clear from the simple effects of party reported in the last column of Table 2. They show that, as expected, Democrats valued agency lower, and communion higher, than Republicans. There was no party difference in the valuation of competence. Per-item analyses give the same results, see the online supplement.

Another way of assessing whether this difference in trait valuation is fundamental to party identification is to analyze if participants' identification as Republican or Democrat can be predicted by whether they valued agency over communion or not. Indeed, this simple rule correctly predicted the party identification of 70% of participants.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of valuations of agency, communion, and competence, among Democrats and Republicans.

Dimension	Democrats (n = 171)	Republicans (n = 147)	Effect size (Cohen's *d*)
Agency	1.43 [1.28, 1.58]	1.94 [1.79, 2.07]	-0.52
Communion	1.99 [1.86, 2.11]	1.34 [1.18, 1.50]	0.66

| Competence | 1.72 [1.58, 1.84] | 1.68 [1.53, 1.83] | 0.04 |

Note: The first two columns report mean ratings with 95% BCa (bias-corrected and accelerated) confidence intervals, based on 5000 bootstrap samples. The last column reports the effect size, that is, the difference of the mean ratings divided by the standard deviation.

Study 2: Partisan Ingroup Bias Content

Design

The objective of the study was to test the hypothesis that the agency-communion framework captures fundamental differences in partisan ingroup bias between Republicans and Democrats. To establish that partisan ingroup bias looks the same post-election as pre-election, data collection was done in two waves: 400 participants in June 2016 and another 400 participants in October 2017.

Prior research has shown that partisan stereotypes may overlap with gender stereotypes, such that the typical Democrats is viewed as feminine and the typical Republican as masculine (Hayes 2011; Winter 2010). To disentangle the effect of gender from the effect of political party, participants were asked to make separate ratings of the typical male Democrat and the typical female Democrat, and similar for Republicans.

To operationalize agency and communion, three traits of each valence was used for each dimension: determined, capable, effective (*agency, positive valence*); disorganized, lazy, messy (*agency, negative valence*); kind, sociable, humble (*communion, positive valence*); insensitive, cynical, stubborn (*communion, negative valence*).

Participants

Participants were recruited in the same way in both waves, through advertising four parallel studies on the Amazon Mechanical Turk. The parallel studies differed only whether the advertisement said the researcher was seeking male Democrats, female Democrats, male

Republicans, or female Republicans as participants. As the aim of the study was to examine partisan ingroup bias, any participant who nonetheless identified as Independent or did not disclose their party preference was excluded from further analysis, leaving a sample of 750 participants, ages 18-74, roughly evenly distributed with respect to gender (49.5% female, 50.5% male), party (46.3% Republicans, 53.7% Democrats), and data collection wave (50.1% first wave, 49.9% second wave).

Procedure

The same set of 12 questions was repeated five times with different rating targets: the average male Democrat, the average female Republican, the average female Democrat, the average male Republican voter, and "you". Each question asked how much the rating target possesses a certain characteristic compared to the average American (e.g., "How kind is the average male Democrat compared to the average American?"). Responses were given on a seven-step Likert scale from -3 = much less to +3 = much more. The order of the targets was counterbalanced and no order effects were found.

Analysis

Ratings of negative valence traits were reverse coded so that higher values always correspond to the target being higher on communion or agency. Descriptive statistics for each item are given in the online supplement. The object of interest here is partisan ingroup bias, which I calculated for each trait by taking the mean rating of the male and female ingroup members and subtracting the mean rating of the male and female outgroup members. The theoretical range of these partisan ingroup bias measures was from -6 to 6. A factor analysis of the twelve partisan ingroup bias measures indicated, as expected, a two-factor solution with all six agentic traits loading on the first factor and all six communal traits loading on the second factor (see online supplement). These measures were therefore averaged into two indices: partisan ingroup bias on agency ($\alpha = .91$) and partisan ingroup bias on communion (α

= .84). Ratings of self were similarly averaged into two indices: self-rated agency (α = .79) and self-rated communion (α = .60).

Results

   Figure 1 shows Republican and Democratic ingroup bias with respect to agency and communion in the 2016 and 2017 waves. The primary research question of this study was how partisan ingroup bias content interacted with party affiliation, and the secondary research question was how results held up between the 2016 and 2017 waves. To answer these questions, I performed a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ (dimension [agency, communion] $\times$ party [Democrat, Republican] $\times$ wave [2016, 2017]) mixed ANOVA on ingroup bias ratings. This analysis revealed no significant main effect of dimension, $F(1, 746) = 1.47$, $p = .23$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$, and no significant main effect of party, $F(1, 746) = 1.30$, $p = .25$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$, but a small significant main effect of wave, $F(1, 746) = 6.82$, $p = .009$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. As is evident in Figure 1, ingroup bias generally decreased somewhat from 2016 to 2017. The main focus of this study is the interaction between dimension and party, which was significant and exhibited a very large effect size, $F(1, 746) = 255.67$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .26$. Figure 1 shows, as predicted, that Republican ingroup bias focused on agency, whereas Democratic ingroup bias focused on communion.
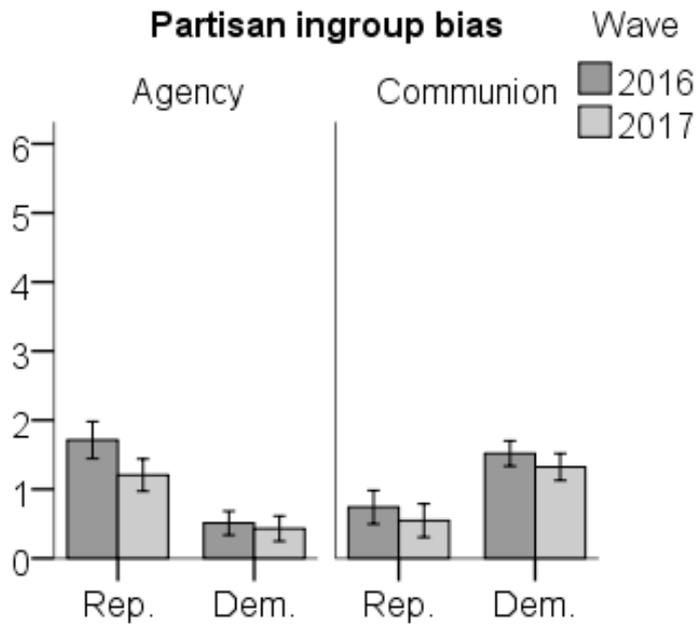
Figure 1. The greatest ingroup bias, in both waves, was shown by Republicans for agentic traits and by Democrats for communal traits. Error bars signify 95% confidence intervals. Although the y-axis starts at zero, note that ingroup bias scores could in principle be negative too.
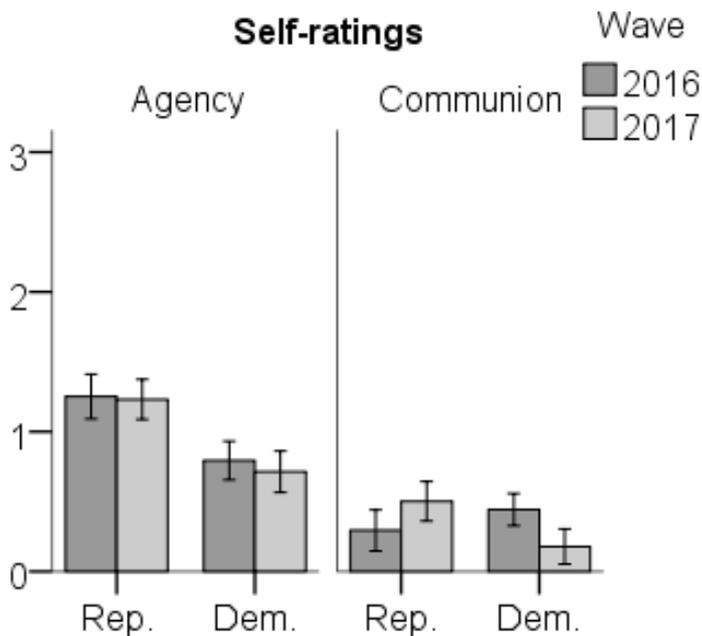

Figure 2. In both waves, both Republican and Democratic participants rated themselves higher on agentic than on communal traits. Error bars signify 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 2 shows the self-ratings on agency and communion of Republican and Democratic participants in 2016 and 2017. A mixed ANOVA on self-ratings revealed a very large main effect of dimension, $F(1, 746) = 1.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .25$. Self-ratings were much higher on agency than on communion, replicating prior research findings of the dominance of agency in self-attitudes (e.g., Wojciszke 2005). Democrats self-rated somewhat lower than Republicans on agency, but not on communion, which is reflected in a small main effect of party, $F(1, 746) = 24.63$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, qualified by an interaction between party and dimension, also of a small effect size, $F(1, 746) = 24.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. There was no significant main effect of wave, $F(1, 746) = 0.47$, $p = .50$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$. Specifically for communion, Democrats made slightly lower self-ratings in 2017 than in 2016, whereas Republicans made slightly higher self-ratings, reflected in a small three-way interaction between wave, dimension, and party, $F(1, 746) = 6.44$, $p = .011$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$.

Discussion

The second study yielded several findings. The main finding was that the content of partisan ingroup bias was well captured by the agency-communion framework. As expected, Republican ingroup bias was focused on agency and Democratic ingroup bias was focused on communion. This finding was robust across the 2016 and 2017 waves, although the data indicated that partisan ingroup bias generally decreased somewhat between these points of time.

Both parties' supporters tended to self-rate higher on agency than on warmth. Thus, self-ratings did not show the strong interaction between party and dimension exhibited by ingroup bias. This study highlights how partisan ingroup bias is a genuine group process and not an extension of individual self-enhancement (Eriksson and Funcke 2015).

Study 3: Testing the Agency-Communion Framework Against Dehumanization Theory

Design

The objective of the study was to test the hypothesis that the agency-communion framework better than the dehumanization theory framework captures how the content of ingroup bias differs between Republicans and Democrats.

Participants

Three hundred participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk and received a small monetary compensation (30 cents). As the aim of the study was to examine partisan ingroup bias, any participant who identified as Independent or did not disclose their party preference was excluded from further analysis, leaving a sample of 201 participants, ages 19-67, evenly distributed with respect to gender, and roughly evenly distributed across political parties (55% Democrats, 45% Republicans).

Procedure

After filling in demographics, participants were instructed to read brief descriptions of twenty persons and to guess, for each person, whether it is a Republican or Democrat supporter. Each person was presented on the following format: *A person is described (by someone whose judgment you trust) as **passionate**. What is your spontaneous guess about this person?* Responses were given on a five-point scale: *Definitely Republican*, *Probably Republican*, *Neutral, Probably Democrat,* and *Definitely Democrat*. The twenty descriptions used the twenty traits in Table 1.

Coding of Ingroup Bias

For positive valence traits (see Table 1), ingroup bias was coded as positive if the participant guessed that a person with that trait was "definitely" (coded 2) or "probably" (coded 1) a supporter of the same party as the participant; if instead the participant guessed

on a supporter of the other party, ingroup bias was coded as correspondingly negative, and "neutral" was coded as zero. For negative valence traits, the coding scheme was reversed.
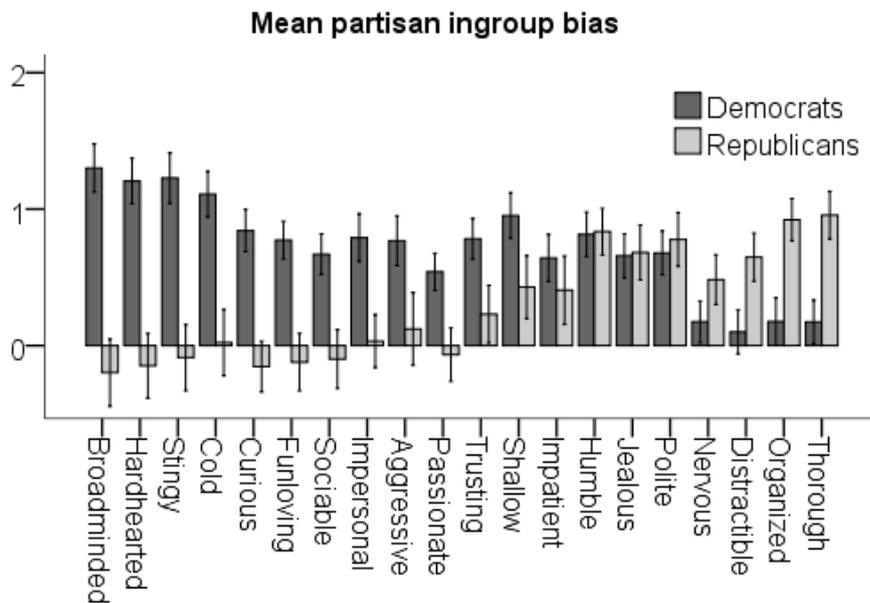
Results and Discussion

Figure 3. Mean partisan ingroup bias on 20 traits, ordered by the difference in ingroup bias between Democrats (dark) and Republicans (light). Error bars signify 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 3 presents the mean ingroup bias per trait among Democrats and Republicans. The nonparametric Mann-Whitney U test, with Bonferroni correction for multiple tests, was used to test for each trait whether ingroup bias differed between Democrats and Republicans. Democrats exhibited the stronger ingroup bias on twelve traits, casting Republicans as less broadminded, more hardhearted, stingier, colder, less curious, less curious, less fun-loving, less sociable, more impersonal, more aggressive, less passionate, less trusting, and shallower. On five traits (impatient, humble, jealous, polite, nervous) there were no significant differences in ingroup bias. Finally, Republicans exhibited the stronger ingroup bias on three traits, casting Democrats as more distractible, less organized, and less thorough.

Apart from the lack of a difference on "humble", these results are entirely consistent with the hypothesis that ingroup bias among Democrats focuses on communion while ingroup bias among Republicans focuses on agency. The results are less consistent with the dehumanization framework, according to which Republicans should cast Democrats as more aggressive and less broadminded; the opposite results were obtained.

General Discussion

This paper set out was to contribute to the understanding of the political differences between Democrats (or liberals) and Republicans (or conservatives) by drawing on social psychological theories of how social judgments are made on two broad dimensions known as agency and communion (Abele and Wojciszke 2007). Specifically, I hypothesized that a characteristic of Republicans and conservatives is that they value agency (self-oriented motivation) higher than communion (other-oriented motivation), and that the opposite holds for Democrats and liberals.

Consistent with this hypothesis, Study 1 found Republicans judging agentic traits (hardworking, ambitious, determined) as more important to society while Democrats judged communal traits (broadminded, sociable, warm) as more important. There was no difference between Republicans and Democrats in their valuations of pure ability traits (competent, intelligent, skillful). This gives additional support to the hypothesis that it is specifically different *motivations* that partisans value differently.

The differences in values were also reflected in the content of partisan ingroup bias. Two studies used different ways of measuring ingroup bias, either by having participants rate typical Democrats and typical Republicans on possession of various traits (Study 2), or by having them guess whether various traits describe a Democrat or a Republican (Study 3). Both methods yielded the same findings. Republicans thought Republicans are especially

superior to typical Democrats with respect to agency, while Democrats thought Democrats are especially superior to Republicans with respect to communion. This theoretical framework also makes sense of why Pew Research Center (2016) found that Republicans rated Democrats as especially lazy while Democrats rated Republicans as especially close-minded.

Some alternative explanations are also addressed in the data. For one thing, valuations of traits and ingroup bias in trait attribution could simply reflect individual possession of traits. For instance, if Democrats really tend to possess more communal traits than agentic traits, this could be the source of their relative valuation of these traits as well as explain the finding that partisans agreed that the typical Democrat is relatively stronger on communion than on agency. In stark contrast to this argument, however, Study 2 found that Democrats self-rated higher on agency than on communion. The data presented here cannot answer whether self-ratings are more accurate than group ratings. What these findings strongly indicate is that Democrats' valuations and ingroup bias are not derived from their individual sense of possessing these characteristics.

Crawford et al. (2013) proposed the alternative hypothesis that differences in partisan ingroup bias content reflects their use of different forms of dehumanization. Specifically, Democrats were thought to liken their opponents to machines while Republicans would liken their opponents to animals. Dehumanization theory has related different kinds of dehumanization to different attribution of traits. Study 3 found that on the few traits on which dehumanization theory made other predictions than the agency-communion hypothesis, it was the agency-communion hypothesis that was supported. It is an open question whether Democrats and Republicans explicitly liken each other to machines and animals, respectively, so called metaphor-based dehumanization (Loughnan et al. 2009).

In conclusion, the studies reported here suggest that the agency-communion framework from social psychology is a useful tool for researchers interested in how Democrats and Republicans differ in their values and biases. For instance, research interested in prejudice could examine whether Democrats and Republicans differ in their view of various stereotyped groups depending on whether these stereotypes are high on agency or communion (or the related dimensions of competence and warmth, see Fiske et al. 2002). The agency-communion framework could also apply to other forms of partisan biases, such as biases in the attribution of motives to the outgroup and in the estimation of outgroup emotions (Chambers and Melnyk 2006; Seger, Smith, Kinias, and Mackie 2009). Moreover, stances on specific policy issues should be interpretable within the agency-communion framework, mirroring how moral foundations theory has been used in this regard (Koleva et al. 2012).

A limitation of the studies presented here is that samples were not representative. Participants were users of Amazon Mechanical Turk, and as a group they may differ in various ways from non-users. It would be good to see key findings replicated in other samples.

Finally, I want to draw attention to a curiosity in the data. Study 2 found that ingroup bias seemed to be at lower levels in 2017 and 2016, at least among users of the Amazon Mechanical Turk. Mirroring this finding, Pew surveys indicate that the proportions of very unfavorable views of the opposing party reached an all-time high in 2016 and then decreased to 2017 (Pew Research Center 2016, 2017). It may be that political outgroup derogation is generally attenuated in post-election years after a temporary election year peak. I leave this as a question for future research.

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