

**Compassionate Democrats and Tough Republicans: How Ideology Shapes Partisan  
Stereotypes**

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**Abstract**

Trait stereotypes are a fundamental form of social cognition that influence public opinion. A long line of literature has established partisan stereotypes of politicians, but we know less about the source of these stereotypes and whether they apply to partisans in the mass public. Building on moral psychology, I argue that the public holds clear stereotypes about the moral character of mass partisans and that these stereotypes are rooted in ideology. Using a national survey, I show that Democrats and Republicans prioritize different aspects of moral character, but that these differences are more strongly linked to political ideology than partisan identity. Next, I show that much of the public holds trait stereotypes about mass partisans that reflect these differences in trait importance. Finally, I provide experimental evidence that people use partisan cues to draw stereotypical inferences about individuals, but that these inferences are more responsive to ideological information than partisan cues. Overall, the results suggest that partisan stereotypes are not merely outgroup animus, but reflect the values and motivations that differentiate the parties.

The parties each have long-standing reputations for upholding particular aspects of personal character (e.g., Goggin and Theodoridis 2017; Hayes 2005).<sup>1</sup> Democratic politicians are perceived as more compassionate and empathetic, while Republican politicians are seen as stronger leaders and as having greater personal morality. These are not just beliefs about specific candidates, but also extend to stereotypic beliefs about the parties (Goggin and Theodoridis 2017). Similarly, analysis of open-ended comments in the ANES demonstrates that people associate the Democratic party with feminine traits (e.g., kind, compassionate, indecisive) and the Republican party with masculine traits (e.g., energetic, efficient, cold; Winter 2010). Just as stereotypes of various social groups structure public opinion (e.g., Berinsky and Mendelberg 2005; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Peffley, Hurwitz, and Sniderman 1997; Sides and Gross 2013), partisan stereotypes help voters make decisions about which party's candidates are better able to handle the particular problems and threats facing the country (Merolla and Zechmeister 2009, 2015).

We know less, however, about the sources of partisan stereotypes, and whether they extend to partisans in the mass public. If partisan stereotypes are rooted in actual differences between the parties, they may facilitate the link between voters' values and their partisan attachments. Group stereotypes, particularly those regarding moral character, are central to group identities (Brambilla et al. 2011, 2012; Brambilla and Leach 2014; Goodwin, Piazza, and Rozin 2014) and help dictate how group members ought to behave and whether others are perceived as belonging with that group (Brambilla et al. 2013; Leach, Ellemers, and Barreto 2007; Pagliaro,

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<sup>1</sup> Data and replication code are available in the Political Behavior dataverse

(<https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/T4GBDS>).

Ellemers, and Barreto 2011). As a result, partisan stereotypes might be a useful tool for citizens to assess a politician's fit, or even their own fit, with a party.

In this paper, I extend research on partisan stereotypes by examining the nature and source of stereotypes of mass partisans. Building on the moral psychology and trait ownership literatures, I argue that Democrats and Republicans prioritize different aspects of moral character that are rooted in political ideology. The public, in turn, holds trait stereotypes about mass partisans that reflect these value differences. Partisan trait stereotypes are not merely group animus, but are a reflection of the normative worldviews espoused by the parties and may serve to link voters' values and dispositions with their partisan affiliations.

I test these expectations across two studies. First, I use a national survey to show that partisans prioritize different aspects of moral character and that stereotypes of the parties tend to reflect these differences. However, consistent with my argument, the importance individuals place on aspects of moral character is more strongly related to political ideology than to partisan identity. Second, using an experimental design, I show that people draw stereotypical trait inferences about individuals based on their partisanship. However, ideological cues have larger effects than party cues and reduce the impact of partisan cues, suggesting that ideology is the mechanism through which partisan stereotypes are generated. These findings suggest that these stereotypes largely reflect differences in the values underlying partisan disagreements, holding important implications for how people evaluate the parties.

### **The Source of Partisan Stereotypes**

Stereotypes of partisan elites have been well established, but what is the source of these stereotypes? Initial work theorizes that trait stereotypes of the parties have been driven in large

part by the issue stances and priorities of the parties (Hayes 2005). The parties' "ownership" of particular character traits thus stems from their long-standing reputations for emphasizing certain valence issues. Republicans are perceived as more motivated and competent at handling crime, national security, and terrorism, while Democrats are perceived to own issues relating to social welfare and the environment (e.g., Egan 2013; Petrocik 1996). In addition to valence issues, over the past decades, the parties have clearly separated on a number of divisive cultural issues, such as abortion and gay rights. Given the clear differences in the goals and priorities of the parties, stereotypes about the character of partisans may stem from their ideological reputations.

People are likely to draw trait inferences from others' ideological viewpoints because an ideology, broadly speaking, "normatively specifies (or requires) good and proper ways of addressing life's problems" (Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009). On this view, an ideology is a collection of attitudes that serve basic psychological needs, such as order, security, and certainty (Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009). These basic psychological needs, in turn, give rise to normative beliefs that help to regulate social behavior and fulfill these needs (Federico et al. 2013; Hirsh et al. 2010). For example, needs related to order and stability lead to greater emphasis on authoritarian moral views (respect, obedience, and strong leadership) and corresponding political attitudes (e.g., support for the death penalty). Thus, the ideological stances taken by a person signal their commitment to particular moral priorities and problems. Recent experimental work supports this claim, showing that people draw distinct patterns of moral trait inferences from politicians' issue stances on divisive issues (Clifford 2014). For example, opposition to the death penalty signals a prioritization of compassion over order and stability, while an aggressive stance on national security signals an emphasis on patriotism over

compassion. Thus, ideological stances, such as positions on divisive cultural issues, send a clear signal of one's moral commitments, and thus their moral character.

Over the past decades, partisanship and ideology have become increasingly tied together (Levendusky 2009), likely facilitating partisan stereotyping. To the extent that the public associates the parties with distinct positions on divisive issues, they should also infer different moral motives, or character traits, of the supporters of the parties. In other words, the ideological differences between the parties are the mechanism through which people form partisan stereotypes. This argument is consistent with broad evidence that partisan and ideological stereotypes reflect (but often exaggerate) actual psychological differences between these groups (e.g., Chambers, Baron, and Inman 2006; Chambers and Melnyk 2006; Farwell and Weiner 2000; Graham, Nosek, and Haidt 2012; Scherer, Windschitl, and Graham 2014).

However, the adoption of these partisan stereotypes might be limited by the public's low levels of political awareness, a potential boundary condition that is rarely tested. Most citizens pay only fleeting attention to politics, which might limit the spread of stereotypes through two mechanisms. First, people may simply be unaware of the ideological differences between the parties, blocking the mechanism through which partisan stereotypes could be formed. For example, a 2012 survey by Pew found that 66% of the public knew that the Democratic party is more supportive of expanding gay rights and 61% knew that the Republican party is more supportive of restricting abortion. Clearly, awareness of the parties' stances on divisive cultural issues is high, but it is not perfect. However, people need not know all of the parties' positions to form consensual stereotypes – knowledge of the parties' positions on only a small number of divisive issues may be sufficient if these issues serve to reinforce similar value-based stereotypes. A second possible limitation is that the public may struggle to connect issue stances

with moral values. Even the effects of basic personality traits on economic attitudes are moderated by political awareness (Johnston, Lavine, and Federico 2017). However, inferring that legalizing same-sex marriage is more in line with compassion and fairness than with notions of tradition and purity, for example, may require less sophistication than ideological reasoning about economic issues. Media coverage of political debates may also help reinforce these connections, as media coverage of partisan polarization has been “heavily imbued with the language of value differences” (Robison and Mullinix 2016, 8). But exposure to this coverage may also be limited to the politically engaged. Nonetheless, the strong link between partisanship and ideology suggests that only a minimal awareness of how the parties differ on salient social issues should be necessary to form stereotypes about partisans’ character.

### **The Content of Partisan Stereotypes**

The previous section provides reason to expect that partisan stereotypes stem from ideological reputations, but does not specify the likely content of those stereotypes. I focus on stereotypes of moral character for two reasons. First, as discussed above, ideological worldviews consist of normative beliefs that specify good and bad and, thus, should be particularly linked to moral aspects of character. Second, a growing body of psychological research demonstrates that perceptions of moral character play a uniquely powerful role in group evaluations and identity (Goodwin 2015). Perceptions of group morality are a powerful predictor of group identity and overall evaluations of that group – more powerful than perceptions of the group’s competence or sociability (Ellemers et al. 2008). Group stereotypes also regulate how individuals interact with that group. People are more motivated to work at improving perceptions of their group’s morality than their group’s competence (Leach, Ellemers, and Barreto 2007), and they uphold

ingroup moral norms in order to gain ingroup respect (Pagliaro, Ellemers, and Barreto 2011) and avoid threatening group image (Brambilla et al. 2013). Perceptions of a team's morality more strongly predict interest in joining the group than do perceptions of the team's competence (van Prooijen and Ellemers 2015) and whether an individual is accepted into a group depends mainly on how that individual compares to the group's moral standards (van der Lee et al. 2017). Thus, examining the moral stereotypes of Democrats and Republicans is critical to understanding partisan group behavior.

While there is a growing recognition of the importance of perceptions of moral character, there is less clarity regarding the structure of moral character. Fortunately, moral foundations theory (MFT) provides a useful framework for the structure of morality, and thus the types of trait inferences that people might draw from others' ideological positions.<sup>2</sup> MFT is a descriptive theory of morality, holding that there are approximately five moral "foundations" that underlie moral judgment. Each foundation represents a set of intuitions, or gut reactions, that evolved to help solve social dilemmas (Graham et al. 2013; Haidt and Graham 2007). The five foundations are divided into two classes: *individualizing* foundations that focus on the individual as victim, and *binding* foundations that focus on the group or society. The individualizing foundations include concerns about harm and suffering (Care) and proportional fairness and reciprocity (Fairness). The binding foundations include concerns about hierarchy and order (Authority), group loyalty (Loyalty), and physical and spiritual purity (Sanctity).

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<sup>2</sup> For related theoretical frameworks, see Lakoff (2010), Schwartz (1992), and Gastil et al. (2011).

Liberals and conservatives tend to emphasize different sets of moral foundations. Liberals place greater importance on Care and Fairness than do conservatives, while conservatives place more importance on Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009). The moral foundations have also been useful in predicting more nuanced variation in political ideology (Weber and Federico 2013), as well as issue stances on culture war issues (Koleva et al. 2012) and foreign policy (Kertzer et al. 2014). Regardless of the direction of causation between the moral foundations and political ideology (for discussion, see Graham et al. 2011; Haidt 2016; Smith et al. 2016), MFT offers a useful framework for understanding how variation in moral views might contribute to partisan stereotypes.

Since its inception, MFT has held that there are character traits or virtues that correspond with each moral foundation, and that these traits represent a dispositional tendency to uphold that foundation (Clifford 2018; Haidt and Joseph 2004). For example, someone who is compassionate is motivated to uphold the Care foundation, while someone who is respectful is motivated to uphold the Authority foundation. As a result, liberals, who tend to more strongly endorse the Care and Fairness foundations, ought to place more importance on being compassionate and fair-minded. Conservatives, who tend to place more weight on the Authority, Loyalty, and Sanctity foundations, ought to see more value in traits like obedience, patriotism, and wholesomeness.

Taken together, the literature reviewed above generates several hypotheses about the nature and source of partisan stereotypes. First, given the strong overlap between partisanship and ideology, Democrats and Republicans should value different aspects of morality. Specifically, Democrats should place more importance on compassion and fairness, while Republicans should place more importance on being loyal, respectful, and wholesome (H1a).



However, as a component of one's normative worldview, these differences in trait importance should be more strongly tied to ideology than to partisan identity (H1b).

To the extent that people perceive partisans to hold distinct normative views, trait stereotypes ought to reflect these value differences. As a result, Democrats should be perceived as more compassionate and fair-minded, while Republicans should be seen as more loyal, respectful, and wholesome (H2). However, according to the theory described above, perceptions of ideology should be the mechanism through which partisan stereotypes are generated. If this is the case, then it leads to three further hypotheses that draw on the logic of statistical mediation. First, people should draw trait inferences from clear ideological cues, such as stances on divisive political issues (H3a). Second, the effects of ideological cues should be larger than partisan cues (H3b). And third, the effects of partisan cues should diminish when ideological cues are present (H3c). At the extreme, ideological cues may even override partisan cues, eliminating partisan stereotyping altogether.

In summary, the theory advanced above holds that Democrats and Republicans place differential value on aspects of moral character, but that these partisan differences are more closely tied to ideological views. These differences create trait stereotypes about mass partisans, but again these moral stereotypes are more responsive to ideological information than partisan cues. I test these hypotheses below across two studies. In the first, I use a national sample to demonstrate that partisans prioritize different aspects of moral character (H1a), but that this difference is primarily driven by ideology (H1b). I also show that the public holds stereotypes of mass partisans that largely reflect these differences in importance (H2). However, partisan stereotypes are not completely consensual, as Republicans and less politically sophisticated respondents are less likely to share these beliefs. Second, I use an experiment to show that people

use partisan cues to draw stereotypical trait inferences about others (H2). Consistent with the mediation argument above (H3a-c), however, ideological cues have larger effects than partisan cues and reduce the effects of partisan cues.

### **Study 1 – Examining Partisan Differences in Trait Importance and Partisan Stereotypes**

The first study serves to test for the existence of partisan differences in trait importance (H1a) and whether partisan stereotypes correspond with these differences (H2). Additionally, the study allows for an exploratory analysis of whether partisanship or political ideology is a stronger predictor of the character traits an individual prioritizes (H1b).

Study 1 was embedded in the Duke University module of the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES).<sup>3</sup> In the pre-election wave, a random half of the sample was asked to rate the personal importance they place on each of six character traits – compassionate, fair-minded, respectful, loyal, wholesome, and intelligent.<sup>4</sup> The first five were selected to correspond with the moral foundations, while the last was chosen as a point of contrast to the moral traits. This series of questions allows a test of partisan and ideological differences in personal importance placed on the five aspects of moral character (H1a, H1b). In the post-election wave, respondents were asked to rate how well each of these six traits describes Republicans and how well each trait describes Democrats, allowing a test of partisan stereotypes (H2). Full question wording is available in the Appendix.

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix for sample descriptive statistics.

<sup>4</sup> The other half of the sample answered the same questions regarding the traits they value in co-partisans. These results are analyzed elsewhere.

To measure ideology, I turn to respondents' issue positions rather than typical self-placement measures. This measurement choice is consistent with conceptualizing ideology as a normative worldview, rather than as an identity.<sup>5</sup> I estimated a single latent dimension of ideology constructed from opinions on six salient issues (abortion, immigration, gun control, gay marriage, affirmative action, and the environment) using a graded response model (see Appendix for details).<sup>6</sup>

*Do partisans value different aspects of personal character?*

According to the argument above, Democrats and Republicans prioritize different moral traits. Because baseline levels of trait importance may be influenced by many factors, such as survey response sets, I follow a broad literature and relativize trait importance scores (e.g., Johnston, Lavine, and Federico 2017; Kam and Kinder 2012). Specifically, for each trait I calculate the relative trait importance by subtracting the individual's average rating of all traits from the rating of the focal trait (for a similar argument regarding trait perceptions, see Goggin and Theodoridis 2017). Thus, each score represents how much importance an individual places on a particular trait, relative to how much importance they place on character more generally. As an omnibus test of H1a and H1b, I also create an index consisting of the difference between the average rating of the individualizing traits (compassionate, fair-minded) minus the average rating

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<sup>5</sup> Moreover, common measures of ideological self-identification are prone to measurement error due to differing interpretations of the terms (e.g., Simas 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Although ideology is arguably better represented by at least two dimensions (Feldman and Johnston 2014), I am forced to rely on a single dimension due to the limited set of issue attitudes measured in the CCES.

of the binding traits (loyal, respectful, wholesome). To test for differences in trait importance, I estimated three sets of OLS models predicting each relative trait importance measure as a function of the seven-point partisan identification scale, the latent ideology scale, or both variables at once. To ensure comparability between the models, each only includes respondents who are non-missing in all models. All models also include controls for education, gender, age, race, ethnicity, and church attendance, and all variables are rescaled to range from 0 to 1.<sup>7</sup>

The left-hand panel of Figure 1 plots the coefficients for partisanship when ideology is not included in the model. Starting with the trait index (marked with a solid square), which provides an omnibus test of H1a, Republicans place significantly less importance on the individualizing aspects of moral character, relative to Democrats ( $b = -.36, p < .001$ ). Turning to the individual traits, Republicans place significantly less relative importance on compassion ( $b = -.20, p = .006$ ) and fairness ( $b = -.16, p = .029$ ), as compared to Democrats. Turning to the next three columns, Republicans place significantly more importance on being respectful ( $b = .20, p = .003$ ) and wholesome ( $b = .24, p = .015$ ), as expected. Although it was expected that Republicans would place more importance on loyalty, this pattern is not statistically significant ( $b = .10, p = .115$ ). Finally, I did not expect to find partisan differences in the importance of intelligence, however, Republicans place significantly less importance on this trait ( $b = -.19, p = .033$ ).<sup>8</sup>

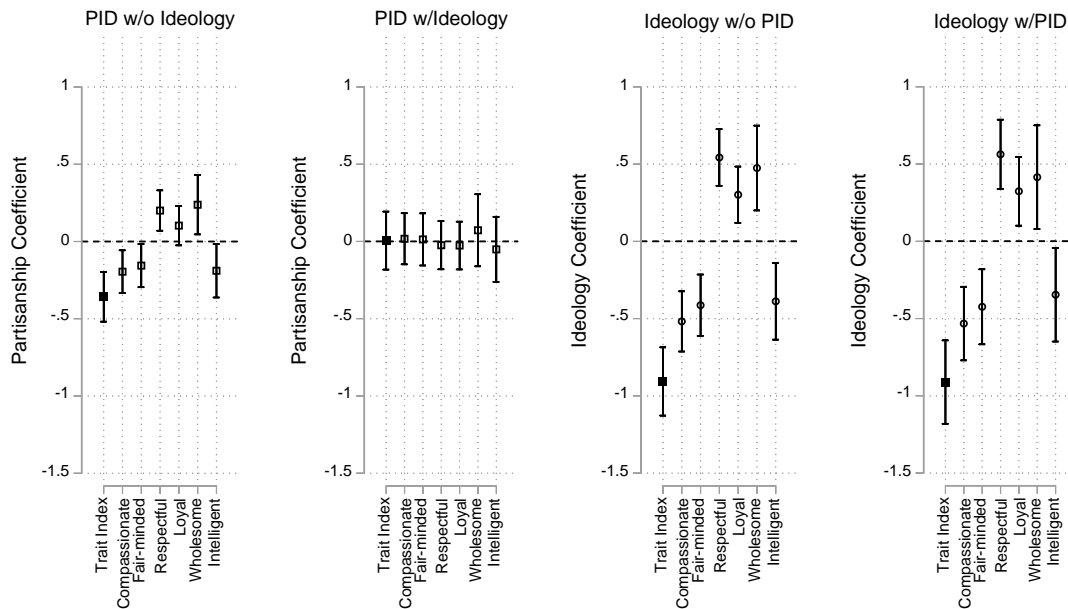
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<sup>7</sup> These specific control variables were selected as they are likely to be correlated with partisanship, ideology, and views about morality, and they are also plausibly prior to partisan identity and ideology.

<sup>8</sup> None of the substantive conclusions reported here change when correcting for multiple comparisons (Benjamini and Hochberg 1995).

According to my argument, these partisan differences are primarily tied to ideology, however. The third panel from the left shows the coefficients for ideology when partisanship is not included in the model, providing a first test of H1b. Starting with the trait index, the results show that conservatives place substantially less importance on the individualizing aspects of moral character ( $b = -.91, p < .001$ ). Moving to the individual traits, conservative respondents place significantly less importance on compassion ( $b = -.52, p < .001$ ) and fairness ( $b = -.41, p < .001$ ), and significantly more importance on being respectful ( $b = .54, p < .001$ ), loyal ( $b = .30, p = .001$ ), and wholesome ( $b = .47, p = .001$ ). Surprisingly, conservatives place significantly less importance on intelligence ( $b = -.39, p = .002$ ).<sup>9</sup> Results are highly similar when using ideological self-identification rather than the issue-based measure of ideology (see Appendix).

Figure 1. Effects of Partisanship and Ideology on Trait Importance



Note: Partisanship (ideology) is coded such that higher values indicate strong Republican (very conservative). Higher values on the DV indicate greater relative importance of that trait. Higher values on the trait index indicate more importance on individualizing than binding traits.

<sup>9</sup> Once again, substantive conclusions are unaffected by the correction for multiple comparisons.

The remaining two panels show the coefficients for partisanship and ideology when both are included in the model simultaneously. As shown in the second panel from the left, partisan identity is no longer a statistically significant predictor in any of the models when ideology is included as a covariate ( $ps > .50$ ). The far right-hand panel shows the coefficients for political ideology from these same models. Political ideology, in contrast, is a significant predictor in the expected direction for every single trait ( $ps < .05$ ).<sup>10</sup> These findings suggest that partisan differences in trait importance are primarily linked with ideology, rather than partisan identity itself.

While the results are consistent with expectations, past research gives reason to expect that the link between moral character and ideology may be limited to only the most politically aware. To test this hypothesis, I focus on the trait index and re-estimate the model above that includes both partisanship and ideology. In addition, I include a measure of political awareness and interactions between awareness and both partisanship and ideology.<sup>11</sup> The left-hand panel of Figure 2 plots the coefficient for partisanship across the range of political sophistication (full model details shown in the Appendix). Across all levels of sophistication, partisanship has a small and non-significant relationship with the trait importance index. As shown in the right-hand panel, there is some evidence of an interaction between ideology and awareness ( $p = .053$ ),

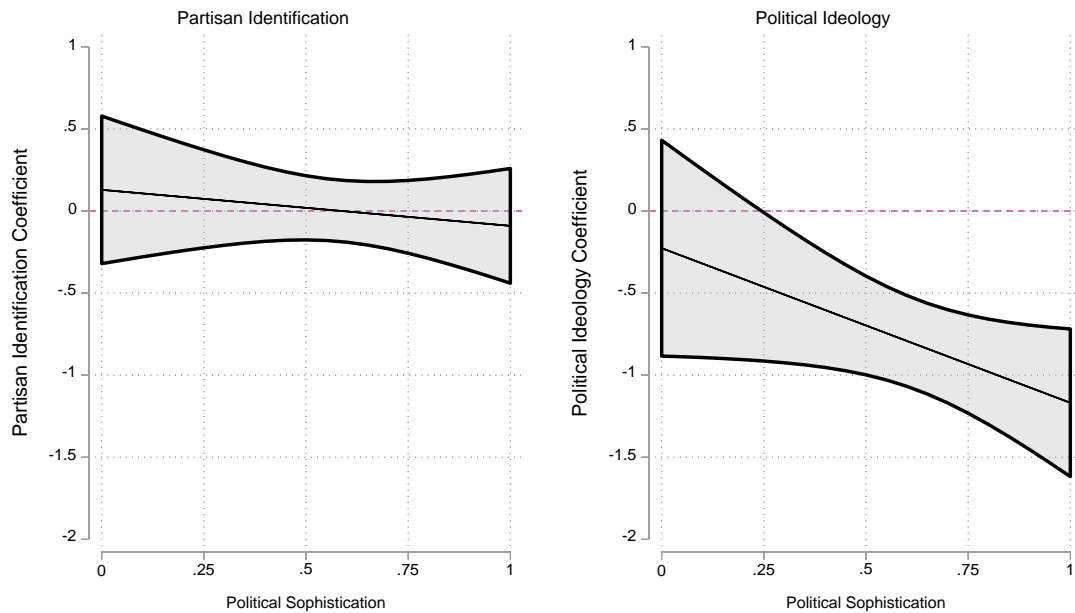
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<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the coefficient for ideology was significantly different from the coefficient for partisanship in every case ( $ps < .05$ ) with the exception of wholesome ( $p = .19$ ).

<sup>11</sup> To measure political awareness, I scale together two factual knowledge items (control of the House and Senate), political interest, and attention to the news using a hybrid item response model.

such that ideology is only linked to trait importance among respondents above the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile of political sophistication. Nonetheless, the pattern is clear among a large majority of the sample.

Figure 2. The Moderating Role of Political Sophistication in Trait Importance



Note: the dependent variable is the trait importance index, where higher values indicate more importance on compassion and fairness. Ideology and PID range from 0 to 1 and are coded such that higher values are more conservative/Republican.

*Does the public perceive partisans as having different traits?*

In the post-election wave of the CCES, respondents were asked to rate the traits of people who identify as Democrats and people who identify as Republicans, using the same set of six traits described above. These items allow a test of whether people perceive trait differences between partisans in the mass public.

Of course, there is substantial partisan bias in trait ratings. Averaging across all six traits, Democrats rate members of their own party 1.3 points higher (on a five-point scale) than members of the Republican party, while Republicans rate their own party about 1.4 points higher than the opposing party. Partisan bias in trait perceptions is well known, but the question here is whether, after accounting for how a person feels about the parties generally, there are shared views of the character strengths and weaknesses of the parties. To address this question, I again

calculate relativized scores for each trait. Specifically, I first calculated a differential rating for each trait (e.g., perceived compassion of Democrats minus perceived compassion of Republicans), then averaged across all six trait differentials. Then, I created relativized scores for each trait by subtracting this average differential from each individual trait differential. Thus, regardless of whether a respondent rates one party more favorably on every trait, a positive score on the relativized compassion measure indicates that respondent sees Democrats as faring better on compassion, in comparison to Republicans, than on other traits. To put it differently, a Republican need not rate Democrats better than Republicans in an *absolute* sense to receive a positive trait score – they only need to rate Democrats better on that trait *relative* to other traits.<sup>12</sup> If scores were not relativized, then the combination of partisan bias and an unequal number of partisans in a sample could generate misleading results.<sup>13</sup> I test the robustness of this approach by using two alternative methods suggested in the literature (Goggin and Theodoridis 2017; Hayes 2005) and find substantively similar results (see Appendix). Finally, as an omnibus test, I created an index by subtracting the average of the three binding traits (respectful, loyal, wholesome) from the average of the two individualizing traits (compassionate, fair-minded).

I begin with the trait index, which provides an omnibus test of the hypothesis. Partisans are rated 0.28 scale points higher on owned traits than non-owned traits ( $p < .001$ ). Trait-specific

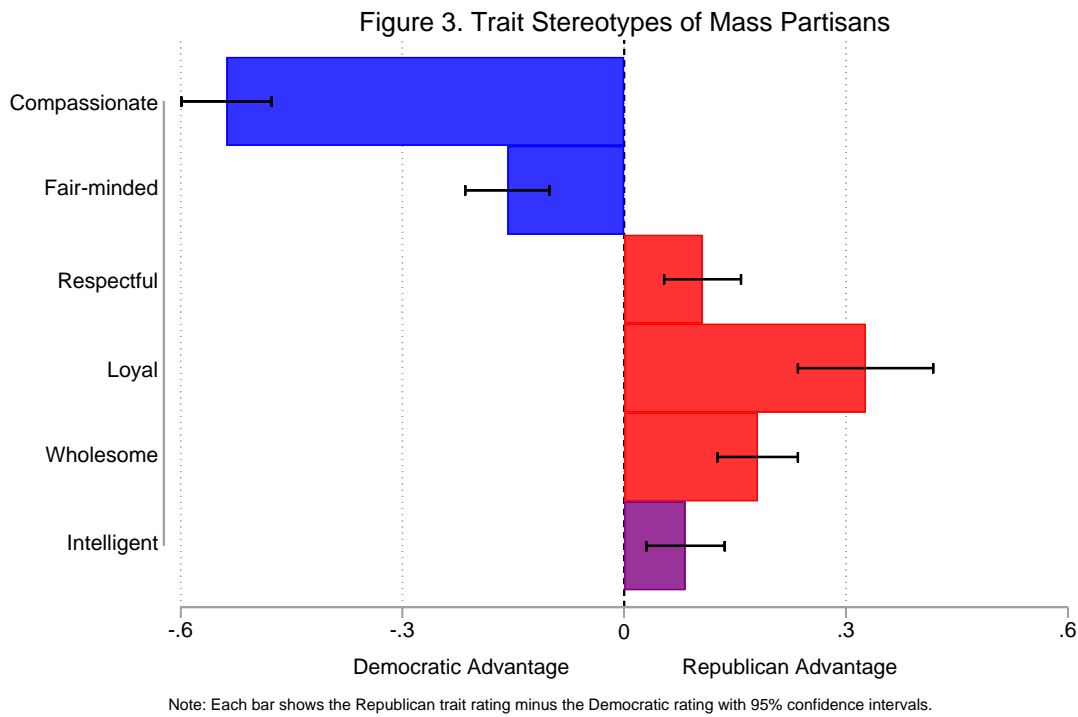
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<sup>12</sup> As an example, a Republican would receive a positive score for compassion (indicating an advantage for Democrats) if he rated Republicans a 5 on all traits and rated Democrats a 4 on compassion, but a 3 on the remaining traits.

<sup>13</sup> For example, this sample leans Democratic, skewing the raw trait scores in favor of Democrats.



estimates are displayed in Figure 3. Blue bars indicate individualizing traits, red bars indicate binding traits, and the purple bar is a non-moral trait (intelligence). Democrats are rated relatively higher on compassion ( $M = 0.54, p > .001$ ) and fairness ( $M = .16, p < .001$ ), while Republicans are rated relatively higher on respectful ( $M = -.11, p < .001$ ), loyal ( $M = -.33, p < .001$ ), and wholesome ( $M = -.18, p < .001$ ). Republicans also score slightly higher in intelligence ( $M = -.08, p = .002$ ).<sup>14</sup> Overall, stereotypes of mass partisans largely reflect the differences in the importance partisans place on these traits.



It is unclear however, whether these stereotypes are widely shared. To examine this question, I re-examine stereotypes among Democrats and Republicans separately, as well as among high and low political sophisticates. The results are shown by partisanship in the top row of Figure 4. As expected, Democrats rate their own party much higher on compassion and

<sup>14</sup> The substantive conclusions are unchanged by the correction for multiple comparisons.

fairness, but lower on loyal and wholesome. The only finding contrary to expectations is that Democrats do not give Republicans an advantage on respectful. The results look similar, though weaker, among pure independents, but differ among Republicans.<sup>15</sup> Republicans rate Democrats relatively higher on compassion and relatively lower on respectful and wholesome, as expected. However, contrary to expectations, Republicans rate Democrats relatively *higher* on loyal, and relatively *lower* on fair-minded. Thus, Republicans seem to hold somewhat different stereotypes than Democrats and independents. In the case of fairness, this trait is both highly desirable and open to a variety of interpretations (for discussion, see Haidt 2013), and thus it may be the least likely to form consensual stereotypes. Turning to loyalty, respondents may have been thinking narrowly in terms of partisan loyalty. If that were the case, then loyalty may be interpreted as a less desirable trait and partisans might be more inclined to attribute it to the opposing party, generating the patterns presented here. As discussed below, however, Study 2 finds evidence of much more consensual partisan stereotypes.

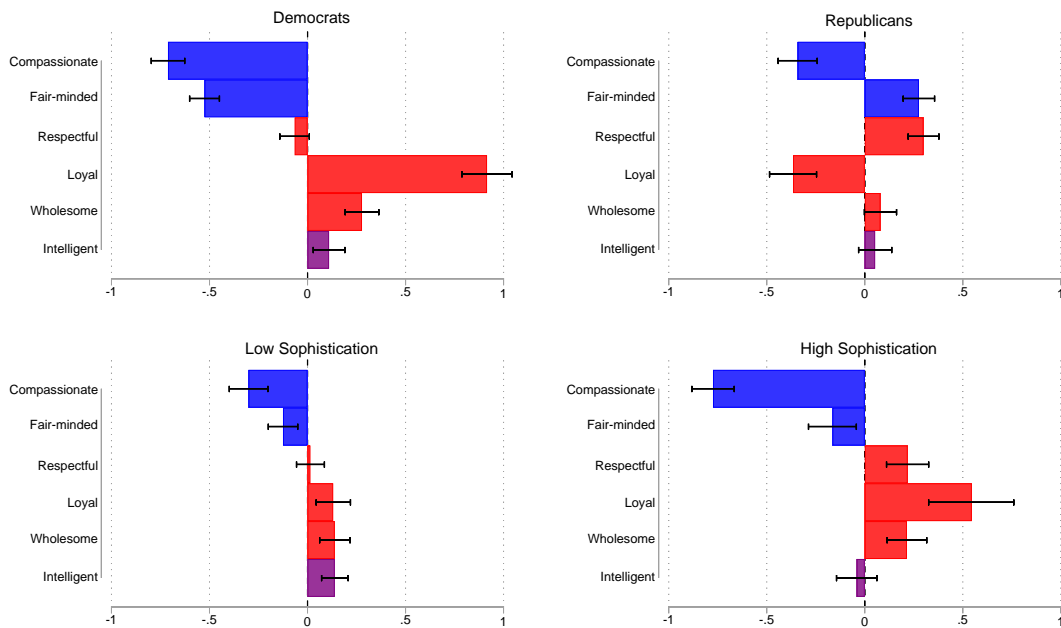
The bottom row of Figure 4 shows the results among high and low political sophisticates. Sophistication is measured as a latent variable constructed from two political knowledge items, political interest, and self-reported attention to the news. Low sophisticates are defined as the bottom third of the distribution, while high sophisticates are defined as the top third. The bottom left panel of Figure 4 shows that low sophisticates rate Democrats as more compassionate and

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<sup>15</sup> The small size of this subsample ( $n = 145$ ) makes estimates uncertain, but independents rate Democrats as more compassionate and fair-minded, though only the former effect is statistically significant. Independents also rate Republicans relatively higher on respectful, loyal and wholesome, though only respectful is statistically significant.

fair-minded, but less loyal and wholesome. Only in the case of respectful, which is not significantly different from zero, do the patterns not match the full-sample results. The bottom right panel shows that high sophisticates hold the expected pattern of partisan stereotypes, though these stereotypes are clearly stronger than among low sophisticates.<sup>16</sup> Overall, the results show that some aspects of partisan stereotypes, particularly that Democrats are more compassionate, are widely held. However, stereotypes are not completely consensual, as partisans clearly differed in their perceptions of some of these traits.

Figure 4. Stereotypes by Respondent Partisanship and Sophistication



Note: Each bar shows the Republican trait rating minus the Democratic rating with 95% confidence intervals. Low and high sophistication refer to the bottom and top tercile, respectively.

## Study 2: An Experimental Test of Partisan Stereotyping and Trait Inferences

<sup>16</sup> Political sophistication is positively related to the strength of partisan stereotypes among Democrats ( $r = .39$ ), but not among Republicans ( $r = -.04$ ).

The evidence above suggests that partisans place differential importance on aspects of moral character, but that these differences are primarily driven by ideological views. Much of the public also holds clear stereotypes about partisans that correspond with these differences. A tougher test of partisan stereotypes is whether people use partisan cues to infer the character traits of individuals. Even when people hold clear stereotypes about partisan groups, they may not draw inferences about individuals (Goggin and Theodoridis 2017). Examining trait inferences about individuals also allows a test of whether ideology is the mechanism driving partisan stereotypes (H3a-c).

For an experimental test of stereotyping of individuals, I recruited 480 respondents from Amazon's Mechanical Turk, which has been shown to consistently replicate experimental results conducted on nationally representative surveys (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012; Coppock 2018; Mullinix et al. 2016).<sup>17</sup> Moreover, partisans on MTurk tend to mirror the psychological divisions of partisans in the mass public (Clifford, Jewell, and Waggoner 2015).<sup>18</sup> Respondents

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<sup>17</sup> I initially recruited 575 respondents. However, to address recent concerns about fraudulent respondents on MTurk, I removed respondents whose IP address indicated they were not located in the U.S. or were using a virtual private server to mask their location (Kennedy et al. 2018). Results are substantively similar when using the full sample (see Appendix).

<sup>18</sup> This study was preceded by a similar study that did not include the experimental conditions with ideological information but no party cues. These results are similar and are shown in the Appendix. Respondents who participated in the first study were not allowed to participate in the second.

were required to be located in the U.S., have completed at least 100 HITs, and an approval rate greater than 95%. Respondents were paid \$0.75 for completing the study.<sup>19</sup>

After completing several questions about political identity, subjects were asked to evaluate fictional people based on six short experimental vignettes. The control condition for each vignette consisted of two to three sentences describing a person and included several pieces of information one would often learn when first meeting a person – name, age, family, occupation, and hobbies. Within each vignette, respondents were randomly assigned to receive one of ten versions, summarized below.

- *Control*: background information
- *Republican Cue Only*: background information + Republican cue
- *Democrat Cue Only*: background information + Democrat cue
- *Liberal Democrat*: background information + Democrat cue + two liberal issue stances
- *Moderate Democrat*: background information + Democrat cue + one liberal issue stance and one conservative issue stance
- *Conservative Republican*: background information + Republican cue + two conservative issue stances
- *Moderate Republican*: background information + Republican cue + one conservative issue stance and one liberal issue stance
- *Liberal Cue Only*: background information + two liberal issue stances
- *Conservative Cue Only*: background information + two conservative issue stances

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<sup>19</sup> See Appendix for sample descriptive statistics.

- *Moderate Cue Only*: background information + one conservative issue stance and one liberal issue stance

Within each vignette, the same two issues were used across all ideological cue conditions to maintain comparability.<sup>20</sup> For the sake of realism and statistical power, I did not include conditions with partisans holding ideologically consistent issue stances that conflict with their partisan identity (e.g., a Republican holding two liberal positions). Within each ideologically moderate condition, the issue that was inconsistent with the target's partisanship was randomly assigned to ensure comparability across conditions. An example of the conservative Republican condition is shown below (the full text of the vignettes is shown in the Appendix).

Eric is 43 years old and is married with two children. He teaches physics at the local high school and is an avid runner. Eric describes himself as a Republican. He believes that the government should provide fewer services and leave things up to the free market. He also firmly believes that marriage should be between a man and a woman.

Following each vignette, respondents were asked to rate the target's character traits. The trait battery included one trait for each of the moral foundations (compassionate, fair-minded, tough, patriotic, wholesome), as well as intelligent. These traits differ slightly from the traits in Study 1. To avoid respondents interpreting the traits narrowly in partisan terms (e.g., partisan

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<sup>20</sup> The issues used were: government provision of services, same-sex marriage, government involvement in health care, environmental regulation, welfare benefits, foreign intervention, taxes and spending, undocumented immigrants, climate change, privacy and civil liberties, police reform, and gender identity.

loyalty), I used “tough” and “patriotic” instead of “respectful” and “loyal.”<sup>21</sup> To simplify analysis, I follow the approach described above and create a stereotype index by subtracting the average individualizing trait rating from the average binding trait rating. Thus, negative scores indicate that the target individual was rated as more compassionate and fair-minded than patriotic, tough, and wholesome while positive scores indicate the reverse.<sup>22</sup>

Given that 480 respondents completed the experiment and were asked to rate six vignettes, the data yield 2,880 observations. I take a repeated measures approach, using linear regression to model the stereotype index with fixed effects for respondents, fixed effects for each vignette, and standard errors clustered on the respondent. To test the key hypotheses, I include dummy variables for each experimental condition with the control serving as the excluded condition. The coefficients for each experimental condition, relative to the control condition, are shown in Figure 5 (model details shown in the Appendix).

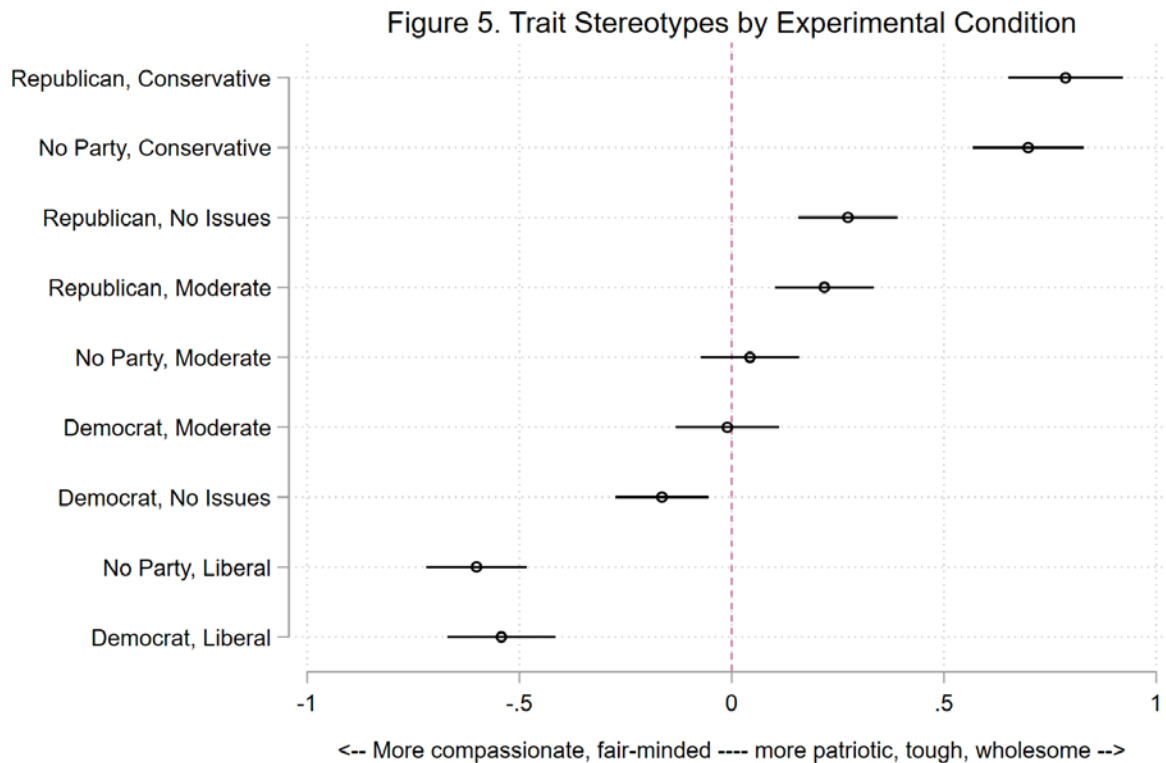
As expected, partisan cues significantly affected trait stereotypes. The Democratic cue led to a modest shift in the trait index ( $b = -.16, p = .003$ ), indicating relatively higher ratings of compassion and fairness. The Republican cue caused higher scores on the trait index ( $b = .27, p < .001$ ), indicating relatively higher scores on patriotic, tough, and wholesome. And, crucially, the Democratic and Republican cue-only conditions significantly differed from each other ( $difference = .44, p < .001$ ). These results demonstrate that people use party cues to draw

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<sup>21</sup> These two trait terms also seem to do a better job tapping into the intended latent dimension according to a factor analysis (Clifford 2018).

<sup>22</sup> As a manipulation check, respondents were also asked to rate the target’s ideology on a 7-point scale.

character trait inferences about individuals, and support the patterns of partisan stereotyping described above.



According to my argument above, however, perceptions of ideology are the primary mechanism through which party cues affect trait inferences. If this is the case, then ideological information should affect trait perceptions (H3a), ideology should have larger effects than partisan cues (H3b), and the effects of partisan cues should diminish when ideological information is provided (H3c). These expectations follow the logic of implicit mediation (Gerber and Green 2012) and the current design allows for a test of mediation without the strong assumptions made by standard mediation models (Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen 2018).

As a first step in testing these expectations, I compare the effects of ideological information to the effects of party cues. The issue stances taken by the target had substantively



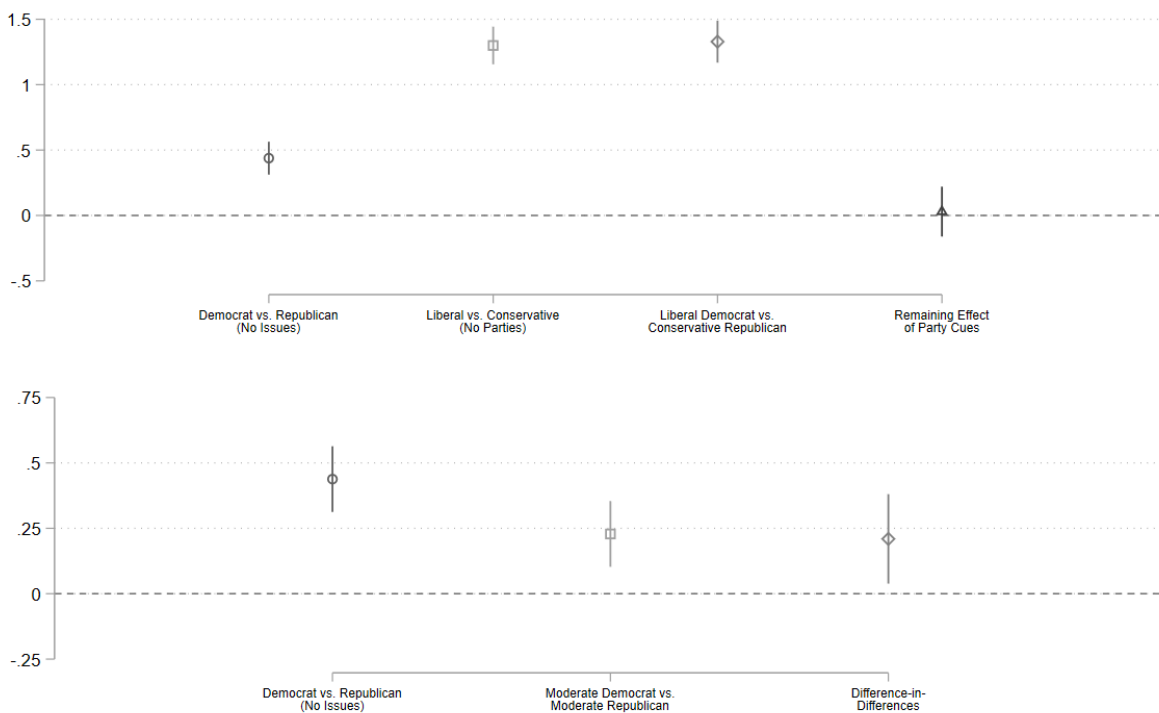
large effects. In the absence of a party cue, the consistent liberal treatment substantially reduced the trait index score ( $b = -.60, p < .001$ ), while the consistent conservative treatment substantially increased it ( $b = .70, p < .001$ ), as expected. The difference between these two conditions is large and statistically significant ( $b = 1.30, p < .001$ ), indicating that people also use information about an individual's issue stances to draw inferences about their character (H3a). This difference is plotted in the top row of Figure 6, next to the party cue difference described above. As is clear, the effect of two issue stances is nearly three times larger than the effect of the party cues (*difference-in-differences* = .86,  $p < .001$ ), supporting H3b.

If ideology is the primary mechanism through which party cues work, then party cues should have little effect when ideological information is provided. This expectation can be tested by comparing differences between the consistent liberal and consistent conservative when party cues are and are not provided. The third estimate from the left in the top row of Figure 6 displays the difference between the liberal Democrat and the conservative Republican. The difference is again large ( $b = 1.33, p < .001$ ), but it is not significantly larger than the difference between the liberal and conservative targets when party cues are *not* provided (*difference-in-differences* = .03,  $p = .761$ ). In other words, when two issue stances are provided, partisan cues provide no additional information about the character of these individuals, supporting H3c.

To provide a further test of whether ideology is the mechanism through which partisan cues affect trait perceptions, I turn to comparisons with the ideologically inconsistent conditions in which the target took one conservative stance and one liberal stance. Following the advice of Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen (2018), I assess the size of party cue effects when the proposed mediator is and is not controlled, which allows for causal estimates of mediation. The results are shown in the bottom row of Figure 6. For reference, the first estimate on the left again shows the

difference between the Democrat and Republican targets when no ideological information is provided ( $difference = .44, p < .001$ ). The next estimate shows this same difference when both targets are ideologically inconsistent, each taking one conservative stance and one liberal stance. This effect is smaller in magnitude than party cues alone, but remains positive and significant ( $b = .23, p < .001$ ). However, the crucial point is that the partisan difference is significantly smaller when ideological information is held constant ( $difference-in-differences = .21, p = .016$ ), supporting H3c. This difference-in-differences, also known as the elimination effect, is plotted in the bottom row of Figure 6. These results imply that ideology mediates the effect of party cues.

Figure 6. Ideological Information Drives Trait Perceptions of Partisans



Of course, it is notable that in this case a party cue effect remains even when ideological information is provided. However, the manipulation of ideological information consisted of only two issue stances. In this sense, it is an imperfect manipulation of the mediating variable, which

should bias estimates of mediation downward (Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen 2018).<sup>23</sup> A fuller accounting of the targets' issue positions would likely reduce party cue effects even further.

In Study 1, there was some evidence that partisan stereotypes were not shared by Republicans and were limited to those who were at least minimally politically aware. I investigate both of those questions again here. To begin, I split the sample into Democrats and Republicans (each including leaners), then re-estimated two versions of the model described above. Several of the main experimental comparisons are shown in the top row of Figure 7. Starting at the top left, Democrats make a clear distinction based on party cues alone ( $b = .58, p < .001$ ), but see a much larger difference between liberals and conservatives ( $b = 1.48, p < .001$ ), and partisan cues add little to this effect ( $b = 1.71, p < .001$ ). In contrast, Democrats see only a small difference between ideologically moderate partisans ( $b = .21, p = .035$ ). The top right panel of Figure 7 shows the same four quantities estimated among Republicans. Republicans see a modest difference based on party cues alone ( $b = .16, p = .078$ ), consistent with weaker partisan stereotypes. However, they see large differences between liberals and conservatives whether party cues are provided ( $b = .75, p < .001$ ) or not ( $b = .98, p < .001$ ). Republicans also see only a modest difference between moderate partisans ( $b = .22, p = .014$ ). Overall, although the effects

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<sup>23</sup> The manipulation check supports this claim. When issue information is absent, the Democrat and Republican were perceived as further apart ideologically ( $difference = 2.88, p < .001$ ) than when both candidates were ideologically moderate ( $difference = 1.92, p < .001$ ). This difference-in-differences is statistically significant ( $b = .97, p < .001$ ), demonstrating that the manipulation worked. However, respondents still clearly perceive an ideological difference between the two moderate partisans, demonstrating the ideology manipulation is imperfect.

are a bit smaller among Republicans than among Democrats, the general patterns are quite similar.<sup>24</sup>

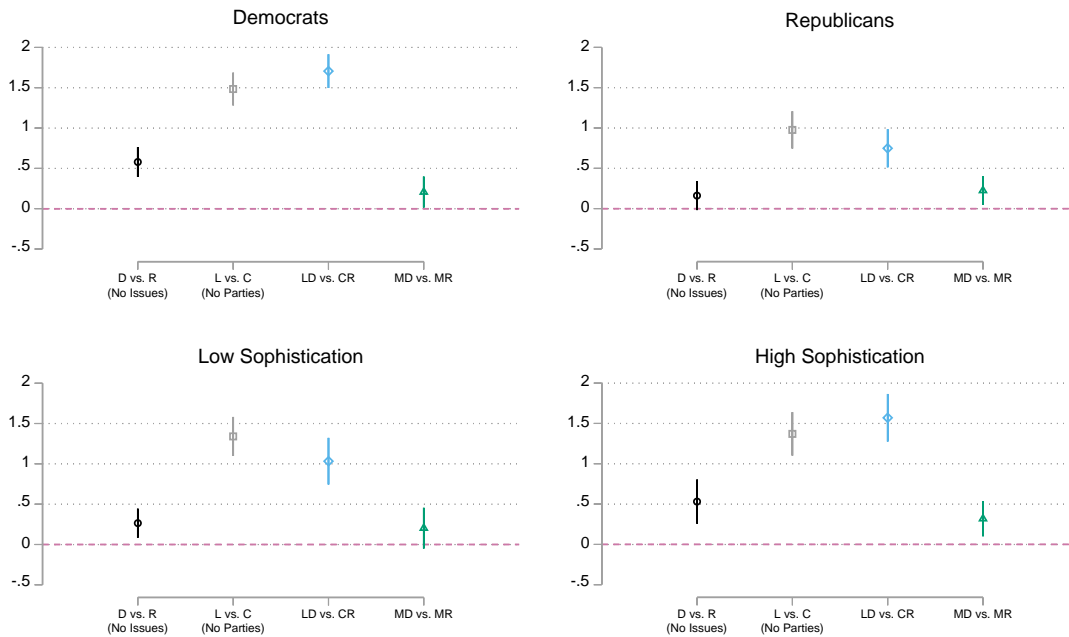
The bottom row of Figure 7 shows the results of two models estimated among respondents with low (left panel) and high political sophistication (right panel). To divide respondents by sophistication, I estimated latent political awareness using four factual knowledge questions and self-reported interest in politics, then divided the sample into thirds. Low sophistication represents the bottom third of the sample, while high sophistication represents the top third. Low sophisticates see a significant difference between partisans on the trait index, as expected ( $b = .26, p = .004$ ), but again see a large difference between liberals and conservatives, regardless of whether party cues are provided ( $b = 1.03, p < .001$ ), or not ( $b = 1.34, p < .001$ ). And low sophisticates see a small, but non-significant difference between moderate partisans ( $b = .20, p = .115$ ). These effects are quite similar among high sophisticates, though a bit larger. High sophisticates see a clear difference between partisans ( $b = 0.53, p < .001$ ), but a much larger difference between liberals and conservatives (without party cues:  $b = 1.37, p < .001$ ; with party cues:  $b = 1.57, p < .001$ ). And finally, high sophisticates see a relatively small difference between moderate partisans ( $b = .32, p = .005$ ). Overall, the patterns are quite similar, contrary to the view that these stereotypes are limited only to political sophisticates.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The results are also quite similar when disaggregating the index into individual traits, though Republicans do not tend to associate fairness with liberalism. See the Appendix for details.

<sup>25</sup> As an additional test, I specified an interactive model that allowed each of the nine treatment effects to vary by levels of political sophistication (see Appendix for full model details). After

Figure 7. Treatment Effects by Respondent Sophistication and Partisanship



Note: D=Democrat, R=Republican, L=Liberal, C=Conservative, M=Moderate. Low sophistication = bottom tercile. High sophistication = top tercile.

Taken together, Study 2 demonstrates that people actively use partisan cues to draw stereotypical trait inferences about individuals. However, ideological information, as operationalized by positions on two issues, had substantially larger effects than partisan cues. Moreover, when positions on these two issues were held constant, the effect of the partisan cues diminished. These results suggest that ideological views are central to the content of partisan stereotypes. Subsample analyses demonstrated that these results were quite similar among Democrats and Republicans, as well as among high and low sophisticates, suggesting these stereotypes and patterns of trait inferences are widely shared.

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correcting for multiple comparisons, none of the nine interaction terms are statistically significant ( $ps > .10$ ).

## Conclusion

Partisanship is increasingly understood as a powerful social identity. A recent body of literature demonstrates that perceptions of moral character are central to how people define and evaluate social groups (Brambilla et al. 2011, 2012; Brambilla and Leach 2014; Goodwin, Piazza, and Rozin 2014) and that people work hard to maintain their group's moral image (Brambilla et al. 2013; Leach, Ellemers, and Barreto 2007; Pagliaro, Ellemers, and Barreto 2011). Yet, we know surprisingly little about the aspects of moral character that partisans use to define their groups. The findings here demonstrate that people hold reliable stereotypes about mass partisans and that these stereotypes correspond with the aspects of moral character that partisans value most. Democrats are seen as more compassionate and more fair-minded than Republicans. Republicans, however, are seen as more patriotic, more tough and respectful, and more wholesome than Democrats. Not only do people hold stereotypes about partisans as groups, but they also use partisan cues to draw stereotypical trait inferences about individuals.

Partisan stereotypes are not simple group animus, but seem to be driven primarily by expectations about ideological viewpoints. In Study 2, experimentally manipulated issue stances had substantially larger effects than partisan cues alone. Moreover, when stances on two issues were held constant, the effect of the partisan cue was significantly reduced. These findings correspond well with the predictors of trait importance. Political ideology emerged as a much stronger predictor of stereotypical differences in trait importance than did partisan identity. These findings suggest that trait stereotypes closely track differences in what political groups value.

Partisan stereotypes were not completely consistent across partisan groups, however. In Study 1, Democratic and Republican respondents agreed on some stereotypes, such as that

Democrats are relatively more compassionate. But partisan respondents disagreed on other trait stereotypes – particularly fairness and loyalty. Study 2 revealed more consistency across partisan groups (see Appendix for additional details), however. The differences between studies might be explained by the use of slightly different trait terms (e.g., patriotism vs. loyalty). Alternatively, it may be that the public holds fairly consensual stereotypes about ideological groups, while partisan stereotypes are more likely to be dominated by partisan bias. Clearly, more evidence is needed on partisan and ideological stereotypes, but these two studies represent an important step.

Overall, my findings fit well with research on partisan stereotypes of politicians (Goggin and Theodoridis 2017; Hayes 2005), but extend this line of research. Past research on trait ownership theory has focused on politicians, placing the source of these stereotypes in campaign behavior. Yet, the evidence here demonstrates that partisan stereotypes are rooted more deeply into ideological viewpoints and extend into perceptions of the mass public. Additionally, past research on trait ownership theory has lacked a clear theoretical foundation for character traits. The evidence presented here suggests that integrating this line of research with moral psychology holds promise for advancing our understanding of the role of character traits in politics.

These findings also have important implications for how we draw the boundaries between social groups. Politicians who do not follow the party line closely enough are sometimes referred to as a Republican or Democrat “in name only,” implying that they are not truly members of the group. In other cases, a politician who bucks the party line may simply be known as a “maverick,” a term that highlights their independence, but does not necessarily reject their partisan identity. This raises the question of how people draw the boundaries between the political parties and why bucking the party line may not always lead to exclusion. Given that people actively use trait perceptions to determine who to accept into social groups (van der Lee

et al. 2017), perceptions of moral character may help clarify how people draw the boundaries that define who is part of a political group and who is not.

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