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Is there an ideological asymmetry in the moral approval of spreading misinformation by politicians?

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ABSTRACT

We investigated the relationship between ideology and moral (dis)approval of spreading misinformation by politicians. In experiment 1 ($N = 254$), higher scores on Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) were positively related to tolerance of politicians lying by commission, paltering, and lying by omission. Also, republicans were more tolerant towards politicians lying by commission and paltering than democrats. Experiment 2 ($N = 395$) replicated these results, and examined partisan bias. Democrats (but not republicans) showed a partisan bias in tolerance of lying by commission, whereas republicans (but not democrats) showed a partisan bias in tolerance of paltering. In both experiments, RWA and SDO mediated the relationships between political party and approval of spreading misinformation. These results suggest that right-wing individuals are more tolerant to the spreading of misinformation by politicians, although it should be noted that overall levels of approval were relatively low.

1. Introduction

Deception in politics is of all times. However, during recent years, there has been a rise in people's concern about misinformation that is spread for political gain (Lazer et al., 2018). This elevated concern has inspired scholars' research agenda, and gave rise to the development of public organizations who investigate the truthfulness of politicians' statements, such as Pulitzer Prize winning organization PolitiFact. Notably, Angie Drobnic Holan, editor of PolitiFact, stated in the New York Times that 'All Politicians Lie. Some Lie More than Others' (Holan, 2015). This bold claim is striking since politicians are by definition entrusted to serve the public, rather than their own interest. In order to further our understanding of how people perceive and judge politicians who 'bend the truth', the present investigation examines whether individuals differ in the degree to which they (dis)approve deceptive behaviors by politicians. In particular, we examine whether individual differences in ideology are related to moral (dis)approval of spreading misinformation.

Although ideology is often portrayed on a single dimension ranging from left-wing to right-wing, or by categorical labels such liberal versus conservative, or democratic versus republican, there is a general consensus in political psychology that the core of socio-ideological attitudes can be represented on two continuous dimensions (Duckitt, 2001; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). The first dimension

concerns the social-cultural domain, and taps into a preference for maintaining the existing social order and a perseverance of what is established. A typical indicator of this dimension is Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), characterized by authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism (Altemeyer, 1981). The second dimension concerns the economic-hierarchical domain, and is often operationalized with Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), referring to one's preference for a hierarchical social structure and inequality among social groups (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Conservatives, relative to liberals, are characterized by higher levels of RWA and SDO (Jost et al., 2003).

A bulk of research has shown that individual differences in ideological attitudes are related to individual differences in personality, cognitive abilities, cognitive styles, needs, motives, and orientations towards the world (Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; Duckitt, 2001; Onraet et al., 2015; Van Hiel, Onraet, Crowson, & Roets, 2016). Moreover, scholars also demonstrated that individuals across the ideological spectrum rely on a different sets of moral foundations (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Kugler, Jost, & Noorbaloochi, 2014). In the following, we argue that individual differences in ideological attitudes might also predict individual differences in moral (dis)approval of politicians' deceptive behaviors.

In their desire for traditionalism and social order, individuals high (vs low) in RWA orient themselves towards the group and its leaders. As

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stated by Altemeyer (2006, p. 2): 'It [authoritarianism] happens when the followers submit too much to the leaders, trust them too much, and give them too much leeway to do whatever they want'. Indeed, empirical research supports the notion that respect for authority might lead individuals high (vs low) in RWA to accept unethical practices of leaders. For example, RWA is positively related to tolerance of illegal acts conducted by the government (Altemeyer, 1981), and negatively related towards perceived seriousness of offenses committed by authority figures (Feather, 1998). In addition, using an in-basket task, Son Hing, Bobocel, Zanna, and McBride (2007), found that followers high (vs low) in RWA were more acquiescent to and supportive of an unethical leader. Hence, given that RWA captures the tendency to defer to legitimized authorities, we predict that RWA is positively related to people's tolerance of politicians spreading misinformation.

In addition, also SDO could reasonably be expected to be positively related to moral approval of spreading misinformation by politicians. Indeed, people high in SDO consider the social world as a competitive jungle (see Duckitt, 2001). This worldview is also reflected in their personality, with positive associations between SDO and the dark personality traits Machiavellianism and psychopathy (Hodson, Hogg, & MacInnis, 2009). Machiavellianism, or the 'manipulative personality' is characterized by exploitation of others and lack of morality (Jones & Paulhus, 2014), and low levels of honesty-humility (Lee & Ashton, 2005). The subclinical trait psychopathy is characterized by callous affect, interpersonal manipulation, and an anti-social orientation (Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, 2016). We expect that people high in SDO may not only be more likely to show dishonesty themselves, but that they may also consider this more normative and common behavior in other people. Hence, we hypothesize that the endorsement of this general dog-eat-dog worldview where everyone does whatever is necessary to get ahead, may also result in higher levels of tolerance towards the spread of misinformation by politicians.

2. The present study

To test the predictive value of ideology on moral judgements of politicians' deceptive behaviors, two studies were conducted in the US context. In Study 1, we examined whether RWA, SDO and political party preference predicted levels of moral approval of politicians' deceptive behaviors, and whether the potential relationship between individuals' political party preference and moral approval of politicians' deceptive behaviors could be explained, i.e. mediated, by RWA and SDO. In Study 2, we additionally examined partisan bias in this regard. In particular, we examined whether the association between participants' political party preference and their moral judgements of politicians' deceptive behaviors depends on the politician's political affiliation.

Deceptive behaviors were operationalized using the three types of deceptive behaviors identified by Rogers, Zeckhauser, Gino, Norton, and Schweitzer (2017); lying by commission (i.e. actively proclaiming untrue facts), paltering (i.e. actively proclaiming truthful facts in such a way that they lead people to reach false conclusions), and lying by omission (i.e. passively failing to correct a mistaken belief that is known to be held by others). Data are available at OSF: <https://osf.io/d4vym>.

3. Study 1

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

Since correlations between individual differences measures typically stabilize when N approaches 250 (Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013), we requested 250 US citizens on Amazon Mechanical Turk. Two hundred seventy-six participants started, and 254 participants completed the experiment ($M_{age} = 36.03$ years, $SD = 10.53$; 44.5% female).

3.1.2. Procedure and materials

All measures were rated on 7-point Likert scales. After completing an 11-item RWA (Altemeyer, 1981, adapted by Van Hiel, Pandelaere, & Duriez, 2004; $M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.33$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$) and 16-item SDO (Pratto et al.'s, 1994; $M = 2.47$, $SD = 1.35$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.96$) measure, participants read that there are several ways in which politicians can mislead people. Participants were then presented with the definition, and an accompanying example scenario of lying by commission, paltering, and lying by omission. Definitions and scenarios were adapted from Rogers et al. (2017). In these scenarios, participants were asked to imagine that over the last five years the unemployment rate has decreased consistently, but that next year a politician (whose political party was unknown) expected an inevitable increase in the unemployment rate. In the lying by commission and paltering scenarios, the politician was asked 'how do you expect the unemployment rate to be next year?'. In the lying by commission scenario, the politician answered: 'I expect the unemployment rate to decrease next year'. In the paltering scenario, the politician answered: 'Well, as you know, over the last five years the unemployment rate has decreased consistently'. It was explicitly outlined that the latter answer is not a direct lie, but it hides the politician's true expectation that the unemployment rate will increase, by giving the impression that (s)he expects that unemployment rate will continue to decrease. In the lying by omission scenario, the politician was not actively asked about his/her expectations of the unemployment rate, but when someone made the statement 'Because the unemployment rate has gone down the last 5 years, I expect them to decrease next year', the politician failed to disclose relevant information, and as such chose to not correct a mistaken belief that (s)he knows that other people hold. Similar to Rogers et al. (2017, Study 3), participants evaluated these behaviors on the dimensions, *unethical vs ethical*, *dishonest vs honest*, *immoral vs moral*, which were combined into a single scale to measure moral approval of lying by commission behavior ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.53$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.92$), paltering behavior ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.46$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$), or lying by omission behavior ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.48$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.92$). Finally, participants indicated their political party preference (46.5% democrat, 27.6% republican, 24.0% independent, 2.0% other).

3.2. Results

As predicted, regression analyses revealed that RWA was positively related to tolerance of lying by commission ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < .001$), paltering ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < .001$), and lying by omission ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < .001$). Likewise, SDO was related to more positive attitudes towards lying by commission ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < .001$), paltering ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < .001$) and lying by omission ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < .001$). Using Gignac and Szodorai's (2016) effect size guidelines, these associations can be considered as moderate to large.

Next, we examined the associations between political party preference (democrat, republican, independent) and attitudes towards deception (see Table 1). ANOVA revealed that republicans evaluated both lying by commission and paltering behavior more positive than democrats did. Additionally, republicans, relative to democrats, also showed a marginally significant tendency to be more positive towards lying by omission. Independents' attitudes towards the deceptive behaviors were more similar to those of democrats than those of republicans, although only for paltering the difference between independents and republicans was statistically significant.¹

¹ For exploratory purposes, after the experiment, participants were asked to indicate how often they thought republican politicians and democratic politicians engage in lying by commission, paltering, and lying by omission. Results showed that republicans believed that democratic politicians used these techniques more often, while democrats believed that republican politicians used

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and ANOVA results in Study 1.

	Democrats	Independents	Republicans	Df	F (sig)	η_p^2
Lying by commission	2.40 _a (1.29)	2.72 _{ab} (1.53)	3.09 _b (1.82)	2, 246	4.67 (.010)	0.037
Paltering	3.01 _a (1.37)	3.15 _a (1.33)	3.71 _b (1.54)	2, 246	5.50 (.005)	0.043
Lying by omission	3.06 _a (1.48)	3.07 _{ab} (1.31)	3.45 _{bf} (1.60)	2, 246	1.75 (.176)	0.014

Means in the same row that do not share a subscript differ at $p < .05$ based on LSD tests. The difference in means between _a and _{bf} is significant at $p = .079$.

Table 2
Standardized estimates and p -values of the total, direct, indirect via RWA, and indirect via SDO effect of political party on attitudes towards lying by commission, paltering, and lying by omission in Study 1.

	Total effect		Direct effect		Indirect via RWA		Indirect via SDO	
	β	p	β	p	β	p	β	p
<i>Democrats (vs republicans)</i>								
Lying by commission	−0.23	.005	0.04	.674	−0.16	.001	−0.12	.002
Paltering	−0.24	.002	−0.03	.714	−0.15	.005	−0.06	.080
Lying by omission	−0.13	.087	0.07	.384	−0.12	.018	−0.08	.020
<i>Independents (vs republicans)</i>								
Lying by commission	−0.11	.201	0.04	.654	−0.11	.001	−0.03	.156
Paltering	−0.17	.024	−0.04	.575	−0.11	.004	−0.02	.275
Lying by omission	−0.11	.135	0.00	.998	−0.09	.020	−0.02	.235

Unstandardized estimates and confidence intervals are available on OSF.

Finally, we examined whether the relationships between political party preference and attitudes towards deception were mediated by RWA and SDO. Political party preference was considered as a multi-categorical variable (democrat, republican, independent). Therefore two dummy variables were created with republicans as the reference category. The mediating role of RWA and SDO was tested simultaneously, using bootstrap analyses (1000 bootstraps) on the observed scores with the Lavaan package (Version 0.5-23; Rosseel, 2012) in R. As shown in Table 2, the relationship between the democrats – republicans contrast and attitudes towards the deceptive behaviors were uniquely mediated by both RWA and SDO, although the mediating role of SDO on attitudes towards paltering behavior was only marginally significant. Furthermore, the relationships between the independents–republicans contrast and the deceptive behaviors were significantly mediated by RWA, but not by SDO.

4. Study 2

Study 1 supported the hypothesized association between the adherence of right-wing ideology and relative higher levels of moral approval of spreading misinformation by politicians. Study 2 extends Study 1 by examining whether the association between one's political party preference and tolerance towards politicians' deceptive behaviors, is dependent on the politician's party affiliation. Traditionally, right-wing individuals are considered to be more biased by motivated reasoning processes (Jost, 2017). However, recently, some scholars have questioned the notion that right-wing individuals act in ways that favor their own political group more than left-wing individuals do (Ditto et al., 2018). Therefore, we had no specific predictions about whether an ideological asymmetry in partisan bias would emerge. For sake of parsimony, there were no lying by omission scenarios included in Study 2. Similar to the work of Rogers et al. (2017), we focus on lying by commission and paltering in this second study since the opportunities to display these behaviors are more often present, whereas the opportunity to lie by omission is rather limited and more context-dependent.

(footnote continued)

these techniques more often. Statistics and data of these measures are available at OSF.

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants

Power analyses based on the sample characteristics and results of Study 1 revealed that 400 participants would provide sufficient power to test our hypotheses.² Therefore, 400 participants were requested on Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants of Study 1 were not allowed to participate in Study 2. Four hundred and seven participants started, and 395 participants completed the full experiment ($M_{age} = 36.28$ years, $SD = 11.19$; 43.3% female, 56.5% male, 0.3% identified as non-binary).

4.1.2. Procedure and materials

After completing the same measures of RWA ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.26$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.90$) and SDO ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.35$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.96$) as in Study 1, participants were presented with the definitions of lying by commission and paltering, and accompanying scenarios wherein a (democratic/republican) governor lied by commission, and a (republican/democratic) governor paltered. The governor's political party was repeatedly and explicitly stated in each scenario. Which governor (democrat or republican) used which type of deception (lying by commission or paltering) was counterbalanced between participants. The scenarios were similar to Study 1. Participants read that a governor was running for re-election. Over the last four years the unemployment rate had decreased consistently in the governor's state, but the governor expected an increase in unemployment rate the next year. During an interview, the governor was confronted with the question: 'How do you expect the unemployment to develop next year?'. In the lying by commission scenario, the politician answered: 'I expect the unemployment rate to decrease next year'. In the paltering scenario, the politician answered: 'Well, as you know, over the last four years the unemployment has decreased consistently'. As in Study 1, participants

² Based on sample 1, we expected that a second Mturk sample would consist of approximately 45% democrats and 30% republicans. Therefore, we decided to recruit 400 participants, which would provide > 0.90 power to detect a medium ($f = 0.25$) partisan bias among democrats, > 0.77 power to detect a medium partisan bias among republicans, and > 0.99 power to obtain the relationships between ideological attitudes and deceptive behaviors similar in size to those found in Study 1.

Table 3
Means, standard deviations, and ANOVA results in Study 2.

	Democrats	Independents	Republicans	Df	F (sig)	η_p^2
Lying by commission	2.33 _a (1.43)	2.23 _a (1.46)	2.86 _b (1.84)	2, 384	4.62 (.010)	0.023
Paltering	3.02 _a (1.49)	3.10 _a (1.58)	3.82 _b (1.77)	2, 384	7.65 (.001)	0.038

Means in the same row with different subscripts differ at $p < .01$ based on LSD tests.

evaluated the displayed behaviors on the dimensions *unethical vs ethical*, *dishonest vs honest*, *immoral vs moral*, which were combined into a single scale to measure moral approval of politicians' lying by commission behavior ($M = 2.39$, $SD = 1.54$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.94$) and paltering behavior ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.61$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$).

Finally, participants indicated their political party preference (45.6% democrat, 20.8% republican, 31.6% independent, 2.0% other).

4.2. Results

Both RWA and SDO were positively related to moral approval of lying by commission ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < .001$ and $\beta = 0.29$, $p < .001$, respectively), and paltering ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < .001$ and $\beta = 0.23$, $p < .001$ respectively). Moreover, participants' political party preference (democrat, republican, independent) was significantly related to moral approval of spreading misinformation (see Table 3). Specifically, republicans, compared to democrats, were more positive towards both lying by commission and paltering behavior. Independents' attitudes towards the deceptive behaviors were similar to those of democrats, and significantly different from those of republicans.

Next, we examined the mediating role of ideological attitudes on the relationships between political party preference and moral approval of spreading misinformation with Bootstrap analyses (1000 bootstraps) on the observed scores with Lavaan. Using dummy coding, republicans were set as the reference category, and the mediating role of RWA and SDO was tested simultaneously. As depicted in Table 4, mediation analyses that contrasted democrats with republicans provided evidence for the mediating role of both RWA and SDO on moral approval of both lying by commission and paltering. Mediation analyses that contrasted independents with republicans yielded the same pattern regarding the mediating role of ideological attitudes on tolerance to spreading misinformation.

Finally, we examined partisan bias. ANOVA and contrast analyses were conducted on moral approval of politicians' lying behavior, with participants' political affiliation, politicians' political affiliation, and the interaction term as independent variables. Results revealed a significant effect of participants' political affiliation, $F(2, 381) = 4.65$, $p = .010$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.024$, with republicans being more tolerant of lying by commission than democrats and independents. Politicians' political affiliation, $F(1, 381) = 2.09$, $p = .149$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.005$, and the interaction term between participants' and politicians' political affiliation were both not significant, $F(2, 381) = 0.74$, $p = .478$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.004$. However, simple effect analyses revealed that democratic participants showed a

significant partisan bias, by displaying more tolerance of the lying behavior of a democratic politician ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.56$) compared to a republican politician ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 1.24$), $F(1, 381) = 4.45$, $p = .035$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.012$. Republican participants showed no significant difference in tolerance between lying behavior of a republican ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.79$) and a democratic politician ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.90$), $F(1, 381) = 0.21$, $p = .645$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.001$. Also independents did not differentiate in their moral approval of deceptive behaviors displayed by a democrat ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 1.44$) and a republican politician ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.50$), $F(1, 381) = 0.07$, $p = .788$, $\eta_p^2 < 0.001$.

Next, we examined attitudes towards paltering behavior. There was a significant main effect of participants' political affiliation, $F(2, 381) = 8.07$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.041$, with republicans being overall more tolerant of paltering. Politicians' political affiliation was not significant, $F(1, 381) = 1.01$, $p = .315$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.003$. A significant interaction between participants' and politicians' political party emerged, $F(2, 381) = 4.91$, $p = .008$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.025$. In particular, whereas republican participants judged the paltering behavior of a republican politician significantly more positive ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.83$) than the paltering behavior of a democratic politician ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.59$), $F(1, 381) = 8.03$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.021$, democratic participants did not significantly differentiate between paltering behavior of a democratic ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.56$) and a republican politician ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.43$), $F(1, 381) = 1.20$, $p = .275$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.003$. Likewise, independents did not judge the paltering behavior of a democrat ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.68$) significantly different from the paltering behavior of a republican ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.46$), $F(1, 381) = 0.60$, $p = .437$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.002$.

5. General discussion

In countries around the world, people are growing increasingly concerned about the deliberate spread of incorrect information. The present contribution aimed to deepen our insight in how people judge politicians, by examining the relationship between ideology and moral approval of spreading misinformation by politicians. Based on literature outlining that individuals high (vs low) in RWA defer to authorities, and that SDO is based on endorsement of a dog-eat-dog worldview, a positive association between right-wing attitudes and levels of moral approval of deceptive behaviors by politicians was predicted.

These hypotheses were supported in two studies. Both studies revealed that individuals high (vs low) in RWA and SDO were relative

Table 4
Standardized estimates and p -values of the total, direct, indirect via RWA, and indirect via SDO effect of political party on attitudes towards lying by commission and paltering in Study 2.

	Total effect		Direct effect		Indirect via RWA		Indirect via SDO	
	β	p	β	p	β	p	β	p
<i>Democrats (vs republicans)</i>								
Lying by commission	-0.17	.023	0.03	.736	-0.09	.010	-0.11	< .001
Paltering	-0.25	< .001	-0.09	.257	-0.10	.019	-0.06	.026
<i>Independents (vs republicans)</i>								
Lying by commission	-0.19	.011	-0.05	.555	-0.08	.013	-0.07	.003
Paltering	-0.21	.004	-0.09	.232	-0.08	.021	-0.04	.040

Unstandardized estimates and confidence intervals are available on OSF.

more tolerant towards politicians who lied by commission, and who paltered. Similarly, RWA and SDO were also positively related to tolerance of lying by omission (only included in Study 1). This ideological asymmetry in moral approval of spreading misinformation was also reflected in associations between political party support and attitudes towards deceptive behaviors. In particular, republicans, compared to democrats, had more positive attitudes towards lying by commission and paltering behavior of politicians. Additionally, republicans, compared to democrats showed also higher levels of moral approval of lying by omission, although this association was only marginally significant. Independents' moral approval of politicians' deceptive behaviors was more similar to that of democrats than that of republicans. Mediation analyses revealed that the associations between political party affiliation and moral approval of spreading misinformation were explained by both RWA and SDO.

Additionally, in Study 2, we examined the role of politicians' party affiliation to investigate potential partisan bias. Results revealed mixed evidence for such partisan bias. Democrats (but not republicans) showed a partisan bias in tolerance of lying by commission behavior, whereas republicans (but not democrats) showed a partisan bias in their tolerance of paltering behavior. Independents' moral approval of politicians' deceptive behaviors was independent of whether the politician was a democrat or a republican. These mixed results regarding an asymmetrical partisan bias among democrats and republicans is of particular interest with regard to the recent, heated debate on whether partisan bias is equivalent among liberals and conservatives (see Ditto et al., 2018 versus Baron & Jost, 2018). Future research may investigate more closely whether the different partisan biases on both sides can be replicated, and why democrats seem to show a partisan bias for lying by commission whereas republicans seem to show a partisan bias for paltering.

To obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the moral (dis)approval of spreading misinformation by politicians, future research might include more recent measures of SDO (e.g. Ho et al., 2015) and RWA (e.g. Duckitt, Bizumic, Krauss, & Heled, 2010), which allow to investigate the role of the different subcomponents of ideological attitudes. In addition, these studies might also measure left-wing authoritarianism (see e.g. Conway, Houck, Gornick, & Repke, 2018), or go beyond ideology and examine the role of moral identity (see Aquino & Reed, 2002).

Another avenue for future research may be to examine republicans' and democrats' tolerance of deceitful behaviors by politicians in various morally charged situations. Although beyond the scope of the present investigation, we recognize that it is not impossible that certain specific topics might affect the observed ideological asymmetry. The topic of our scenarios was deliberately chosen relatively neutral (i.e. expectations of unemployment rate), and arguably of equal importance to republicans and democrats. We believe that such 'ideology-neutral' scenarios are most suitable for the start of a new research line, but future research may want to expand the range of topics.

Finally, it is important to note that, although the present study suggests that right-wing individuals are more tolerant towards the spread of misinformation by politicians, the results do not indicate that right-wing individuals consider the spread of misinformation as a 'morally acceptable' practice. Indeed, despite the observed significant differences among people on the ideological spectrum that are by no means trivial in effect size, both democrats and republicans still rated the moral appropriateness of spreading misinformation rather low.

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