Partisans are migrating into “red” and “blue” communities where their neighbors increasingly share their values (Bishop, 2008; Motyl et al., under review). This moral and political migration leads to communities where people’s values are “morally fit,” or congruent with the majority of their neighbors.

Moral fit confers a sense of belonging, and may make people more comfortable holding more extreme and negative attitudes towards other groups. Furthermore, these segregated ideological enclaves limit exposure to the beliefs and values held by people with differing ideologies. The selective exposure to evidence confirming one’s beliefs can lead to increasingly extreme beliefs, and more negative attitudes towards outgroups. Moral misfits, who feel that they do not belong, may be less willing to express extreme, negative attitudes towards outgroups (perhaps out of fear of alienating potential social interaction partners who may help satisfy their belonging needs).

The current study induces exclusion using CyberBall, a popular social exclusion task, to induce a sense of inclusion or exclusion, independent of moral or political content.

Hypotheses
1. Exclusion will decrease political polarization and reduce Political Manicheism
2. Inclusion will increase political polarization and Political Manicheism
3. This will operate the same for Democrats and Republicans

Method
Participants
129 participants from Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk service
- Non-representative, but more diverse than samples used in much social science research
  • 93 Democrats
  • 36 Republicans

Procedure
Cyberball Social Exclusion Task

Results

Figure 1. Manipulation check. Participants excluded in Cyberball reported reduced sense of belonging.

Figure 2. Democrats polarized following exclusion; Republicans polarized after inclusion.

Figure 3. Democrats became more Manichean after exclusion; Republicans became more Manichean after inclusion.

Discussion
The findings partially supported the hypotheses. The main divergence from the hypotheses was that exclusion had distinct effects for Democrats and Republicans. Specifically, Democrats responded to exclusion by exhibiting greater polarization in their thermometer ratings of political parties and greater Political Manicheism. In contrast, Republicans responded to exclusion by exhibiting reduced polarization in their thermometer ratings of political parties and reduced Political Manicheism.

This unexpected divergence may suggest some underlying fundamental difference in Democrats and Republicans, particularly in how they respond to threats to their basic psychological needs (e.g., belonging). Future research should test the reproducibility and robustness of this finding.

If these findings are accurate, they suggest that Democrats who live in communities with disproportionately many Republicans would be expected to harbor the most negative attitudes towards Republicans and show the strongest bias in favor of the Democratic party. In contrast, Republicans who live in communities with disproportionately many Democrats would be expected to harbor the least negative attitudes toward Democrats and show a weaker bias in favor of their party.

References

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