

# Heroes & Villains: social projection of political identities

Stuart J. Turnbull-Dugarte & Markus Wagner

# VOX: last defender of the "woke" invasion?









# Theory (I) - Balance theory

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  - ② individuals feel out of balance (experience cognitive dissonance) if they discover imbalance between these factors

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# Theory (II) - Projection as means of maintaining balance

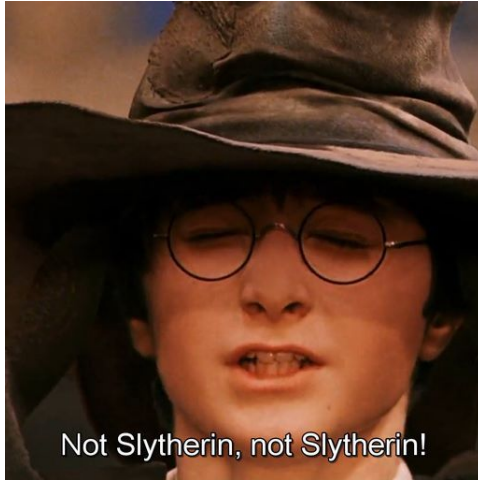
- Projection → *the inferential act of ascribing one's own specific attributes to resolve something previously unknown about the target group* ([Ames 2004](#))
  - ① projection of the self is both cognitively-based and motivational ([Machunsky et al 2014](#))
  - ② individuals engage in activity that promotes a positive image of their in-group identities ([Tajfel 1974](#), [Tajfel & Turner 1975](#))
  - ③ projection (assimilation) and counter-projection (differentiation) is moderated by subjects' valance signals



## Theory (II) - Social *dis*identification

- Balance and social identity theory can trigger both active projection **and** *counter*-projection →
  - "defining who we are by who we **are not** as opposed to who we **are**" (Elsbach & Bhattacharya 2001) ▶ (example)

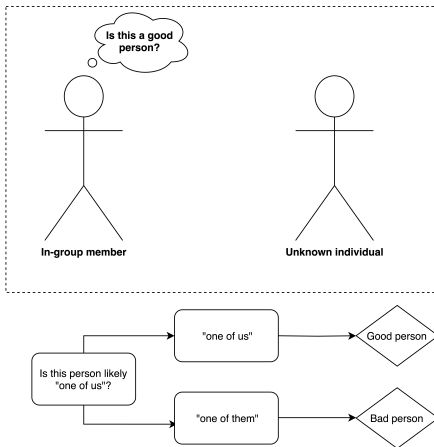
# Social disidentification in the field



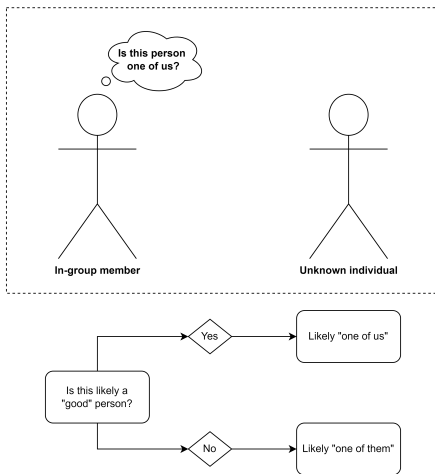
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  - "defining who we are by who we **are not** as opposed to who we **are**" (Elsbach & Bhattacharya 2001) ▶ (example)
    - ① in order to curate positive self-perceptions, individuals engage in active efforts of *disidentification* (Turnbull-Dugarte & López Ortega 2024)
    - ② if we are to protect the integrity of our identities, then our projection of who qualifies as "one of us" or "one of them" is also likely determined by valence signals

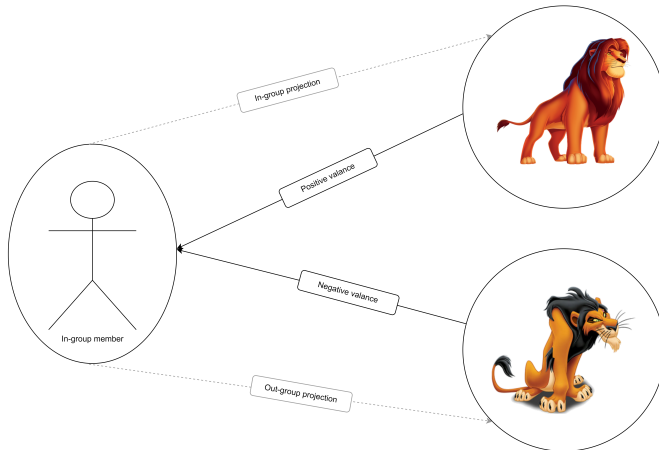
# Conventional motivated-reasoning model



# Our projection model



# Theoretical expectation



## (Pre-registered) hypotheses

- 1 Individuals will perceive positively valanced (*virtuous*) individuals to be members of their partisan in-group & negatively valanced (*deviant*) individuals to be members of the partisan out-group

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# (Pre-registered) hypotheses

- ① Individuals will perceive positively valenced (*virtuous*) individuals to be members of their partisan in-group & negatively valenced (*deviant*) individuals to be members of the partisan out-group
- ② Individuals will perceive virtuous (deviant) individuals to be ideologically closer (distant) relative to their own ideological position
- ③ Projection and counter-projection effects will be higher among those with stronger in-group partisan attachments

# Conjoint design

- We fielded an original *pre-registered* ▶ (visual) conjoint experiment in the USA & UK
- **Outcomes**
  - ① Subject shares partisan identity of respondent (forced choice)
  - ② Subject ideologically approximate to respondent

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  - ② Subject ideologically approximate to respondent
- **Treatment:** Exposure to individual fictional characters from successful film/TV franchises

Character A



Character B



Which character do you think is a more likely to be a **Democratic** voter?

☐ Character A

☐ Character B

(a) Example A

Character A



Character B



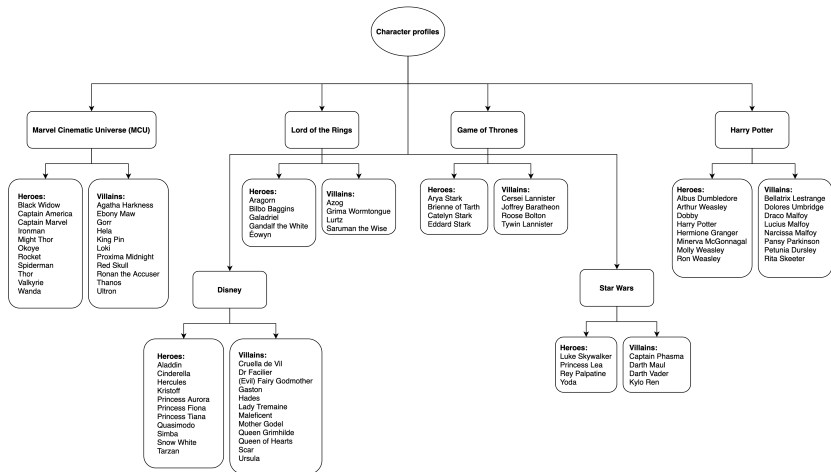
Which character do you think is a more likely to be a **Republican** voter?

☐ Character A

☐ Character B

(b) Example B

# Experimental units



## Character rationale & character attributes

- Fictional characters are familiar but often **not** *politically* known
- Operate in fictional universe beyond conventional partisan primes

# Character rationale & character attributes

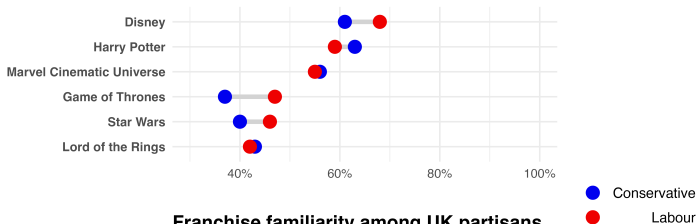
- Fictional characters are familiar but often **not** *politically* known
- Operate in fictional universe beyond conventional partisan primes
- Character vary on large slate of attributes including:
  - ① Villain vs Hero (Negative vs positive valance)
  - ② Gender
  - ③ Class
  - ④ Franchise
  - ⑤ British accent (type casting)
  - ⑥ Year (cohort association)
  - ⑦ Popularity of movie/series character first appeared in
  - ⑧ Level of public engagement with movie/series

## We use character-specific fixed effects

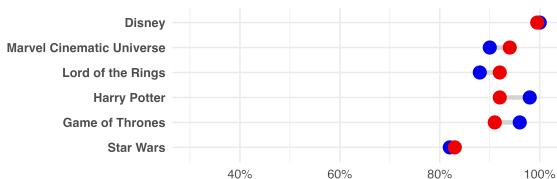
► Measure validity

# Media

## Franchise popularity among UK partisans



## Franchise familiarity among UK partisans



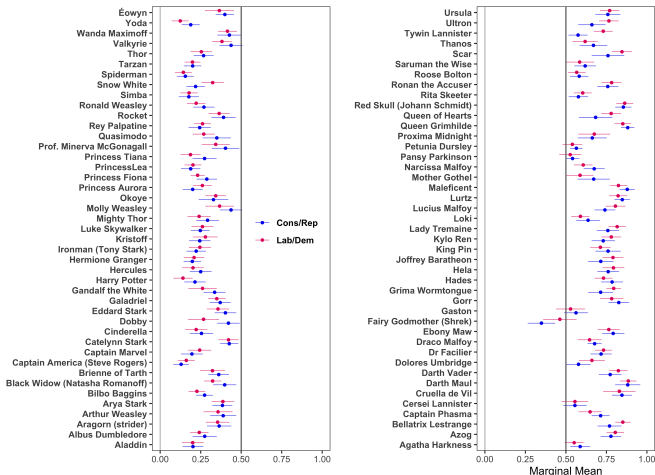
Source: YouGov tracker (January 2023)



# Measure Validity (I)

◀ back

## Perception of characters as heroes (0) and villains (1)



## Measure validity (II)



# So are we the baddies?

"We" are the goodies, "**they**" are the baddies (N=22,400)

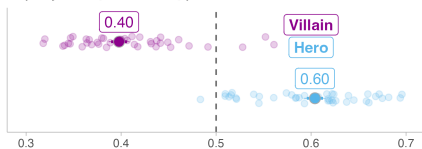
"We" are the goodies, "**they**" are the baddies (N=22,400)

# Conjoint results (I) - Partisanship

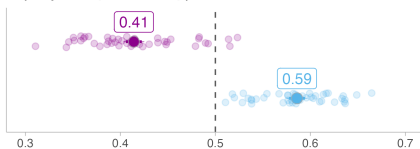
## Study 1: Modelling in-group projection & out-group counter-projection

Plot reports marginal means

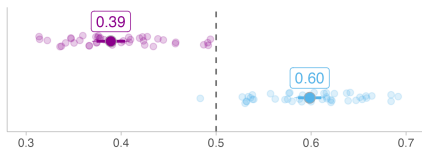
Pr(Projected partisanship) - USA



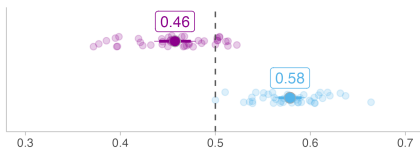
Pr(Projected partisanship) - UK



Pr(Projected ideology) - USA



Pr(Projected ideology) - UK

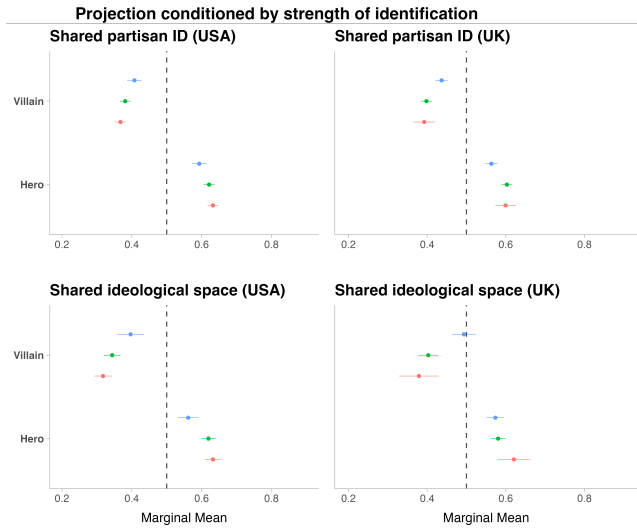


Confidence intervals at 95% & 99%  
Overlaid observations indicate mean in-group projection of individual characters



With greater held identities must there also come greater identity projection?

# Conjoint results (III)

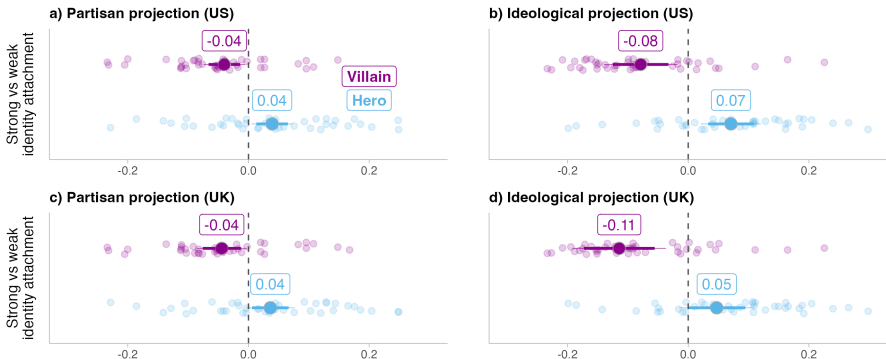




# Conjoint results (III)

## Study 1: Effects larger among strong identifiers

Plot reports pairwise difference in the marginal means



Overlaid observations indicate mean difference for individual character target

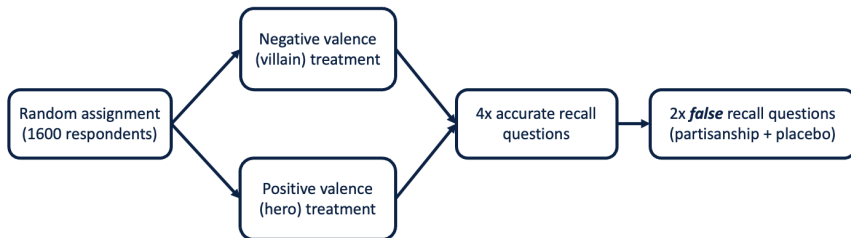
## Discussion: the story so far

- ① Strong support for projection thesis
- ② Significant moderation in line with SIT

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- ① Strong support for projection thesis
- ② Significant moderation in line with SIT
- ③ 😡 **Reviewer 2:** *"what then is learned from how respondents (are forced to) assign partisanship to fictional characters?"*

# Design (I)



# Design (II)

## NEGATIVE VALENCE CONDITION

{page1}

A local resident, [NAME][SURNAME], has been in the news this week after members of the local community discovered that [SURNAME] had been stealing from a charitable fund operating out of a local GP's office.

[NAME][SURNAME], a [AGE]-year-old former [JOB] who had long served as a political councillor in the local council, had been stealing envelopes of cash from the charity for more than twelve months before the crime was discovered.

{page2}

It is believed that [SURNAME] may have stolen more than [AMOUNT] in charitable donations which [SURNAME] spent on buying a luxury [ITEM]. The stolen money was supposed to provide financial aid for the elderly and less fortunate to help pay for prescriptions and other medical items.

{page3}

Shocked neighbours struggled to reconcile the news. [NEIGHBOUR], a 73-year-old widow who relies on the charity, described [SURNAME] as a "disgrace", adding: "It just goes to show you that there are always bad people out there, looking to take care of themselves even if that means taking from those who really need it!"

# Design (III)

## POSITIVE VALENCE CONDITION

{page1}

A local resident, [NAME][SURNAME], has been in the news this week after members of the local community discovered that [SURNAME] had been quietly making donations to a charitable fund operating out of a local GP's office.

[NAME][SURNAME], a [AGE]-year-old former [JOB] who had long served as a political councillor in the local council, had been donating unmarked envelopes of cash to the charity for more than twelve months before the good deed was discovered.

{page2}

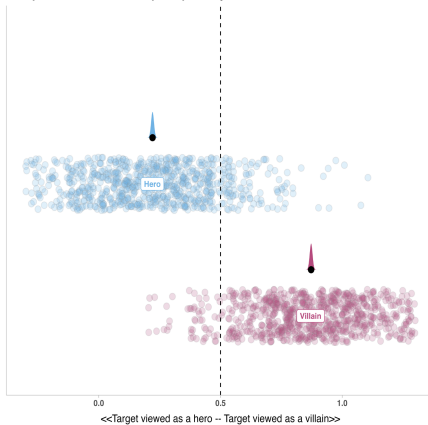
It is believed that [SURNAME] may have made more than [AMOUNT] in charitable donations which they paid for after selling off some of their belongings, including a car. The donated money will provide financial aid for the elderly and less fortunate to help pay for prescriptions and other medical items.

{page3}

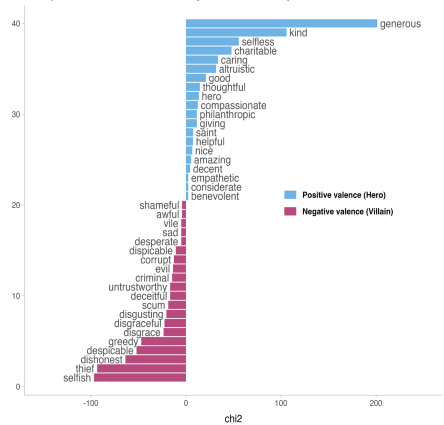
Proud neighbours were delighted by the news.  
[NEIGHBOUR], a 73-year-old widow who relies on the charity, described [SURNAME] as a "saint", adding: "It just goes to show you that there are always good people out there, looking to take care of others who really need it even if that means putting themselves out of pocket!

# Validation

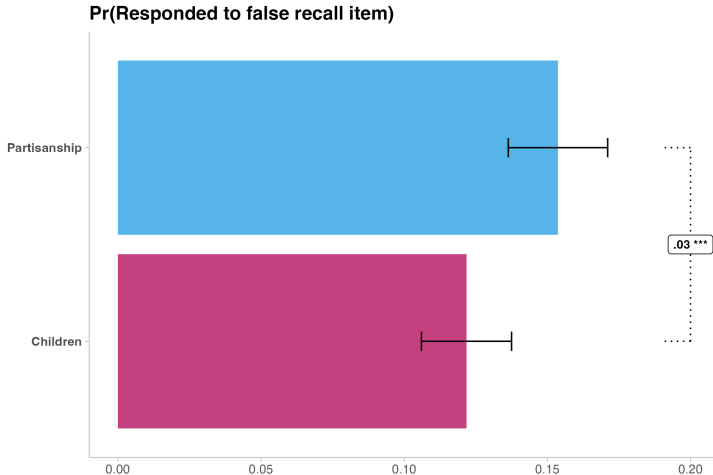
Manipulation test: valence perception by treatment condition



Manipulation check: Relative keyness of terms by treatment condition



# Vignette results: Placebo I

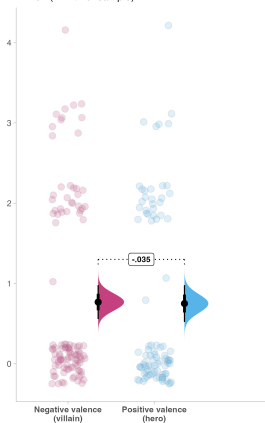




# Vignette results: Placebo II

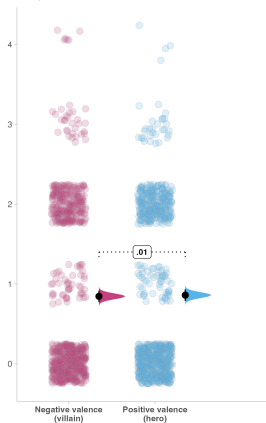
## (Organic) projection effects

N: 202 (12.2% of sample)

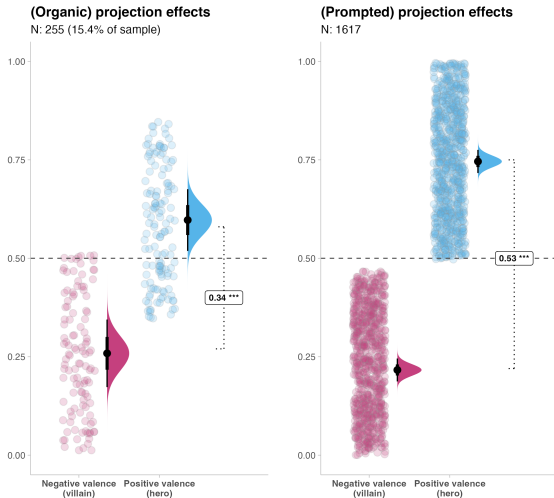


## (Prompted) projection effects

N: 1617



# Vignette results (I)

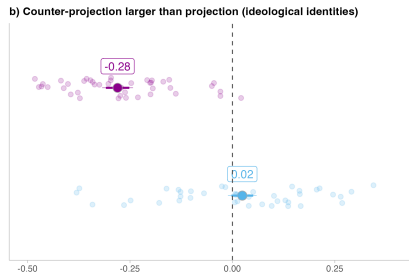
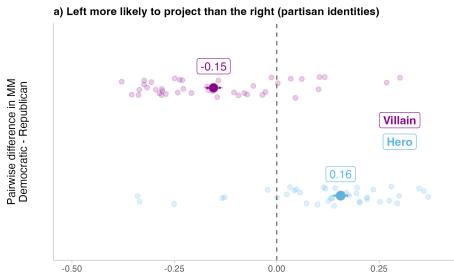


## Exploratory analyses – Partisan asymmetries

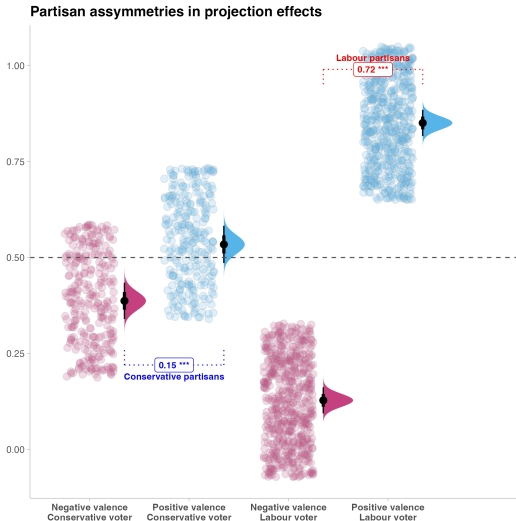
## Exploratory analyses – Partisan asymmetries but with caution ([Kam & Trussler, 2017](#))

# Partisan asymmetries - Study 1

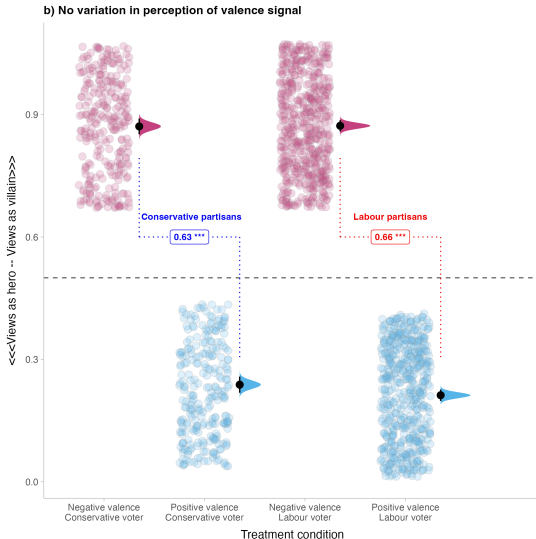
## Study 1: Party & affect-based exploratory analyses



# Partisan asymmetries - Study 2



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# Explaining partisan divergence

## Is partisan asymmetry surprising?

- Individuals on the "left" hold stronger negative affect towards the "right" than vice-versa ([Hebling & Sebastian 2020](#); [Areal 2022](#))
- Same also true of policy-based identities
  - ① Remainers vs Leavers ([Hobolt et al 2021](#))
  - ② Pro-Vaxxers vs Anti-vaxxers ([Wagner & Eberl 2022](#))
- Is variation result of Dems/Labour being more out-group hostile than Rep/Cons?



# Evidence from BESIP

**TABLE A25. Modelling out-group social rejection via BES data**

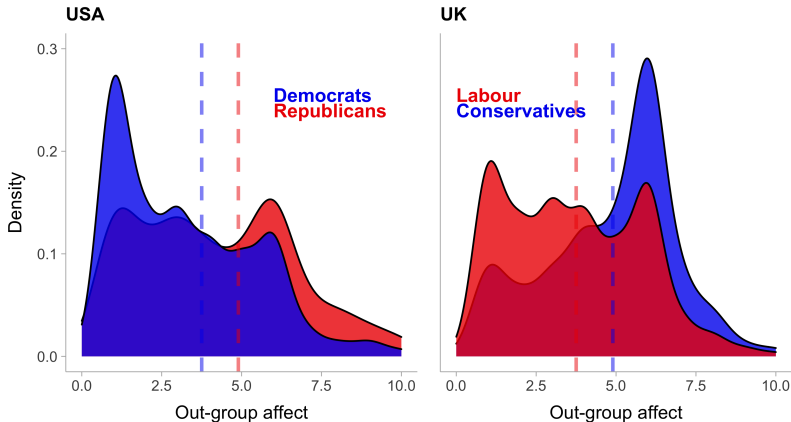
	Pr(Unhappy if child married out-group)
Partisanship (ref: Conservative)	
Labour	0.130*** (0.019)
Constant	0.373*** (0.012)
N	4435
R2 Adj.	0.017
Log.Lik.	-3557.868

+ p < 0.1, \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001

# (Negative) partisan affect

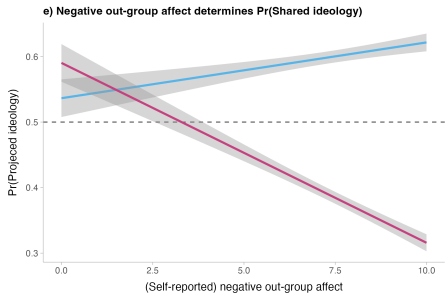
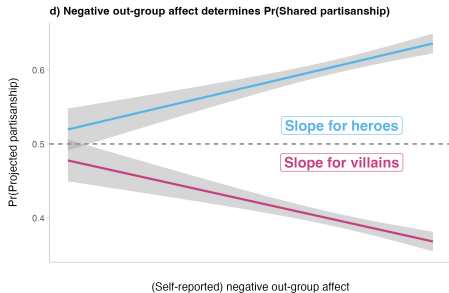
## Partisan out-group affect (self-reported)

Unfavourable (0) - Favourable (10)



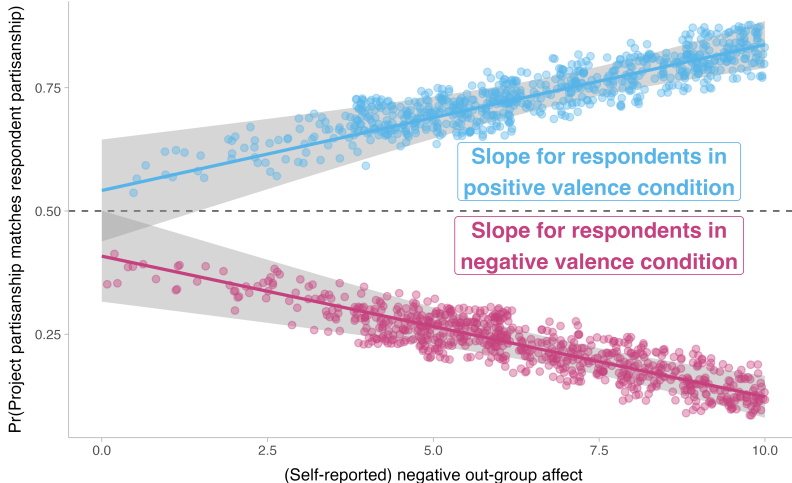
Using the 0-10 scale below, we'd like you to rate how you feel about the following groups and people.  
On this scale 0 means strongly unfavourable, 5 means you have no feelings either way, and 10 means strongly favourable

# Out-group affect - Study 1



# Out-group affect - Study 2

c) Negative out-group affect determines magnitude of effect asymmetry



# Conclusions

- Citizens assign individuals group-membership based on valence signals
  - present in both irrational and rational scenarios
  - happens "organically"
- Counter projection > projection  
(rejection of villains > acceptance of heroes)
- Projection more prevalent among the left

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(rejection of villains > acceptance of heroes)
- Projection more prevalent among the left
- Implications:
  - ① Citizens likely over-estimate group-based homogeneity (false consensus effects)
  - ② Bad news for affective polarisation (completes motivated reasoning loop)

# Where to next?

- 1 Does *correcting* projection result in reduced affective polarisation? (vignette study with Markus Wagner)
- 2 Projection in a fast-paced social world: evidence from the dating market (visual conjoint study with Alberto López Ortega)

Thank you 😊



READ THE PAPER!

BlueSky ☁



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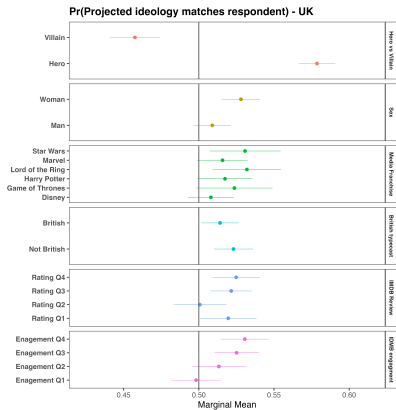
# Categorical coding

**Pr(Projected partisanship matches respondent partisanship)**

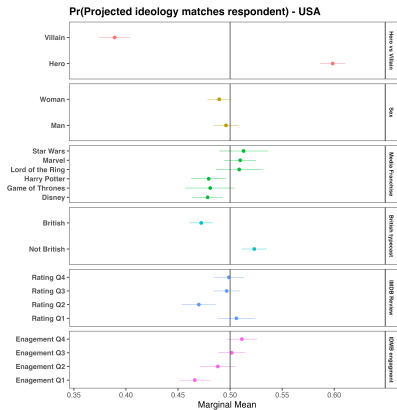


**Pr(Projected partisanship matches respondent partisanship)**





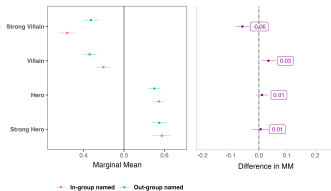
(c) Britain



(d) USA

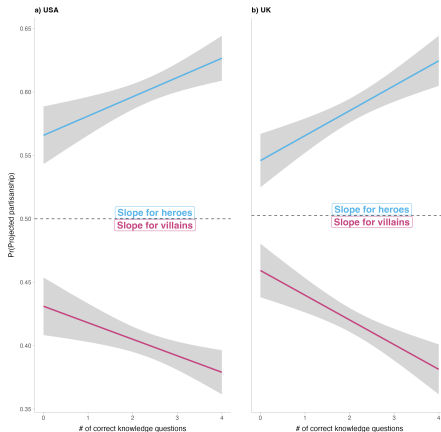
# Party Q presented - Study 1

Pr(Projected partisanship matches respondent partisanship)  
Conditioned by named party in question (UK)



# Character knowledge - Study 1

Study 1: Moderating effect of character knowledge



# Accurate recall - Study 2

