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Can Good Groups Create Immoral Individuals?

Examining Vicarious Moral Licensing in Political Ingroups

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**Abstract**

Research suggests that people often engage in a process called “moral licensing,” through which they point to past good deeds as a way to license their present immoral actions. Additional research demonstrates that through a process of vicarious moral licensing, people can reference their ingroup members’ morality to license their own morally dubious behavior. However, these proposed moral balancing acts seem to strikingly contradict decades of research arguing that people strive to act consistently with past behavior. The present research studies the phenomenon of ingroup licensing specifically as it relates to political ingroup identity, and examines the conditions under which people license their immoral actions as opposed to behaving consistently with their past good deeds. We hypothesized that learning about their political party’s moral actions would lead people to behave less morally themselves, that this effect would be heightened among people with stronger political party identification, and that it would be weakened among people with a strong moral identity concerning the behavior in question. Together, these three studies did not establish strong support for any of the three hypotheses. The implications of these findings are discussed, and directions for future research are proposed.

*Keywords:* moral licensing, vicarious licensing, ingroup, political affiliation, consistency

## Can Good Groups Create Immoral Individuals? Examining Vicarious Moral Licensing in Political Ingroups

### **Introduction**

As social beings, we value our own and others' morality. One might assume that people would do their best to uphold their moral ideals. Indeed, decades of research argues that people strive to act consistently with past moral behavior. However, other research suggests that people attempt to balance their moral and immoral actions by doing good deeds to counter immoral ones, and licensing immoral behavior after demonstrating moral virtues (Meijers, Noordewier, Verlegh, Zebregs, & Smit, 2019). This proposed moral balancing act seems to strikingly contradict research on moral consistency. To examine under which conditions people exhibit moral licensing as opposed to consistency, we will first review the literature on both effects.

### **Consistency effects and moral identity**

In 1957, Festinger proposed that people strive to maintain internal psychological consistency regarding their thoughts and behaviors to reduce cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that when individuals hold two or more competing cognitions, they will experience psychological discomfort until they are able to resolve this dissonance by altering their cognitions (Festinger, 1957). Since then, hundreds of other studies demonstrate that people strive toward behavioral consistency. As a follow up to his original article on cognitive dissonance, Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) found that after performing a boring task, participants who received a smaller amount of money, as opposed to a larger sum, changed their attitudes to report more favorably on the task. The researchers posit that participants modified their attitudes to ease the dissonance felt after performing an unpleasant and lengthy task. These

findings strongly suggest that people feel motivated to demonstrate actions and attitudes consistent with their prior behavior.

Other research on consistency suggests that people are motivated to behave consistently with their prior good deeds. Exploring the mechanisms behind moral consistency cognition, Blasi (1980) argued that by considering one's past moral deeds, people highlight their moral self-concept and are thus motivated to act in line with their prior moral behavior. As such, prior good deeds and a moral sense of self are thought to constrain present behavior.

Many studies have explored the impact of cognitive dissonance on behavioral consistency. Research on the effects of dissonance suggests that people are more likely to agree to comply with a larger request after having already agreed to a smaller one as a means to avoid cognitive dissonance (Freedman & Fraser, 1966). This phenomenon of complying with increasingly large requests is called the foot-in-the door effect, and has been reliably demonstrated by many researchers (e.g., Burger, 1999; Dillard, 1990). Taylor and Booth-Butterfield (1993) found that participants who had already signed a petition against drunk driving were more likely to comply with a request to call a taxi when inebriated than participants who had not signed the petition. Dolin and Booth (1995) discovered that women were more likely to schedule a gynecological exam after first accepting a card with information on breast exams. The researchers interpreted these results as evidence of the foot-in-the-door phenomenon. Research even shows that the foot-in-the-door process does not need to occur in person. A study by Gueguen (2002) found that the technique even works for requests sent via email. Evidence from the foot-in-the-door phenomenon, as well as general research on consistency effects, suggest that people strive to act in accordance with their past behavior.

Additional research on consistency demonstrates that when moral identity is salient, people are likely to behave consistently with their moral identity and prior good deeds. Indeed, there is significant evidence that moral identity directly predicts moral behavior. Aquino and Reed (2002) discovered that participants' moral identities predicted volunteerism and charitable donations. Similarly, people with a salient moral identity demonstrate greater moral regard and stronger prosocial intentions than people without an accessible moral self-concept (Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009). Additional research suggests that stronger moral identity can predict prosocial judgements and behaviors (Sage, Kavussanu, & Duda, 2006). Reed and Aquino (2003) found that participants whose identities highly emphasized morality demonstrated greater prosocial behavior toward outgroup members. In addition, research suggests that people behave particularly prosocially when their moral self-concept is salient. Kraut (1973) found that after donating to charity, people who were labeled charitable donated more than people who did not receive a label. These five articles demonstrate that participants behave consistently with their moral self-concepts. Further, when moral identity is salient or prominent, people display strengthened prosocial and moral behavior.

Other research demonstrates that people can exhibit moral consistency effects even without their moral identity salient. Tanford and Montgomery (2014) found that after leading participants to select a non-environmentally friendly resort, cognitive dissonance made proenvironmental participants rate the green resort less favorably than their less environmentally conscious peers. In other words, for pro-environmental participants, reducing conflicting cognitions about the green resort led participants to rate it less favorably. This finding suggests that even without being primed with moral identity, participants behave consistently with their moral self-concept.

**Moral licensing**

Based on the aforementioned robust body of findings, one might assume that people always behave consistently with their prior moral behavior. However, another body of research suggests the opposite effect: people can, and often do, behave inconsistently with their previous behavior through a process called “moral licensing.” Many studies have established a moral licensing effect in which people use past moral behavior to earn moral “credentials” and thus justify current immoral or selfish actions without concern that they will feel or appear immoral (Merritt, 2010). The process occurs such that people earn moral credentials by demonstrating their morality, and these credentials in turn allow people to license their morally dubious behavior.

Many studies on moral licensing and balancing suggest that people often behave more-morally following an immoral act as a way to balance the scale. When asked to write a self-relevant story regarding their negative traits, participants subsequently donated more money as a means to regain moral self-concept (Sachdeva, Iliev, & Medin, 2009). In addition, Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton (1994) found that participants who feel guilt behave more prosocially as an attempt to morally cleanse. Similar, in three studies, Jordan, Mullen, and Murnighan (2011) demonstrated that participants who recalled their prior immoral behavior behaved more morally, reported stronger prosocial intentions, and cheated less than participants who reflected on their prior moral actions. The researchers argue that this compensatory behavior is a means for participants to adjust their moral self-concept. These studies provide evidence that the process of moral licensing can occur in the reverse, which makes moral licensing a more compelling theory of moral cognition because it can explain behavior in multiple unique contexts. Although it is possible to interpret this phenomenon as a form of consistency in which people behave morally

to reestablish their moral identity, the opposite pattern (i.e., using past moral behavior to justify immoral actions) cannot be understood as a form of consistency.

Indeed, many studies demonstrate this surprising pattern of results: people not only behave morally to counter past immoral deeds, but also often point to past moral behavior as a way to license their present immoral actions. Much of the literature on moral licensing examines the phenomenon through the expression of biased attitudes. In their seminal paper on moral licensing, Monin and Miller (2001) found that when participants' past behavior has established their lack of prejudice, they are more willing to display explicitly biased attitudes. Similarly, when given the opportunity to voice support for Obama, White participants were more likely to display heightened racial bias against Black people (Effron, Cameron, & Monin, 2009). Further research demonstrates that having a friend who is a member of a minority group can credential White people to display racial bias and tolerance toward prejudiced beliefs (Bradley-Geist, King, Skorinko, Hebl, & McKenna, 2010). Furthermore, Krumm and Corning (2008) found that voicing support for gay rights licenses heterosexual people to express prejudiced attitudes.

Evidence of moral licensing extends beyond displays of overt prejudice, also emerging in research on how pro-environmental behaviors can credential people to make immoral choices in domains both related and unrelated to the environment. A study on an energy conservation campaign found that residents of an apartment complex who conserved water subsequently increased their electricity consumption (Tiefenbeck, Staake, Roth, & Sachs, 2013). The researchers posit that these people used moral licensing to justify their anti-environmental behaviors by pointing to evidence of previous pro-climate behaviors (Tiefenbeck et al., 2013). Another study of pro-environmental behavior found that purchasing green forms of electricity result in higher electrical use for many households (Jacobsen, Kotchen, & Vandenbergh, 2012).



Relatedly, Mazar and Zhong (2010) argue that people who recently purchased green products may be more likely to cheat and steal. This article suggests that good deeds can license morally dubious behavior in unrelated domains. Mazar and Zhong's (2010) findings are surprising because most research investigates the process of earning credentials and then licensing a related immoral behavior, but this study demonstrates that moral credentials can transcend domain to license unrelated immoral behavior.

In addition, some licensing research directly addresses the impact of moral identity on licensing effects. A study by Sachdeva, Ilic, and Medin (2009) showed that writing a self-relevant story containing words referring to positive moral traits led to an increase in moral self-concept and, as a result, a decrease in altruistic and prosocial behavior due to an affirmation of moral identity. Jordan, Mullen, and Murnighan (2011) found that participants who wrote about a time they helped someone subsequently expressed decreased motivation to behave prosocially in the future, as compared to participants who wrote about a nonmoral accomplishment. These findings provide a direct contrast to the previously cited research on how moral identity can often lead to consistency effects. These studies counterintuitively demonstrate that making participants' moral identity salient can lead to moral licensing in the same domain.

Further research demonstrates moral licensing effects in an applied context. A marketing article by Huber, Goldsmith, and Mogilner (2008) found evidence of moral licensing both immediately following an action as well as long after the behavior was performed. Management research extends the theory of moral licensing to find that employees (Klotz & Bolino, 2013) and leaders (Ormiston & Wong 2013) alike display moral licensing effects in a work setting. These findings demonstrate that moral licensing can occur at an organizational level as well as at a

personal level, and lend support for the generalizability of the phenomenon beyond the laboratory setting.

The phenomenon of moral licensing has strong reliability and generalizability. In addition to the vast body of research cited above, some meta-analyses have established the strength of this phenomenon. Ebersole and colleagues (2015) conducted a moral licensing experiment across many labs, and collected data from a total of 3134 participants. The researchers demonstrated the predicted licensing effect, with a 95% confidence interval for  $d$  ranging from 0.08 to 0.21. Other research demonstrates moral licensing effects outside the laboratory in the context of everyday social interactions, such that people who had behaved morally earlier in the day were more likely to subsequently act immorally (Hofmann, Wisneski, Brandt, & Skitka, 2014). Taken together, these findings provide additional evidence and validity to the phenomenon of moral licensing.

### **Hypothetical licensing**

The aforementioned research on moral licensing all involved engaging in, or reflecting on, past good deeds. However, additional research suggests that people can exhibit licensing effects through considering hypothetical or future moral behavior. Thus, simply anticipating doing a good deed can allow people to license their immoral behavior while maintaining their sense of their own morality. In this vein, some psychological research has demonstrated a strong effect of hypothetical licensing.<sup>1</sup> Hypothetical moral licensing describes how the simple act of planning to behave morally in the future can lead to licensing in the present (Cascio & Plant, 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that some articles use the term “prospective licensing” rather than “hypothetical licensing.” However, for the sake of simplicity, this paper will use the term “hypothetical licensing.”

Research by Cascio and Plant (2015) found that participants who planned to behave morally by attending a charity event felt morally licensed to display heightened racial bias. In addition, Effron, Miller, and Monin (2012) found that just by pointing to an immoral alternative to prior behavior people can license their current immoral behavior. Furthermore, when made to feel insecure about their morality, people exaggerate the extent to which immoral alternatives existed in order to obtain evidence of their morality (Effron et al., 2012). Khan and Dhar (2006) examined how committing to behaving morally in the future can lead participants to have positive self-concepts, and as a result can license people to engage in self-indulgent behavior. Lastly, a meta-analysis of 91 studies on moral licensing found that both actual and hypothetical behaviors facilitated moral licensing (Blanken, van de Ven, & Zeelenberg, 2015). These findings suggest that people can point to both hypothetical scenarios as well as their own prior behavior to elicit moral licensing effects. Thus, people can license without even performing a moral behavior.

### **Vicarious moral licensing**

The previously cited literature reveals how completed moral actions, and even hypothetical ones, can lead to moral licensing. Yet the question remains as to whether licensing can likewise occur even when considering someone else's prior moral behavior. Very little research has directly addressed whether people can morally license their own immoral deeds using their ingroup members' good behavior. However, studies on the overlap between the self and others can begin to provide an answer to this question.

Findings reveal that people view their own identity and self-concept as substantially tied up with others' identities and attributes. Research suggests that in close relationships, people view close others as included in their sense of self (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991).

Similarly, research by Goldstein and Cialdini (2007) finds that when people identify with another person, they can infer their own attributes from this other person's behavior and incorporate attributes relevant to the other person's identity into their own self-concept. That is to say, people incorporate close others' behavior into their own identity. Indeed, this effect was so strong that participants modified their behavior as a result of their changed self-perception. Other research suggests that perspective-taking can lead to strong cognitive overlap between one's self-concept and perceptions of others (Davis, Conklin, Smith, & Luce, 1996). These studies suggest that people can view others as part of their own sense of self. This inclusion of others in one's own sense of self may extend to moral domains. If so, this broadened sense of self suggests that people may use the moral actions of relevant others to license their own immoral behavior.

In addition to these studies on overlap between the self and close others, a few studies have directly addressed ingroup moral licensing. Studying ingroup licensing provides a lens to examine a specific manifestation of self-other overlap because ingroups share a relevant group identity. A study conducted by Kouchaki (2011) on vicarious moral licensing found that people are more willing to express prejudiced attitudes when their group members' past behavior has established non-prejudiced credentials. Banas, Cruwys, de Wit, Johnston, and Haslam (2016) researched vicarious licensing through ingroup members' healthy food selections. The researchers found that after learning that ingroup members engaged in healthy behavior, people who identify strongly with their ingroup feel less motivated to make healthy food choices (Banas et al., 2013). Given that people perceive healthy eating in moral terms (Brown, 2013), this study provides additional evidence of vicarious moral licensing. Most recently, Meijers, Noordewier, Verlegh, Zebregs, and Smit (2019) found evidence that when people think about a close other behaving pro-environmentally, they are more likely to vicariously license their own morally

dubious intentions. Although relatively few studies have examined the topic of ingroup licensing directly, decades of research on overlap between the self and close others along with these three studies provide strong evidence for the existence of ingroup licensing.

### **Political party as ingroup**

Previous research has demonstrated how stronger moral identity impacts licensing and consistency effects. People's moral identities are crucial to their sense of self, and people are often motivated to act consistently with their established identity to avoid violating their self-concept (Shao, Aquiano, & Freeman, 2008). This moral sense of self often motivates behavior. Therefore, to reveal potential ingroup licensing effects, it is likely critical to examine ingroups that are socially meaningful, and perhaps even morally laden.

The three existing studies on vicarious licensing all examined different potential ingroups for licensing effects. Kouchaki (2011) studied ingroup licensing with somewhat-meaningful ingroups (i.e., other students at the participant's university). Banas and colleagues (2016) used the more socially-relevant ingroups of nationality and gender identity. Lastly, Meijers et al. (2019) had participants reflect on their best friend or partners, which primed participants with a particularly close, yet not necessarily socially-relevant, ingroup. Given the sparse literature on ingroup licensing, many potential ingroups remain unexamined.

The present study uses political identity because political affiliation is a central and morally-laden dimension of social identity (Turner-Zwinkels, van Zomeren, & Postmes, 2016). Other research demonstrates that political party affiliation leads to a strong sense of ingroup identity (Balliet, Tybur, Wu, Antonellis, & Van Lange, 2018). In addition, Moral Foundations Theory shows that moral judgements vary widely across the political spectrum (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). These findings suggest that people's political identities are connected to their

general social identities and moral concerns. Because political identities are both socially relevant and highly moralized, ingroup licensing effects are likely to occur. As such, political ingroups offer a compelling way to study ingroup moral licensing.

### **Comparing licensing and consistency**

It would appear that moral licensing research directly contradicts the multitude of articles on consistency. On the one hand, research on consistency reveals that people behave consistently with their moral identity. Yet on the other hand, moral licensing research demonstrates that people engage in a moral balancing act, which is a clear form of inconsistency. Although these two bodies of research appear to be at odds, very few studies to date have attempted to directly compare the two phenomena. Research by Conway and Peetz (2012) found that recalling recent moral acts leads to moral licensing, whereas recalling more distant moral behavior leads to consistency. Another similar study found that focusing on consequences leads to moral licensing, whereas focusing on rules leads to moral consistency (Cornelissen, Bashshur, Rode, & Le Menestrel, 2013). Two studies by Joosten, Van Dijke, Van Hiel, and De Cremer (2014) posit that people morally license in social situations as a form of reputation management, and behave consistently with prior moral deeds as a way to build and maintain a positive moral reputation. Although these three articles begin to provide possible explanations and moderators for moral licensing and consistency, many other moderators remain largely unexplored.

Although few studies have investigated variables to moderate consistency versus licensing, some research suggests that identification with the target moral behavior might predict consistency and licensing effects. For example, when told to imagine making environmentally-conscious purchases, participants with strong proenvironmental identities demonstrate consistency effects, whereas participants with weaker proenvironmental identities exhibit moral

licensing (Meijers, 2014). Similarly, other studies have demonstrated that low-identifiers exhibit licensing behavior, whereas high-identifying participants exhibit consistency effects (e.g., Clot, Grolleau, & Ibanez, 2014). The third study in Effron and colleagues' (2009) article on racial moral licensing found that after endorsing Obama, white participants with high levels of racial prejudice felt increased comfort allocating funds to other white people, whereas participants with low levels of racial prejudice allocated more funds to black people. These studies suggest that the more someone identifies with the behavior in question (i.e., sees it as more integral or important to their moral identity), the more likely they are to behave consistently with their prior behavior, as opposed to exhibiting licensing effects. Although these findings point to identification as a potential moderator of consistency and licensing effects, no other research to date has examined identification specifically with non-prejudiced racial attitudes, in the context of political ingroups, or as a predictor of both self and ingroup licensing effects.

### **The present research**

Previous research has demonstrated licensing effects within different domains and tasks, and with both actual and hypothetical behavior, but very little research examines vicarious licensing effects. The question remains as to whether vicarious licensing extends to political ingroup identity. Studies 1, 2, and 3 will address this 'political ingroup licensing hypothesis', which argues that priming participants with a sense of their party's morality will lead to political ingroup licensing effects. Studies 1 and 3 test the 'political identification hypothesis', which states that the strength of participants' political identification will moderate the relationship between credentials and licensing, such that participants with stronger political identities will demonstrate greater moral licensing effects.

The present research also attempts to reconcile opposing consistency and licensing findings. Very little research directly addresses whether certain variables help predict when people opt for patterns of moral licensing as opposed to consistency. Thus, study 3 investigates the conditions under which people morally license their behavior by using ingroup members' good behavior as opposed to behaving consistently with their own prior moral behavior. Study 3 tests the 'behavior identification hypothesis', which holds that the strength of participants' affiliation with the licensing domain will determine whether they demonstrate licensing or consistency effects. We anticipate that participants with stronger moral identities will be more likely to behave consistently with past moral behavior, whereas participants with weaker moral identities will be more likely to exhibit moral licensing.

### Study 1

Study 1 tests whether there is evidence for the 'political ingroup licensing hypothesis'. This study elicits moral credentials through fictional news stories of a political ingroup member's morality, and examines moral licensing effects through a charitable donation task.

#### Method

**Participants.** Participants ( $N=605$ ) were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk. Only participants who self-identified as Democrats or Republicans were allowed to participate. After filtering out participants who did not pass the attention checks, 590 responses remained for analysis. Of these participants, 382 were Democrats and 209 were Republicans. Our sample included 323 men and 267 women. In addition, 421 participants were white, 91 were black or African American, 54 were Asian, 2 were Hispanic or Latinx, and 22 were multiracial. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 78 ( $M=38$ ,  $SD=10.94$ ). For their participation in the study, participants were compensated \$.45, plus an additional \$.25 if they decided to keep the bonus.



**Design.** Study 1 used an experimental design. The predictor variables were measured level of political in-group affiliation and licensing condition. This study had two credentials conditions (i.e., political positive and apolitical positive) and two control conditions (i.e., apolitical control and neutral control). The outcome variable was the degree of moral licensing. Moral licensing was measured through the choice to keep or donate an additional \$0.25.

### Measures

**Political group membership and identification.** Strength of political identification was assessed with the Political Group Identification Measure (Greenaway, Haslam, Cruwys, Branscombe, Ysseldyk & Heldreth, 2015). The scale contained two items consisting of statements regarding political affiliation and political identity. Before completing the scale, participants first indicated their political group membership by responding to the question “*Do you identify as a Republican or Democrat?*” Responses were scored (*1=Republican; 2=Democrat; and 3=neither*). Participants who did not identify with either political group were sent to the end of the survey and were not compensated.

Depending on their stated political group, participants were presented answer-specific Political Group Identification Measure scales that assessed their level of identification with their party. Political group identification was measured using two items: “I identify with Democrats/Republicans,” and “Being a Democrat/Republican is an important part of how I see myself” (Greenaway et al., 2015). Participants rated their agreement using a seven-point Likert scale (*1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree*). Greenaway et al. (2015) demonstrated that the measure had strong reliability ( $r=.74, p<.001$ ).

**Demographic information.** At the end of the survey before reading the debriefing form, participants were asked of their age, gender identity, and racial identity. For gender identity and

racial identity, participants were able to select as many answers as they wanted. The four options for gender identity were “Male,” “Female,” “Nonbinary,” and “I identify as another gender (please describe).” The last option allowed a text entry for participants to fill in their gender identity. The options for racial identity were “White,” “Black or African American,” “American Indian or Alaskan Native,” “Asian,” “Hispanic/Latinx,” “Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander,” “Not listed (please describe),” or “Prefer not to say.” The penultimate option allowed a text entry for participants to enter their racial identity. Participants were asked to type in their age.

### **Procedure**

As part of an online survey created through [www.qualtrics.com](http://www.qualtrics.com) (Qualtrics, LLC, Utah, USA), participants were asked to answer questions regarding politics and morality. The survey was anonymous, which participants accessed from a specific link on Amazon Mechanical Turk. The survey began by ensuring participants of anonymity, and participants were not asked any personal questions other than age, gender, and race so that they felt comfortable answering honestly. Participants were told that the study is interested in decisions and political preferences. Conditions were randomized between participants, but measures were always presented in the same order.

After giving consent, participants were asked whether they identify as a Democrat, Republican, or neither. Participants who did not identify with either party did not complete the remainder of the questionnaire. Based on indicated political group membership, participants completed the two-item political group identification measure.

Next, participants were presented with a credentialing prime. Priming vignettes can be found in Appendix A. In the political positive condition, participants read positive party-specific articles on moralized topics important to Democrats and Republicans respectively. Democratic

participants viewed a fictional article about a Democratic congressmen passing a progressive bill (i.e., *pro-climate legislation*). Likewise, Republican participants read a fictional news story about a Republican congressmen passing conservative-backed legislation (i.e., *strengthening immigration laws*). In the apolitical positive condition, Democratic and Republican participants read about a congressman from their indicated party doing a positive apolitical action (i.e., *helping a person change a flat tire*). In the apolitical control condition, participants read about a congressman from the participant's party doing an apolitical action (i.e., *attended the opening night of a restaurant*). In the neutral control condition, participants read about a congressman of an unstated political party doing an apolitical action (i.e., *attended the opening night of a restaurant*). In all conditions, participants were asked to rate the morality of the politician, as well as the morality of his actions, on 7-point Likert scales (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*).

After reading a fake news article, participants completed the licensing measure, which was a charitable donation task based on Sachdeva, Iliev, and Medin's (2009) measure of moral licensing. For this task, an instructions screen informed participants that in an effort to "give back," the lab conducting the study usually asks participants if they would like to make a small donation of \$0.25 to a charity of their choice. They were asked to select either "yes" or "no" to donating the additional quarter. Participants were informed that in addition to donating their quarter, two entries would be selected at random and their donations would be multiplied by 100x so that those participants' total donations would equal \$25 each. We chose to multiply two random entries by 100x to ensure that participants felt as if their contribution had the potential to make a substantial difference. They were also informed that if they selected "no" and their entry was picked, the lab would not select another participant, but would instead donate \$0 on their

behalf. If participants chose to donate, they were given the opportunity to select a charity of their choice from a list of options. This opportunity to donate measured licensing in that choosing to keep, rather than donate, the extra \$.25 can be interpreted as a form of licensing.

After participants completed the donation task, they answered demographic questions regarding their age, race, and gender. Lastly, participants were thanked and brought to a debriefing page with information regarding the true nature of the experiment and the various experimental conditions, along with researchers' emails to contact with any follow up questions or concerns.

## **Results**

We ran a linear regression model examining morality ratings as a function of condition (credentials vs. control) and political party affiliation, and tested their interaction. There was a significant difference in morality ratings by credentials condition, such that participants in the two credentials conditions viewed the senator as more moral than participants in the control conditions,  $t(586)=4.744$ ,  $p<.001$ . Thus, the manipulation for the two experimental conditions successfully increased participants' perceptions of the senator's morality. There was no overall difference in morality ratings among Democrats and Republicans,  $t=1.552$ ,  $p>.10$ . However, there was a significant condition by political party interaction, such that credentialed democrats reported higher ratings of the senator's morality than credentialed republicans,  $t(586)=3.941$ ,  $p<.001$ . As a result, we can conclude that the manipulation provided greater credentials to democrats than republicans,  $t(586)=3.941$ ,  $p<.001$ .

Having confirmed that participants saw the actions in the credentials conditions as more moral than those in the control conditions, we next examined whether this in turn led to greater licensing. To assess this question, we examined the proportion of participants who chose to

donate in each condition. Mean proportions of participants who chose to donate did not differ between the apolitical control condition ( $M=.27$ ,  $SD=.445$ ) and the neutral control condition ( $M=.27$ ,  $SD=.415$ ),  $t(296)=1.0016$ ,  $p=.32$ . Thus, responses from participants in the two control conditions were combined for additional analyses.

Next, we ran two linear regression models comparing each of the credentialing conditions to the combined control conditions. Counter to our predicted pattern of results, participants were not any more likely to donate in the control conditions ( $M=.24$ ,  $SD=.431$ ) as compared to the apolitical positive condition ( $M=.31$ ,  $SD=.463$ ),  $t(442)=.1175$ ,  $p=.12$ , or as compared to the political positive condition ( $M=.23$ ,  $SD=0.420$ ),  $t(442)=.2317$ ,  $p=.82$ . Figure 1 depicts the percentages of participants who chose to keep the additional quarter, collapsed across the 2 control conditions and the 2 credentials conditions.

After comparing mean donations by condition, we tested the two potential moderators: strength of political identity and political affiliation (i.e., Republican or Democrat). First, we ran a regression predicting licensing by condition and political affiliation, and tested the interaction between the two variables. The overall model did predict licensing significantly,  $F(3,586)=2.136$ ,  $p > .05$ , multiple  $R^2=.01$ . The regression predicting licensing by condition and political affiliation did not find a main effect of condition on licensing,  $t(586)=.49$ ,  $p=.62$ , or a main effect of political identification on licensing,  $t(586)=1.36$ ,  $p=.17$ . Furthermore, the effect of condition on licensing did not differ depending on political party affiliation,  $t(586)=.577$ ,  $p=.56$ .

Lastly, we ran a regression predicting licensing by condition and strength of participants' political identification, and tested the interaction between the two variables. Before running the regression we standardized the strength of political identification measure. We did not find a main effect of credentials condition on licensing,  $t(586)=.13$ ,  $p=.90$ , or a main effect of

standardized strength of political affiliation on licensing,  $t(586)=.69$ ,  $p=.49$ . The effect of condition on licensing did not differ as a result of the strength of participants' political identification,  $t(586)=.61$ ,  $p=.54$ .

## **Discussion**

Inconsistent with previous research, study 1 failed to obtain evidence for ingroup licensing effects. Although participants in the two credentials conditions viewed the senator as more moral than participants in the two control conditions, there was no difference in mean proportions of participants who chose to donate in the credentialing conditions compared to the control conditions. We also did not find evidence that either political party or strength of political identification moderated these results.

## **Study 2**

Given that study 1 failed to find the predicted licensing effects, study 2 used a different manipulation of credentials. For the ingroup credentialing condition, we modified the ingroup news articles to more broadly discuss the morality of the political party as a whole, rather than the morality of a specific senator. Likewise, the ingroup control discusses the entire party rather than a certain politician. We made this change because we anticipated that broadening the focus of the prime would give participants greater moral credentials due to an increased sense of ingroup identity.

In addition to a modified ingroup credentialing vignette, study 2 also included self credentialing conditions. By including these conditions, we can directly replicate the methodology from previous self licensing research, and test whether we can find evidence for these frequently demonstrated licensing effects. We used Monin and Miller's (2001) widely cited

hiring task, in which participants are led to select a highly-qualified Black applicant for a job instead of less-qualified white applicants, and thus earn moral credentials.

Lastly, in study 2 we changed the measure of moral licensing to Monin and Miller's (2001) racist police force hiring task. We changed the measure as an attempt to eliminate the ceiling effects seen in study 1. In addition, by including both Monin and Miller's (2001) credentialing manipulation and licensing measure, we will be able to interpret our pattern of results by comparing them to the original findings on moral licensing.

## **Method**

**Participants.** Participants ( $N=568$ ) were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk. Only participants who self-identified as Democrats or Republicans were allowed to participate. After filtering out participants who did not pass the attention checks, 490 responses remained for analysis. Of these participants, 302 were Democrats and 188 were Republicans. Participants included 269 men and 221 women. In addition, 380 participants were white, 55 were black or African American, 3 were American Indian or Alaska Native, 29 were Asian, 6 were Hispanic or Latinx, and 17 were multiracial. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 82 ( $M=37$ ,  $SD=11.78$ ). For their participation in the study, participants were compensated \$.45.

**Design.** Study 2 implements a 2 (credentials: credentialing vs. control) x 2 (target: ingroup vs. self) between-groups design. Thus, the four possible conditions were as follows: ingroup credentialing, ingroup control, self credentialing, and self control. The predictor variables were credentials condition and target. Study 2 also measured participants' level of political in-group affiliation. Credentials condition had two levels: credentialing and control. Target also had two levels: participants were either credentialed through political ingroup members' actions ("ingroup") or through their own actions ("self"). The outcome variable was

the degree of moral licensing. Moral licensing was measured through participants' indication that a job is better suited for a White applicant than a Black applicant. Saying the job is not well-suited for a Black applicant was interpreted as evidence of moral licensing.

### **Measures**

**Political group membership and identification.** As in study 1, strength of political identification was assessed with the Political Group Identification Measure (Greenaway et al., 2015).

**Demographic information.** At the end of the survey before reading the debriefing form, participants were asked of their age, gender identity, and racial identity. For gender identity and racial identity, participants were able to select as many answers as they wanted. The four options for gender identity were "Male," "Female," "Nonbinary," and "I identify as another gender (please describe)." The last option allowed a text entry for participants to fill in their gender identity. The options for racial identity were "White," "Black or African American," "American Indian or Alaskan Native," "Asian," "Hispanic/Latinx," "Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander," "Not listed (please describe)," or "Prefer not to say." The penultimate option allowed a text entry for participants to enter their racial identity. Participants were asked to type in their age.

### **Procedure**

As part of an online survey created through [www.qualtrics.com](http://www.qualtrics.com) (Qualtrics, LLC, Utah, USA), participants were asked to answer questions regarding politics and morality. The survey was anonymous, which participants accessed from a specific link on Amazon Mechanical Turk. The survey began by ensuring participants of anonymity, and participants were not asked any personal questions other than age, gender, and race so that they felt comfortable answering honestly. Participants were told that the study is interested in decisions and political preferences.



Conditions were randomized between participants, but measures were always presented in the same order.

After giving consent, participants were asked whether they identify as a Democrat, Republican, or neither. Participants who did not identify with either party did not complete the remainder of the questionnaire. Based on indicated political group membership, participants completed the two-item political group identification measure.

Next, participants were assigned to one of four possible credentialing primes: ingroup credentialing, ingroup control, self credentialing, or self control. In the two self conditions, credentialing occurred through an appeal to participants' own moral behavior, rather than through political ingroup members' moral behavior. Because self licensing has been reliably demonstrated by many studies, the two self credentialing conditions were included to ensure that the measure of moral licensing (i.e., the police force hiring task) indeed works. These conditions illuminated how any observed ingroup-based licensing effect compares to the self-licensing effect.

In the two self conditions, participants viewed the faces and qualifications of 5 applicants for a consulting job and they have to indicate which applicant should be hired. In the self credentialing condition, the most qualified candidate is the sole Black applicant. The expectation is that participants will select the Black candidate, and thus establish their non-prejudiced moral credentials. By making this moral choice, participants should feel credentialed, therefore becoming more likely to exhibit moral licensing in the subsequent licensing task. In the control condition, all five applicants are White and thus participants do not get the opportunity to establish their lack of bias. As a result, participants will not earn moral credentials through the

credentialing task, and therefore will be less likely to exhibit moral licensing in the licensing measure. For the full measure, including the text and images, see Appendix B.

In the two ingroup conditions, participants read fictional news stories about their political party. The text for these two conditions can be found in Appendix C. In the ingroup credentialing condition, credentials were established by presenting participants with a fictional news article lauding Republicans'/Democrats' general success in advancing their party's agenda in recent years. In the ingroup control condition, the news article described the party's success at expanding voter outreach. As a manipulation check for the ingroup credentialing conditions, participants were asked how moral the Republican/Democratic party is, and how well the party fights for its core values. Higher scores on these two questions for participants in the credentials conditions as compared to the control condition would indicate that the credentialing manipulation was effective in eliciting moral credentialing effects.

After completing a quick attention check, participants responded to the licensing measure. In this measure, participants are told about a job opening in a rural police force, and are asked to indicate whether the job is better suited for a White or a Black applicant (1 = *yes, much better for a Black person* to 7 = *yes, much better for a White person*). Higher scores indicate greater moral licensing effects. The text of this measure can be found in Appendix D. Previous studies have shown that saying the job is not well suited for a Black applicant can be interpreted as a moral licensing effect (e.g., Bradley-Geist et al., 2010; Effron et al., 2009; Cascio & Plant, 2015).

Upon completion of the licensing measure, participants answered demographic questions regarding their age, race, and gender. Lastly, they were thanked and brought to a debriefing page

with information regarding the true nature of the experiment and the various experimental conditions, along with researchers' emails to contact with any follow up questions or concerns.

## Results

We first examined morality ratings in the two ingroup conditions to ensure that the credentialing manipulation led participants to perceive their party as more moral. Indeed, an ANOVA revealed that the manipulation successfully led participants in the ingroup licensing condition to view their party as more moral ( $M=6.95$ ,  $SD=1.20$ ) than participants in the control condition ( $M=6.48$ ,  $SD=1.46$ ),  $F(1,289)=9.37$ ,  $p=.002$ .

According to the ingroup licensing prediction, participants in the political condition should be more likely to recommend a White applicant for a job than participants in the control condition. However, there was no effect of condition on licensing in either the ingroup or the self licensing conditions. For participants in the ingroup licensing conditions, responses to the hiring question did not differ between the control condition ( $M=4.40$ ,  $SD=1.30$ ) and the political condition ( $M=4.41$ ,  $SD=1.11$ ),  $t(327)=.115$ ,  $p=.91$ . Likewise, in the self licensing conditions, there were no statistically significant differences between the control condition ( $M=4.49$ ,  $SD=1.01$ ) the self credentials condition ( $M=4.19$ ,  $SD=1.20$ ),  $t(161)=1.76$ ,  $p=.08$ . See figure 2 for a graph of marginal means in the 4 conditions.

We then ran a 2x2 ANOVA examining condition by political party. Although there were no main effects of condition on licensing, we found a significant interaction between self credential condition and political party affiliation (Figure 3), such that among Republicans credentials led to stronger licensing, whereas among Democrats credentials led to decreased licensing,  $F(1,133)=4.28$ ,  $p=.041$ . Within this significant interaction, a pairwise comparison revealed that the effect of condition on licensing among Democrats was significant,  $F(1,$

93)=4.70,  $p=.033$ , whereas the effect of condition on licensing among Republicans did not reach significance,  $F(1,44)=1.05$ ,  $p=.311$ .

## **Discussion**

Although the manipulation successfully led participants in the ingroup licensing condition to view their party as more moral, study 2 failed to find evidence of ingroup licensing effects. Surprisingly, we also failed to replicate frequently-demonstrated self licensing effects. However, we found a significant interaction in the self credentials condition that revealed that after reading about their party's morality, Republicans were more likely to say a job is better suited for a White applicant, whereas Democrats were less likely to indicate this racial hiring preference.

We did not anticipate this crossover interaction; however, upon further consideration this pattern of results fits with existing research on the values of Democrats and Republicans. Research has demonstrated that Democrats tend to favor racial equality (Jacobsmeier, 2015). Furthermore, highly dominant and authoritarian white students endorse color-blind racial attitudes, which in turn predicts modern racism attitudes (Poteat & Spanierman, 2012). The qualities of dominance and authoritarianism are far more common among Republicans than Democrats (Womick, Rothmund, Azevedo, King, & Jost, 2019). This research suggests that when primed with their political affiliation, and thus their political party's values of anti-prejudice, Democrats may be less likely to demonstrate moral licensing because they highly value behaving in non-prejudiced ways.

## **Study 3**

Given that people have many malleable facets to their identity that can vary in salience in different contexts, certain moral identities should strongly influence prosocial behavior when that

particular identity has been primed (Markus & Kunda, 1986). More specifically, when primed with egalitarianism, participants who value non-prejudiced behavior should behave more prosocially. The racial credentials manipulation in the previous studies likely primed participants with strong egalitarian identities to reflect on their non-prejudiced values. As a result, these anti-racist participants may have felt compelled to answer in particularly unbiased ways rather than display the predicted moral licensing pattern. Their salient prior egalitarian behavior may have led them to display additional unbiased attitudes later in the study. These participants could be thought of as exhibiting moral consistency effects.

Thus, study 3 attempts to examine the impact of moral identity by examining identification with anti-prejudiced behavior as a potential moderator between moral licensing and consistency effects. This moderator measures variability in people's values regarding explicit racism. Our third study is akin to Effron and colleagues' (2009) third study, in which the researchers found that white participants with high levels of racial prejudice displayed moral licensing effects, whereas participants with low levels of racial prejudice evidenced behavioral consistency. Similarly, we hypothesized that the strength of participants' affiliation with the licensing domain (i.e., anti-racism) determines whether they demonstrate licensing or consistency effects. We anticipated that participants with stronger anti-racist identities would be more likely to behave consistently with past moral behavior, whereas participants with weaker anti-racist identities would be more likely to exhibit moral licensing.

Finally, in study 3 we changed the licensing task from measuring participants' attitudes toward explicitly racist actions to ambiguously racist actions. Study 3 measured licensing by using Crosby and Monin's (2013) licensing measure, in which participants evaluate ambiguously

prejudiced behaviors. We anticipated that participants would be more likely to display licensing effects if the licensing task did not involve explicit racism.

## **Method**

**Participants.** Participants ( $N=528$ ) were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk. Only participants who self-identified as Democrats or Republicans were allowed to participate. After filtering out participants who did not pass the attention checks, 458 responses remained for analysis. Of these participants, 158 were Republicans and 300 were Democrats. Participants included 243 men, 213 women, and 2 participants who did not identify as either male or female. In addition, 365 participants were white, 26 were black or African American, 1 was American Indian or Alaska Native, 42 were Asian, 1 was Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 1 was Hispanic or Latinx, and 14 were multiracial. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 75 ( $M=41$ ,  $SD=12.25$ ). For their participation in the study, participants were compensated \$.45.

**Design.** Study 3 used an experimental design. The outcome variable for all conditions was degree of moral licensing. Moral licensing was measured through a rating task of ambiguously racist behavior (Crosby & Monin, 2013). A lower average score indicated a greater degree of moral licensing. The independent variables were target and credentials. This study also measured participants' level of political ingroup affiliation and their identification with licensing domain (i.e., anti-discrimination) as potential predictor variables.

Participants were assigned to one of three conditions: self-credentialing, ingroup-credentialing, or non-credentialing control. The self-credentialing condition and the non-credentialing control used the same racial hiring task as study 2 (Monin & Miller, 2001). Unlike in study 2, participants in the ingroup credentials condition were shown the Monin and Miller (2001) racial hiring task, but instead of answering it they were simply told that members of their political party overwhelmingly selected the Black applicant for the job. This statement served to

establish their ingroup's morality. As in study 2, participants in the non-credentialing control condition were presented five White applicants, and thus were unable to establish their non-racist moral credentials.

## Measures

**Political group membership and identification.** As in the first two studies, study 3 assessed strength of political affiliation with the Political Group Identification Measure (Greenaway et al., 2015).

**Moral licensing.** Study 3 measured licensing by using Crosby and Monin (2013) licensing measure. Participants were asked to evaluate five ambiguously racist behaviors on a 9-point Likert scale from “definitely NOT discrimination” to “definitely discrimination” with a mid-point labeled “not sure” (e.g., “*A woman is walking alone at night and sees a Black man coming towards her. She crosses the street.*”). The full measure can be found in the Appendix E. Participants with lower average scores were considered to exhibit higher levels of moral licensing.

**Target behavior identification.** Identification with the target behavior (i.e., anti-racism) was measured using the five item Internal Motivation to Respond without Prejudice Scale (IMS) (Plant & Devine, 1998). All five questions pertained to valuing non-prejudiced behavior toward Black people (e.g., “*I attempt to act in non-prejudiced ways toward Black people because it is personally important to me*”). See Appendix F for the full measure. Participants rated their agreement on a 9-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Higher scores indicate greater identification with the target behavior. The IMS had reasonably strong reliability (alphas ranging from .76 to .85) and test-retest reliability ( $r=.77$ ). In addition, IMS scores correlated with traditional measures of prejudice, including the Attitude Towards Blacks scale (Brigham, 1993) and the Modern Racism Scale (McConahay, 1986).

**Procedure**

As part of an online survey created through [www.qualtrics.com](http://www.qualtrics.com) (Qualtrics, LLC, Utah, USA) and run through Mechanical Turk, participants were asked to answer questions regarding politics and morality. The survey was anonymous, which participants accessed from a specific link on Amazon Mechanical Turk. The survey began by ensuring participants of anonymity, and participants were not asked any personal questions other than age, gender, race, and political affiliation so that they felt comfortable answering honestly. Participants were told that the study is interested in decisions and political preferences. Conditions were randomized between participants, but measures were always presented in the same order.

Participants were asked whether they identify as a Democrat, Republican, or neither. Participants who did not identify with either party did not complete the remainder of the questionnaire. Based on indicated political group membership, participants completed the two-item political group identification measure.

Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (i.e., self-credentialing, ingroup-credentialing, or a non-credentialing control) and completed the credentialing hiring task. Participants in the ingroup credentialing condition also completed a manipulation check asking whether they believed their ingroup members' actions were moral. Next, all participants completed the ambiguous racism licensing measure. After the licensing measure, participants completed the IMS to assess the extent to which being anti-racist is important to their identity. Next, all participants were sent to the demographics questionnaire. Participants were asked their age, gender identity, and racial identity. Lastly, participants were thanked and brought to a debriefing page with information regarding the true nature of the experiment and the various experimental conditions, along with researchers' emails to contact with any follow up questions or concerns.



## Results

The manipulation of ingroup morality appeared effective: ratings of party morality were high for the ingroup credentialing condition for both Republicans ( $M=6.66$ ,  $SD=1.65$ ) and Democrats ( $M=6.69$ ,  $SD=1.46$ ). This result suggests that the manipulation successfully led both Republicans and Democrats to view their party's morality favorably after learning of their fellow party members' non-prejudiced choices.

Next, we tested whether condition was a predictor of licensing. We found that there were no statistically significant differences between the non-credentialing control condition mean ( $M=4.55$ ,  $SD=1.71$ ), the ingroup-credentialing conditions ( $M=4.58$ ,  $SD=1.78$ ), and the self-credentialing condition ( $M=4.39$ ,  $SD=1.70$ ) as determined by a one-way ANOVA,  $F(2,454)=.614$ ,  $p=.541$ . See figure 4 for a graph of the marginal means.

Furthermore, neither moderator predicted licensing behavior. We ran a regression examining the relationship between condition and licensing with standardized strength of political identification as a moderator. Differences in political strength did not moderate licensing behavior,  $t(274)=.672$ ,  $p=.50$ . There was also no interaction between condition and strength of political affiliation,  $t(274)=.467$ ,  $p=.64$ .

We ran two linear regression models that separately compare the control condition to each of the credentials conditions. We found that although identification with the target behavior was a significant predictor of licensing,  $t(254)=4.48$ ,  $p<.001$ , this effect was not moderated by condition when comparing the non-credentialing control condition to either the ingroup-credentials participants  $t(279)=1.12$ ,  $p=.27$ , or the self-credentials participants  $t(254)=.70$ ,  $p=.48$ .

## Discussion

We hypothesized that the strength of participants' affiliation with the licensing domain would determine whether they demonstrate licensing or consistency effects. Study 3 failed to

find evidence for this prediction. Responses to the ambiguous racism licensing measure did not differ by condition. In addition, neither moderator predicted licensing behavior.

### **General discussion**

The present research examined ingroup licensing effects specifically as they relate to political ingroup identity, and investigated the conditions under which people license their immoral actions as opposed to behaving consistently with their prior moral behavior. We tested the ‘political ingroup licensing hypothesis’, which predicted that priming participants with a sense of their party’s morality would lead to moral credentials and thus political ingroup licensing effects. Credentialed participants were expected to demonstrate licensing by choosing to keep money rather than donate it (study 1), recommending a White applicant for a job (study 2), and indicating that fewer ambiguous behaviors were racist (study 3).

We also tested the ‘political identification hypothesis’, which posited that strength of political affiliation would moderate the relationship between credentials and licensing, such that participants with stronger political identities would demonstrate greater moral licensing. Finally, we also tested the ‘behavior identification hypothesis’, which predicted that the strength of participants’ affiliation with the licensing domain would determine whether they demonstrate licensing or consistency effects, such that participants with stronger moral identities would be more likely to behave consistently with past moral behavior, whereas participants with weaker moral identities would be more likely to exhibit moral licensing. Altogether, the three studies in this project did not find strong support for any of these hypotheses. We failed to find evidence of political ingroup moral licensing. Likewise, political party, strength of political affiliation, and identification with the target behavior all failed to moderate the relationship between condition and licensing.

Overall, although the present research failed to find evidence for the main hypotheses, certain patterns emerge from the data that suggest evidence of consistency effects. In study 1, the direction of relationship between the credentials conditions and the control conditions was the opposite of what a licensing hypothesis would predict. That is to say, people in the credentials conditions chose to donate money more often than participants in the control condition. Although these results did not reach statistical significance, the pattern suggests that after being primed with their party's morality, participants in the credentials conditions behaved consistently with their ingroup members' good deeds.

Similarly, in study 2 there was a significant interaction in the self credentials condition that revealed that after earning moral credentials, Republicans were more likely to say a job is better suited for a White applicant, whereas Democrats were less likely to indicate this racial hiring preference. It is important to note that within this significant interaction, the effect of condition on licensing among Democrats, but not Republicans, was significant. This pattern of results reveals consistency effects among Democrats, but does not provide evidence of moral licensing among Republicans.

Lastly, study 3 established that identification with a target behavior significantly predicts licensing effects. More specifically, participants who strongly identified as having non-prejudiced attitudes were more likely to report that ambiguous behaviors were racist. These anti-racist participants behaved more consistently with their prior moral behavior than participants for whom non-prejudiced attitudes are less central to their identities. This result might suggest that reinforcing values makes people more likely to behave consistently with their prior moral actions. When taken together, these three patterns taken from each of the studies in this article

lend support for a consistency-based explanation of moral behavior when considering political ingroups.

### **Integrating current findings with prior research**

As previously discussed, prior licensing research has established moral licensing effects in many domains, and with both real and hypothetical actions, and with the credentialing agent as the self or an ingroup member. Considering this vast body of research, why did the three present studies fail to find evidence of moral licensing?

There are multiple plausible explanations for why we failed to find evidence of moral licensing. First, due to the anonymous nature of the Mechanical Turk platform, participants may have felt less social pressure to behave morally. Indeed, a study of the impact of anonymity on social desirability in online questionnaires revealed that people feel disinhibited online and thus do not behave as prosocially as they would in real-life settings (Joinson, 1999). This finding might suggest that our licensing measure results may have inaccurately skewed toward immoral behavior regardless of condition because neither set of participants likely felt strong social pressure to respond prosocially. That is to say, perhaps our results are not due to a failure to increase immoral behavior in the credentialing task, but rather that immoral behavior was higher in all conditions as a result of anonymity. Thus, the pattern of results may stem from a failure of the control condition rather than the credentials condition. In sum, perhaps the present null licensing effects can be attributed to the anonymity of the online survey format leading participants to not feel the necessary social pressure to establish their morality.

Another explanation for our null licensing results is that in the present day, many people may be unwilling to credential or license either ambiguous or unambiguous racist behavior. Research suggests that racism -- both explicit and implicit -- has declined steadily in recent years

(Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019). Other research argues that by some measures, racial prejudice may have decreased in white Americans since the election of Trump (Hopkins & Washington, 2019). These findings suggest two related possibilities. First, based on the apparent decrease in racism over time, one might speculate that many people would not receive strong moral credentials from acting non-prejudiced because people may not view egalitarian behavior as particularly moral or praise-worthy in the present day. It is plausible that being anti-racist is more of a given in 2020 than back in the early 2000s when many of the cited racial hiring task studies were conducted. Second, these findings might suggest that people are unwilling to license prejudiced behavior. That is to say, even if people are able to gain moral credentials by displaying unbiased racial attitudes, perhaps they are unwilling to express explicit racism in the racial licensing measures (i.e., Monin and Miller's (2001) police hiring task, and Crosby and Monin's (2013) ambiguous racism measure). Either of these possibilities could begin to explain why moral licensing patterns did not emerge in these three studies. Our third study supports this explanation by demonstrating that participants did not receive moral credentials from selecting the highly-qualified black applicant. Additionally, the trend from the second study also fits this rationale because overall these participants did not receive moral credentials from selecting the black applicant.

To test whether changing racial attitudes might impact the explanatory power of these manipulations, future research should examine credentialing manipulations and licensing measures in domains other than race. Domains such as cheating (e.g., Jordan et al., 2011), willingness to volunteer (e.g., Conway & Peetz, 2012), charitable donations (e.g., Clot, Grolleau, & Ibanez, 2014), offering corrupt versus honest advice (e.g., Cain, Loewenstein, & Moore,

2010), and stealing money (e.g., Mazar & Zhong, 2010) would eliminate the risk of interference from changing social norms, because these domains are less likely to change over time.

Finally, the present research may not have found evidence of moral licensing because the effect in the literature is perhaps not as strong as researchers previously assumed. Blanken and colleagues (2015) argue that there is evidence of publication bias within the moral licensing literature. A regression test of the symmetry of their funnel plot revealed strong evidence for the presence of publication bias,  $t(55) = 5.72$ ,  $p < .001$ . In addition, Blanken et al. (2015) tested study publication status (i.e., published or unpublished) as a moderator, and found that publication status significantly influenced licensing effect sizes such that published studies had larger effect sizes ( $d = 0.43$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ) than unpublished studies ( $d = 0.11$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ),  $QM(1) = 20.66$ ,  $p < .001$ . These two findings suggest that smaller studies that failed to find significant evidence for moral licensing may have gone unpublished, and as a result overall moral licensing evidence may have a smaller effect size than previously cited. The current three studies had strong statistical power as a result of large sample sizes, so our null findings are particularly noteworthy. Thus, the present research calls into question the strength of moral licensing effects.

The current research not only failed to find evidence of moral self licensing, but also did not find results supporting the ‘political ingroup licensing hypothesis’. So far no direct evidence exists to support the idea that political ingroups can elicit vicarious licensing effects. Although prior research shows that political ingroups are socially relevant and highly moralized, there is a chance that these qualities do not in fact impact ingroup licensing. Most previous research has only investigated ingroup licensing effects in the context of a close other. Of the three studies on ingroup licensing, two examined ingroup licensing effects in the context of people the participant already knew (i.e., other students at the participant’s university (Kouchaki, 2011), or the

participant's best friend or partner (Meijers et al., 2019). The third study referenced people of the same nationality and gender identity (Banas et al., 2016), which may yield stronger ingroup identification than political party affiliation. As such, the question remains as to whether only close others and highly relevant social ingroups can provide the moral credentials necessary to license one's own behavior, or whether other relevant ingroups such as political identity can elicit licensing as well. Future research should examine ingroup licensing effects with other socially relevant ingroups. In addition, researchers may want to compare ingroup licensing effects with close others and with unknown ingroup members, to test whether these effects differ in strength.

The present three studies failed to find strong evidence for any of the three proposed hypotheses. Studies 1, 2, and 3 did not support the 'political ingroup licensing hypothesis'. In addition, studies 1 and 3 failed to find evidence of the 'political identification hypothesis', and study 3 did not support the 'behavior identification hypothesis'. However, one might find these null findings encouraging, because they suggest that people do not simply excuse their immoral behavior based on their own previous actions, or based on their group membership. These results could be read as evidence that participants still felt accountable for their behavior even after learning of an ingroup member's good deeds, or after demonstrating their own morality.

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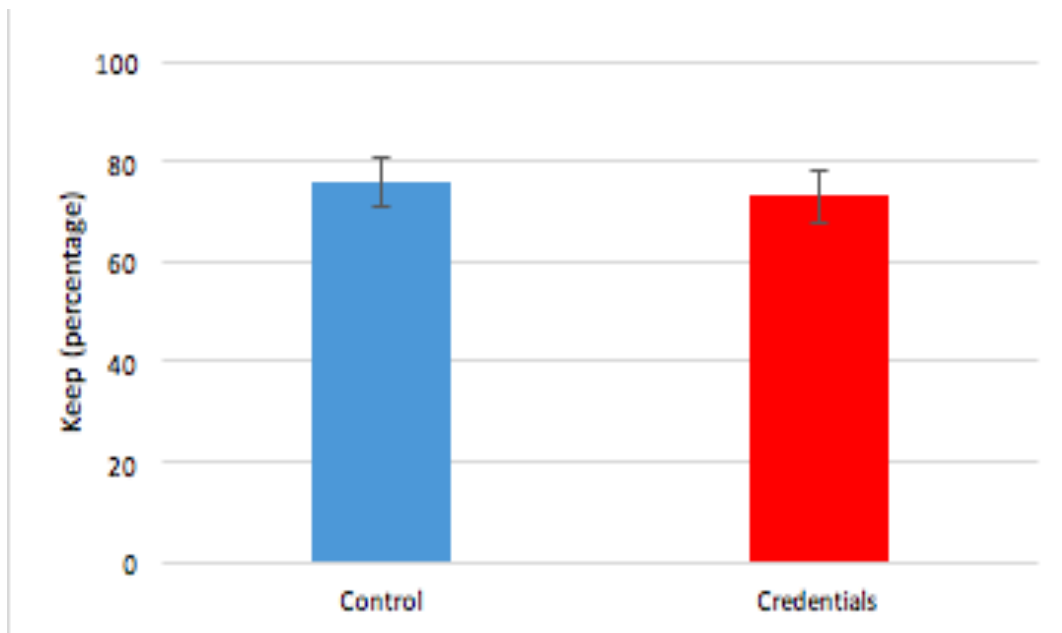
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**Figures**

*Figure 1.* Percentage of participants who chose to keep the money in the combined control conditions and combined credentials conditions.

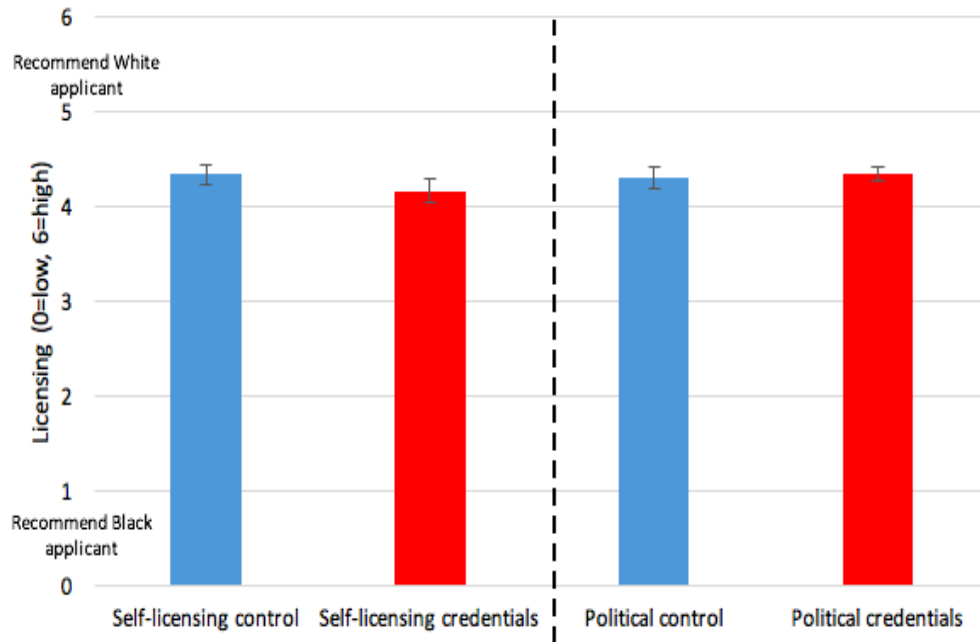


Figure 2. Means of licensing in the 4 conditions, split by self licensing and ingroup licensing.

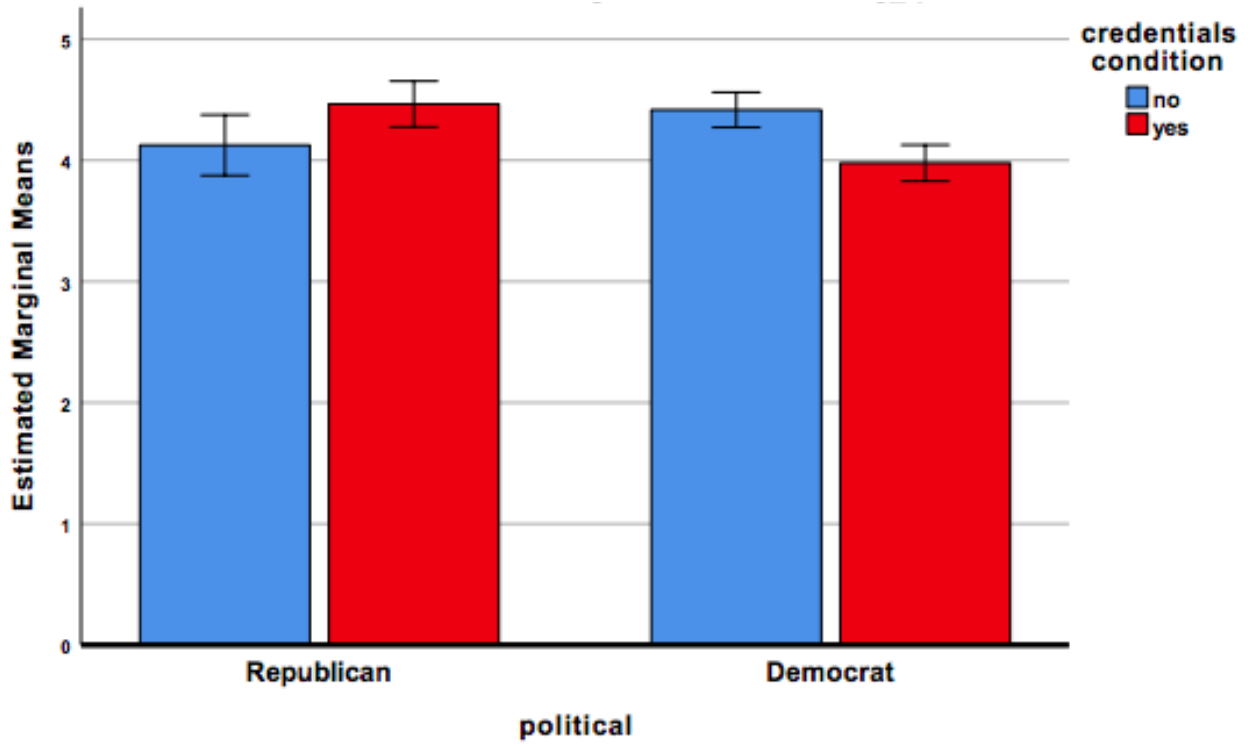


Figure 3. Condition by political party interaction in the self credentials condition.

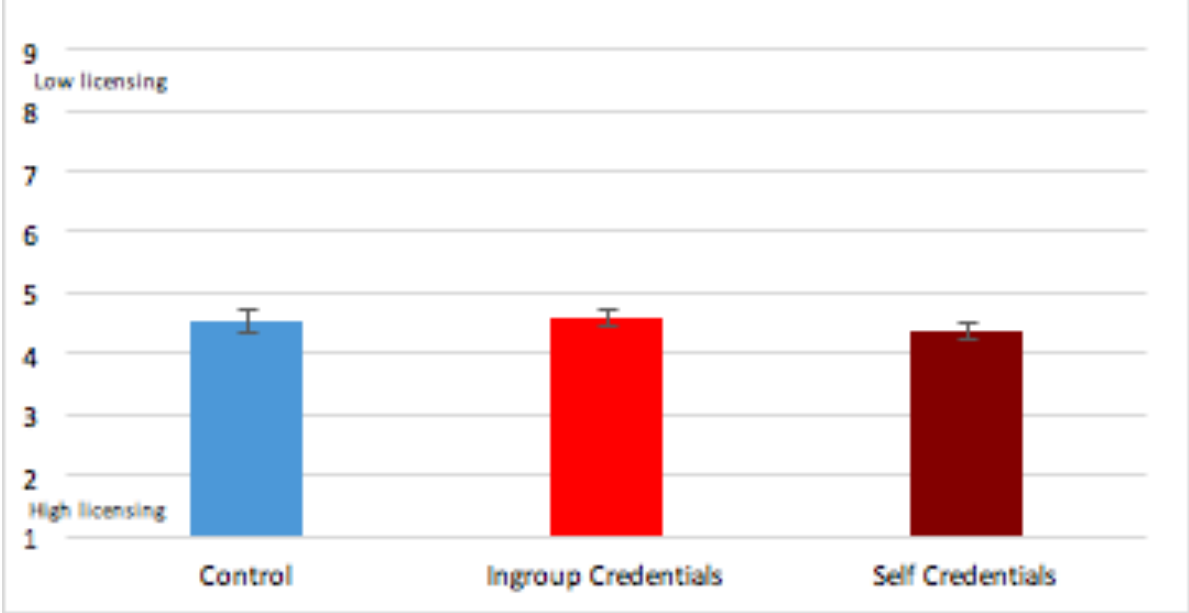


Figure 4. Means of licensing in the 3 credentials conditions.

## Appendix A

### **Republican political positive:**

#### Senator Anderson Votes in Favor of Immigration Crackdown

Republican senator Anderson voted in favor of a pioneering piece of legislation that will decrease the number of immigrants allowed to enter the United States per year. The bill passed by a small margin, and will take effect in 2020. After the vote, Anderson hailed the passage of the bill, saying, “This is a pivotal step in ensuring our country’s continued success.” Border security groups praise the bill as being one of the strongest crackdowns on immigration that the US has seen in the past decade. In response to the recent vote... (Continued on page 4)

### **Democrat political positive:**

#### Senator Anderson Votes in Favor of Pro-climate Legislation

Democratic senator Anderson voted in favor of a pioneering piece of legislation that will double consumers’ use of renewable energy sources by 2030. The bill passed by a small margin, and will take effect in 2020. After the vote, Anderson hailed the passage of the bill, saying, “This is a pivotal step in ensuring our country’s continued success.” Environmentalist organizations praise the bill as being one of the strongest pro-climate initiatives that the US has seen in the past decade. In response to the recent vote... (Continued on page 4)

### **Republican/Democrat apolitical positive:**

#### Senator Anderson Helps Local Man Change a Flat Tire

Yesterday evening, while coming home from work, Republican/Democratic senator Anderson stopped during a snowstorm to help a local man change a flat tire. The man expressed his

appreciation that Anderson helped him get home to his family in time for dinner, especially given the inclement weather. Anderson was quoted, saying... (Continued on page 4)

**Republican/Democrat apolitical control:**

Senator Anderson Attends the Opening Night of The Corner Table

Yesterday evening, Republican/Democratic senator Anderson attended the opening night of new restaurant The Corner Table. The Corner Table is a casual American restaurant, serving mouthwatering comfort food made from local ingredients. Anderson ordered the signature dish, and praised the establishment for its... (Continued on page 4)




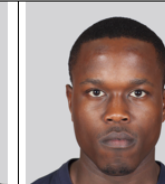

**Republican/Democrat neutral control:**

Senator Anderson Attends the Opening Night of The Corner Table






Yesterday evening, senator Anderson attended the opening night of new restaurant The Corner Table. The Corner Table is a casual American restaurant, serving mouthwatering American comfort food made from local ingredients. Anderson ordered the signature dish, and praised the establishment for its... (Continued on page 4)

**Appendix B**

A large financial consulting firm is looking to hire an employee for a starting position. The search committee has narrowed their selection down to these five applicants. Whom would you recommend they hire?

					
<b>Name</b>	Henry Johnson	Fred Miller	George Anderson	Jordan Green	Daniel Taylor
<b>GPA</b>	3.35	3.64	3.59	3.93	3.22
<b>College</b>	Syracuse University	University of Miami	University of Maryland	Harvard University	Ohio State University
<b>Major</b>	Spanish Literature	Engineering	Medicine	Economics	Art History

Credentials:

					
<b>Name</b>	Henry Johnson	Fred Miller	George Anderson	Jacob Green	Daniel Taylor
<b>GPA</b>	3.35	3.64	3.59	3.93	3.22
<b>College</b>	Syracuse University	University of Miami	University of Maryland	Harvard University	Ohio State University
<b>Major</b>	Spanish Literature	Engineering	Medicine	Economics	Art History

Control:



### **Appendix C**

#### Experts Laud Republicans' Success in Advancing Core Values

Political pundits agree that over the past 3 years Republicans have been remarkably successful in advancing their party's agenda. Republican politicians have fought tirelessly to reduce taxes and to decrease government control over American citizens' lives. The party has worked to preserve traditional family values. Republicans have fought hard for free market capitalism. Furthermore, the party has preserved Second Amendment gun rights for Americans. Most experts agree that, in their efforts over the past few years, Republicans have been more productive and successful than what even their most ardent supporters could have hoped for.

#### Experts Laud Democrats' Success in Advancing Core Values

Political pundits agree that over the past 3 years Democrats have been remarkably successful in advancing their party's agenda. Democratic politicians have fought tirelessly to combat discrimination on the basis of race, gender, and sexual orientation. The party has worked to expand access to health care. Democrats have fought hard to protect the rights of immigrants. Furthermore, the party has prioritized environmental protection. Most experts agree that, in their efforts over the past few years, Democrats have been more productive and successful than what even their most ardent supporters could have hoped for.

#### Experts Laud Republicans'/Democrats' Success in Voter Outreach

Political pundits agree that over the past 3 years Republicans/Democrats have been remarkably successful in expanding their party's base. The party has steadily increased their number of donors, and has prioritized canvassing initiatives to directly communicate with voters.



### Appendix D

Imagine that you are the police chief of a small town in a rural area of the United States. Historically the population of the town has been exclusively White, and attitudes towards other ethnicities tend to be unfavorable. As much as you regret it, you know this is especially the case within your unit. You couldn't help overhearing racist jokes coming from people you otherwise consider excellent officers. In fact a couple of years ago an African-American patrolman joined your unit, and within a year he quit, complaining about hostile working conditions. You are doing what you can to change attitudes, but your main objective is that the police force should do its job, and so far it has been rather effective so you do not want to provoke any major unrest within the ranks.

The time has come to recruit a new officer. As a general rule, officers need to be responsible and trustworthy, show quick intelligence enabling them to make split-second decisions in crisis situations. Recent scandals have also highlighted the need for a high level of integrity, resistance to corruption, mild manners and a calm temper.

You have just received applications from the new graduates of the local Police Academy. You wonder whether ethnicity should be a factor in your choice.

Do you feel that this specific position (described above) is better suited for any one ethnicity?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Yes, much better for a Black person			I do not feel this way at all			Yes, much better for a White person

### Appendix E

Instructions: For the situations described below, please tell us if, in your opinion, the behavior constitutes discrimination.

1. A company conducts regular business on Martin Luther King Jr. Day.
2. A clothing chain with a “preppy” image employs significantly more White than Black salespeople.
3. A police officer stops a Black male whose clothing and hair match the description of a crime suspect.
4. A woman is walking alone at night and sees a Black man coming toward her. She crosses the street.
5. A school discontinues its affirmative action policy, resulting in a decrease in minority students.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Definitely NOT discrimination				Not sure			Definitely discrimination	

