Forthcoming in Psychological Inquiry, in response to the target article: "Strange Bedfellows: The Alliance Theory of Political Belief Systems" by Pinsof, D., Sears, O. & Haselton, M.G.

It's more complicated than that - alliances are one of many factors shaping political belief systems

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In their target article, Pinsof et al. (2023) make the case for a unified theory of political belief systems. Rather than people aligning with political factions that support their inherent and consistent moral principles, people instead join political alliances and subsequently adopt the ideologies and moral beliefs of these groups. According to this 'Alliance Theory' of political belief systems, the tendency to support one's allies and denigrate one's rivals can give rise to so-called 'political alliance structures'. Such tendencies can also explain why so many political beliefs don't seem to stem from consistent moral principles and why certain ideological beliefs cluster together in different ways in different places. The above can be summed up in a single claim, which is that there are few, if any, inherent psychological differences between those who

espouse conservative or progressive views; instead, the essential difference between conservatives and progressives is whom they view as their allies.

We are sympathetic to some of the underlying claims supporting the Alliance Theory view. Specifically, we accept the two fundamental assumptions that: [1] we have cognitive mechanisms for forming and detecting alliances (e.g. Tooby & Cosmides 2010; Boyer et al. 2015); and [2] we use propagandistic tactics to support allies and oppose rivals in conflicts (e.g. see also Williams 2023). We also accept the premise that the cognition involved in alliance formation can affect political belief formation, and the ways that individuals view and represent their political rivals.

Nevertheless, we have serious doubts over whether support for these two rather general assumptions is sufficient to account for variation in the structure of political beliefs within and between societies. The implication of this grand conclusion is that we need not worry about individuals' abstract values on questions of equality, tolerance and authority; instead, the only thing that matters is the groups people belong to and the strategic interests of those groups. As the authors put it in the abstract, "If Alliance Theory is correct, then we need a radically different approach to political psychology - one in which belief systems arise not from deep-seated moral values, but from ever-shifting alliances and rivalries." Grand conclusions require strong empirical support and a full consideration of alternative hypotheses. We believe that the account offered fails on both counts.

Although political belief systems may stem in part from cognitive mechanisms designed to form and sustain alliances, this is unlikely to be the whole story. An account based only on Alliance Theory raises some otherwise unanswered questions. For instance, why do people choose a political 'side' and stick with it, rather than simply switching allegiance to the winning team when it is expeditious to do so? In the target article, an analogy is drawn between alliances in humans and other species, like chimpanzees, but the analogy is a pretty loose fit. Several important disanalogies cast doubt on whether the mechanisms outlined in the piece really work the way the authors are proposing. For instance, while it is the case that chimpanzee males form alliances with other males (e.g. to help secure a dominant alpha position within the group or to attempt to overthrow a dominant individual), observational studies of wild chimps indicate that such alliances can be very fluid, with males switching allegiance from one male to another when it may prove advantageous to do so (e.g. Nishida 1983, Gilby & Wrangham 2008). Under Alliance Theory, we might expect such 'allegiance fickleness' to be relatively common and yet we rarely see this with political ideology; instead, party allegiance tends to be more firmly and consistently held (Evans et al. 1986; Pew Research Centre 2020). One possibility is that there's more to political belief systems than just alliances - and that people's political preferences do reflect some underlying variation in core moral principles and values.

Moreover, there are fundamental differences in choosing allies for joint enterprise compared to professing support for a political group. Alliance formation can be beneficial because individuals receive support or help from interaction partners (for example, during conflicts or buffering against environmental conditions). A corollary is that individuals are themselves expected to provide such assistance to their partners when it is called for. This requirement for reciprocal

help and support means that there is more potential for reciprocal partner choice or rejection under typical alliance formation than we see in political allegiance: I can't make someone be my friend, but no one can stop me from supporting the conservatives or the democrats. The lack of reciprocal partner choice in the case of political allegiance derives from the fact that the political group I choose to join is not required to help or support me in any way - there are few tangible in-kind benefits that I might derive from professing my political allegiance to a group. This suggests some rather important differences from alliance formation in the typical sense where help and support from an ally is the key benefit for investing in such relationships. Again, we return to the plausible alternative hypothesis that political allegiance is about more than just alliances - perhaps joining such groups does reflect some deeper commitment to a set of moral principles and values that render the allegiance subjectively rewarding, even if the tangible downstream benefits are unclear.

Related to above - and the issue of the costs and benefits of forging political alliances - an implicit assumption of Alliance Theory is that joining a political alliance renders one's own identity somehow indistinguishable from the wider group's. This assumption is the basis upon which the propagandistic biases can be said to operate: reputation threats to the group become reputation threats to the self, wins and losses for the group are wins and losses for the self. But how justified is this assumption, really? And, even if it holds for political alliances, why doesn't it hold for other groups that we identify with? For example, why is it that a college professor would be more harshly judged for espousing politically conservative views than for supporting a different football team (e.g. one based in a different town to the college)? Again, alternatives to

Alliance Theory offer a plausible explanation - that political alliances are different precisely because, unlike the football team one supports, they are attached to abstract moral values[1].

In addition to the explanatory gap left by these disanalogies between animal alliance formation and the kinds of political alliances referred to in their paper, Pinsof et al. (2023) also present a somewhat biased view of empirical work in political psychology. First, much of the evidence put forward in the paper begs the question. In order to establish the relative superiority of an Alliance Theory account of political belief systems over appeals to deep-seated moral values, it is necessary to consider empirical evidence on variation in beliefs at both the group level (at which Alliance Theory operates) and the individual level (at which the stated alternatives operate). However, throughout their paper, the authors rely mainly on group level claims to bolster their argument, stating, for example, that 'well-off people…assume their social and material advantages derive from internal dispositions' and 'conservatives … feel allegiance towards members of the American military'. But, of course, if you're only asking questions at the level of what *groups* think and how *groups* are aligned, it is perhaps no surprise that *group* alliances appear important. This approach ignores variation *within* these groups and therefore cannot evaluate whether and how individual level psychological variation predicts political allegiance, let alone its importance relative to group level alliances.

If group alliances really are all we need to explain the political landscape, then membership of key demographic groups like those referred to in the paper should be highly predictive of individual voting preferences. In fact, demographic group membership isn't a particularly good

[1] Note that this can be the case regardless of whether most people can identify these abstract moral values. Claessens et al., (2020) liken this to the fact that most proficient speakers of a language cannot articulate its grammar.

predictor. For example, including race, education, income, age and gender in a model of US voting patterns shifts predictive out-of-sample accuracy from 50% (chance) to 64% (Kim & Zilinsky 2022)[2]. Proponents of Alliance Theory might argue that there are unaccounted-for alliances here, that will explain much more of the variation. Yet even including a range of additional predictors that are surely among the most salient political divisions in the United States (urban/suburban/rural area, census region, political south/nonsouth, working status, religion, church attendance, home ownership, and marital status) only increases accuracy to around 67%. These data show it is simply not true that group level alliances are particularly good, let alone entirely sufficient, explanations for political preferences.

Even if, contra the claims of Alliance Theory, the salient demographic divisions in the US aren't that important, proponents of the theory might argue the novelty of their approach lies in the claim that party identification itself is an important group identity that shapes political belief systems of individuals. We don't doubt party identification can influence people's beliefs, but this is not a radical new proposal (Converse 1964; Kalmoe 2020; Zaller 1992; Williams 2023). As an account of the political landscape, though, this explanation leaves many questions unanswered. For example, why hasn't politics always been this partisan in the US and elsewhere? What countervailing forces exist? Given basic demographic predictors explain so little of the variation, why do people come to identify with a particular party in the first place? Or to put it differently, how do people from very similar backgrounds come to support rival parties? And why do political views around the globe cluster together in predictable ways despite varied

[2] In fact, since winners in a 2-party system like the US receive more than half the vote, a simple prediction model in which everyone is expected to vote for the winning party will already lead to out-of-sample accuracy a few percentage points above 50%.

and shifting party alliances? We think answering these questions requires going beyond alliances between groups.

Another problem with the case of Alliance Theory as presented, is its focus on a unidimensional (and US-centric) 'liberal versus conservative' conceptualisation of political values. Under such a framework, departures from the standard US liberal-conservative divide do, indeed, seem puzzling. For example, libertarians, who hold liberal views on traditional values but conservative views on the economy, or the existence of authoritarian views among some US liberals (sometimes dubbed Left-Wing Authoritarianism, Costello et al. 2022). And outside the US, the pairing of left-wing economic policies with traditionalism in some [e.g., former communist] countries (Malka et al. 2019). But to view this as evidence against the importance of ideology mistakes the unidimensional trade-offs inherent in any two-party system like the US, in which alliances undoubtedly play a role (if you're not with us, you're against us), with the psychological structure of individual dispositions and ideological preferences. In fact, over the last few decades, political researchers have repeatedly and independently identified not one, but two key dimensions of political ideology that can vary independently (Claessens et al. 2020, Duckitt & Sibley 2009). The occurrence of two recognisable dimensions across diverse cultural and political contexts, including two-party and multi-party democracies, is itself evidence that there is more ideological structure to political belief systems than predicted from Alliance Theory alone.

Two-dimensional approaches to political ideology have deployed various labels, such as economic and social conservatism (Hughes 1975), equality and freedom (Rokeach 1973),

egalitarianism and individualism (Trompenaars 1993), and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) and Right-Wing-Authoritarianism (RWA, Duckitt & Sibley 2009), yet they appear to reflect a common set of concerns. One recent attempt to explain this recurrent structure is the Dual Foundations model (Claessens et al. 2020) of political ideology, which proposes that the two dimensions reflect two basic trade-offs inherent to the evolution of human group living: 1) a drive for egalitarian outcomes and large-scale cooperation versus Machiavellian competition; and 2) a drive for individualism versus maintaining group viability and conformity. The model posits that these motives provide the psychological foundations for the recurrent two-dimensional structure to political ideology across societies, and that variation in these social preferences (both due to enduring individual differences and plastic responses to the social environment) help explain why people support the political views they do.

Under the Dual Foundations framework, far from being puzzles, phenomena like Left-Wing Authoritarianism, libertarianism and the pairing of egalitarianism and conservatism are predicted as demonstrations of the recurrence and independence of the two dimensions. Work testing other predictions of the model is only just beginning, but prior research and new findings support the approach and are difficult to reconcile with bold claims about the primacy of Alliance Theory. First, individual variation across the two dimensions of ideology is heritable (Alford et al, 2004, Kandler et al. 2016, Verhulst et al. 2012, Alford & Hibbing 2004, Lewis & Bates 2014, Batrićević & Littvay 2017) and prospectively predicted by enduring personality differences (Perry & Sibley 2012; Block & Block 2006), suggesting that people do not merely generate ideology ad hoc in response to current alliances[3]. Second, variation across the two dimensions of

[3] One might argue that perhaps genetic or personality differences determine group membership (e.g., religion, income or education) and that it is alliances between these groups that generates what looks like heritable ideology.

ideology also correlates with more general, abstract social preferences. For example, measures of cooperation and egalitarian preferences in anonymous one-shot economic games predict views on economic policy issues (and not social issues), while behavioural measures associated with conformity predict views on social policy issues (but not economic issues) (Claessens et al. 2023; Fischer et al. 2021). Moreover, these abstract preferencess can be at least as predictive of policy views as basic demographics, like age, gender and ethnicity (Claessens et al. 2023).

In response to a host of similar findings linking party support to abstract social preferences, to support their bold claim that political beliefs are above all about alliances, not values, Pinsof et al. (2023) must argue that it is party support that determines values and not the reverse. To support this, they cite a 2005 study (Goren et al. 2005), which used a cross-lagged analysis of three waves of longitudinal data to show that while partisanship predicted later 'egalitarianism', 'egalitarianism' did not predict later partisanship. In a footnote, Pinsof et al. (2023) dismiss a more recent study (Satherley et al. 2021) which finds support for the inverse conclusion - SDO and RWA predict later party support, but party support does not predict later values - on the grounds that "measures like SDO are confounded with group allegiances and therefore poor measures of abstract values". We agree there are potential problems with SDO, but the measures used in Goren (2005) are no less problematic, referencing politically loaded terms such as "equal opportunity". Moreover, the Satherly et al (2021) finding uses among the most widely used multi-item measures of ideology, applies a newer random-intercept cross-lagged modeling approach that allows within-person change to be separated from between-person stability, and is based on a sample that is roughly 20 times the size and spans nine waves of data. We have no

No doubt this causal pathway plays some role, but remember, as noted above, group membership itself is not a particularly good predictor of ideology.

particular problem with the Goren (2005) paper, but find it difficult to justify its presentation as obviously superior. In addition, both earlier and later findings (including more recent work by Goren; Chen & Goren 2016) support values predicting party support and not the reverse (Evans & Neundorf 2018; McCann 1997), or find evidence for a reciprocal causal relationship between values and party support (Chen & Goren 2016; Greaves et al. 2014). We think the only reasonable interpretation of the current evidence is that probably the party someone supports impacts their values and their values impact the party they choose to support.

Pinsof et al. (2023) also cite evidence that commitment to egalitarian values shifts strategically in response to context to argue that "egalitarianism is not a stable, pre-existing orientation, but is instead a flexible tactic designed to support oneself and one's allies." But both can be true. That is, none of the findings cited rule out the possibility that stable dispositions are also important for understanding egalitarian (or any other) values. This would be like arguing that, since anyone can be provoked to anger in certain situations, there are no meaningful dispositional differences in aggression between people. As one of the articles cited by Pinsof et al. to support their argument puts it, "Importantly, this observation does not necessarily undermine the idea that people's moral views are in some sense foundational, forming the basis of judgments on many particular issues. However, people can also strategically adjust these initial views to benefit themselves" (DeScioli et al., 2014). Again, the only reasonable interpretation given current evidence seems to be that both factors - dispositions and strategy - play a role.

We think Pinsof et al. have overstated their case - sure, alliances matter, but to suggest that they are *all* that matters is at odds with current evidence. The authors seem to back down from the

bold version of their argument in places. For example, they acknowledge that attitudes towards institutions are shaped "secondarily (if at all) by the values they symbolize", allowing for at least the possibility of some role for moral values after all. But since few political psychologists would argue that moral values explain everything or that alliances are irrelevant, this concession makes Alliance Theory much less radical than the authors elsewhere imply. The bold predictions of Alliance Theory are also weakened somewhat by the introduction of a 'stochasticity' factor. This seems to acknowledge that the theory cannot explain everything (phew), but it also implies that findings not predicted by alliance formation must be unpredictable noise, rather than explainable in terms of other theoretical perspectives. Folding a vaguely defined stochasticity factor into the model itself also risks making the theory unfalsifiable - predicted patterns can be interpreted as support for the theory, while failed predictions can be dismissed as (expected) noise.

One might argue that there's no harm in presenting a new hypothesis in its boldest form, to promote subsequent debate and drive forward the research agenda. We're sympathetic to this stance, but we would like to see a more measured presentation of rival theories (our own work included) in the future, lest the field falls victim to the very divisions and biases that are the focus of Pinsof et al.'s paper. Pinsof et al.'s work could be read as an antidote to an excessive focus by (mostly liberal) researchers on dispositional differences between political identities, a focus which risks promoting the idea that those who think differently about some political issue do so because of purely internal factors, like intelligence, beneficence or loyalty to the group. Alliance Theory reminds us that many of our political differences are the product of those with similar motives in different contexts. At the same time, it is no less problematic to portray politics as all about rival group interests, to the exclusion of individual differences and values.

As Kim and Zilinsky (2022) put it in their recent paper on the relatively poor ability of demographic groups to predict voting preferences, “The results could help dispel the myth that demographics are deterministic indicators of vote choices. Such myths are perpetuated due to the horse-race coverage of pre-election and postelection polls based on group membership. They have the potential to wreak real-world damage by widening the emotional gap between groups by wrong ecological inferences.” Portraying political beliefs as simply strategic responses to rival alliances encourages a dangerous kind of moral relativism in which political discourse is assumed to be competitive and destructive, rather than cooperative and constructive, and in which nobody is willing to admit anyone has good moral arguments for anything. The truth is that we need both alliance psychology and individual differences in disposition and values (not to mention intergroup psychology and some stochasticity) to fully understand the complex nature of human politics.

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