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Political Orientation and Motivated Social Cognition

David M. Njus and Emily Ironside

Luther College

Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway (2003) maintain that political conservatism stems from motivated social cognition. Specifically, they maintain that conservative political, and not liberal political belief, satisfy non-directional psychological motives, such as need for cognitive closure (i.e., a need to reduce ambiguity, to have definitive answers to questions) and existential motivations dealing with low or unstable self-esteem. Their contention, however, is supported by research utilizing measures of conservatism that may be problematic in defining traditional left-right differences in the United States.

For example, a number of studies Jost et al (2003) cite in support of their contention that conservatism has roots in motivated social cognition utilize the Wilson-Patterson Conservatism Scale as a measure of conservatism. This scale, devised in Great Britain in 1968, asks if respondents favor such things as “royalty,” “fluoridation,” and “empire building,” topics arguably tangential to most liberal-conservative distinctions in 21st century America. Other studies Jost and his colleagues cite in support of their hypothesis do not measure conservatism directly, but rather utilize measures such as social dominance orientation (SDO) (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle (1994) or right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) (Altemeyer (1981) as proxies for conservatism. While items from these scales (such as “What our country needs *most* is discipline, with everyone following our leaders in unity” from the RWA scale and “Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups” from the SDO scale) may or may not fit stereotypes of what conservatism is, these constructs are not in and of themselves measures of United States political conservatism. Mehrabian (1996), for example, using a measure of liberalism-conservatism designed for and validated on American samples, found a negative correlation between totalitarianism (an aspect of authoritarianism relating to political ideas and actions) and political conservatism.

The present study, therefore, looks at the relationship between conservatism and motivated social cognition using Mehrabian’s (1996) measure of conservatism-liberalism, a measure specifically devised for American samples. Our purpose is to examine whether Jost et al’s (2003) contention about the relationship between political orientation and motivated social cognition in an American sample is supported using a more construct-valid measure of conservatism.

# Method

## Participants and Procedure

Undergraduate student participants (123 women and 35 men; mean age = 19.74) from a Midwest liberal arts college completed the measures in this study for extra credit in an undergraduate psychology class. Subjects completed the Mehrabian (1996) conservatism-liberalism scale, responding on a -4 (*very strong disagreement*) to 4 (*very strong agreement*) scale to seven items, such as “I am politically more liberal than conservative” (reverse-scored); “In any election, given a choice between a Republican and a Democratic candidate, I will select the Republican over the Democrat”; and “Socialism has many advantages over capitalism” (reverse-scored). The Cronbach alpha reliability of the scale was acceptable (.81). The scale scores (in original scale units of -4 to +4) ranged from -3.29 on the liberal side of the spectrum to 3.86 on conservative side, and the scale mean was -.14, very close to the absolute center of the scale.

Participants also completed four other measures, including the Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale, a 10-item scale with a Cronbach alpha reliability of .89.

Subjects completed the Preference for Consistency Scale (Cialdini, Trost, & Newsom, 1995), which taps subjects’ desire to maintain consistent cognitions. The scale consists of 18 items (such as “I don’t like to appear as if I am inconsistent,” and “I’m uncomfortable holding two beliefs that are inconsistent”) answered on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*) scale. The alpha reliability of this scale for this study was .87.

The third scale subjects completed measured their need for cognition, a social-cognitive/individual-difference variable that refers to a person’s desire to engage in effortful thinking (Cacioppo, Petty, Feinstein, & Jarvis, 1996). Compared to a person low in need for cognition, for example, a person high in need for cognition would be more likely to enjoy solving complex rather than simple problems and would take greater pleasure in thinking abstractly. This 18-item scale, measured on a 1 (*extremely uncharacteristic*) to 5 (*extremely characteristic*) scale, had an alpha reliability of .88.

The final scale subjects completed was need for closure ( Kruglanski, Webster, & Klem, 1993), which consists of 5 subscales, each answered on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) scale. The first subscale, predictability (e.g., “I dislike unpredictable situations”) is comprised of 8 items and had an alpha coefficient of .78 in this study. The second closure subscale is decisiveness (e.g., “When faced with a problem I usually see the one best solution very quickly”), which was comprised of 7 items and had an alpha coefficient of .74. Ambiguity is the third closure subscale (e.g., “I don’t like situations that are uncertain”). The scale has 9 items and an alpha coefficient of .65. The fourth subscale is order (“I like to have a plan for everything and a place for everything”). The order subscale has 10 items and had an alpha coefficient of .83. The final need for closure subscale is closed-mindedness (e.g., “I dislike questions which could be answered in many different ways”), which is comprised of 8 items and which had an alpha coefficient of .68 in this study.

# Results

There were no significant sex differences on ratings on political orientation on any of the other variables measured in this study (all *p*’s > .15) except for the order subscale of the need for closure scale (women had a higher mean level of order than did men (44.2 vs. 39.1 on a 10-50 scale); *t*(156) = 3.34, *p* = .001).

Our central research question dealt with Jost et al’s (2003) contention that liberals and conservatives differ in underlying non-directional and existential psychological motivations. Table 1 presents means and standard deviations of these motivational variables broken down by political orientation (“liberals” were defined as individuals with an average conservatism-liberalism score of less than or equal to -1 on the -4 to +4 scale, “conservatives” were defined as those with an average score greater than or equal to 1, and “moderates” were those between -1 and 1). An analysis of variance (ANOVA) performed on the need for cognition data revealed a significant effect for political orientation (*F*(2,141) = 6.71, p = .002). A Tukey Honestly Significantly Difference post hoc test revealed that political moderates had lower levels of need for cognition than did liberals or conservatives. All other ANOVAs performed on the motivated cognition variables were non-significant (all *p*’s > .05).

Another way of examining the relationship between political orientation and motivated social cognition variables is to forego the classification into political groups (liberal, moderate, conservative) and look at correlations among the scales. Table 2 presents these correlational data. Need for cognition, self-esteem, and preference for consistency were uncorrelated with conservatism (all *p*’s > .20). Of the five need-for-closure subscales, “preference for order” was positively correlated with conservatism (*r*(156)=.19, *p*=.018), “predictability” approached traditional statistical significance (*r*(156)=.14, *p*=.084), and the others (“decisiveness,” “ambiguity,” and “closed-mindedness”) were uncorrelated with political orientation (all *p*’s > .13).

Consistent with the categorical data presented in Table 1, political extremism (being high on conservatism *or* liberalism) was positively correlated with need for cognition (*r*(156)=.32, *p<*.001) but not with any of the other variables (all *p*’s > .05).

# Discussion

The purpose of this study was to test Jost et al’s (2003) assertion that motivated social cognition is related to political orientation—specifically, that the motivation underlying political conservatism, but not political liberalism, is to arrive at a particular belief irrespective or independent of the content of that belief. Conservatives’ presumed intolerance for ambiguity, for example, would compel them to arrive at clear and absolute answers to questions irrespective of the nature of the questions or the consequences of arriving at those conclusions. As discussed in the introduction, many of the measures used by Jost et al to support their assertion use measures of conservatism not appropriate for American samples, or measures that are proxies for conservatism but not measures of conservatism per se.

Conclusions based on a single study are necessarily tentative, but we found weak support for the hypothesis of motivated social cognition as the basis of differences between liberals and conservatives. Conservatism, as measured by a scale that asks specifically about the American political arena (attitudes about Republicans and Democrats, for example) and about voting behaviors, was significantly correlated with only one subscale of need for closure, and not at all with need for cognition, self-esteem, or preference for consistency.

Caution must of course be exercised about generalizing these results based on a sample of college students to the wider American population. This external validity issue is also one that plagues many of the studies Jost et al (2003) cite in support of their motivated cognition hypothesis, however. While generalization issues are therefore relevant, it is not inappropriate to compare the present research to results from previous research in this area.

Ultimately, our results tentatively suggest that using measures of political orientation validated on American samples may provide a different picture of liberal-conservative differences—especially differences in what motivates people to be liberal or conservative—than the picture provided by using proxy measures of conservatism or measures designed to tap political orientation in different countries.

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Table 1 Motivated Social Cognition Means as a Function of Political Orientation

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Political Orientation | | | | |
|  | Liberal (n = 42) |  | Moderate (n= 70) |  | Conservative (n=32) |
| Need for Cognition | 64.5 (10.5)a |  | 57.6 (12.2)b |  | 64.5 (10.2)a |
| Preference for Consistency | 104.7 (16.8) |  | 107.5 (19.5) |  | 111.3 (18.6) |
| Order | 41.3 (9.8) |  | 43.2 (7.3) |  | 45.2 (7.9) |
| Predictability | 27.9 (6.5) |  | 29.3 (6.0) |  | 30.0 (5.4) |
| Decisiveness | 22.8 (6.7) |  | 25.3 (5.0) |  | 23.5 (5.7) |
| Ambiguity | 37.5 (6.1) |  | 37.2 (5.1) |  | 38.7 (4.7) |
| Closed-Mindedness | 23.5 (6.1) |  | 24.5 (5.3) |  | 24.8 (4.8) |
| Self-Esteem | 29.0 (8.2) |  | 29.2 (6.7) |  | 30.2 (6.4) |

Note: Means in same row that have a different subscript differ at the *p* < .05 level of significance. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Table 2. Correlations Between Conservatism and Measures of Motivated Social Cognition

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Conservatism | -.01 | .13 | .19b | .14a | .06 | .09 | .12 | .07 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2. Need for Cognition |  | .03 | -.14a | -.33d | .07 | -.26c | -.50d | .13a |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3. Preference for Consist. |  |  | .42d | .50d | .03 | .39d | .05 | .08 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4. Closure--Order |  |  |  | .49d | .17b | .39d | .16b | .18b |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 5. Closure—Predictability |  |  |  |  | -.07 | .53d | .32d | -.09 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 6. Closure—Decisiveness |  |  |  |  |  | -.11 | .01 | .37d |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 7. Closure—Ambiguity |  |  |  |  |  |  | .34d | -.21c |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 8. Closure—Closed-Mind |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 9. Self-Esteem |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

a: *p* < .10

b: *p* < .05

c: *p* < .01

d: *p* < .001