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## Political Orientation and Beliefs About Liberty, Justice, and Personal Responsibility

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Political conservatives and liberals differ not only in their support of different policies and programs; they also differ in the stereotypes they have of each other. Liberal columnist Michael Lind (2012), for example, asks “why do conservatives hate freedom?”, while conservative columnist George Will (2010) states that “today, conservatives tend to stress freedom [while] liberals today tend to stress equality.”

The proposed reasons for these liberal-conservative differences in attitudes and stereotypes vary, from Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway (2003), who maintain that political conservatism stems from motivated social cognition, to Morgan, Mullen, and Skitka (2010), who propose that some of the differences between liberals and conservatives are based on differences in values. More broadly, Graham, Haidt, and Nosek (2009) provide evidence that political conservatives and liberals emphasize different intuition-based moral foundations which subsequently lead to different views and positions on issues.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the degree to which liberals and conservatives differ on several core political/social values—liberty/equality, justice/compassion, and environment/personal responsibility—differences that may themselves give direction to the endorsement of specific policies or programs.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

Undergraduate student participants (216 women and 116 men) from two Midwest liberal arts colleges completed the measures in this study for 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”; “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.” For the purpose of making categorical analyses, “liberals” in this study were defined as individuals with an average conservatism-liberalism score of less than or equal to -1 on the -4 to +4 scale ( $n=60$ ), “conservatives” were defined as those with an average score greater than or equal to 1 ( $n=96$ ), and “moderates” were those between -1 and 1 ( $n=175$ ).

Subjects also completed a three-item measure of social-political values. Item 1 explained the difference between equality and liberty, and asked subjects to indicate a preference if the two were in conflict. The second question asked subjects to choose their preference between justice and compassion when those values were in conflict. The third asked subjects their view of whether people’s behaviors were better understood as resulting from their own choices/decisions or from their situation/environment. Each question was answered on a 1-6 scale with the respective political values anchoring the ends (see Table 1).

Finally, subjects completed a measure of need for cognition (NFC), 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. Comprising 18 items, the NFC was measured on a 1 (*extremely uncharacteristic*) to 5 (*extremely characteristic*) scale.

## Results

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the liberty/equality item was statistically significant ( $F(2, 329)=6.86, p=.001$ ). A Tukey HSD post hoc test revealed that conservatives and moderates had a greater preference for liberty, while liberals emphasized equality. (see Figure 1).

A second analysis of variance on the compassion/justice item was also significant ( $F(2, 329)=5.00, p=.007$ ). A post hoc test revealed that, as with liberty/equality, there was not a significant difference between conservatives and moderates, both of whom indicated a greater preference for justice than did liberals, who emphasized compassion.

Finally, an ANOVA examining views on the cause of individuals' behaviors—environment vs. person—was significant ( $F(2, 329)=10.53, p<.001$ ). The post hoc test revealed that liberals were most inclined to indicate the environment as the cause of behavior, while conservatives emphasized personal responsibility. Political moderates were in between, significantly different from both liberals and conservatives.

There were no significant differences among the political orientation groups on NFC ( $F(3, 328)=.46, p=.63$ ; liberal  $\bar{X} = 62.3$ ; moderate  $\bar{X} = 60.7$ ; conservative  $\bar{X} = 61.4$  on a scale ranging from 18-90), nor was NFC correlated with any of the three value questions (all  $r$ 's  $<.09$ , all  $p$ 's  $>.13$ ).

## Discussion

Political conservatives and liberals differ on three values that may underlie more specific social/political beliefs. Relative to liberals, conservatives emphasize liberty, justice, and a view of people as responsible for their behaviors, while liberals emphasize equality, compassion, and a view of the person as shaped by the situation, while political moderates tend to endorse views that are either between liberals and conservatives or which are statistically indistinct from conservatives.

The desire to engage in effortful thought, or need for cognition, was not related to the three social/political beliefs, nor did liberals, conservatives, and moderates differ on that construct.

These data provide further evidence that policy differences between liberals and conservatives are reflective of underlying differences in the values that conservatives and liberal hold. Further research should explore how these values relate to the established conservative-liberal moral foundations differences discussed by Graham et al. (2009).

## References

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Table 1

*Items on the Political Values Questionnaire*

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***Liberty and Equality***

*Equality* and *liberty* are valued in our society. Sometimes, however, these two values conflict with each other. At one extreme, for example, if everyone was forced to be totally equal to everyone else in every way—the size and type of house, the size of car, the amount and style of clothing, the amount and type of food consumed—there would be no choice, no liberty. At the other extreme, with total liberty comes inequality: some will choose jobs that pay more than jobs others have, and people with greater ability, skill, and motivation will be able to acquire more money and material possessions than those with less ability and skill—some of whom may be reduced to living in poverty. Since equality and liberty, both prized and valued, sometimes conflict, sometimes a choice must be made for one of these values at the expense of the other.

*In general*, when such a choice between *equality* and *liberty* must be made, which do you think should be chosen? Please use the following scale to indicate your preference.

***Justice and Compassion***

Two other qualities valued in our society are *justice* and *compassion*. We often seek justice in our communities when someone violates a law or some other rule or norm, while at other times we respond with compassion to such violations. Justice and compassion do not always conflict with each other, but there are times when those who seek justice in a particular situation are in opposition to those who seek a more compassionate response.

*In general*, when such a conflict between *compassion* and *justice* occurs, which do you think governments should chose? Please use the following scale to indicate your preference.

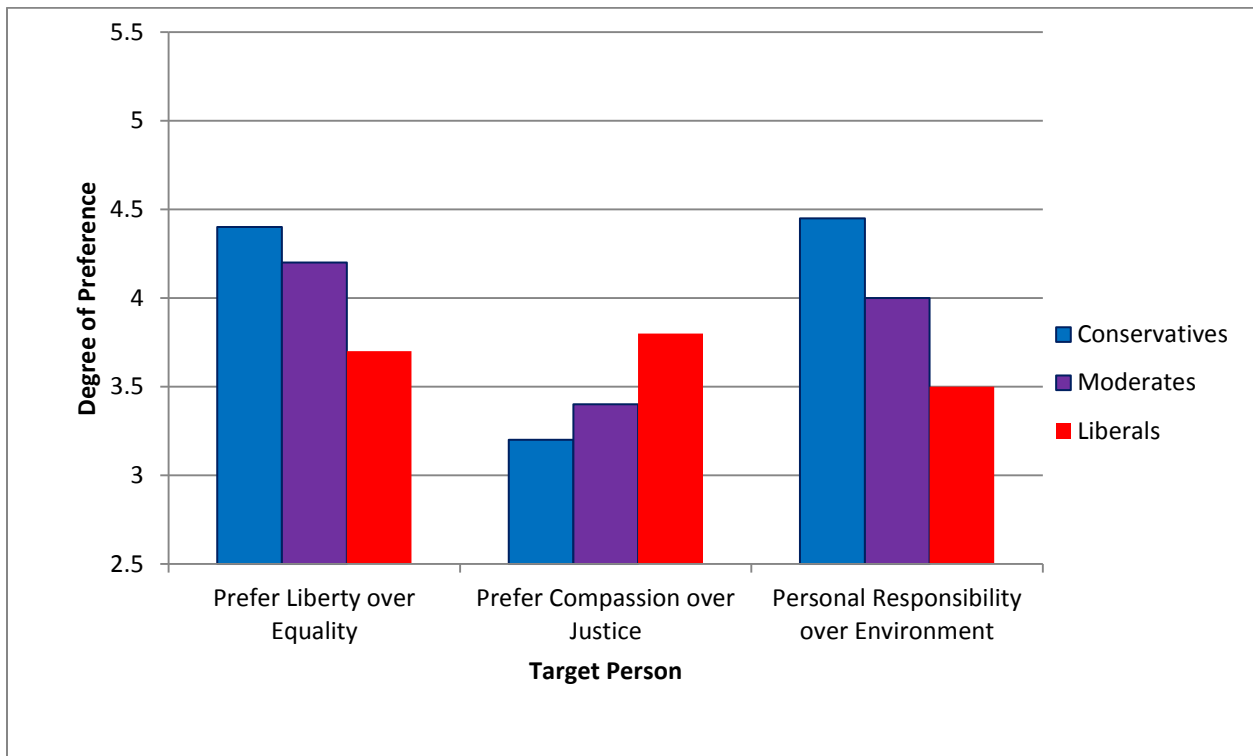
***Personal Responsibility and Environment/Situation***

When people break the law or do other things that get them in trouble, there are a variety of things that can be said to cause those behaviors. Some of those causes relate to *personal responsibility*—that is, the person is the one responsible for choosing to do those wrong things. Other times, though, we are aware of circumstances in a person's life that can lead him or her to do things he or she would not otherwise do—that is, the person's *environment or situation* can lead the person to do those things. Many behaviors we see in others are probably a combination of personal responsibility and the environment or situation, but sometimes we have to make choices about which type of cause—personal responsibility or environment/situation—is the greater cause.

*In general*, when you look at someone else's behavior and you have to make a choice between *personal responsibility* and *environment/situation* as the cause of that behavior, which type of cause are you more likely to make? Please use the following scale to indicate your preference.

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Note: All three items were on a 1-6 scale, where “1” corresponded to (respectively) “In general, I strongly prefer equality over liberty”; “In general, I strongly prefer justice over compassion”; and “In general, I strongly believe that environment and situation cause people's behaviors,” and a “6” corresponded to a strong preference for the other anchor (liberty; justice, and personal responsibility, respectively).



*Figure 1.* Preferences of liberals, moderates, and conservatives for liberty vs. equality, compassion vs. justice, and personal responsibility vs. environment as cause of behavior.