



Conservatism predicts lapses from vegetarian/vegan diets to meat consumption (through lower social justice concerns and social support)



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ABSTRACT

Lapses from vegetarian and vegan (i.e., veg*n) food choices to meat consumption are very common, suggesting that sustaining veg*nism is challenging. But little is known about why people return to eating animals after initially deciding to avoid meat consumption. Several potential explanatory factors include personal inconvenience, meat cravings, awkwardness in social settings, or health/nutrition concerns. Here we test the degree to which political ideology predicts lapsing to meat consumption. Past research demonstrates that political ideology predicts present levels of meat consumption, whereby those higher in right-wing ideologies eat more animals, even after controlling for their hedonistic liking of meat (e.g., Dhont & Hodson, 2014). To what extent might political ideology predict whether one has lapsed from veg*n foods back to meat consumption? In a largely representative US community sample (N = 1313) of current and former veg*ns, those higher (vs. lower) in conservatism exhibited significantly greater odds of being a former than current veg*n, even after controlling for age, education, and gender. This ideology-lapsing relation was mediated (i.e., explained) by those higher (vs. lower) in conservatism: (a) adopting a veg*n diet for reasons less centered in justice concerns (animal rights, environment, feeding the poor); and (b) feeling socially unsupported in their endeavor. In contrast, factors such as differential meat craving or lifestyle inconvenience played little mediational role. These findings demonstrate that ideology and justice concerns are particularly relevant to understanding resilience in maintaining veg*n food choices. Implications for understanding why people eat meat, and how to develop intervention strategies, are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In much of the Western world, the adoption of vegetarian (meat free) and vegan (animal-product free) diets are on the rise. In the US, for example, a recent Gallup poll found that 5% of Americans describe themselves as vegetarian, with a further 2% considering themselves vegan (Newport, 2012). And this trend is growing rapidly; an Ipsos Mori poll in the UK observed a 350% increase over the past decade in those identifying as vegan (Saner, 2016). Such trends are gaining cultural currency, with an increase in celebrity endorsement, and the declaration of January as *Veganuary*, a month in which people strive to reduce their meat consumption (Doward,

2016). Consider also that, in the “What’s Hot in 2011” poll by the (US) National Restaurant Association, the majority of 1500 chefs earmarked vegan food a hot trend (*Vegan diets become more popular, 2011*). Moreover, consumers are increasingly putting pressure on businesses to offer animal-free products. For instance, beer-maker Guinness has bowed to public pressure to manufacture its famous stout without using animal by-products, after more than 250 years of its traditional brewing practices that involved using fish bladders as a filtering agent (*Guinness goes vegan, 2015*). With the adoption of “veg*n” (vegetarian/vegan) food choices gathering momentum, there is a pressing need to better understand the psychological factors underlying why many people fail in their own commitment to avoiding meat.

Several factors predict positivity toward veg*n diets. Experiments have shown, for instance, that asking people to eat meat (vs. nuts) lowers their moral concern for consumed animals, and lowers the perception of mental states in such animals (Loughnan, Haslam,

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& Bastian, 2010). There are also demographic and individual difference predictors. For instance, large-scale nationally representative data indicate that women (vs. men) are more likely to be vegetarian (Gale, Deary, Schoon, & Batty, 2006). Relatedly, eating meat is frequently associated with masculinity (Ruby & Heine, 2011; Thomas, 2016), leading some feminist theorists to draw direct links between animal exploitation and sexism (e.g., Adams, 2015; see also Rothgerber, 2013). Others have observed that those with more education or with higher IQ scores are more likely to become veg*n later in life (Gale et al., 2006).

Perhaps more intriguingly, research has also established a consistent relationship between (political) ideology and attitudes toward animal exploitation. For instance, those on the right (vs. left) are significantly more likely to consume meat and/or support other forms of animal exploitation (Allen & Ng, 2003; Allen, Wilson, Ng, & Dunne, 2000; Dhont & Hodson, 2014; Dhont, Hodson, & Leite, 2016; Dhont, Hodson, Costello, & MacInnis, 2014; Dietz, Frisch, Kalof, Stern, & Guagnano, 1995; Hyers, 2006; Ruby, 2012). In two relatively large Belgian community samples, Dhont and Hodson (2014) also isolated two key mechanisms responsible for explaining the left-right divide in animal consumption: Those on the right were more likely to consider vegetarianism a threat to culture/society, and were more likely to endorse human supremacy over animals. These relations held even after statistically controlling for the liking of meat; left-right differences in meat consumption were not simply due to differences in the hedonistic value in meat eating, but rather are relevant to dominance and superiority beliefs. Such findings offer novel insights into the reasons why people eat certain foods in their present lives, and highlight ideology as a less intuitive but consistent predictor.

Given that ideology plays a role in predicting meat consumption generally, we consider whether ideology plays a role in predicting the *return to meat consumption* among those who have, at some point in life, attempted to become veg*n. Surprisingly little is known about factors predicting a lapse back to meat consumption. Arguably, sustaining a non-meat diet requires considerable restraint, particularly if doing so for non-moral reasons (e.g., health) as opposed to for the sake of animals (Rozin, Markwith, & Stoess, 1997). Moreover, adopting a veg*n diet requires the development of new habits, learning of new skills (e.g., food preparation), the curbing of cravings for meat, and navigating new and awkward social interactions (e.g., being presented with a meat-based meal in a social setting). Consider an unpublished study (Herzog, 2011) of former vegetarians ($n = 77$), most of whom (57%) had become vegetarian for reasons of animal ethics, with others doing so for health (15%) or environmental (15%) reasons. Among the reasons listed for returning to meat consumption were social awkwardness, stigma, inconvenience, and meat cravings. Recent polls confirm that remaining vegetarian or vegan is indeed challenging. In a 2005 CBS News national poll ($n = 936$), three times as many people identified as *former* than current vegetarians (Alfano, 2005).

To what extent might psychological factors explain why (some) people fail to meet their goal of not eating meat? In the present investigation we consider several factors that can theoretically predict lapsing to meat consumption. Given the role of ideology in predicting the one's *present* levels of meat consumption (e.g., Dhont & Hodson, 2014; see; Ruby, 2012), we focus on whether ideology can predict *lapsing* from veg*n food choices. With the correlation between ideology and meat consumption typically in the 0.20 (Allen et al., 2000) or 0.25–0.30 (Dhont & Hodson, 2014; Studies 1–2) range, the relation between ideology and meat consumption is not close to perfect (i.e., 1.0). Even though *on average* those on the right consume more meat, some on the right are likely to eat little or no meat, and some on the left are likely to eat considerable amounts of meat. Presently unknown is whether those on the right

(vs. left) are at greater odds of lapsing back to meat consumption. We observe that those on the right, on average, consume more meat than those on the left, and may do so for reasons of dominance (e.g., human supremacy and entitlement over animals) and as pushback against vegetarian threat (e.g., beliefs that vegetarianism jeopardizes cultural customs and traditions, and negatively impacts the economy). We predicted that those relatively higher (vs. lower) in conservatism are at greater odds of having lapsed back to eating meat. In our analyses, we also consider potential confounds that can be related to ideology or meat consumption (e.g., respondent sex, education, or age) to isolate the ideology effect and determine its magnitude. To the extent that conservatism may predict greater odds of lapsing to meat-eating, we also seek to understand *why* this might be the case.

1.1. Rationale and hypotheses

Our goal is to understand the predictors of lapsing to meat consumption. We focus on political ideology given its relation to meat consumption (e.g., Dhont & Hodson, 2014), but we also consider demographic variables such as age, gender, and education. To the extent that political ideology predicts lapsing, we seek to understand *why* (i.e., the mediating processes that could account for this left-right difference) and the degree to which it operates through various mediators. There exist several reasons why those higher (vs. lower) in conservatism might have greater odds of having relapsed to meat consumption. Some of these presumably concern the reasons why an individual had attempted a veg*n diet in the first place. Adopting a veg*n diet for reasons of justice (e.g., animal rights, environmental concern) will theoretically sustain a meat-free diet. In such a case, one is guided by values to not harm others. Yet, animal rights and related concerns are, on average, relatively more central to left-leaning ideology. Thus, if conservatives exhibit greater odds of relapsing, it might be due to (or explained by) lower endorsement of social justice motives as a reason for having previously adopted a veg*n diet. We also consider whether those on the right versus left differ in their personal reasons for not eating meat, or in terms of experience peer/cultural pressure to become veg*n, in ways that might account for a conservatism-lapse relation. Other reasons that might explain left-right differences in the odds of lapsing might reflect differential experience of several risk factors. For example, it is possible that those on the right (vs. left) might crave (or have craved) meat more, given their higher levels of meat consumption on average, with this mediating process explaining left-right differences in lapsing to meat eating. Likewise, those on the right versus left might differ in feelings of insufficient social support. In particular, those on the right might not experience sufficient support to the extent that they are more likely to associate with people with similar ideologies. We also consider if left-right differences in lapsing to meat consumption might be explained by perceived health concerns or displeasure with lifestyle inconveniences. Thus, we not only ask whether political ideology predicts the odds of having lapsed to meat eating among those attempting a veg*n diet, but we posit and test several unique mediation processes that might explain any observed left-right divide.

We predicted that those relatively higher (vs. lower) in conservatism will exhibit greater odds of lapsing to meat consumption (H1). We also tested whether ideology predicts lapsing above other demographic variables, such as age, education, and gender, each of which could be potential confounds. We also predicted that a conservatism-lapsing relation might be explained (i.e., mediated) by several factors, especially: (a) lower justice motivations underlying initial veg*n diet decisions (H2); greater meat craving (H3); and (d) lower perceived social support (H4). We held these

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