



## Different political systems suppress or facilitate the impact of intelligence on how you vote: A comparison of the U.S. and Denmark

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Intelligence  
Vote choice  
Ideology  
Cross-cultural psychology

### ABSTRACT

Intelligence is rarely studied as a predictor of vote choice, and at first glance our data supports this neglect: In samples from the U.S. and Denmark ( $N_s = 1419$  and  $953$ ), intelligence does not predict the standard operationalization of vote choice in which parties are placed on a single left-vs-right dimension. (Standardized coefficients predicting right-wing vote choice were  $0.05$  and  $-0.03$ , respectively.) However, this apparent non-effect in fact reflects approximately equal and opposite effects of intelligence on vote choice as transmitted through social and economic ideology. In both countries, higher ability predicts left-wing social and right-wing economic views. The impact of intelligence on vote choice is thus most visible in true multi-party systems like Denmark, in which parties do not simply pair similar levels of social and economic conservatism, but instead provide diverse combinations of social and economic ideology. Comparing the parties closest to representing authoritarian egalitarianism (social-right plus economic-left) and libertarianism (social-left plus economic-right), we observed a  $0.9$  SD intelligence gap.

### 1. Intelligence and vote choice

Supporters of a losing side of an election are often quick to invoke a straightforward explanation for their defeat: those voting for the opposing side are cognitively deficient. Surprisingly little research exists to help evaluate such explanations, however. To be sure, a vast literature has explored various contributors to vote choice, having identified an extensive list of predictors: ideology, personality, sociodemographic factors, and many more (Krosnick, Visser, & Harder, 2010). An even larger body of research has explored the various consequences of intelligence, demonstrating it to be one of the single most potent predictors of major life outcomes across domains - not only in the educational and occupational realms but also in health, criminality, social relationships, prejudice, and ideology (Gottfredson, 1997, 2003; Jensen, 1998; Van Hiel, Onraet, & De Pauw, 2010). It is thus counter-intuitive that these two literatures appear to have intersected only three times (Choma & Hanoch, 2017; Deary, Batty, & Gale, 2008; Meisenberg, 2015).

These studies, as well as some of the results presented below, may indicate a reason for the sparse literature: intelligence and vote choice at first glance appear to bear little relationship, perhaps motivating researchers to leave relevant data in the file drawer. Choma and

Hanoch (2017) observed no significant difference between Trump and Clinton supporters on a very brief and self-administered IQ measure, and Meisenberg (2015) reports that differences in the cognitive ability scores of those voting for Republican and Democratic presidential candidates tended to be modest (equivalent to 1–2 IQ points). Deary et al. (2008) observed a comparably small difference between voters for the two major UK parties (Labour and the Conservatives), though a non-trivial ability edge was observed for Liberal and Green supporters.

Such results might be considered surprising given that a substantial research literature has demonstrated a clear link between intelligence and political ideology (Onraet et al., 2015), but recent results on the topic points to a potential resolution of the apparent puzzle. Vote choice results are commonly represented as differing along a general left-right dimension, with right-wing parties espousing free markets and social traditionalism, and left-wing parties supporting economic redistribution and social progressivism. However, contemporary research suggests that there are *two* meaningful ideological dimensions underlying this general left-right divide (Feldman & Johnston, 2014; Kriesi et al., 2006) and it increasingly appears that these two dimensions of ideology relate in opposite ways to intelligence: higher ability scores are linked most clearly with left-wing social views, but also with economic conservatism (Carl, 2014b; Kemmelmeier, 2008; Mollerstrom & Seim, 2014;

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Onraet et al., 2015; Oskarsson et al., 2014). Accordingly, IQ's relevance to vote choice may be obscured when the differences between political parties are such that each party adopts a position on one of these dimensions that closely approximates the left-ward or right-ward degree of its position on the other dimension.

The present study addresses this possibility directly. Denmark has a true multi-party system in which different parties offer multiple different combinations of economic and social ideology – that is, party differences do not exclusively reflect simultaneous shifts in the same “left versus right” direction in both the social and economic domain, but instead more fully represent the two-dimensional ideological space. This allows us to test the effect of intelligence on party choice when conceptualized not as capturing differences between what we currently think of as “left-wing” and “right-wing” parties, but when conceptualized as differing along an axis separating what we might label authoritarian egalitarianism (social conservatism paired with economic redistribution) and libertarianism (social leftism paired with free-market ideology). Under such a representation of party differences, the effect of intelligence on vote choice should be substantially increased when compared to the more typically considered “left-right” representation. A study of ideological self-placement provides some initial support for this expectation: Iyer and colleagues (Iyer, Koleva, Graham, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012) reported that whereas scores on the Cognitive Reflection Task were fairly similar for self-identified liberals and conservatives, libertarian self-identifiers scored more highly than either group.

Recent events suggest such a result is hardly an abstract intellectual exercise: candidates and parties emphasizing authoritarian egalitarian themes have experienced rapid increases in electoral success in several Western democracies, including in the most recent national elections in both the U.S. and Denmark. Although Libertarian parties have yet to achieve notable electoral success in either country, a recent poll reporting a third of young Americans self-identify as libertarian points to the potentially increased relevance of the authoritarian-egalitarianism versus libertarian axis (Becker, 2016).

## 2. Study 1

### 2.1. Participants

2566 American residents completed a survey via MTurk between 19 September and 2 October 2014 in exchange for financial compensation. MTurkers are fairly representative compared to nationally representative samples such as CPS and ANES, although as with our own MTurk sample they are more likely to vote for Democratic candidates and are usually also younger (Mean Age = 37.1; SD = 11.5) (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012; Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Mason & Suri, 2012). Data from this sample was collected primarily for a different research study (concerning political efficacy, education and personality traits; (Rasmussen & Nørgaard, 2018), but no previous report has analyzed the interrelationships among the constructs evaluated here.

Participants were not allowed to skip questions in the assessment. However, because the present research concerns which party a person will vote for and not whether an individual will vote, only respondents who specified (when asked) the party for which they voted (N = 1419) had provided the needed information on the dependent variable; all other participants were dropped from the analyses.

### 2.2. Measures

To ease understandability of effect sizes all results across both samples are presented in terms of standardized effects. Full question wording for both samples can be found in Appendix 1.

#### 2.2.1. Cognitive ability

To measure cognitive ability we use 16 items from the International Cognitive Ability Resource (ICAR) pool (Condon & Revelle, 2014). The ICAR consists of four subtests: Letter series, verbal reasoning, matrices and geometric figures. Alpha reliability is 0.85 for this measure. Previous research has found that scores on the ICAR as completed in online settings provide a reasonably close if imperfect parallel to other measures of ability (Condon & Revelle, 2014), and the ICAR sum scores from the present study (M = 8.64, SD = 3.44, from a theoretical range of 0 to 16) give no indication that participants were particularly prone to treat the test trivially. To measure intelligence using the ICAR we used the first principal component (accounting for 51% of the variance) from a principal component analysis using the four subtests. There are no marked ceiling or floor effects (see Fig. A1 in Appendix 2) and the measure is only very slightly skewed (skewness = -0.06).

#### 2.2.2. Political attitudes

Attitudes were assessed using a slightly abbreviated form of the political ideology assessment described by Feldman and Johnston (2014), completing all three social attitude items and three of the four economic attitude items. (“Assistance to the poor” was not assessed, for brevity.) Despite using only three items the economic scale had adequate alpha reliability (0.84), using items such as “Some people feel the government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living. Others think the government should just let each person get ahead on their own.” The alpha reliability for the social measure was lower (0.62), using items such as “Recently there has been a lot of talk about women's rights. Some people feel that women should have an equal role with men in running business, industry, and government. Others feel that a woman's place is in the home.”

#### 2.2.3. Vote choice

The only vote choice question respondents completed pertained to their vote in the 2008 U.S. Presidential election, where they indicated one of the following: Barack Obama (N = 1006), John McCain (N = 413), another (unspecified) candidate (N = 127), that they did not remember (N = 33), or that they did not vote (N = 466). As noted above, we only analyze data from participants providing one of the first two responses. In order to perform comparable analyses in both the two-party U.S. system and multi-party Danish system, we transform these responses into a dimension assessing general left-right vote choice, following the procedure of Alvarez and Nagler (1998). Specifically, we compute a score for each party on each ideology measure by averaging the scores of the respondents who indicated they voted for that party, and then summing the economic and social party scores together. This creates a single dimension used as the primary dependent measure for our analyses.

Using the ideology of a party's voters to characterize the ideology of the party facilitates analyzing non-traditional representations of party differences (e.g. along an authoritarian egalitarianism/libertarianism dimension), as we do in Study 2. Further, it produces a dimension that, where comparable, is highly similar to coding the ideology of a party based on statements in the party platform: in the two-party U.S. system this cannot be meaningfully analyzed, but for Study 2 (Denmark) we correlated our DV with an alternative version produced by scoring parties not based on the ideology of respondents but on the coding of party platforms provided by the Comparative Manifesto Project (Werner, Lacerwell, & Volkens, 2011). The general left-right measure from this project (the “RILE” variable) correlated 0.71 with our measure. Analyses using the “RILE” variable rather than our DV (available upon request) provided no substantive changes to the analyses presented here.

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