



Short Communication

Cognitive ability and political beliefs in the United States



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ABSTRACT

Recent evidence indicates that cognitive ability has a monotonically positive relation to socially liberal beliefs and some measures of fiscally conservative beliefs, and that it has a non-monotonic relation to other measures of fiscally conservative beliefs. This study examines the relationship between cognitive ability and political beliefs in a recent, nationally representative sample of American adults. It finds that cognitive ability is positively associated with both socially liberal beliefs and fiscally conservative beliefs. The relationships with socially liberal beliefs are monotonically positive. In contrast, some of the relationships with fiscally conservative beliefs are non-monotonic: Americans of highest ability are less fiscally conservative than those of high ability. The association between cognitive ability and a dimension of fiscal conservatism is reduced substantially when controlling for socio-economic position.

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1. Introduction

Numerous studies have found that individuals with higher cognitive ability tend to be more socially liberal on issues such as gay marriage, abortion, working women, free speech and marijuana legalisation (Deary, Batty, & Gale, 2008; Kimmelmeier, 2008; Stankov, 2009; Schoon, Cheng, Gale, Batty, & Deary, 2010; Kanazawa, 2010; Heaven, Ciarrochi, & Leeson, 2011; Hodson & Busseri, 2012; Carl, 2014). At the same time, some studies have found that individuals with higher cognitive ability tend to be more fiscally conservative¹ in areas such as redistribution of income and government intervention in the economy (Caplan & Miller, 2010; Carl, 2014; Mollerstrom & Seim, 2014; Oskarsson et al., 2014; Rindermann, Flores-Mendoza, & Woodley, 2012). On the other hand, Solon (2014) argues that there is actually U-shaped relationship between cognitive ability and leftism such that people with very high cognitive ability tend to be more left-wing than those of only high ability. In support of this argument, he points out that academics and other scholarly elites lean overwhelmingly toward the Democratic Party in the United States. Responding to Solon's (2014) article, Carl (2015) finds that cognitive ability has a pronounced U-shaped relation to some measures of leftism, a slightly U-shaped relation to others, and a monotonic negative relation to still others.

The finding that cognitive ability has a positive relation to both socially liberal beliefs and at least some measures of fiscally conservative beliefs is consistent with evidence that a single ideological axis (from left to right, or from liberal to conservative) is insufficient to characterise the distribution of political beliefs within countries such as the United States (Carl, 2015; Feldman & Johnston, 2014). What's more, cognitive ability is not the only psychological trait that has been identified with this pattern of associations: Malka, Soto, Inzlicht, and Lelkes (2014) find that need for security and certainty is positively associated with socially conservative attitudes, but negatively associated with right-wing economic attitudes. The present study examines the relationship between cognitive ability and political beliefs in a recent, nationally representative sample of American adults.

2. Method

2.1. Data

Data are from the 2012 wave of the American National Election Study (ANES): a biennial/triennial survey concerned with Americans' political attitudes and behaviours. In the 2012 wave, two separate nationally representative samples were collected, one via face-to-face interviewing, and one via the internet. The present study only utilises the face-to-face sample because one of the cognitive ability measures is not available for the internet sample. Respondents in the face-to-face sample were interviewed twice: before and then after the

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presidential election. Precise details of the sampling design employed for the 2012 wave of the ANES are provided in the survey's codebook (ANES, 2014a).

2.2. Measurement of cognitive ability

Two measures of cognitive ability are available in the 2012 wave of the ANES. The first is a 10-item vocabulary test in which the respondent must identify which of five phrases supplies the correct definition of a given word. It was administered to respondents once, during the pre-election interviews. In general, vocabulary tests load more strongly onto the crystallised factor of general intelligence than onto the fluid factor (Cattell, 1963). They tend to have high heritabilities and high *g*-loadings, relative to other subtests (Jensen, 2001). For a longer discussion of the measure's validity, see Caplan and Miller (2010).

The second measure of cognitive ability is a rating by the interviewer of the respondent's apparent intelligence. In particular, the interviewer assesses whether the respondent's intelligence appears to be "very low", "fairly low", "average", "fairly high" or "very high". These categories were re-coded from '1' to '5', respectively. Because assessments were made during both the pre-election and post-election interviews, I utilise each respondent's average rating. Encouragingly, the Pearson correlation between the two ratings is strong, namely $r = .69$ ($p < 0.001$, $n = 1906$)². Whilst the measure obviously relies on the interviewer's subjective judgement, studies have demonstrated that observer ratings of intelligence are positively correlated with actual test scores (Borkenau & Liebler, 1993; Hall, Andrzejewski, Murphy, Mast, & Feinstein, 2008). Furthermore, it was recently employed by Urbatsch (2012) in a successful replication of the association between cognitive ability and electoral turnout.

Because both measures of cognitive ability are somewhat crude, I combine the two using principal components analysis (PCA). Specifically, I extract the first principal component from a PCA on vocabulary test score, measured from 0 to 10, and average interviewer rating, measured from 1 to 5. This component had an eigenvalue of 1.41 and explained 71% of the variance. It is approximately normally distributed, with a very slight positive skew (mean = 0, median = -0.09). The Pearson correlation between the two original measures is moderate-to-large, namely $r = .39$ ($p < 0.001$, $n = 1862$).

2.3. Measurement of political beliefs

Seven measures of socially liberal beliefs are utilised. These encompass attitudes toward gay marriage, abortion, immigration, marijuana legalisation, the death penalty, torture, and government wiretaps. Twenty-four measures of fiscally conservative beliefs are utilised. These encompass attitudes toward the size and scope of government, the free market, business regulation, income redistribution, government spending, the Affordable Care Act, the budget deficit, the top rate of income tax, and affirmative action. Details about each measure can be found in the survey's pre-election and post-election questionnaires (ANES, 2014b, 2014c).

3. Results

The first column in Table 1 displays correlations between cognitive ability and seven measures of socially liberal beliefs. In all seven cases, the correlation is positive and statistically significant.

Table 1

Relationships between cognitive ability and seven measures of socially liberal beliefs.

	Correlation with cognitive ability	Quadratic term: significant <i>t</i> -test, sign	Most socially liberal decile
Favour legal recognition of gay relationships (1–3)	.09*	Yes, positive	10 th
Favour legal abortion (1–9)	.14***	No	10 th
Favour increasing immigration (1–5)	.20***	Yes, positive	10 th
Favour legalising marijuana (1–3)	.08**	No	10 th
Oppose the death penalty (1–2)	.13***	Yes, positive	10 th
Oppose torture of terrorist suspects (1–3)	.09*	No	10 th
Government wiretaps have gone too far (1–3)	.16***	No	10 th

Notes: Estimates are from weighted OLS models. *n*'s range from 1646 to 1841. Significance levels, based on linearized standard errors: *5%, **1%, ***0.1%. Tests on quadratic terms were conducted at the 5% level.

The second column in Table 1 shows whether or not a quadratic term in cognitive ability enters significantly at the 5% level, along with its sign if it does so. In three cases, the quadratic term is positive and significant, which implies that the effect of cognitive ability becomes stronger at higher levels of cognitive ability. The third column in Table 1 indicates which decile of cognitive ability is the most socially liberal on average. In all seven cases, social liberalism peaks in the 10th decile.

The first column in Table 2 displays correlations between cognitive ability and twenty-four measures of fiscally conservative beliefs. In twenty-two cases, the correlation is positive, and in nineteen cases, positive and significant. In one case, namely attitude toward federal spending on science and technology, the correlation is significantly negative. The second column in Table 2 shows whether or not a quadratic term in cognitive ability enters significantly at the 5% level, along with its sign if it does so. In eight cases, the quadratic term is negative and significant, while in four cases it is positive and significant. The third column in Table 2 indicates which decile of cognitive ability is the most fiscally conservative on average. In sixteen cases, fiscal conservatism peaks before the 10th decile. The difference in average fiscal conservatism between the most fiscally conservative decile and the 10th decile is significant at the 5% level in two cases: attitude toward public expenditure on welfare, and attitude toward affirmative action at work.

A dimension of social liberalism was obtained by extracting the first principal component from a PCA on the seven measures of socially liberal beliefs. This component had an eigenvalue of 1.73 and explained 25% of the variance; all factors loadings had positive signs. Likewise, a dimension of fiscal conservatism was obtained by extracting the first principal component from a PCA on the twenty-four measures of fiscally conservative beliefs. This component had an eigenvalue of 6.10 and also explained 25% of the variance; all factor loadings except one (attitude toward public spending on defence) had positive signs.

There is a moderate negative association between social liberalism and fiscal conservatism: $r = -.36$ ($p < 0.001$, $n = 990$). Consistent with the results from Tables 1 and 2, cognitive ability has a small-to-moderate positive correlation with both social liberalism ($r = .22$, $p < 0.001$, $n = 1449$) and fiscal conservatism ($r = .22$,

² All reported *n*'s are unweighted.

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