

Research Dialogue

The marketplace of ideology: “Elective affinities” in political psychology and their implications for consumer behavior

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Abstract

An abundance of research in political psychology demonstrates that leftists and rightists (or liberals and conservatives) diverge from one another in terms of: (a) personality characteristics; (b) cognitive processing styles; (c) motivational interests and concerns; (d) the prioritization of personal values; and (e) neurological structures and physiological functions. In this article, I summarize these findings and discuss some of their implications for persuasion, framing, and advertising; consumer choice, judgment, decision-making, and behavior; and customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction and politically motivated boycotts. I conclude that the theory and practice of consumer psychology will be enriched by taking into account ideological asymmetries and the ways in which human behavior both reflects and gives rise to left–right divergence in political orientation—not only in terms of beliefs, opinions, and values but also in terms of underlying psychological processes.

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“A clash of doctrines is not a disaster—it is an opportunity.”
(Alfred North Whitehead, 1925).

Intellectual historians suspect that the left–right dimension—which is now ubiquitous in Western political life—has ancient origins pertaining to the concept of handedness. Laponce (1981), for instance, recounted that in Medieval Europe the right was regarded as the “side of God,” and “universally associated with the notion of privilege, dominance, and sacredness” (p. 10) as well as “liking for or acceptance of social and religious hierarchies” (p. 135). By contrast, the “gauche,” “sinister” left was associated with the “equalization of conditions through the challenge of God and prince” (p. 135).

The historical longevity of the left–right spatial metaphor in politics was practically assured by the French Revolution, which lasted from 1789 to 1799. Supporters of the ancient regime—which kept power in the hands of the monarchy,

the aristocracy, and the Church—sat on the right side of the French Parliament, whereas those who commiserated with the revolutionaries occupied the left of the chamber. From then on, the *right-wing* label has characterized ideological perspectives—such as those of Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre, who vigorously opposed the French Revolution, and those of Barry Goldwater, William F. Buckley Jr., and many others who resisted the New Deal and civil rights movements—that are conservative, supportive of the status quo, and protective of tradition and hierarchy. *Left-wing* views, by contrast, are associated with progressive social change and egalitarian ideals, as in political movements inspired by liberalism, socialism, and Marxism (Bobbio, 1996; Inglehart, 1989; Noël & Thérien, 2008).

My colleagues and I have drawn on historical and philosophical sources such as these to propose that there are two core attitudinal dimensions that separate left and right (Jost, 2006, 2017; Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003a, 2003b; Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008). The two dimensions are (a) advocating vs. resisting social change,

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and (b) rejecting vs. accepting inequality (or hierarchy), and they are intertwined—at least in the Western world—for historical reasons:

Liberal democracies were built in opposition to older, hierarchical orders, in the name of equality and individual rights. The shift in perspective was huge and difficult, because up to then inequality had been understood as the natural order of things. The family, the Church, social classes, even the animal kingdom were seen as hierarchies designed by God.

(Noël & Thérien, 2008, p. 17).

In seeking to understand why some people are drawn to conservative, rightist belief systems that emphasize tradition and hierarchy, whereas others are drawn to liberal, leftist belief systems that emphasize progress and equality, we have developed a theoretical model of political ideology as motivated social cognition. This approach belongs to an intellectual genealogy of “functional” perspectives (e.g., Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956), which assume that individuals hold the attitudes they do because they resonate with underlying needs, interests, and goals. In particular, our model is inspired by Max Weber’s account of *elective affinities*—the “selective process” by which “ideas and their publics” are bound together through forces of mutual attraction (Gerth & Mills, 1948/1970, p. 63; see also Jost et al., 2009).

The major insight is that people may be seduced by certain beliefs, opinions, and values because of social and psychological forces that are not necessarily salient or obvious to them. This way of thinking about political orientation and its relationship to social, cognitive, and motivational factors is compatible with Itamar Simonson’s (2008) notion that there exist relatively “stable, inherent preferences” that may remain dormant for long periods of time but nevertheless come into play once an individual is exposed to stimuli that were formerly unfamiliar. Ideological predispositions may help not only to explain the origins of individual differences in the specific contents of dormant preferences but also why some people are more eager than others to acquire certain types of experiences in the first place (e.g., Khan, Misra, & Singh, 2013).

When it comes to Western political life, most social scientists agree that the left–right dimension captures the “core currency of political exchange” (Noël & Thérien, 2008, p. 229). Nevertheless, there are still some political scientists who hold fast to Philip Converse’s (1964) skeptical notion (based on public opinion data from the 1950s) that, at least when it comes to American politics, most citizens are “little more than casual spectators”:

Parochial in interest, modest in intellect, and burdened by the demands and obligations of everyday life, most citizens lack the wherewithal and motivation to grasp political matters in a deep way. People are busy with more pressing things; politics is complicated and far away. Ideology is not for them.

(Kinder & Kalmoe, 2017, p. 3).

Despite the remarkable staying power of the assumption that ordinary citizens are devoid or “innocent” of ideology (see Jost, 2006), the evidence has been mounting for decades that the American public is highly divided—socially and psychologically as well as politically—over issues that may be readily understood in left–right terms (e.g., Pew, 2014). Ideological conflict and polarization, it should be noted, is far from unique to the United States. It has been shaping Latin American politics for many years (Moraes, 2015) and is on the rise in Europe once again (Groskopf, 2016). Optimists hold out hope that a scientific understanding of similarities and differences between leftists and rightists will eventually help to overcome destructive forms of ideological conflict and forge communication strategies that transcend purely parochial concerns (Hibbing, Smith, & Alford, 2014), but this is by no means assured.

In the field of political psychology, we have witnessed a virtual explosion in research over the last 15 years demonstrating that liberals and conservatives diverge from one another in terms of: (a) personality characteristics; (b) cognitive processing styles; (c) motivational interests and concerns; (d) the prioritization of personal values; and (e) neurological structures and physiological functions. In this target article, I briefly summarize the history of these five areas of research and underscore the major empirical conclusions that have emerged thus far. Although these research programs developed more or less independently, they tell a remarkably consistent story about psychological differences between the left and right. In the final section of the article, I speculate more freely about the implications of findings from political psychology for the theory and practice of persuasion, judgment, decision-making, consumer behavior, and ideological market segmentation.

Ideological differences in personality characteristics

The earliest accounts of personality differences between leftists and rightists focused on traits that are now associated with the syndrome of authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 2007). Members of the Frankfurt School—including Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm, and Theodor W. Adorno—sought to integrate the social-structural theories of Karl Marx with the psychodynamic sensibilities of Sigmund Freud. Thus, Fromm (1947) saw parallels between Freud’s description of the “anal character” and “conservative” tendencies focused on the “preservation of what had been acquired” and the attainment of “security ... based upon hoarding and saving.” Fromm associated the conservative personality type with a “pedantic orderliness” that could be “sterile and rigid” (Fromm, 1947, pp. 65–66), as well as positive characteristics such as being careful, methodical, practical, loyal, orderly, and tenacious.

Adorno the social theorist teamed up with research psychologists Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel Levinson, and Nevitt Sanford to advance a psychodynamic explanation of how intense frustration brought on by World War I and the Great Depression eventually gave rise to the fascist conflagration throughout Europe. Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford (1950) emphasized unresolved childhood conflicts

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