



# A deterministic worldview promotes approval of state paternalism<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

The proper limit to paternalist regulation of citizens' private lives is a recurring theme in political theory and ethics. In the present study, we examine the role of beliefs about free will and determinism in attitudes toward libertarian versus paternalist policies. Throughout five studies we find that a scientific deterministic worldview reduces opposition toward paternalist policies, independent of the putative influence of political ideology. We suggest that exposure to scientific explanations for patterns in human behavior challenges the notion of personal autonomy and, in turn, undermines libertarian arguments against state paternalism appealing to autonomy and personal choice.

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## 1. Introduction

When Michael Bloomberg, former New York City Mayor, proposed a 16-ounce limit on soft drink size, public response split neatly into two opposing factions. Critics denounced the bill's flagrant disregard for personal autonomy and choice ("Don't let bureaucrats tell you what size beverage to buy"), while supporters enumerated the public health risks of sugar overconsumption: diabetes, heart disease, obesity, and so on. The tension between these distinct moral motives, autonomy and welfare, has fueled a productive and long-standing debate on the proper limits of state paternalism (Dworkin, 1972; Feinberg, 1971; Mill, 1869; Sunstein & Thaler, 2003; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008).

Attitudes toward paternalism represent a particular puzzle for existing approaches to political psychology. In several contexts, conservatives have been found to trust and respect authority more than liberals (e.g., believing that authorities are "generally right about things," obeying orders even if one disagrees with them; see Altemeyer, 1981; Graham, Haidt & Nosek, 2009). Some theories propose that submission to authority may satisfy needs for order and structure (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003), with external systems such as God and the government compensating for the subjective lack of personal

control and order (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008). Yet, in the context of paternalism, these roles are reversed: Conservatives repudiate authoritarian control while liberals defend it. So, why might liberal and conservative attitudes reverse in this specific context?

One reason may be that paternalist policies – such as the regulation of health care and retirement, for instance – often have a redistributive flavor since the self-directed harm and the irrational behavior of a minority are paid for by society at large. This redistributive flavor may be unpalatable to conservatives who hold a stronger belief that the world is inherently just (Lerner, 1980).

In the present paper, we pursue a distinct, but complementary explanation. Advocates of a libertarian state argue that paternalist regulation violates personal autonomy, but appeals to personal autonomy and liberty depend on certain assumptions concerning free will and determinism. So the present study examines the role of beliefs about free will and determinism in attitudes toward paternalist regulation. Below, we review a handful of recent studies that demonstrate the pervasive influence of metaphysical beliefs on interpersonal behavior in order to contextualize and motivate this suggestion.

The belief in free will is widespread (Nichols & Knobe, 2007) across cultures (Sarkissian et al., 2010) and fulfills a critical social purpose: Free-will beliefs are strengthened by the desire to punish others' immoral behavior (Clark et al., 2014), while a deterministic perspective mitigates punishment (Aspinwall, Brown & Tabery, 2012; Monterosso, Royzman & Schwartz, 2005), particularly by sapping retributive motives (Carey & Paulhus, 2013; Shariff et al., 2014).

Though the belief in free will may play a valuable role, cognitive scientists argue that its empirical grounds are shaky (Bargh, 2008; Crick,

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1995; Gazzaniga, 2012; Pinker, 2003; Wegner, 2002; but see Mele, 2014; Nahmias, 2014). A series of influential studies in neuroscience seems to directly challenge the existence of free will by pointing to neural activity that precedes the volition to act (Haggard, Clark, & Kalogeras, 2002; Libet, Gleason, Wright, & Pearl, 1983; but see Schultze-Kraft et al., 2016). A more extensive research program establishes innumerable influences of genes, brain structures, childhood experience, and our physical environments on decision-making, personality, and success.

Although we cannot establish a causal link, views on the 'locus of control' have shifted together with the expansion of the behavioral sciences. Between 1960 and 2002, the belief that people are themselves in control of their outcomes has given way to a belief that external circumstances shape people's outcomes (Twenge, Zhang, & Im, 2004), a trend which may be partly attributable to the dissemination of scientific evidence for determinism (Saint-Paul, 2011).

In sum, if deterministic thinking threatens the ordinary notion of personal autonomy, and an appeal to autonomy subserves the rejection of state paternalism, we should expect that a deterministic worldview reduces opposition to paternalist policies. We first provide cross-sectional evidence of a link between locus of control and political preferences, using a large and diverse sample of United States adults (Study 1) and two student samples in Brazil (Studies 2 and 3). Next, in two experiments we manipulate belief in scientific determinism and observe its effects on the assessment of libertarianism and paternalism in the abstract (Study 4) and as reflected by concrete policies (Study 5). We report all procedures, measures, and exclusions throughout our studies. Based on small-to-moderate effect sizes and statistical power at .80, we estimated and met minimum required sample sizes for every primary analysis in Studies 1 through 5.

## 2. Study 1

### 2.1. Methods

As our starting point in Study 1, we examine whether locus of control predicts beliefs about the role of government in private life, using a heterogeneous sample of 3184 United States adults (1569 females,  $age_{mean} = 53$  years) recruited in a nationwide telephone survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2014). Five proxy variables were identified, but we report only the clearest test of our hypothesis in the main text. (See Supplementary Analysis 1 for converging evidence from the remaining four proxy variables).

People with an internal locus of control believe that they can control the events that happen to them, while people with an external focus of control believe that the events that happen to them are determined by external factors that are beyond their control (James, 1973; Rotter, 1966). While the locus-of-control construct is not identical to the belief-in-free-will construct (Waldman, Viney, Bell, Bennett, & Hess, 1983), the two are related (Stroessner & Green, 1990; Paulhus & Carey, 2011): People who believe in free will often have an internal locus of control, while believers in determinism tend to have an external locus of control.

If beliefs in free will and/or indeterminism underlie opposition to paternalist policies, an internal locus of control should be linked to a preference for libertarian policies. Meanwhile, paternalist breaches of autonomy may be less objectionable from the perspective of an external locus of control, according to which factors beyond one's personal control regularly shape one's outcomes.

As part of a battery of questions, subjects were asked to endorse either a libertarian (0: "It's not the government's job to protect people from themselves") or a paternalist (1: "Sometimes laws to protect people from themselves are necessary") view of government. In two questions, respondents were also asked whether willpower or forces outside one's control determine success in life – serving as our proxy measures of locus of control (Rotter, 1966).

### 2.2. Results

To begin with, we examined the locus of control items independently. As predicted, the belief that (LC<sub>1</sub>) "hard work and determination are no guarantee of success" was linked to greater support for paternalism than the view that "people who want to get ahead can make it if they're willing to work hard",  $\chi^2(1, 3088) = 51.5, p < 0.0001, \phi = 0.13$ . Similarly, those who believed that (LC<sub>2</sub>) "success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside of our control" expressed greater endorsement of a paternalist government than those who believed that "everyone has it in their own power to succeed",  $\chi^2(1, 3029) = 35.9, p < 0.0001, \phi = 0.11$ .

The correlation between an external locus of control and support for paternalism may be due to a common cause, in particular, to political orientation. To control for this possibility, we investigate whether political orientation and locus of control exert independent effects on views about paternalism. A mixed effects logistic model predicted attitudes toward paternalism from LC<sub>1</sub>, LC<sub>2</sub>, the LC<sub>1</sub> × LC<sub>2</sub> interaction, and a series of demographic measures entered as covariates: age, gender (1: female; 0: male), educational attainment, religiosity, annual personal income (\$10,000 brackets), political orientation (continuous), and race (categorical), allowing the intercept to vary randomly by state (see Supplementary Analysis 1 for model summary).

The influence of both locus of control items on paternalism remained significant, (LC<sub>1</sub>)  $B = 0.401, SE = 0.111, OR = 1.49, p = 0.001$ ; (LC<sub>2</sub>)  $B = 0.359, SE = 0.180, OR = 1.43, p = 0.046$ , indicating that an external locus of control predicted approval of paternalism and that this relationship was independent of political orientation. In order to visualize these separate effects, we plot the proportion of paternalists by political orientation and locus of control items in Fig. 1a and b. Corresponding analyses of attitudes toward specific regulation surrounding healthcare and retirement savings, for instance, revealed similar effects of locus of control beliefs: An external locus of control was linked to the preference for paternalist over libertarian government programs (see Supplementary materials).

### 2.3. Discussion

Study 1 provided indirect evidence that beliefs about free will and determinism underlie views about the role of government: As predicted by past research on the correlation between belief in determinism and locus of control, individuals with an external locus of control were more likely to endorse state paternalism, whereas individuals with an internal locus of control tended to endorse a libertarian government. Moreover, although the role of government is a matter of political disagreement, the relationship with locus of control was not explained by differences in political ideology.

#### 2.3.1. The role of free will and determinism beliefs

Studies 2 and 3 directly test the prediction that beliefs in free will and determinism underlie the preference for, respectively, libertarian and paternalist policies. First, both libertarian scholars (Hayek, 1960; Rothbard, 1978) and voters (Iyer, Koleva, Graham, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012) advocate minimal state regulation of citizen's behavior based largely on a categorical defense of individual freedom.

A second line of reasoning predicts that believing that human behavior is determined reduces people's objection to state paternalism (Saint-Paul, 2011; Sunstein & Thaler, 2003). Individuals with a deterministic worldview, who readily grant a broad influence of external factors on human decision-making, may be more likely to condone paternalist limitations on their behavior.

In Studies 2 and 3, we investigate the relationship between participants' evaluations of libertarian and paternalist policy proposals about canonical issues in the debate (such as the pension system, health

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