



An abstract mind is a principled one: Abstract mindset increases consistency in responses to political attitude scales[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Past literature suggested that not everyone is politically sophisticated. In the current research, it is proposed that an experimental manipulation of abstract mindset would decrease variation in responses to political attitude scales and render individuals more internally consistent in their political attitudes. Three hypotheses are proposed: (1) Abstract mindset would lower within-subject standard deviations (SDs) and increase Cronbach's alphas in responses to political attitude scales; (2) decrease in SDs could not be attributed to a response bias; and (3) abstract mindset would lower SDs even after controlling for differences in mean scores on those scales. In seven experiments, five different paradigms were used to manipulate abstractness and four different political scales were used as dependent measures on samples from two distinct cultures (US and Turkey). Analyses of individual studies and an aggregate analysis of combined data supported all hypotheses and showed that abstract mindset decreases SDs and increases Cronbach's alpha scores in self-reported political attitudes. Results suggest that abstract mindset enhances apparent political sophistication by highlighting core political beliefs behind different attitudinal statements. Implications for construal level theory and political sophistication research are discussed.

1. The question of political sophistication

Whether people are politically consistent has been an important question for the last couple of decades since the publication of the influential book *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960) in which authors claimed that only a very small minority of the American electorate was politically sophisticated whereas the majority consisted of naïve subjects who either had no ideological underpinning or were largely influenced by contextual factors, rather than core political beliefs. Later, researchers argued that attitudinal constraint is one of the most important factors determining the level of political sophistication (Converse, 1964, 1970; Luskin, 1990; Zaller, 1992). Accordingly, political attitudes of sophisticated individuals are constrained into a single dimension of ideology (e.g., liberalism vs. conservatism), so political attitudes regarding different domains are more likely to be determined by core political values only among politically sophisticated individuals. More recent research similarly showed that only politically more sophisticated people are “[...] able to understand and structure abstract ideological concepts” (Federico & Schneider, 2007) and form political attitudes that are unidimensional (Lupton, Myers, & Thornton, 2015).

In the current research, a novel hypothesis is proposed, and it is argued that consistency in political attitudes would be increased when people are led to adopt an abstract mindset. Past research demonstrated several other predictors of consistency in political attitudes, including higher levels of education (Althaus, 2003; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Highton, 2009; Jennings, 1996), political expertise (i.e., political knowledge; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Federico & Schneider, 2007; Goren, 2000; Judd & Downing, 1990), and active involvement in politics (Jennings, 1992; Layman, Carsey, Green, Herrera, & Cooperman, 2010; Lupton et al., 2015). Despite extant work on predictors of political sophistication, to my knowledge, past research has not attempted to experimentally induce consistency between interrelated political attitudes. I hypothesize that a manipulation that enhances an abstract mindset would result in consistency in responses to political attitude scales. Research on construal level theory (CLT; Fujita, Eyal, Chaiken, Trope, & Liberman, 2008; Liberman & Trope, 2008, 2014; Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007; Trope & Liberman, 2010) has previously showed that abstract mindset leads to context-free judgments that are not vulnerable to external factors (Ledgerwood, Trope, & Chaiken, 2010; Luguri & Napier, 2013), but no research has been conducted on the effects of mindset on consistency between attitudes representing

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different dimensions or issues. I argue that abstract mindset would lead to greater consistency in political attitudes that are associated with a common latent political value. Before explaining the rationale behind the hypothesis in detail, the relationship between abstract mindsets and attitudinal consistency will be discussed.

2. Construal level theory and attitudinal consistency

Attitudes were thought to be consistent across contexts by early researchers (Ajzen, 1988; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993) whereas later research proposed a different stance and emphasized the effect of the context (Schwarz, 2007; Schwarz & Bohner, 2001). Recent research emphasizes both consistency and malleability (e.g., Fazio, 2007; Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2011). One important candidate for explaining why attitudes are sometimes consistent and sometimes not is CLT (Fujita et al., 2008; Liberman et al., 2007; Liberman & Trope, 2008, 2014; Trope & Liberman, 2010). According to CLT, we construe objects either on a higher or a lower level depending on their *psychological distance* which was defined as “... a subjective experience that something is close or far away from the self, here, and now” (Trope & Liberman, 2010, p. 440). This distance might be in terms of time (e.g., near vs. distant future), place (e.g., close or faraway places), social distance (e.g., familiar vs. unfamiliar), and hypotheticality (e.g., high vs. low possibility) (see Liberman & Trope, 2014, for a review). According to CLT, when the distance is low, we adopt a lower-level construal of objects and think more concretely by focusing on specific details and distinct characteristics of objects. When the distance is high, on the other hand, we adopt a higher-level construal by focusing on more coherent, prototypical, inclusive aspects of objects that can potentially transcend over different contexts. For example, when imagining drinking something in the near future (which is psychologically close), specific details about that drink are important to us and we categorize it in a less inclusive category like soda, juice, or something else. But when we imagine drinking it in the distant future (which is psychologically distant), we choose to omit specific details, because we need to construe that object in a way that would transcend various times and places and thus we need a more inclusive category. In that case, we categorize it in a more abstract way, like beverage or drink.

But how does this relate to attitudes? First, we adopt an abstract mindset when something is psychologically distant, as CLT proposes. Second, the process of abstraction, as also mentioned above, is about focusing on “invariant central characteristics” that are not dependent on time and place (Burgoon, Henderson, & Markman, 2013). We identify the invariant aspects, because:

To maximize their accuracy when making judgments and decisions regarding psychologically distant things, people must broaden their mental horizons by focusing on central characteristics of those things that are likely to be invariant across distance; therefore, as things become more psychologically distant, people think about them at progressively higher levels of abstraction.

(Burgoon et al., 2013, p. 503)

Such abstraction process can be applied to political attitudes as well. For example, when you think about whom you will vote for in the next election, it is psychologically close and you need to consider specific details, distinct characteristics of the existing political leaders, and current political atmosphere. Thus you need to think more concretely. In this case, you can name a specific political leader or a party that you will vote for. However, when you think about who you will vote for 15 years from now, it is not viable to make accurate predictions about who will be the candidates, what the political atmosphere would look like, or what the major political problems would be in that era. In that case, it is psychologically distant, and you think more abstractly by focusing on your core political values which you think that are very central to you and would be invariantly important across time and place. For example, you might say that you would vote for the

candidate who would advocate for environmental sustainability, instead of emphasizing a specific environmental problem that might or might not exist in the future. So, although you do not know about the specific political problems of the distant future, you can make a reference to broad, abstract principles that might apply to the future as well as today.¹

Past literature demonstrated that when a psychological distance is made salient, people give responses that are more consistent with their core values (see Ledgerwood, 2014, for a review). For example, when people think about a distant future, instead of a near one, evaluations of offensive and virtuous behaviors were found to be more morally driven (see Eyal & Liberman, 2012, for a review; Eyal, Liberman, & Trope, 2008); voting intentions were more consistent with self-reported ideological orientations (Ledgerwood, Trope, et al., 2010); behavioral intentions were more consistent with general values (Eyal, Sagristano, Trope, Liberman, & Chaiken, 2009); and support for violating individual freedoms in order to protect national interests was increased among people who value national security more than individual freedoms (Eyal, Liberman, Sagristano, & Trope, 2009). The reason why psychological distance has such effects is that psychologically distant objects are construed by focusing on abstract, higher-order aspects and leaving out context-dependent details; when an object is psychologically closer to us, on the other hand, context and details become more relevant, so we adopt a more concrete mindset (Fujita et al., 2008; Ledgerwood, 2014; Ledgerwood, Trope, et al., 2010). Therefore, when we are evaluating a psychologically distant object, our evaluations are less susceptible to contextual details and more likely to be determined by our core, abstract values.

It is also possible to manipulate mindset without introducing psychological distance (Burgoon et al., 2013). In several studies, abstract mindset was induced by asking about commonalities (versus similarities) between objects (e.g., Fujita & Roberts, 2010), higher-order categories that include the target object (versus lower-level examples of it; e.g., Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006), and *why* an action would be performed (versus *how* that action is performed; e.g., Freitas, Gollwitzer, & Trope, 2004). Such manipulation techniques, similarly to psychological distance, bolster an abstract mindset which emphasizes core values, as opposed to context-specific judgments which are characteristics of a concrete mindset (Burgoon et al., 2013).

3. Abstract mindset and political consistency

To demonstrate the key role of abstract thinking in producing attitudinal and ideological consistency, Ledgerwood, Trope, et al. (2010) hypothesized that abstract mindset would increase evaluative consistency in political domains. As expected, they found that people's policy evaluations, voting intentions, and ideological values were influenced by their interaction partners only when they had a concrete mindset. When people had an abstract mindset, it was not affected by the interaction. Instead, it was predicted by previously self-reported ideological orientation. It was reasoned that core political attitudes and ideologies represent invariant, central, and superordinate political values that apply to different times and places, so they can be considered as abstract principles (Ledgerwood, Trope, et al., 2010). An abstract mindset makes these broad, abstract principles more salient and leads people to think and behave more consistently with these principles (Ledgerwood, Trope, et al., 2010).

Considering the association between an abstract mindset and more consistent responses, we might expect that an abstract mindset would result in political polarization (Luguri & Napier, 2013). For example, when led to think more abstractly, liberals would be relatively more

¹ It should be noted that psychological distance influences judgment even when near and distant situations do not differ in terms of availability of information (e.g., Ledgerwood, Wakslak, & Wang, 2010).

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