



# The ideological importance of worldview: An experimental investigation of the moderating effects of dangerous and competitive worldviews on ideological attitudes

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## ABSTRACT

Considerable research attention has focused on dispositional traits (e.g. worldview beliefs, personality) as predictors of ideological attitudes, suggesting that ideology tends to be consistent in individuals over time. However, an emerging approach suggests that ideological attitudes may play a functional role associated with coalition affiliation, suggesting flexibility in attitudes across contexts that differ in terms of their coalitional relevance. Further, evolved coalitional mechanisms should be particularly sensitive to threats and competition from out-groups, and past research has demonstrated that perceptions of danger and competition are important predictors of ideology. As such, the present research investigated differences in participants' agreement across a host of ideological statements which differed in their coalitional relevance, and examined dangerous world beliefs (DWB) and competitive world beliefs (CWB) as moderators of the differences in participants' agreement with each statement. Across three topics (social mobility, 2nd Amendment rights, and personal freedom), DWB and CWB played an important role in predicting agreement with ideological statements, and these effects differed depending on the ideological content presented. Implications for these findings and suggestions for continued development of the research design are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

At times, ideological attitudes take center stage in popular media, particularly during an election year. In the throes of an election cycle, candidates (and their supporters) stake out their positions on a range of issues and attempt to make their ideological positions clear. It is common for people to hold consistency in ideological attitudes in high regard, lest somebody be labeled a “flip-flopper”. However, consistent political positions are surprisingly hard to come by, even among the strictest of ideologues. For example, it would not be uncommon for someone strongly supportive of “personal freedom” to also vehemently oppose same-sex marriage or the legalization of recreational drugs; issues that largely involve individual choices and personal freedom. Similarly, it is common for some conservative political groups in the U.S. to voice strong opposition to large governments and military-style police forces using imposing physical tactics to control citizens. However, some of these same groups commonly advocated in defense of police in the highly publicized deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner in recent years. Given these examples, the extent to which ideological beliefs (even beliefs based on seemingly ‘core’ ideological values) are stable across contexts is open to question.

Multiple theories have been proposed to explain factors which influence the development and change of ideological attitudes (Duckitt, 2001; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Verhulst, Hatemi, & Martin, 2010). Duckitt's (2001) Dual Process Model (DPM) proposes that the ideological belief dimensions of right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO) stem from tendencies to view the world as a threatening and competitive place, respectively. As such, ideological attitudes toward a range of topics result from these worldviews. For example, people who view the world as threatening might support strong, authoritative leadership as a means to mitigate this perceived threat, and people who view the world as competitive might advocate for social policies which give them a competitive advantage over others. Conversely, Jost et al. (2003) model of ideology as motivated social cognition proposes that chronic perceptions of fear, threat, and uncertainty motivate individuals to adopt more conservative ideological attitudes which promote resistance to social change and endorsement of inequality between social groups. In yet another line of research, Verhulst et al. (2010) provided a behavioral-genetic account of ideology which illustrated relations between personality traits (e.g., Psychoticism, Social Desirability, Extraversion, Neuroticism) and ideological attitudes toward religion, sex, out-groups, and punishment, arguing for a more biological basis of ideology. An underlying assumption across these well-established approaches is that

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ideology is a more-or-less stable construct, and that differences in ideological beliefs constitute dispositional differences between individuals.

However, given that attitudes toward topics such as individual freedom or the use of force by the government are potentially context-dependent, there appears to be justification for examining ideology at a more dynamic level. Morgan, Skitka, and Wisneski (2014) recently argued that ideological attitudes can be flexible in the face of contextual variability and highlighted a number of studies which found evidence to support this perspective. For example, Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Hutchinson, and Chamberlin (2002) found that liberals and conservatives initially evaluate the world in very similar ways, but make subsequent updates to their attitudes to be more consistent with core ideological beliefs. Their findings indicate that initial attitude evaluations are context dependent, and subsequent variance in ideological attitudes between liberals and conservatives might stem from motivated post-hoc corrections to promote consistency.

This is not to argue that dispositional factors are irrelevant to ideology. Prior research has indicated that genetic factors are likely to play an important role in shaping ideological attitudes (Eaves & Hatemi, 2008; Smith, Oxley, Hibbing, Alford, & Hibbing, 2011), and this evidence is key to developing an understanding of the core factors that influence differences in ideological preference. However, the finding that ideological attitudes can vary depending on the context in which they are evoked suggests that ideology may play a more strategic functional role in social interactions.

Conceptualizing ideological attitudes as flexible is more consistent with the emerging theoretical framework of evolutionary political science (Lopez & McDermott, 2012), which views ideological belief alignment as the product of functional psychological mechanisms which evolved to effectively manage coalitional affiliations. Such a coalitional approach suggests that ideological attitudes are shaped by processes which promote solidarity within one's social group as a means to out-compete rival alliances (Boyer, Firat, & van Leeuwen, 2015). Holding ideological attitudes that are consistent with other members of one's social group conveys a commitment to group norms which should garner trust and support from other group members. From this perspective, ideological attitudes might be expected to vary if they are applied in different contexts, or if they pertain to out-group (as opposed to in-group) members. For example, in considering ideological attitudes toward government regulations, an individual who identifies as a conservative Christian might be expected to favor a reduction in government regulations regarding hiring and employment practices for religious groups (so that the church has as much freedom and control over their business practices as possible), but might favor an increase in government regulations concerning abortion or same-sex marriage (to restrict the extent to which people can engage in behaviors that are inconsistent with the church's stated beliefs). From this standpoint, asking somebody to report their general ideological beliefs about government regulations is likely to be confounded by the assumptions the individual makes about the context in which those regulations will be applied.

From an evolutionary political science perspective, beliefs about the extant levels of danger or competitiveness in one's social world are likely to be particularly relevant in determining ideological attitudes, and it is no surprise that such worldview beliefs have been a prime focus of ideological research to date. A primary function of coalitions throughout human history has been to provide support and protection against the threats posed by nature and rival groups. Thus, perceptions of threat or competitiveness are likely to activate psychological systems that function to forge coalitional alliances, and ideological attitudes might be especially likely to vary as a function of dangerous and competitive world beliefs when these attitudes are evoked in the context of different social groups.

Against this background, the present study incorporated a novel research paradigm to investigate the manner in which ideological attitudes varied as a function of differences in social context, and the extent to which worldview beliefs moderated this variability. Attitudes toward three broad ideological topics (social mobility, 2nd Amendment rights, and personal freedom) were investigated, and participants

were randomly assigned to read one of three statements within each ideological topic. The content of the statements varied across the three conditions, and individual differences in participants' dangerous and competitive worldview beliefs were investigated as moderators of participants' differences in agreement with these statements across the conditions (within each topic).

## 2. Method

Data for the present study were collected as part of a larger online survey administered to introductory psychology students during the fall of 2014 academic semester.

### 2.1. Participants

Five-hundred ninety-four introductory psychology students began the online study and were awarded course credit. However, a number of participants did not complete all research measures ( $n = 40$ ), and of those that completed all measures, 66 additional participants provided responses to the dangerous or competitive worldview measure which were invariant (the participant gave the same rating to all items in the measure), and were dropped from further analyses.<sup>1</sup> The remaining sample ( $N = 488$ ) was 68% female with an average age of 20.03 years ( $SD = 4.46$ ). Participants in the sample categorized their ethnicity as White/Caucasian (48%), Hispanic/Latino(a) (23%), African-American/Black (12%), Asian (12%) and Native American (<1%), with the remaining participants (~5%) not indicating a racial/ethnic identification.

### 2.2. Material and methods

#### 2.2.1. Ideological identification

Participants self-reported their political ideology on a 7-point scale anchored at 1 = *Liberal* and 7 = *Conservative*. Ideological identification was used as a control variable across all analyses in order to isolate the unique effects of dangerous and competitive worldviews.

#### 2.2.2. Dangerous world beliefs

Dangerous World Beliefs (DWB) were assessed using Altemeyer's (1988) 12-item scale which measures the extent to which participants view the world as a dangerous and threatening place (e.g. "Any day now chaos and anarchy could erupt around us. All the signs are pointing to it."). Agreement with each item was rated on a 7-point scale with higher scores indicating higher levels of belief that the world is dangerous ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ).

#### 2.2.3. Competitive world beliefs

Competitive World Beliefs (CWB) were assessed using a 12-item version of Duckitt's (2001) 'Competitive Jungle Worldview' scale, which measures the extent to which participants believe that the social world is characterized by a ruthless struggle for survival where winning is everything (e.g. "Winning is not the first thing, it's the *only* thing."). Agreement with each item was also rated on a 7-point scale with higher scores indicating higher levels of belief that the world is a competitive place ( $\alpha = 0.74$ ).

#### 2.2.4. Ideological topic statements

Participants' evaluations of three different ideological topics of interest (social mobility, 2nd Amendment rights, and personal freedom) were investigated, and each topic was evaluated across three conditions. Version 1 was a core statement that was present in all three conditions. Each Version 2 statement made reference to a particular social group. Specifically, for the social mobility topic, the Version 2 statement referenced immigrants, for the 2nd Amendment rights

<sup>1</sup> Analyses using all participants did not substantially change the overall pattern of results. Results of the analyses are reported with participants dropped in order to report more accurate estimates of effect size.

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