Does intelligence have a U-shaped relationship with leftism?

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ABSTRACT

Solon (2014) makes an interesting and thoughtful contribution to the literature on intelligence and political beliefs. He concludes that there is a U-shaped relationship between intelligence and leftism such that people with very low and very high intelligence tend to be more left-wing. One piece of evidence he cites is the prevalence of support for the Democratic Party among scholarly elites in the United States. Here I propose a number of qualifications to Solon's (2014) conclusion. I begin by noting that Solon (2014) employs quite a specific definition of 'left', which does not reflect how the term is often used in political discourse. I then analyse the functional form of the relationship between verbal intelligence and 23 separate measures of political beliefs from the U.S. General Social Survey. Some of the results support Solon's (2014) thesis, while others do not. I also review previous studies that have found evidence contradicting Solon's (2014) thesis. Finally, I outline several reasons why the prevalence of support for the Democratic Party among scholarly elites does not constitute overly compelling evidence that there is a U-shaped relationship between intelligence and leftism.

1. Introductory remarks

Solon (2014) reviews the evidence on intelligence and political beliefs. He concludes that there is a U-shaped relationship between intelligence and leftism such that people with very low and very high intelligence tend to be more left-wing. To quote Solon's (2014) abstract, "Individuals of most or least intelligence consistently orient further to the left politically than those of middle intelligence, producing a U-shaped curve." Here I propose a number of qualifications to this conclusion.

In the first section, I note that Solon (2014) employs quite a specific definition of 'left', which does not reflect how the term is often used in political discourse. In the next section, I analyse data on verbal intelligence and political beliefs from the U.S. General Social Survey, finding some evidence that supports Solon's (2014) thesis, and some that does not. I also review previous studies that have found evidence contradicting Solon's

(2014) thesis. In the final section, I outline several reasons why the prevalence of support for the Democratic Party among scholarly elites in the United States, a key facet of Solon's (2014) argument, does not constitute overly compelling evidence for his central conclusion. Notwithstanding these comments, I thank Solon (2014) for making an interesting and thoughtful contribution to the literature.

2. Defining the term 'left'

In Section 2 of his paper, Solon (2014) writes the following:

Across a vast section of political issues, the relationship between educational attainment and leftism is consistently characterized by monotonic, positive correlation, except when rights for a substantial, less-educated segment are at issue. On these latter issues (e.g., those that concern economic and racial minorities), a U-shaped curve consistently occurs, with the most educated segment joined on the left by the least educated segment, as the leftist position disproportionately benefits less educated individuals. Accordingly, no material, lower-educated segment is at the

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Table 1
Effect of vocabulary score on party identity.

| | Democrat rather than Republican identity | | | |
	Pooled	1970s and 1980s	1990s	2000s and 2010s
0–2 out of 10	0.46***	0.51***	0.35***	0.49***
3 out of 10	0.43***	0.42***	0.42***	0.44***
4 out of 10	0.31***	0.39***	0.24***	0.25***
5 out of 10	0.27***	0.36***	0.22***	0.19**
6 out of 10	0.16***	0.25***	0.12*	0.11
7 out of 10	0.06	0.14*	0.02	0.02
8 out of 10	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
9 out of 10	0.06	0.08	0.01	0.09
10 out of 10	0.11*	0.06	0.12	0.20*
n	16,402	6685	4993	4724

Notes: The left-hand column gives the score in the vocabulary test. The dependent variable, which is standardised, corresponds to the intermediate definition in Carl (2014a). Black respondents oversampled in 1982 and 1987 are excluded. Sample weights are applied. Significance levels, based on robust standard errors: *5%, **1%, ***0.1%.

Table 2
Effect of vocabulary score on political ideology.

| | Liberal rather than conservative ideology | | | |
	Pooled	1970s and 1980s	1990s	2000s and 2010s
0–2 out of 10	0.09*	0.16**	0.12	0.08
3 out of 10	0.09*	0.12*	0.10	0.16*
4 out of 10	0.01	0.06	Ref.	0.06
5 out of 10	0.03	0.12**	0.04	Ref.
6 out of 10	0.02	0.08*	0.04	0.02
7 out of 10	0.02	0.09*	0.01	0.06
8 out of 10	Ref.	Ref.	0.06	0.05
9 out of 10	0.14***	0.21***	0.09	0.22***
10 out of 10	0.24***	0.22***	0.28***	0.36***
n	23,875	10,006	7591	6278

Notes: The left-hand column gives the score in the vocabulary test. The dependent variable, which is standardised, was a measured on a scale from 1 ("Extremely conservative") to 7 ("Extremely liberal"). Black respondents oversampled in 1982 and 1987 are excluded. Sample weights are applied. Significance levels, based on robust standard errors: *5%, **1%, ***0.1%.

focus of the following issues, and opinions relating to these issues are characterized by a monotonically positive relationship between educational attainment and left inclination: gay marriage, abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research, immigration, environmental concerns, and foreign policy. By contrast, health care, minimum wage, affirmative action, and fiscal policy involve rights conferred to economic and racial minorities, which, traditionally, are lower-educated demographics, and opinions on these issues are characterized by a U-shaped curve.

Here Solon (2014) argues that the relationship between intelligence and leftism is U-shaped on issues where economic or racial minorities are concerned (e.g., affirmative action), and is monotonically positive on issues where such groups are not concerned (e.g., abortion). In Section 3 of his paper, Solon (2014) goes on to explain that one should not expect intelligence to be associated with extreme left-wing positions such as socialism or government control of the economy because these represent authoritarianism, rigidity and dogmatism. According to Solon (2014, p. 47), the single feature that distinguishes issues on which a U-shaped relationship between intelligence and leftism obtains is pertinence to economic or racial minorities. Indeed, Solon (2014) essentially uses 'leftist' as synonymous with 'liberal', by which he of course means 'American social democrat' rather than 'European liberal' or 'classical liberal'.[1]

Arguably however, this does not reflect how 'left' has been used historically, nor how it is used in many countries around the world (see Greenberg & Jonas, 2003; Malka, Soto, Inzlicht, & Lelkes, 2014). In *The Penguin Dictionary of Politics*, Robertson (1987, p. 181) writes, "a 'left-wing' position in modern politics would involve leaning toward such positions as the following, in some mix or other: nationalisation of industry; state control of the economy; highly redistributive tax policies; pacifism or

arms reduction; egalitarian policies in education; a preference for ecological rather than industrial expansionist policies; positive discrimination towards minority groups; and so on". Similarly, in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics*, McLean and McMillan (2009, p. 303) emphasise "egalitarianism, support for the (organised) working class, support for nationalisation of industry, hostility to markers of hierarchy, opposition to nationalistic foreign or defence policy".

At least three prominent models of political ideology postulate a left-right dimension going from *laissez-faire* and capitalist at one end to interventionist and socialist at the other. For example, the Pournelle chart (Pournelle, 1964) includes a dimension that goes from "State as ultimate evil" to "State worship", while both the Nolan chart (Doherty, 2007, p. 321) and the well-known political compass (Political Compass, 2014) include an economic axis that runs between the more capitalist "right" and the more socialist "left" (see also Friedman, 1962, pp. 7–21). In short, having left-wing views usually entails being pro-redistribution, pro-intervention and pro-nationalisation; rarely does it simply entail being an American social democrat (and see Cohen, 2001; Jones, 2012).

Both the Nolan chart and the political compass also postulate a dimension of personal freedom going from libertarian at one end to authoritarian or totalitarian at the other; this dimension of personal freedom is conceptualised as being largely orthogonal to the left–right dimension (Doherty, 2007; Friedman, 1962; Political Compass, 2014). Consistent with such a schema, Feldman and Johnston (2014) present evidence that the distribution of political beliefs in the U.S. is better characterised as having at least two separate axes, one economic and one social, than by a single liberal-conservative axis (and see Malka et al., 2014). Thus, while many social democrats may be in favour of abortion rights, gay marriage, and marijuana legalisation, these are not strictly left-wing positions[2]; after all, they are also held by libertarians and classical liberals, very few of whom

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[1] In Europe, Australia and New Zealand, 'liberal' is typically used in its classical sense, namely a belief in civil liberties, private property, the rule of law, and relatively *laissez-faire* economic policy (Berlin, 1969, pp. 123–4; Mill, 1859; Miller, 2003, pp. 55–73). As Klein (2014) shows, 'liberal' was first used politically in the 1760s and 1770s by Scottish classical liberals such as the historian William Robertson and the economist Adam Smith.

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[2] In addition, as Solon (2014, p. 45) himself points out, many individuals who support the ostensibly left-wing Democratic Party, notably those from low-income groups and ethnic minorities, are actually quite socially conservative.