



The politics of luck: Political ideology and the perceived relationship between luck and success



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We investigated individuals' belief about the importance of luck to success.
- Political conservatives endorsed this belief less than political liberals.
- Luck was polarizing because it emphasizes chance and challenges deservingness.
- Conservatives were more amenable to notions of luck that de-emphasized chance.

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ABSTRACT

Three studies examined how individuals' beliefs about the relation between luck and success vary with political ideology. Conservative participants endorsed luck as influential to success considerably less than liberal participants (Studies 1 and 2). The ideologically polarizing effect of luck was shown to be related to its emphasis on random chance: Polarization was not found in response to an external attribution for success that was unrelated to chance (Study 2), and was specific to the challenge that random chance poses to deservingness (Study 3). Moreover, conservatives' support for the notion that luck contributes to success was related to their belief that luck is a quality of the person (which does not rely on random chance), whereas liberals' support was not (Study 3). These findings demonstrate that there is ideological disagreement over how success is achieved, which may be at the heart of the ideological divide over wealth redistribution.

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It is common to think about being “lucky in love” or being favored by “lady luck.” Happenstance can lead to finding romance or winning blackjack streaks and either phrase is unlikely to be met with disapproval. However, this is not the case for all matters related to luck. In particular, invoking luck as one of the forces behind whether people experience success can be met with hostility. This was the experience of the economist Robert Frank (2009, April 25) when he wrote in the *New York Times* that in addition to talent and hard work, luck plays a role in success. A host from a Fox News talk show “treated Frank’s argument with total incredulity, offering up ripostes such as ‘That’s outrageous!’ and ‘That’s nonsense!’” (Chait, 2009).

Although the link between luck and success may be contentious, luck can affect success. The experience of randomly-determined early success exerts a causal influence on the ultimate success of an

endeavor: Randomly chosen projects on kickstarter.org that were provided with a small percentage of their funding goal were two times as likely to receive additional funding from other individuals than projects that received no such initial donation (van de Rijt, Kang, Restivo, & Patil, 2014). Professional sports provide another instance in which luck affects success, such as hockey players who benefit from being born in January (rather than December). As player groupings in hockey are based on the calendar year, these January-birthday players were more physically mature and experienced in their early years due to being the oldest in their cohort, resulting in more playing time and opportunities to develop their skills, which facilitated their path to success (Addona & Yates, 2010; Gladwell, 2008; Levitt & Dubner, 2009).

These “happy accidents” illustrate the role luck plays in success, but leave open the question of what factors determine individuals’ beliefs about whether luck contributes to success. Theoretically, investigating beliefs about luck’s influence on success is important because prior work on ideological differences in attributions has focused primarily on attributions for negative outcomes. This research finds that liberals are more likely than conservatives to

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emphasize external attributions for failure (e.g., Skitka & Tetlock, 1992, 1993; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). In this research, we examine whether analogous polarization is observed in explanations for success, and if so, why.

The investigation of the ideological differences in the role of luck in success is both theoretically and politically important. Theoretically, explicitly linking random chance with success could be ideologically divisive because it implies that successful individuals have not fully earned their spoils. It challenges the notion that people get the outcomes that they deserve (Feather, 1992). Concerns about the violation of the deservingness principle have been empirically shown to be a more important consideration to conservatives than to liberals (e.g., Brandt, 2013; Reyna, Henry, Korfmacher, & Tucker, 2005; Skitka & Tetlock, 1992, 1993). Correspondingly, individuals with socially conservative attitudes have been shown to believe more strongly in the Protestant work ethic (Atieh, Brief, & Vollrath, 1987; Feather, 1984) and belief in a just world (Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Rubin & Peplau, 1975) than their liberal counterparts. Therefore, we hypothesize that conservatives (individuals on the political right) will be less likely to endorse the link between luck and success than their liberal counterparts (individuals on the political left). Conservatives should be less supportive of the notion that luck is influential to success because the randomness it invokes challenges their belief that people's outcomes are deserved, whereas the notion of random chance contributing to success is consistent with the liberal worldview.

This investigation of this hypothesis is politically important as emphasizing luck's importance to success has been used to support redistributive social policies. For instance, author Michael Lewis (2012) contended in a commencement address to Princeton University that, "Life's outcomes, while not entirely random, have a huge amount of luck baked into them. Above all, recognize that if you have had success, you have also had luck — and with luck comes obligation... You owe a debt to the unlucky." Invoking luck as one explanation for success can support the conclusion that the successful (the lucky) should help the unsuccessful (the unlucky). Those who have benefited from random chance, this argument goes, should give back to those who have not. However, if the basic premise (luck plays a role in success) is not broadly shared by a segment of the population, then it is unlikely to be an effective rallying cry for redistribution. Therefore, it is crucial to understand whether this premise has the potential to be ideologically uniting, or whether the premise itself is, as we expect, ideologically divisive.

Overview of studies

The present research examines whether there is a relationship between political ideology and the belief that luck is influential to success. Study 1 provides evidence that people's views about the role of luck in success are related to their political ideology. Study 2 examines whether there is greater polarization for external attributions of success that emphasize randomness (i.e., luck) as opposed to external attributions that place less emphasis on randomness (i.e., help from others). Study 3 illustrates that this ideological polarization is based on how luck's role in success challenges the notion that people deserve their outcomes. Study 3 further demonstrates that conservatives support the idea that luck influences success to the extent that they conceptualize luck as a quality of the person, a notion of luck that does not resonate as well with liberals.

Study 1: Ideology, luck, and success

Study 1 investigated whether political ideology predicts people's views on the importance of luck in determining success, even when controlling for other demographic variables.

Method

Participants

American participants ($N = 576$) were recruited from a Qualtrics panel, and received monetary compensation for their participation. Participants completed an attention check, which asked them whether they were reading carefully. They were instructed to ignore this question and select "Not At All Carefully". As determined a priori, the responses of participants who failed the attention check ($N = 76$) were discarded (the inclusion of participants who failed the attention check did not change the results, which is also true in Studies 2–3). 500 participants remained (49% male; $M_{\text{Age}} = 48.95$). The sample size was determined a priori, we did not analyze the data until data collection was completed, and we did not collect additional responses after analyzing the data (this is also true of Studies 2–3).

Procedure

Participants first provided their demographic information, including their age, gender (female = 0, male = 1), education level (ranging from less than high school to advanced degrees), income level (ranging from below \$20,000 to above \$100,000 in \$20,000 increments), frequency of attendance at religious services, and extent of belief in a supreme being. For all of the continuous demographics, higher numbers indicate a higher level/greater amount.

Participants completed three measures of political ideology (in general, on economic issues, and social issues) separately indicating their general, economic, and social political ideology on a scale from 1 (*very liberal*) to 7 (*very conservative*), with a midpoint of 4 (*moderate*). These items were averaged to provide an overall measure of political ideology ($\alpha = .95$, $M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.53$). Participants indicated which political group they most identified with (Democrats, Republicans, Independents, Other) and which person they would vote for in the presidential election if it was held today (Obama, Romney, Undecided, Would Not Vote).¹

Participants next indicated their agreement with the following items (presented in a random order) on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*):

- Successful people are likely to have been lucky in their lives.
- Unsuccessful people are likely to have been unlucky in their lives.
- When good things happen to people, luck usually played some role.
- People do not need luck to do well in their lives. (Reverse-coded)

We averaged these four items to create the Luck and Success Scale (LASS, $\alpha = .80$, $M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.14$). All measured variables are reported, which is true of all studies.

Results and discussion

Participants' overall political ideology (with higher scores representing a more conservative ideology) was negatively correlated with people's belief about the extent to which luck plays a role in success ($r(498) = -.15$, $p = .001$). Conservatives believed that luck played a role in success less than did liberals. To further examine this ideological divide, we compared participants who identified as conservative (a score of 5 or higher on the composite ideology measure, $n = 171$) to those who identified as liberal (a score of 3 or lower, $n = 126$). Conservatives viewed luck as less important to success less than did liberals ($M_{\text{Conservative}} = 3.62$, $SD = 1.21$ vs. $M_{\text{Liberal}} = 4.01$, $SD = 1.11$, $t(295) = 2.85$, $p = .005$, $d = .34$).

We examined whether participants' political ideology would predict the belief that luck is important to success, even when controlling for other demographic variables that might affect the perceived relationship between luck and success. We regressed participants' LASS scores onto

¹ Studies 1 and 3 were conducted in 2012 prior to the Presidential election.

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