



Is ideology the enemy of inquiry? Examining the link between political orientation and lack of interest in novel data



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ABSTRACT

Four studies examined the relationship between political orientation and data selection. In each study participants were given the opportunity to select data from a large data set addressing a specific issue: the justness of the world (Pilot Study), the efficacy of social safety nets (Studies 1–3), and the benefits of social media (Study 3). Participants were given no knowledge of what the data would tell them in advance. More conservative participants selected less data, and in Study 3 this relationship was partly accounted for by an increased tendency to question the value of science as a way of learning about the world. These findings may reveal one factor contributing to political polarization: an asymmetrical interest in scientific data.

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1. Introduction

“Closed-minded” is a common slight in the realm of political debate. Conservatives complain of “knee-jerk liberalism” while liberals bemoan the rigidity of conservatism. In the United States political partisanship appears to be increasing, raising concerns about how societal progress is to be made if both parties simply ignore information that might challenge their views (Pew Research Center, 2014; Stroud, 2010). This raises the question: are both ends of the political continuum equally closed-minded when it comes to new information? On the one hand, a defining feature of political conservatism is a resistance to change (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). As a consequence, conservatives might be less likely than liberals to entertain ideas or information that could contradict their current views. On the other hand, liberals might be closed-minded to the benefits of the status quo in much the same way conservatives are accused of being resistant to change.

Previous investigations have examined how various forms of disinterest in information are related to political orientation (e.g., Iyengar, Hahn, Krosnick, & Walker, 2008; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009; Lavine, Lodge, & Freitas, 2005). In these studies, the disinterest exhibited by participants is thought to reflect their

desire to protect their existing views. Participants are asked to select from information that clearly supports or challenges their views. One question that remains unanswered, then, is: How is political orientation related to disinterest in novel information that may support or may challenge an existing view (i.e., empirical data) on political issues?

Here, we created a simple paradigm designed to present people with an opportunity to view new “raw” data, free from the potential bias that could be imposed by journalists and reporters. Imagine a massive data set that could help provide a rather definitive answer to a politically relevant question (e.g., “Is the world a just place?” or “Are social safety nets beneficial?”). How much of this massive data set would you want summarized for you? Clearly, if you *really* want to know the answer, you would request all of it (or a lot of it). In the present research, we address whether the amount of data selected for viewing is contingent on one’s political orientation; in this way, we address whether political orientation is associated with truly wanting an answer to issues that are important to both liberals and conservatives.

1.1. Selective interest in information

Considerable evidence suggests that, although people are curious about the world, this curiosity manifests itself in selective ways (Hart et al., 2009; Kunda, 1990; Sweeny, Melnyk, Miller, & Shepperd, 2010). People do not appear to indiscriminately seek out new information; instead there are multiple ways in which

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people limit the amount of information to which they attend. Some of these processes reflect a “confirmation bias” – a desire to reaffirm one’s current views. For instance, people often avoid information that will challenge their existing beliefs, as when people ignore news outlets that contradict their worldview (Frey, 1986; Hart et al., 2009; Jonas, Schulz-Hardt, Frey, & Thelen, 2001; Ross, Lepper, & Ward, 2010). In contrast, there appear to be other times when people avoid information even before they know what it will tell them, as when people would rather not know the result of a medical test or their definitive score on a measure of intelligence (Sweeny et al., 2010). Here, we were interested in exploring this latter form of disinterest as it relates to political orientation.

1.2. Political orientation and information exposure

Some researchers have suggested that people with extreme political views (i.e., very liberal views or very conservative views) might be less interested in new information than people with more moderate political views (Brannon, Tagler, & Eagly, 2007). Theoretically, people with extreme views may be more motivated to defend them, and thus more threatened by new information (especially if it is contradictory). Other researchers, however, have proposed that there is something about a *conservative* orientation, specifically, that predisposes people to be disinterested in new information. There is evidence that people who are politically conservative are especially prone to motivated cognition, which can lead to the avoidance of information (Hart et al., 2009; Jost et al., 2003). In their comprehensive meta-analysis, Jost et al. (2003) propose that there are core aspects of conservatism – resistance to change and acceptance of inequality – that foster a reluctance to consider alternative viewpoints. Supporting this view, previous findings have demonstrated associations between conservatism and dogmatism (Rokeach, 1960), need for closure (Golec, 2001; Jost, Kruglanski, & Simon, 1999), and reduced openness to experience (Peterson, Smirles, & Wentworth, 1997).

Most of the previous studies that have directly examined these two possibilities have focused on confirmation bias. Indeed, there is evidence that people with extreme views (Brannon et al., 2007; Brock & Balloun, 1967; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009; cf., Taber & Lodge, 2006) and people with conservative views (Iyengar et al., 2008; Lavine et al., 2005; cf., Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009) show greater confirmation bias, reflecting a disinterest in information that contradicts their existing views. It remains unclear, however, whether these findings extend to interest in new, unbiased information. Perhaps when people view information as coming from an objective source, people show comparable curiosity across the political spectrum.

Shook and Fazio’s (2009) examination of political orientation and attitude formation provides preliminary evidence, outside of a confirmation bias paradigm, that conservatives may be more disinterested in new information than liberals. In this experiment, participants played a game, called Beanfest, in which they could learn by sampling novel stimuli (“beans”) that produced positive or negative outcomes. They found that more conservative participants chose to sample fewer beans, thus limiting their exposure to information. This finding provides some evidence that conservatives might be less interested in new information than liberals, even in situations where confirmation bias does not play a role. In this study, however, sampling beans also involves risking a loss of points, and thus decreased sampling may reflect greater risk aversion amongst conservatives rather than decreased interest in information (Hibbing, Smith, & Alford, 2014). Thus, it is unclear whether this finding would extend to situations in which there is effectively zero cost to learning new information.

2. The current investigation

In the current investigation our goal was to extend our existing understanding of the relationship between political orientation and disinterest in new information. Previous work has tended to focus on how people gather information that clearly supports or challenges an expressed view, and has thus been helpful in revealing how people of different political orientations seek information from their allies and opponents. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how political orientation would relate to disinterest in new information of unknown content – that is, content that could be supportive or challenging. We believe answering this question provides novel insight into the debate about whether political orientation relates to really wanting to know objective reality (vs. one’s own version of reality). We attempted to examine this issue directly by presenting people with new information in the form of raw data and allowing them to indicate how much of the data they wanted us to summarize for them. In this way we hoped to examine how political orientation might be associated with truly wanting to understand a political issue.

3. Method – pilot

In our first attempt to address the relationship between political orientation and interest in novel data we turned to data that had been collected as part of two experimental studies. In the first study we originally attempted to manipulate support for just world beliefs, and the second we attempted to manipulate perceptions of the comprehensibility of the world. Our main dependent variable in both studies was a data selection task designed to assess the amount of empirical data participants were interested in viewing. Because both studies included measures of political orientation, we were able to combine these data into a Pilot Study examining the association between political orientation and data selection. Here we focus specifically on this relationship and do not discuss the manipulations further (but see Supplementary Materials for further details about the manipulations and their effects on the dependent variables of interest).

The data selection task in these studies assessed people’s interest in learning about new data on the justness of the world. We expected that just world beliefs would be politically divisive (with conservatives holding a stronger belief in a just world; e.g., Jost et al., 2003; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001) but that both liberals and conservatives would view this issue as important. To decrease the likelihood that people’s decisions would be influenced by confirmation bias (i.e., attempting to gather support for one’s view) they were not told anything about what the data would reveal in advance. In this way we attempted to rule out the possibility that selecting less data would reflect people’s disinterest in things they already know. If interest in novel data is related to political orientation, then we should see a direct relation between these variables. Alternatively, if interest in novel data is related to the extremity of political orientation we should see a quadratic relationship such that people at both ends of the political orientation measure are less interested in the data than those closer to the middle (i.e., an inverted “U”).

3.1. Participants

A total of 227 undergraduate psychology students at the University of Alabama (140 females, $M_{\text{age}} = 19.60$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.52$) participated for course credit. These participants completed one of two studies, the first involving a manipulation of pre-existing support for the just world hypothesis ($n = 118$) and the second involving a manipulation of comprehensibility ($n = 109$).

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