

## **Political Attitudes and Complexity: Responses From a Motivational Perspective**

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The paragraphs that follow are an attempt to reply to two questions regarding differences in specific attitudes and complex thinking associated with the political Left and Right. In addressing the question of attitudes, I also take the opportunity to present a more nuanced view of political orientations, drawn from the proposed motivational framework. I then discuss work on motivational bases of information processing, attributions, and competing views of justice that can inform the question of complexity differences in political orientation, and I conclude with a brief discussion of differences in the types of societies associated with liberalism and conservatism in the human progression from small foraging groups to complex modern cities.

### **Liberal Versus Conservative Attitudes and Policy Preferences**

Liberals' and conservatives' political attitudes and preferred forms of social regulation reflect distinct motivational orientations. Liberalism is approach based, whereas conservatism is avoidance based. Liberals therefore focus on advancing positive outcomes and typically seek societal regulation through activation (i.e., interventions). Conservatives focus on preventing negative outcomes and typically seek social regulation through inhibition (i.e., restraints). The positive-outcome focus of liberals leads them to emphasize providing for others in society, whereas the negative-outcome focus of conservatives leads them to emphasize protecting societal members.

More generally, these differences are reflected in an emphasis on social justice by liberals and an emphasis on social order by conservatives. Liberals' approach-based "provide" orientation is reflected in their strong support for issues advancing social welfare such as health, education, and employment; liberals value greater fairness and equality across society and typically support policies such as affirmative action, universal health care and social security. In contrast, conservatives' avoidance-based "protect" orientation is reflected in their strong support for issues advancing security; they value stability and norm adherence and are therefore concerned not only with national defense (involving threats from outside), but also with

countering norm violations that are believed to threaten society from within. This leads to a focus on lifestyles and personal behaviors (that often involve the body and intimate relationships), such as abortion and same-sex marriage, which conservatives perceive as dangers to the group.

Conservatives thus focus on restraint-based regulation of lifestyles and personal behaviors, whereas liberals, whose concerns lie elsewhere, do not believe this is an appropriate domain for social regulation; instead liberals emphasize the need for autonomy and choice in this area. In contrast, liberals focus on activation-based regulation of economics and social goods, and in particular government interventions that promote the fair distribution of societal resources. Yet it is this domain that conservatives regard as inappropriate for social regulation. Clearly both liberals and conservatives value autonomy but view it as crucial in different arenas, specifically the domains the other group seeks to regulate.

These distinct attitudes toward greater equality and social justice versus security and social order are likely to underlie Left–Right differences across time and place, but the specific political policies and issues they reflect will no doubt differ. For liberals, the crucial question is whether an issue or policy promotes the well-being of people across society. For conservatives the crucial question is whether it is perceived as a danger or destabilizing element in society. Over time many issues that are initially perceived as threats become normalized, such that they no longer are seen as threatening to social order and stability. Thus women's suffrage, which in the past was opposed by conservatives, is now supported by people regardless of their political orientation (Sugar, Viney, & Rohe, 1992); similarly, it seems likely that with the passage of time, same-sex marriage, too, will be accepted by the Right, for the threat conservatives perceive is likely to dissipate as such marriages become increasingly common.

Political attitudes depend largely on societal experiences, and policies we would readily identify as liberal or conservative may reflect different political preferences in countries or regions with different histories. Thus, Kossawska and Van Hiel (2003) recently found that in both Flanders and Poland, conservatism was positively associated with scores on a

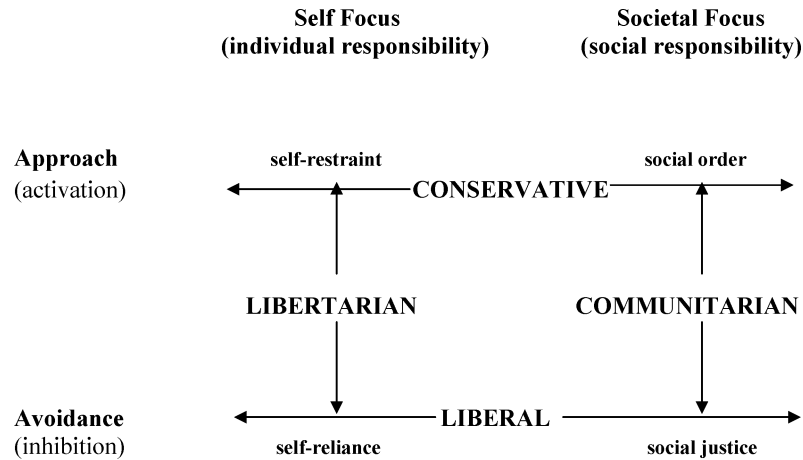


Figure 1. An expanded view of political orientation.

religious-nationalism scale, which presumably reflected social order concerns. However, differences arose on a scale that assessed social-welfare protectionism versus capitalism. In Flanders, where a free-market ideology had been the tradition for years, conservatism was positively associated with a preference for capitalism. Yet in Poland, which had years of experience with communism, conservatism was positively associated with a preference for social-welfare protectionism, society's traditional orientation in this case. For liberals to promote social welfare in Flanders, (approach-based) liberals looked to greater government regulations and economic interventions; to advance social welfare beyond its current state in Poland, however, required a different set of changes, and the desired interventions in this case involved greater movement toward free markets. Liberalism and conservatism reflect distinct approach versus avoidance motivations. As political orientations, however, they are nevertheless embedded within societies, which have their own unique histories, institutions, and traditions.

### An Expanded Motivational View of Political Orientation

Particular political attitudes associated with liberalism and conservatism may change over time and historical circumstances. It is also the case that although liberalism and conservatism are no doubt the two primary forms of political ideology, by focusing on these two alone we are surely simplifying the political world. I believe liberals and conservatives differ in their basic motivational orientations (i.e., approach vs. avoidance). However, our model of associated moral motives can serve to provide a more nuanced perspective of political orientation (see Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Balducci, 2008). Specifically, in this model approach and avoidance motivation are crossed with a focus

on the self (individual responsibility) versus society (social responsibility). Considered in terms of rows, we have essentially "pure" liberals and conservatives, distinguished by motivation (see Figure 1). However, if we expand our view and instead attend to motivational focus (i.e., self vs. society), the columns rather than the rows of the model, we have two additional orientations that provide a broader perspective on politics. In particular, those who focus on the self—that is, emphasize individual responsibility and individual regulation—are libertarians; those who focus on the regulation of society—on social responsibility and common bonds—are communarians (see Figure 1).

From the perspective of liberalism and conservatism, libertarianism and communarianism have a foot in both camps; for libertarians, there is a belief in self-reliance and self-restraint but an eschewal of strategies that involve communal forms of regulation. Communarians emphasize both social order and social justice—social regulatory strategies that both involve communal bonds. Although each of these groups may identify primarily with conservatives at one historical time (i.e., recent years), they are not driven by approach-avoidance differences, but rather by motivational focus, and their "foot in both camps" can lead them to shift allegiance to a particular party or orientation. Thus "economic conservatives" are often actually libertarians; essentially they are economic conservatives and social liberals. They do not want regulation in the economic sphere and are committed to autonomy regarding more personal lifestyle choices. The economic issues (i.e., nonregulation and the free market) for these people are primary, and thus they typically define themselves as conservatives and identify with the Republican Party. However, to the extent that issues such as abortion or same sex marriage become more important, they might instead identify as liberals.

Similarly, there are evangelical religious groups that are committed to the prohibition of abortion and gay

marriage (social order issues) but also are concerned about social justice. These communitarians are social conservatives and economic liberals. To the extent that social issues such as abortion are more important, communitarians will identify with the Republican Party and as conservatives. As social justice issues become more important to them, their more "liberal" concerns may lead to a stronger identification with the Democratic Party and more liberal initiatives. Though Left–Right political orientation is largely a matter of self-regulatory strategies, by enlarging the emphasis on motivation to include the focus of one's efforts (i.e., self vs. society), we gain a broader and more nuanced perspective of people's political views.

### **Liberalism, Conservatism, and Complex Thinking**

Returning to the primary political orientations of liberalism and conservatism, would a self-regulatory framework lead us to expect differences in the complexity of their thinking? In addressing this question, I want to emphasize that "complex thinking" here is not a matter of differences in reasoning ability or brain power. Neither the Left nor the Right has a monopoly on intelligence, and well-reasoned, sophisticated arguments—as well as their opposite—can surely be made on both sides of the political spectrum. Rather, the issue instead is whether one group or the other is likely to engage in more complex information processing, considered in terms of number of dimensions taken into account or number of processing steps involved.

### **Approach–Avoidance Differences in Information Processing**

Although complexity differences are not a defining feature of a motivational perspective, the motivational differences underlying liberalism and conservatism nevertheless are suggestive of such differences. In particular, recent research has demonstrated that there are information processing differences associated with approach versus avoidance motivation. These studies have found that approach motivation involves reliance on a broader number of cognitive representations than does avoidance motivation, and thus suggests that liberals' thinking may be more complex than conservatives'. More specifically, recent research by Friedman and Forster (Friedman & Forster, 2005; Forster, Friedman, Ozelsel, & Denzler, 2006; also see Derryberry & Tucker, 1994) provides evidence that an approach (vs. avoidance) mode is associated with broader conceptual attention and with a broader array of mental representations. Avoidance motivation narrows the focus of conceptual attention and thereby restricts the constructs and dimensions that are considered. In their

research, Friedman and Forster found that only the most accessible mental representations are attended to in avoidance regulation, whereas less accessible representations also receive attention in approach regulation. Consequently, participants in the approach condition of their studies outperformed avoidance participants by escaping part-list cueing inhibition (Forster et al., 2006, Study 2) and by finding alternative solutions to presolved anagrams (Forster et al., 2006, Study 3; also see Friedman & Forster, 2005, which found that approach participants were better at the Stroop task and the 2-back task).

This use of more dimensions or representations in mental processing may also help explain the greater category inclusivity associated with approach motivation; in contrast, avoidance motivation is associated with narrower category membership (see, e.g., Mikulciner, Kedem, & Paz, 1990; Rock & Janoff-Bulman, 2009; also see Isen & Daubman, 1984). Consideration of more dimensions increases the likelihood of recognizing similarities and therefore increases the likelihood of greater inclusivity, whereas avoidance motivation inhibits consideration of a broader range of dimensions. As Forster et al. (2006) note, approach states "expand the breadth of conceptual attention, facilitating working memory access to shared exemplar features and enabling construction of broader mental categories" (p. 135).

It appears that the inhibition-based nature of avoidance motivation and the activation-based nature of approach motivation are evident in their information-processing differences. Overall, approach motivation produces a more "complex cognitive context" (Isen, 1987) relative to avoidance motivation, thereby providing access to and use of a greater number of mental constructs and dimensions in thought processes. Of course the greater number of representations in approach-based information processing may not translate directly to more complex thinking in their attitudinal and policy positions, although work by Tetlock (1983; Tetlock, Bernzweig, & Gallant, 1985) suggests this possibility.

### **Self-Reliance and Social Justice: Implications for Complex Thinking**

A closer look at liberal and conservative attitudes within a motivational framework suggests that there may be differences in number of cognitive processing steps as well. In particular, the distinct pattern of findings regarding the relationship between self-reliance and social justice beliefs has, I believe, implications for complexity. As discussed in my target article in this issue, in our research (Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Baldacci, 2008) we find conservatives are high on self-restraint and social order, indicating a general avoidance orientation; liberals are low on both.

Self-reliance tends to be high for participants across the political spectrum, no doubt reflecting a dominant individualist ideology in the United States (see Kuegel & Smith, 1986). However, self-reliance and social justice, both activation-based approach moral motives, are strongly positively correlated for liberals, indicating their general approach orientation, whereas this positive association is absent for conservatives, for whom the two are generally negatively correlated (Janoff-Bulman et al., 2008).

Both liberals and conservatives believe in providing for themselves. However, for liberals, the more they believe in providing for themselves, the more they believe in providing for others. For conservatives, the more they believe in providing for themselves the less they believe in providing for others. From a liberal perspective, in a fair and just society, we have a common obligation to provide for each other, and in particular, to provide for those worse off in society. Liberals' focus on positive outcomes includes positive outcomes for both the self and others.

The conservative perspective involves seeing the self and others similarly—both should fend for themselves. Those worse off in society are apt to be blamed for their situation; that is, conservatives make dispositional rather than situational attributions for people's plights. In contrast, liberals are more apt to take into account situational constraints and thereby make situational attributions for people's circumstances (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Skitka, 1999; Skitka & Tetlock, 1993; Williams, 1984). Implicit in a social justice perspective is the recognition that when fending for themselves, people do not start the race from the same starting line; some are very advantaged, others are very disadvantaged.

Yet dispositional attributions are our automatic, default option (see, e.g., Gilbert, 1998; Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull; also see Ross, 1977, on the fundamental attribution error). Situational attributions represent a correction involving more effortful, controlled thinking. Thus situational attributions involve additional processing over and above the automatic dispositional reactions, which suggests that conservatives' dispositional attributions are "simpler" than liberals' situational attributions. This processing level difference for liberals versus conservatives was demonstrated in a series of studies by Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Hutchinson, and Chamberlin (2002; also see Eidelman, Crandall, & Goodman, 2009, and Hansson, Keating, & Terry, 1974). When processing resources were limited through cognitive overload, the attributions of liberals resembled the dispositional attributions of conservatives, but when processing resources were not artificially constrained, conservatives continued to make dispositional attributions for disadvantaged others, whereas liberals shifted to situational attributions (also see Wänke &

Wyer, 1996, who found that liberals scored higher than conservatives on the Attributional Complexity Scale).

In embracing social justice for the larger society, liberals demonstrate more complex processing that incorporates situational attributions and recognition of situational constraints. It is not the case that conservatives do not believe in justice; they believe in reaping rewards based on one's own inputs. This is the fundamental principle of microjustice (Brickman, Folger, Goode, & Schul, 1981), involving fairness of outcomes for an individual. Liberals use this principle as well, typically with regard to the self; in fact it is the fundamental, default fairness principle in individualist cultures. However, liberals also use macrojustice principles, which go beyond the self and consider fairness of outcome distributions across society (Brickman et al., 1981). These are more effortful (and typically less self-interested) determinations. Outcomes such as affirmative action or universal health care, while typically perceived as unfair from a microjustice perspective, are nevertheless fair from a macrojustice perspective (also see Rawls, 1971). Thus whether considered in terms of dispositional-situational attributions or microjustice-macrojustice principles, liberals' concerns for social justice and providing for those worse off in society appear to reflect more complex, less automatic (default) thought processes.

### **Types of Societies Associated With Liberalism and Conservatism**

It is also interesting to consider that liberalism and conservatism seem to be associated with different types of societies in the human progression from small foraging groups to complex modern cities. Our early history as humans was spent in small foraging groups that are characterized as immediate-return societies (Woodburn, 1979, 1988; also see Martin & Shirk, 2008). Here tools are simple, food isn't stored or processed, and the return on labor is immediate. These societies are highly egalitarian; possessions are few, as are authority, power and status differences. Group members tend to be related and there are high levels of mutual trust and non-contingent sharing. These foraging groups live in small, temporary camps that are spread out and are part of a larger population, and there is a great deal of social fluidity, because individuals move freely in and out of these camps (Martin & Shirk, 2008; Woodburn 1979, 1988).

Only a handful of such societies continue to exist (see, e.g., Marlowe, 2002), but these small, trusting egalitarian groups no doubt defined humans' earliest societal experiences. Dramatic changes came with the advent of agriculture, for we became members of delayed-return societies, in which there is a return on

labor over time (Woodburn 1979, 1988; also see Martin & Shirk, 2008). In these larger, sedentary communities, which continue to define our societies today, there is an inevitable lag between exertion and reward for one's efforts.

Life in these delayed-return societies is characterized by uncertainty; return is not immediate, and therefore social mechanisms develop to emphasize and enforce long-term, binding commitments. The communal relationships of immediate-return societies are replaced with exchange relationships (Clark & Mills, 1979). There are now possessions and accumulation of personal property; status, wealth, and authority differences arise (Martin & Shirk, 2008; Woodburn, 1979, 1988). Delayed-return societies involve a shift toward inequality.

These are relatively homogeneous, closed societies; their social structure and societal boundaries are far more rigid than those of their foraging precursors. The success of the group depends on a shared social identity that defines ingroup membership as well as adherence to norms based on this identity, which in turn behaviorally demonstrate commitment to the group. Here "difference" evokes danger, and the societal focus is on protecting group members from threats, whether from outside the group or from nonconformists within. These are conservative communities, characterized by a strong emphasis on social order, obedience to social norms and rules, and legitimizing myths that justify increasing inequality.

Liberalism seems to grow with increasing exposure and openness to differences across communities. As diverse individuals and groups come into greater contact and live together in expanded, (delayed-return) heterogeneous communities, difference becomes a feature of the group itself. The success of the group as a whole, with its intragroup variability, is likely to depend largely on interdependence and efforts involving positive welfare-promoting obligations across the larger community. Concerns for social justice rather than social order become paramount. Whereas conservatives seek social homogeneity and uniformity in norm-adherence, liberals strive for greater economic homogeneity and egalitarianism.

It is perhaps little wonder that to this day small towns tend to be conservative, whereas cities, which maximize heterogeneity, tend to be liberal. Thus, in the 2000 presidential election, rural American voted overwhelmingly Republican and urban America overwhelmingly Democratic (Bishop, 2008); similarly, in the 2004 presidential election, most of the counties that voted for John Kerry were "near major waterways, where ports and cities are usually located and where mobility and diversity are greatest" (Haidt & Graham, 2007, p. 113). Of interest, these differences in the nature of communities associated with liberalism and conservatism are reflected in the motivational

differences that define the two political orientations, for conservatism is avoidance based and focused on protecting the group from harm, whereas liberalism is approach based and focused on providing for group members' welfare.

## Note

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