Ideological Extremity and Attitudinal Ambivalence

Abstract

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The question whether individuals with opposite political views differ in their feeling and thinking not only when it comes to political issues but also in general and outside the political arena has intrigued scholars for decades and continues to be debated. With respect to *feeling*, the debate has concerned issues such as security needs and sensitivity to threats, the relative importance of different moral intuitions, or disgust sensitivity. With respect to *thinking*, the debate has concerned issues such as epistemic needs and tolerance of ambiguity, thinking style, or intelligence. Recently, bringing together both domains of mental life, scholars have raised the question whether ideology-related differences in information processing entail differences in the structure of attitudes and, more specifically, whether individual differences in political ideology are associated with the extent to which people tend to hold ambivalent attitudes (Jost & Krochik, 2014; Newman & Sargent, 2020; Sargent & Newman, 2020). Interestingly, extant empirical findings of research on this question are inconsistent: While findings by Krochik, Jost, and Nosek (2007; reported in Jost & Krochik, 2014) suggest a stable tendency for more conservative (vs. more liberal) individuals to hold less ambivalent attitudes, findings by Newman and Sargent (2020; Sargent & Newman, 2020) indicate an association in the opposite direction. In the following, after briefly introducing the concept of attitudinal ambivalence, we describe the theoretical explanations for the opposite predictions/findings and propose a third perspective. In the empirical part, we test the predictions that follow from the three perspectives using data of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) collected during the 2017 and 2013 Federal Election Campaigns in Germany.

**Attitudinal Ambivalence**

Attitudinal ambivalence refers to the simultaneous existence of strong positive *and* negative evaluative reactions toward the same attitude object (e.g., Conner & Sparks, 2002; Haddock & Maio, 2019; Jonas et al., 2000; Thompson et al., 1995; van Harreveld et al., 2015). This definition makes clear that attitudinal ambivalence is conceptually distinct from indifference where an attitude object elicits weak evaluative reactions in general. The present research focuses on *affective ambivalence* as a special form of attitudinal ambivalence where the ambivalence occurs within the affective attitude component rather than between affective, cognitive, and behavioral attitude components (see Cacioppo et al., 1997, on the independence of positive and negative affect).

**The Rigidity of the Right Hypothesis**

According to the ideology as motivated social cognition perspective (Jost et al., 2003, 2009), individuals tend to experience affinities for political views that are compatible with their psychological dispositions. More specifically, the associated rigidity of the right hypothesis holds that strong needs for security (existential needs) and certainty (epistemic needs) facilitate the endorsement of conservative views that can be characterized by two core elements: (a) resistance to change and (b) acceptance of inequality. In line with this hypothesis and focusing on the role of epistemic needs, numerous studies have documented associations between conservatism and measures that reflect a motivation to obtain and stick to clear answers, low tolerance of ambiguity, avoidance of attitude-inconsistent information and cognitive dissonance, low openness for new experiences, and a tendency to rely on intuitive rather than reflective judgments (e.g., Burger et al., 2020; Deppe et al., 2015; Pennycook & Rand, 2019; for overviews, see Hibbing et al., 2014; Jost et al., 2009; Van Hiel et al., 2010). Some authors have concluded from these findings that biased information processing and intolerance are in general on average more prevalent on the right side of the political spectrum than on the left (e.g., Baron & Jost, 2019; Jost, 2017) which has been questioned by others (e.g., Brandt et al., 2014; Ditto et al., 2019; Frimer et al., 2017; Greenberg & Jonas, 2003).

With respect to the issue of attitudinal ambivalence, Jost and Krochik (2014) argued that the characteristic ideology-related pattern of self-reported epistemic preferences and thinking style has implications for the structure of the (political and non-political) attitudes that individuals hold. In an online study using a large convenience sample of US residents and involving 95 political and non-political attitude objects, they found support for the hypotheses that individuals with a more conservative (vs. liberal) orientation tend to endorse attitudes with greater certainty, expect less variability of their attitudes, and experience less ambivalent affective reactions toward attitudinal objects.

**The Conservatism-Ambiguity Hypothesis**

Newman and Sargent (2020) investigated the association of political orientations with (subjective and objective) attitudinal ambivalence among convenience samples US residents in a set of five online-studies where they failed to find support for a negative association of conservatism with attitudinal ambivalence (across attitude objects as well as at the level of individual attitude objects). Instead, their results indicate associations of subjective and objective ambivalence in the opposite direction: conservatism was associated with more rather than less attitudinal ambivalence (across attitude objects as well as at the level of most individual attitude objects). A follow-up study (Sargent & Newman, 2020) replicated this pattern for objective (but not subjective) ambivalence using attitude objects similar to the ones used by Krochik and colleagues (2007) as well as systematically varying the procedure of presenting these objects (paired vs. separate). As a post-hoc explanation for their findings Newman and Sargent (2020) speculate that increased attitudinal ambivalence among conservatives (vs. liberals) might result from conservatism being associated with a tendency to avoid conscious reflection on ambivalent attitude objects which could be a necessary condition for resolving these ambiguities and constructing more consistent attitudes.

**The Ideological Extremity Hypothesis**

According to the ideological extremity hypothesis extreme political orientations on both sides of the political spectrum rather than conservatism specifically are associated with simplistic, dogmatic, and inflexible belief systems and thinking styles (Brandt et al., 2015; Conway et al., 2018; Fernbach et al., 2013; Greenberg & Jonas, 2003; Lammers et al., 2017; Toner et al., 2013; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019; Zmigrod et al., 2020). In line with this view, ideological extremity on both sides of the ideological spectrum has been demonstrated to be associated with higher scores on behavioral measures of cognitive inflexibility (Zmigrod et al., 2020), more simplistic perceptions of the political domain (Lammers et al., 2017), a tendency to ignore external information in judgments (Brandt et al., 2015), illusions of understanding (Fernbach et al., 2013), the perception of own beliefs as superior (Toner et al., 2013), as well as intolerance (Brandt et al., 2014) and authoritarianism (Conway et al., 2018; for an overview, see van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019). If Jost and Krochik (2014) are right that a rigid cognitive style as well a biased information processing and intolerance decrease the likelihood of holding ambivalent attitudes, it follows from the ideological extremity hypothesis that attitudinal ambivalence should be low at the extremes of both sides of the political spectrum rather than on the right side in particular.

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