In contemporary societies there are many topics that are subject to political contestation, including civil liberties, immigration and the rights of ethnic minorities, state intervention in the economy, redistribution of economic resources from the rich to the poor, gender equality, family relationships and the role of religion in society. In many countries, groups of attitudes toward politicized topics are packaged together into wider ideologies. For example, in the United States, one of the countries with the most strongly polarized political spectra (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008), individuals who support free-market market economics, an increased role for religion in society and traditional gender roles form the voter base of the Republican Party, while people who prefer a welfare state, a secular society and gender equality form the voter base of the Democratic Party. The American political spectrum, which is the most widely studied case in the research literature, represents a classic example of a left-right political spectrum. The right-left model has long dominated the study of political ideologies, both at the level of parties and politicians, and at the level of political orientation among common citizens.

Recent research has challenged the traditional left-right model of the political spectrum from two different perspectives. Psychologists and neuroscientists have started to investigate the factors that predispose individuals toward certain political orientations. They discovered that there are at least two separate dimensions of political orientation that originate in distinct cognitive and personality profiles. Comparative researchers from both political science and psychology have started to compare the spectrum of political attitudes in multiple countries and observed that the left-right spectrum is far from universal. In many countries around the world, especially in former communist countries, socially progressive attitudes are actually correlated with free market economic attitudes conventionally associated with right – wing politics, contrary to the expectations derived from the traditional left-right model.

The purpose of the current project is to investigate differences among countries related to the type and pattern of the spectrum of political orientations. Seven varieties of politicized attitudes are included in the present study, relating to (1) individual freedom, (2) socialism and the welfare state, (3) immigration and ethnic minorities, (4) gender equality, (5) family, sexuality, and reproduction, (6) nationalism, as well as (7) religion. The present study extends previous research by investigating the relationships among seven components of political orientation instead of just social and economic orientation as well as by including a larger set of countries and territories from every inhabited continent, numbering more than 100 countries and autonomous territories in total.

**1.1. The origin of political orientations**

**1.1.1. Classic theories and research traditions**

There are two research traditions about the structure and pattern of the political attitude spectrum among individuals. One originated in political science while the other originated in psychology. The first stresses the contingent and arbitrary nature of the political spectrum, while the second proposes that political orientations reflect the basic psychological processes of each individual.

In his 1964 book called “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics”, American political scientist Phillip Converse proposed that attitudes toward different politicized issues (for example, economic redistribution to the poor and gender equality) are packaged together by politicians to attract many voters who are loyal to their party of choice. In principle, it would be possible, for example, for individuals who support gender equality to also support free market economics. However, gender equality and free market attitudes are negatively correlated due to arbitrary historical circumstances in which politicians who advocated for women’s rights and those advocating for greater state intervention in the economy managed to unite around a common platform to attract more voters. According to Converse’s theory, ordinary citizens align their attitudes according to the pre-defined choices offered to them by mainstream politicians and political parties (Hill, 2001; Sturgis & Smith, 2010).

By contrast, in their 1950 book called “The Authoritarian Personality”, Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel Levinson, and Nevitt Sanford argued that political orientation is the product of an individual’s personality. Individuals inclined toward conventional behaviour, cynicism, and impulsivity develop affinities for authoritarian ideologies (Martin, 2001). Adorno and his colleagues considered authoritarianism as an intrinsic feature of right-wing politics.

**1.1.2. Contemporary research in political psychology**

Adorno’s authoritarian personality theory was revived with minor adjustments by contemporary political psychologists in the form of the rigidity of the right hypothesis (RRH). Right-wing political orientation is considered as the product of a rigid cognitive style adopting by individuals when processing information (Costello et al., 2022). A rigid cognitive style has multiple aspects including dogmatism, structure, certainty, and closure. Dogmatism is the tendency to reject arguments and evidence that contradict one’s existing opinions. Some individuals have a stronger need to order everything their interact with in a pattern that is simple and easy to remember, a trait called “need for structure”. The need for certainty refers to the tendency of individuals to avoid information that is ambiguous or complex. People with a strong need for closure think that there is a single right answer to every question that they encounter (Brandt & Reyna, 2010).

**1.2. Theoretical models for the spectrum of political orientation**

Feldman and Johnston (2013) argued that there are distinct social and economic dimensions of political orientation, and that the traditional left-right spectrum is inadequate for measuring the policy preferences of individuals. Costello and Lilienfeld (2021) found that only social conservatism is associated with the rigid psychological profile that was attributed in previous research to all right-wing individuals. Statistically controlling for social conservatism, the correlations between economic conservatism and psychological rigidity become insignificant or even change sign and become negative. Such results suggest that social and economic conservatism are caused by different cognitive processes and correlate among the general public only as a result of being exposed to political discourses that links social and economic attitudes into broader “right-wing” and “left-wing” packages.

**1.3. Historical perspective**

The meaning of “left” and “right” have changed over time. These two designations originated during the French Revolution, when those who supported the absolute monarchy, the hereditary privileges of the nobles and the established Church positioned themselves in the right part of the National Assembly while those who desired a new social and political order based on the ideals of secularism, freedom and equality positioned themselves on the left side of the National Assembly. During the 19th century, the left was associated with liberal and radical groups while the right was associated with conservative and reactionary groups.

In the early 20th century, socialist parties in industrialized countries gained widespread support from the newly enfranchised working-class voters and entered national legislatures, sometimes replacing liberal parties in the process. The most extreme example is that of the Liberal Party of the United Kingdom. Despite being one of the two main British political parties of the late 19th century along with the Conservative Party, the Liberal Party faded into obscurity after the 1924 elections, while the Labor Party took its place as the main party of British progressives.

The rise of socialism within the political systems of rich countries coincided with the rise of anticolonial nationalist movements in the rest of the world (Friedman, 2022). Socialist intellectuals and activists supported the anticolonial movement, leading to a long-lasting alliance between socialists and nationalists within most non-Western countries, especially in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, India, and China. The fusion between socialism and nationalism led to the apparition of a wide variety of new political ideologies specific to certain countries or regions. Most had an authoritarian character and served as the justification for dictatorial power. Such ideologies include Soviet patriotism/ socialism in one country, Titoism (Yugoslav socialism), Ba’athism/ Arab socialism, Islamic socialism, African socialism, Nehruvian socialism (India), Burmnese Way to Socialism, socialism with Chinese Characteristics, Ho Chi Minh Thought (Vietnam), and Juche (North Korea).

**1.4. Comparative research**

Malka et al. (2019) found that in most countries, right-wing economic attitudes (support for free markets and free trade) relate positively to socially progressive attitudes like gender equality or openness toward immigrants. By contrast, in developed Western democracies, adherents of economic right-wing ideology are more likely to support social conservatism and ethnic nationalism. Apart from economic development, the history of political regimes in a country influences the structure of its political spectrum. In former communist countries, economically right-wing attitudes are correlated with socially progressive attitudes, in stark contrast with Western democracies. In developing and/ or former communist countries, the social and political orientations of citizens form an open – closed or freedom – protection spectrum, as opposed to a right-left spectrum.