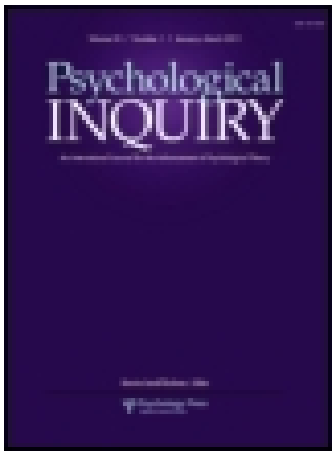

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Can a Psychological Theory of Ideological Differences Explain Contextual Variability in the Contents of Political Attitudes?

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Can a Psychological Theory of Ideological Differences Explain Contextual Variability in the Contents of Political Attitudes?

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In this brief reply, we explore the ways in which a psychological theory of ideology as motivated social cognition (e.g., Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003a, 2003b) can explain several distinct but related empirical phenomena, including why (a) epistemic and existential needs to reduce uncertainty and threat would be positively associated with social or cultural conservatism in virtually all societal contexts and yet be associated with support for either capitalism or socialism, depending upon the local context; (b) conservatives eventually come to support policy positions that were once considered to be liberal or progressive; (c) liberals are more likely than conservatives to exhibit cognitive complexity and engage in "value trade-offs" between equality and freedom; and (d) time pressure and cognitive load produce "conservative shifts" in political opinion, even among liberal respondents. By clarifying the similarities and differences between the two core dimensions of Left–Right ideology (i.e., advocating vs. resisting social change and rejecting vs. accepting inequality) and highlighting the role of status quo acceptance in conservative ideology, we hope to demonstrate that a psychological theory of Left–Right differences can account for contextual variability in the contents of political attitudes.

Scholarly and scientific interest in political psychology—and in the social and psychological bases of ideological stances in particular—has exploded in recent years, as the current special issue of *Psychological Inquiry* attests (see also Jost, Kay, & Thorisdottir, 2009). We are grateful to Leonard L. Martin and other members of the journal's advisory board not only for promoting current work in this area but also for posing a set of rich, provocative questions that we are pleased to address here. In this brief article, we explore the ways in which a theory of ideology as motivated social cognition (e.g., Jost, 2006, this issue; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003a, 2003b; Jost et al., 2007) can explain several distinct but at least somewhat related empirical phenomena pertaining to Left–Right differences, including (a) why epistemic and existential needs to reduce uncertainty and threat would be positively associated with social or cultural conservatism in virtually all societal contexts and yet be associated with support for either capitalism or socialism, depending upon the local context (Kossowska & Van Hiel, 2003); (b) why conservatives eventually come to support policy positions that were once considered to be liberal or progressive (Sugar, Viney, & Rohe, 1992); (c) why liberals are more likely than conservatives to exhibit cognitive complexity, to process information integratively, and engage in "value trade-offs" between equality and freedom (e.g., Tetlock, Bernzweig, & Gallant, 1985); and (d) why time pressure and cognitive load produce "conservative shifts" in political opinion, even among liberal respondents (Hansson, Keating, & Terry, 1974; Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Hutchinson, & Chamberlin, 2002).

Content-Free Versus Content-Laden Dimensions of Left–Right Ideology

In an effort to identify the most historically and culturally stable aspects of the Left–Right distinction, Jost et al. (2003a, 2003b) proposed that *advocacy of versus resistance to social change* and *rejection versus acceptance of inequality* were the two core dimensions that best differentiated between left-wing and right-wing ideology. In this issue, Jost traces the origins of these differences back to the French Revolution of 1789,

when left-wing ideologues supported the goals of the revolution and right-wing ideologues opposed them (see also LaPonce, 1981). For more than 2 centuries, ideological preferences with respect to these two core differences have been largely intertwined, insofar as leftists (and liberals) have generally pushed for social change in the direction of greater social, economic, or political equality, whereas rightists (and conservatives) have generally opposed such changes in the name of defending traditional customs, norms, and authority figures (e.g., Lipset & Raab, 1978). Psychological research confirms that liberals today are significantly more likely than conservatives to hold implicit and explicit attitudinal preferences for abstract philosophical constructs such as progress, rebellion, flexibility, chaos, equality, and feminism. Conservatives, on the other hand, are more likely than liberals to exhibit implicit and explicit preferences for tradition, conformity, stability, order, hierarchy, and traditional values (Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008).

This occasion provides us with an opportunity to highlight an important feature of our conceptualization, namely, that one of the two core dimensions—advocating versus resisting change—is relatively nondirectional or *content free*, insofar as "status quo conservatism" could involve preserving a wide range of customs, norms, or traditions, depending on the specific characteristics of the status quo. In contrast, the other core dimension—rejecting versus accepting inequality—is relatively more directional or *content laden*, insofar as specific issue positions (e.g., on economic policy or civil rights) can be derived on the basis of general attitudes concerning equality or inequality. Thus, in our view Minogue (1967) was exactly half right when he wrote that "the actual content of a conservative's preferences must be determined by his time and situation" (p. 198).

In addition to the historical correspondence between attitudes concerning stability (vs. change) and inequality (vs. equality), a psychological affinity may also bring preferences for stability and hierarchy into alignment. In other words, hierarchical social arrangements may satisfy psychological needs for certainty, order, structure, and closure, just as stable or traditional social arrangements do, to the extent that hierarchical structures clearly distinguish between leaders and followers, delineate guidelines for behavior on the basis of status or position in the hierarchy, and offer unambiguous explanations for social and economic outcomes (see also Jost, 2006; Jost et al., 2003a, 2003b; Jost et al., 2007). Consistent with this reasoning, experimental inductions of the need for cognitive closure by Kruglanski and colleagues have shown that the desire to establish closure (a psychological tendency that is associated with political conservatism) tends to stifle egalitarian discussion in groups and leads to autocratic patterns of influence among group members (Kruglanski, Pierro, Manetti, & De Grada, 2006).

Nevertheless, certain historical developments or societal circumstances may bring resistance to change and acceptance of inequality into conflict or contradiction. This may well have occurred in Communist societies in the late 1980s (see also Jost et al., 2003a; Thorisdottir, Jost, Liviatan, & Shrout, 2007). Some of the apparent paradoxes highlighted in the questions posed to us can be resolved by considering the psychological implications of situations in which the (relatively content-free) dimension of resisting (vs. advocating) change operates independently or even in contrast to the (more content-laden) dimension of justifying (vs. rejecting) inequality. We turn now to a more thorough discussion of these issues.

Contextual Variability in the Psychological Predictors of Support for Socialism Versus Capitalism

As a general rule, the correlation between social and economic ideologies is significant and positive (e.g., see Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009). In other words, most citizens hold attitudes that are either liberal or conservative on both social issues and economic issues. Nevertheless, it is possible for social and economic attitudes to be ideologically dissociated. For instance, libertarians are said to be socially liberal and economically conservative, whereas populists are said to be socially conservative and economically liberal. Although both groups are quite small in terms of the population as a whole (e.g., Zaller, 1992), their presence in the political domain does suggest that social and economic forms of ideology can at least sometimes diverge.

A similar issue arises when one inquires as to whether supporters of Socialism or Communism in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s should be considered "liberal" or "conservative" (e.g., see Greenberg & Jonas, 2003). According to our conception, the last generation of communist supporters were conservative with respect to one of the two core dimensions (resisting change, preserving the status quo, defending traditions) and liberal (or leftist) in terms of the other, at least rhetorically if not in practice (rejecting inequality, advocating economic equality). Thus, they were more conservative than the original Bolshevik revolutionaries but also more liberal than those who supported Feudal and other traditionally hierarchical regimes (Jost et al., 2003a, pp. 385–386). To the extent that communists in the late 20th century may be considered to be relatively conservative in at least one of the two senses we have identified (e.g., status quo

preservation), it follows from our psychological analysis that their late and enduring support for Communism may have reflected not only resistance to change but also uncertainty avoidance.

Although tight restrictions on social scientific research prevented psychologists from investigating the social and psychological bases of political ideology under Communist rule, the available evidence from Eastern Europe (conducted after the fall of Communism) suggests that persistent support of communist and socialist economic policies can, under some circumstances, be associated with needs for certainty and security. Along these lines, Kossowska and Van Hiel (2003) found that the need for cognitive closure was positively correlated with Left–Right orientation and cultural conservatism (i.e., resistance to social change) in both Flemish and Polish samples, but that it was negatively correlated with support for capitalism (i.e., acceptance of economic inequality) in Poland only, presumably because of the country's communist past (see also Jost et al., 2003b, pp. 359–360).

Thorisdottir et al. (2007) similarly compared the psychological correlates of political orientation in Eastern and Western Europe using data from the European Social Survey. Results indicated that whereas the need for security was associated with right-wing orientation in Western Europe, it was associated with left-wing orientation in Eastern Europe. Furthermore, openness to new experiences was associated with greater egalitarianism in both contexts, but it was associated with left-wing orientation in Western Europe and with right-wing orientation in Eastern Europe. Taken in conjunction, the results of studies by Kossowska and Van Hiel (2004) and Thorisdottir et al. (2007) lead one to expect heightened epistemic and existential needs to reduce uncertainty and threat to be associated with increased social or cultural conservatism in virtually all societal contexts. At the same time, these needs may be associated with support for either capitalism or socialism, depending upon the specific context (i.e., the societal status quo).

A serendipitous finding obtained by Jost et al. (2007, p. 1003) may shed further light on this issue. Specifically, these authors found that uncertainty avoidance was significantly associated with resistance to change but not acceptance of inequality, consistent with the notion that the status quo (apart from the degree of equality/inequality it promotes) is more likely to satisfy epistemic needs for stability, certainty, and familiarity than are alternatives to the status quo. In this sense, the advocacy versus resistance to change dimension may "trump" the rejection versus acceptance of inequality dimension in importance, at least when needs to reduce uncertainty are particularly strong and the two dimensions imply contradictory political preferences. We would thus expect that over time, to the extent that capitalism is assimilated to the status quo and free market ideology becomes tradition (as it is in the United States), conservatives in Eastern Europe will more fully embrace "neoliberal" economic principles (if they have not done so already).

Why Do Conservatives (Eventually) Support Liberal Policies?

If liberals are more likely than conservatives to endorse social change, then most genuine innovations in society will be liberal or progressive in nature, and, as a general rule, conservatives will tend to resist many of them (especially if these innovations involve an increased commitment to egalitarianism). Nevertheless, to the extent that liberals ultimately succeed in incorporating the new policies into the established status quo, the next generation of conservatives can be counted on to accept and defend most of them. For example, a great many progressive initiatives throughout the 20th century—including child labor laws, women's suffrage, civil rights for minorities, and so on—were opposed by conservatives when they were initially introduced, but few conservatives today would oppose them. These historical facts are highly consistent with our theory, which suggests that conservatives are motivated to accept and justify the status quo and to reject alternative calls for qualitative social change (see Jost et al., 2003a, 2003b).

A study conducted by Sugar et al. (1992) revealed that although liberals and conservatives disagreed substantially on a host of contemporary social and political issues, they were equivalently supportive of legislative and policy initiatives of the past that were considered by historians to be liberal or progressive at the time they were introduced. The 12 historically liberal innovations that eventually came to be embraced by the conservative respondents in this study are listed in Table 1. It is noteworthy that 8 of these 12 initiatives clearly increased the extent of social, economic, or political equality; the other 4 may have also done so, but it is less obviously the case. All of this suggests that if liberals are able to be politically successful (despite conservative resistance), conservatives will *eventually* come to accept the legitimacy of even those policies that were once regarded as progressive challenges to the status quo. Nosek, Banaji, and Jost (2009, pp. 497–500) reached precisely this conclusion following an analysis of public opinion data, which revealed that whereas in 1972 conservatives held much less favorable explicit attitudes toward African Americans than did liberals, by 2004 conservatives had finally "caught up" to where liberals had been for 30 years or more (see Figure 1).

Table 1. *Legislative and Other Societal Innovations Rated by Historians as Initially Liberal That Are Now Also Supported by Conservatives.*

Historically Liberal Innovation	Did It Also Increase the Extent of Equality?
Smallpox vaccination	Unsure
Child labor laws	Yes
Voting rights for women	Yes
Social Security programs	Yes
Medicare	Yes
Admission of women into universities	Yes
Admission of Blacks into universities	Yes
Integration of Blacks and Whites	Yes
Clean Air Act	Unsure
Clean Water Act	Unsure
Enactment of a national minimum hourly wage	Yes
Restrictions on gun ownership	Unsure

Note. These items are taken from Sugar, Viney, and Rohe (1992), pp. 91–93.

Why Are Liberals More Likely to Engage in Complex "Value Trade-Offs"?

An extensive research program carried out by Tetlock and colleagues has demonstrated compellingly that integrative complexity (defined as the tendency to avoid "black-and-white" thinking and to engage in higher order trade-offs among potentially competing values or pieces of information) is associated with political liberalism. In their painstaking content analytic studies of written opinions by Supreme Court judges and speeches and interviews given by U.S. senators and British members of the House of Commons, the researchers consistently observed the highest levels of integrative complexity among center-leftists or moderate liberals (e.g., Tetlock et al., 1985; for a quantitative review, see Jost et al., 2003b, pp. 353–356). Whereas liberal politicians and judges tended to consider, differentiate among, and integrate multiple value dimensions when rendering opinions, their conservative counterparts often employed a single dimension of evaluation or judgment. Research on the cognitive and motivational styles of ordinary citizens similarly reveals that liberals (on average) are significantly more tolerant of ambiguity and uncertainty, more cognitively flexible and complex, and less dogmatic and rigid, in comparison with conservatives (e.g., see Jost et al., 2003a, pp. 388–390; Jost et al., 2007).

Building on the work of Milton Rokeach, Tetlock (1986) suggested that Left–Right differences in cognitive complexity are due to the fact that liberal ideology treats the potentially conflicting values of freedom and equality as more or less equal in importance (whereas conservative ideology clearly privileges freedom over equality). Thus, liberals' ideological preferences more or less "require" them to engage in value trade-offs between freedom and equality, which presumably leads to more complex modes of reasoning (see also Skitka et al., 2002). Whereas the interpretation offered by Tetlock does not address the question of what psychological factors draw people to liberal versus conservative ideologies (or to countenance complex value trade-offs) in the first place, our theory of "elective affinities" is meant to fill precisely this void (see Jost, this issue). Political psychologists need to understand *why* liberals are more likely than conservatives to recognize and tolerate conflicts between equality and freedom. The best explanation, it seems to us, is that both situational and dispositional factors pertaining to open-mindedness (vs. closed-mindedness) and tolerance (vs. intolerance) of ambiguity and uncertainty lead some people to gravitate toward relatively complex liberal

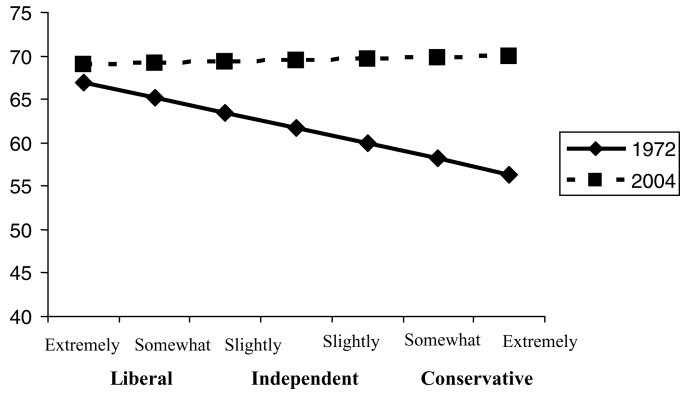

Figure 1. Warmth ratings toward African Americans in 1972 and 2004 as a function of political orientation (adjusted means). *Note.* These results are taken from an analysis of American National Election Studies data summarized by Nosek, Banaji, and Jost (2009, p. 499). Means are adjusted by gender, race, family income, age, and religion.

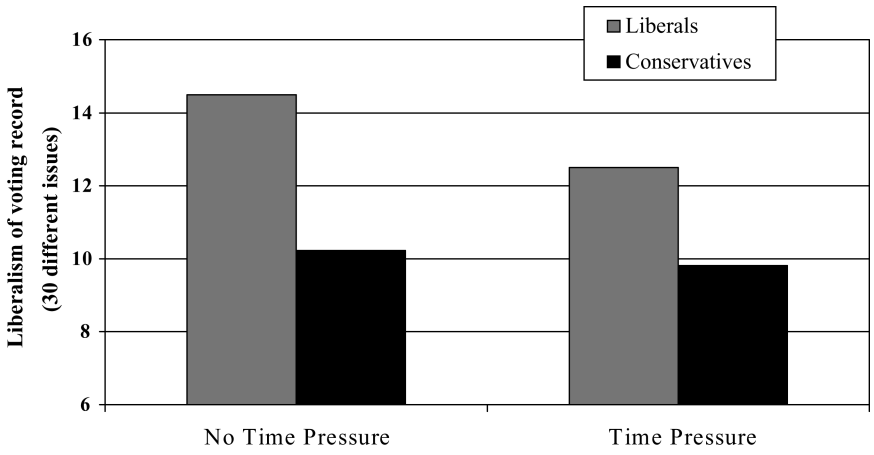

Figure 2. Time pressure caused a "conservative shift" in the voting behavior of liberal and conservative respondents. *Note.* These data are taken from an experiment reported by Hansson, Keating, and Terry (1974, p. 340).

(or center-left) ideologies and others to reject them in favor of simpler, more Manichean ways of thinking about the social and political world (see also Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; Jost, 2006, this issue; Jost et al., 2003a, 2003b, Jost et al., 2007; Jost et al., 2008; Thorisdottir & Jost, 2009).

Why Do Time Pressure and Cognitive Load Produce "Conservative Shifts"?

In a clever study conducted by Hansson and colleagues (1974), research participants (who had completed a measure of liberal and conservative attitudes 8 weeks earlier) voted on 30 pieces of legislation that were actually under consideration in the state of Washington. Approximately half of the participants were allowed as much time as they wanted to register their votes, whereas the other half were given a 2-min time limit (which was in fact the statutory time limit in official polling places in Washington at the time). As can be seen in Figure 2, liberal (and, to a lesser extent, conservative) respondents exhibited voting preferences that were less liberal (or more conservative) in the time pressure condition than in the no time pressure condition. Given that time pressure is known to temporarily increase the desire for certainty and the need for cognitive closure (e.g., Kruglanski, 2004), these results are highly consistent with our theory of ideology as motivated social cognition (e.g., Jost et al., 2003a, 2003b; Jost et al., 2007), which predicts that psychological needs to reduce uncertainty increase preferences for conservative (vs. liberal) attitudes.

Skitka et al. (2002) similarly showed that the imposition of cognitive load (or distraction) interferes with liberals' egalitarian values, leading them to think and act more like conservatives. Consistent with past research (Skitka & Tetlock, 1992), they found that under normal conditions, liberals were significantly more likely than conservatives to provide medical assistance to AIDS patients when it was possible to see them as responsible for their plight (e.g., when they practiced unsafe sex). However, when cognitive load was introduced, liberals and conservatives behaved similarly, apparently because the liberal tendency to take into account more complex, extenuating circumstances involves a correction process requiring cognitive effort, which can be fairly easily disrupted. Thus, Skitka et al. concluded, "It is much easier to get a liberal to behave like a conservative than it is to get a conservative to behave like a liberal" (p. 484; see also Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009, pp. 319–320). As we have suggested, it may take years or even decades for conservatives to embrace liberal opinions. However, studies by Crandall and Eidelman (2007) suggest that drinking alcohol, which reduces the need for cognition and strengthens the desire for cognitive closure, leads liberals to endorse more conservative opinions than they otherwise would. Experimental manipulations of threat similarly induce motivated closed-mindedness, which, in turn, contributes to conservative shift (see Thorisdottir & Jost, 2009). Evidence that time pressure, cognitive load, and alcohol intoxication all produce conservative shifts in political attitudes, even among liberal respondents, strongly supports the notion that heightened needs to reduce uncertainty increase the psychological affinity for politically conservative ideology (e.g., Jost, this issue).

Concluding Remarks

Our hope is that by clarifying the similarities and differences between the two core dimensions of

Left–Right ideology (i.e., advocating vs. resisting social change and rejecting vs. accepting inequality) and highlighting the role of status quo acceptance in conservative ideology, we have demonstrated that our theory of ideology as motivated social cognition can account for contextual variability in the contents of political attitudes. By emphasizing the "elective affinities" that exist between epistemic and existential needs to reduce uncertainty and threat, on one hand, and the specific contents of liberal and conservative ideologies, on the other hand, we can also explain why liberals are more likely than conservatives to engage in complex value trade-offs, and why variables such as time pressure and cognitive load tend to produce "conservative shifts." Future research would do well to spell out the litany of psychological, and perhaps even neuropsychological (see Amodio, Jost, Master, & Yee, 2007; Oxley et al., 2008) mechanisms that mediate the effects of situational and dispositional variables on political attitudes. Among other things, this knowledge would help to circumvent undesirable social and political effects of threatening circumstances or messages. It might also suggest ways of devising constructive policy that will satisfy rather than exploit the basic psychological needs of the citizenry.

Note

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