

Rigidity of the Economic Right? Menu-Independent and Menu-Dependent Influences of Psychological Dispositions on Political Attitudes

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Abstract

The rigidity of the right model posits that psychological needs for security and certainty (NSC) attract people to a broad right-wing ideology that includes both sociocultural and economic political attitudes. We review evidence that NSC characteristics do not consistently predict economically right-wing preferences and propose the Menu-Independent and -Dependent Influence (MIDI) model as an alternative account of disposition-politics relations. In this model, NSC naturally attracts people to socioculturally conservative attitudes, but its effects on economic attitudes are the net outcome of potentially competing dispositional and discursive influences. We review evidence in support of the MIDI model and discuss its implications for understanding the interplay of background characteristics, social context, and political conflict.

Keywords

ideology, political psychology, conservatism, rigidity of the right, political attitudes

Contemporary political conflict in the United States and many other nations is organized around a right-left, or conservative-liberal, dimension. The substance of this conflict concerns two key issue domains. One is the sociocultural domain, with the right in favor of enforcing traditional social norms and the left promoting progressive social policies. But at least as central to right-left conflict is the economic domain (e.g., Benoit & Laver, 2006; Poole & Rosenthal, 2011), with the right supporting free markets and low levels of redistributive social welfare provision, and the left supporting relatively strong redistributive and regulatory economic intervention.

Reflecting the prominence of the right-left dimension in politics, much research has investigated its psychological origins. One particular core idea, dubbed the “rigidity of the right” hypothesis, underlies much of this work. This hypothesis proposes that psychological characteristics having to do with needs for security and certainty (NSC)—such as social conformity, intolerance of ambiguity, threat sensitivity, and needs for order, structure, and security—attract people to a broad-based right-wing ideology (e.g., Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003).

In this article, we argue that the rigidity of the right model is incomplete in that NSC characteristics do not,

on average, predict the right-wing economic views that are central to conservative ideology in much of the world. We propose an alternative model that more fully accounts for the extant findings, which we refer to as the Menu-Independent and -Dependent Influence (MIDI) model. In this model, NSC attracts people to right-wing sociocultural views, but the economic attitudes stemming from NSC are the complex result of potentially competing dispositional and discursive influences. The MIDI model, as we discuss below, has important implications for understanding the interplay of background characteristics, social context, and political conflict.

The Rigidity of the Right Model

According to the rigidity of the right model, psychological characteristics associated with high NSC push people toward a broad-based right-wing ideology, including both traditional sociocultural attitudes and free-market

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economic attitudes (e.g., Hibbing, Smith, & Alford, 2014; Jost et al., 2003). This, according to the model, is because right-wing policies protect both social traditions and economic hierarchy against potentially destabilizing reform, and are therefore experienced as need satisfying for people with high NSC.

The available research evidence consistently supports some predictions drawn from the rigidity of the right model. Specifically, high NSC predicts identification with the political right (e.g., Feldman & Johnston, 2014), traditional sociocultural attitudes (e.g., Van Hiel, Onraet, & De Pauw, 2010), and political-attitude composites that blend cultural and economic content (e.g., Fraley, Griffin, Belsky, & Roisman, 2012). Moreover, high NSC predicts right-wing economic attitudes among political elites, such as politicians and activists (Golec, 2002, Study 2; Tetlock, Bernzweig, & Gallant, 1985). However, this model's predictions concerning economic attitudes have been less consistent in samples of ordinary citizens. Some studies have shown relations of NSC characteristics with right-wing economic attitudes (e.g., Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling, & Ha, 2010; Hennes, Nam, Stern, & Jost, 2012; Jost & Thompson, 2000), but others have found near-zero and nonsignificant relations (e.g., Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; Crowson, 2009; Oxley et al., 2008; Smith, Oxley, Hibbing, Alford, & Hibbing, 2011), and still others have shown relations between NSC and left-wing economic views (e.g., Golec, 2002, Study 1; Johnson & Tamney, 2001; Johnston, 2013).

What might account for this inconsistency in the economic domain? A number of researchers have proposed that sociocultural and economic political attitudes have different psychological bases (e.g., Duckitt & Sibley, 2009; Duriez & Van Hiel, 2002; Feldman & Huddy, 2014; Feldman & Johnston, 2014; Schwartz et al., 2014; Stangor & Leary, 2006). Perhaps the most prominent of these views is the dual-process model of ideology, according to which sociocultural conservatism is rooted in social conformity and belief in a dangerous world (along the lines of NSC), whereas economic conservatism is rooted in tough-mindedness and experience of the world as a "competitive jungle" (Duckitt & Sibley, 2009, 2010). In what follows, we integrate and build upon such multidimensional views by explicitly incorporating the concept of political discourse.

Effects of Needs for Security and Certainty on Economic Attitudes: The Menu-Independent and -Dependent Influence Model

We and others have proposed that the small and inconsistent relationships between NSC and right-wing economic

attitudes are the net outcome of potentially competing influences (Federico, Johnston, & Lavine, 2014; Malka & Soto, 2014). This process involves political discourse: the overall context of political communication in a society. Going back to the seminal work of Converse (1964), political scientists have emphasized the role of political discourse in attitude structuring. As they have noted, not everyone receives the messages of political discourse to the same degree. Rather, only people who are highly politically engaged receive and internalize a high volume of political messages. Across many societies, these messages convey that conservatives both oppose economic redistribution and favor socioculturally traditional norms, whereas liberals hold the opposite positions. Thus, these messages form a context in which specific economic views cohere with specific cultural views under specific ideological banners, as though particular bundles of attitudes comprise options on an ideological "menu" (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009; Sniderman & Bullock, 2004). As a consequence, those high in political engagement are more likely to adopt a consistently conservative or consistently liberal package of attitudes.

We argue that understanding the relation of NSC to economic attitudes requires explicit attention to how political discourse might compel an individual to hold some political attitudes that do not necessarily cohere with that individual's basic psychological dispositions. To this end, we propose the MIDI model, which posits that many high-NSC individuals experience both forces compelling them to adopt left-wing economic attitudes and forces compelling them to adopt right-wing economic attitudes.

NSC's menu-independent influence on left-wing economic attitudes

Should a person high in NSC be expected to prefer right-wing or left-wing economic policies? According to the rigidity of the right model, they should prefer the former, because such policies resist disruption of the prevailing economic hierarchy. However, one reason for expecting the latter is that many left-wing economic policies aim to provide people with economic stability and security, and this might be naturally need satisfying for high-NSC individuals (e.g., Federico et al., 2014).

In a recent large-scale cross-national analysis, we did indeed find support for a relation of NSC with left-wing economic views (Malka, Soto, Inzlicht, & Lelkes, 2014). Our sample included over 70,000 respondents residing in 51 nations that varied substantially in terms of development, political institutions, and culture. We found that, pooled across nations, high NSC predicted conservative position on cultural attitudes, as well as right-wing

self-identification, but that it slightly predicted left-wing economic attitudes. This pattern is consistent with the findings of several previous studies that have examined NSC's separate relations with sociocultural and economic attitudes (e.g., Feldman & Johnston, 2014; Johnson & Tamney, 2001; Johnston, 2013). Thus, far from underlying a broad-based conservative ideology, NSC predicted a configuration of attitudes that is socioculturally right wing but that leans to the left in the economic domain.

NSC's menu-dependent influence on right-wing economic attitudes

The MIDI model posits a second force that might counteract the effect of NSC on left-wing economic attitudes. A person high in NSC craves order and stability and will therefore gravitate toward traditional cultural views (e.g., Duckitt & Sibley, 2009; Jost et al., 2003). But what if this same person is repeatedly exposed to political messages suggesting that traditional sociocultural views belong together with right-wing economic views under the ideological banner of "conservatism"? Recent evidence suggests that exposure to this menu of ideological options might compel this person to identify with the political right, and therefore shift his or her economic attitudes to the right.

This shift appears to happen through a two-step process. First, individuals who are highly exposed to this discourse are more likely to translate certain psychological characteristics, such as NSC and religiosity, into a symbolic conservative identity (e.g., Federico & Goren, 2009; Malka & Soto, 2011). Second, once these individuals identify as conservative, they tend to adopt issue stances described as ideologically appropriate (e.g., Malka & Lelkes, 2010) in order to bolster and protect their political identities (e.g., Kahan, 2013; Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Hutchinson, & Chamberlin, 2002). Through this process, political messages can create a link between a psychological characteristic and a previously unrelated issue stance.

How might this process impact the relation between NSC and economic attitudes? In the cross-national data described earlier (Malka et al., 2014), we found that people high in NSC tended to adopt right-wing sociocultural views rather consistently. However, the economic views of high-NSC individuals were conditional on two factors concerning discourse exposure: political engagement (the degree to which one has been exposed to political discourse) and nation-level ideological "constraint" (the degree to which one's social context promotes the organization of diverse political attitudes on the right-left dimension; e.g., Converse, 1964). People low in political engagement, regardless of the nation where they lived, tended to show an effect of NSC on left-wing economic

attitudes. This is consistent with the idea that without great exposure to an ideological menu, people translate desires for security and certainty into preference for strong government economic intervention (cf., Federico et al., 2014). However, high levels of political engagement counteracted this effect, especially within nations characterized by a strong level of ideological constraint. In fact, the only people to consistently display an effect of NSC on right-wing economic attitudes were politically engaged individuals from nations where it is common to organize attitudes on the right-left dimension.

This pattern of results is consistent with findings from several other lines of research. For example, the finding of a moderating effect of political engagement is consistent with evidence that political elites, who are by definition highly politically engaged, tend to show relations between NSC and right-wing economic attitudes, whereas ordinary citizens often do not (Golec, 2002; Tetlock et al., 1985). Moreover, the finding of a moderating role of nation-level ideological constraint is consistent with evidence that high NSC more strongly predicts left-wing economic preferences in post-Communist nations—nations where interventionist, rather than free-market, economic policies are ideologically traditional (Kossowska & Van Hiel, 2003; Thorisdottir, Jost, Liviatan, & Shrout, 2007). Finally, this pattern is further supported by experimental evidence that Americans are more likely to display a relation between NSC and right-wing economic views when such views are explicitly presented as characteristic of the Republican Party (Johnston & Wronski, 2013). Whereas high-NSC Americans were strongly attracted to right-wing cultural views regardless of the presence of cues indicating ideological appropriateness, such cues were important for getting high-NSC people "on board" with right-wing economic stances.

Summary, Implications, and Future Directions

In this article, we have argued that the rigidity of the right hypothesis, which proposes that high NSC promotes a broad-based ideological conservatism, generally applies to attitudes in the sociocultural domain but not the ideologically central economic domain. We have proposed the MIDI model, which integrates and extends ideas about the psychological origins of ideology from (a) the rigidity of the right hypothesis (e.g., Hibbing et al., 2014), (b) multidimensional models of political attitudes (e.g., Duckitt & Sibley, 2009), and (c) the study of discursive influences on attitudes (e.g., Federico & Goren, 2009). According to the MIDI model, while high-NSC people are somewhat attracted to left-wing economic policies (a menu-independent influence), this effect is counteracted when such people are highly exposed to discourse

promoting a right-left structuring of political attitudes (a menu-dependent influence). This latter, menu-dependent influence might reflect both conformity to ideological cues (e.g., Malka & Lelkes, 2010) and a greater appreciation of historical and philosophical connections between the sociocultural and economic issue domains among politically engaged people (e.g., Jost et al., 2009).

The MIDI model has important implications for research on the psychological origins of political attitudes. First, this model highlights that fully understanding the psychological basis of political attitudes requires researchers to separately measure sociocultural and economic attitudes (e.g., Crowson, 2009; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010), although we acknowledge that some political issues (e.g., affirmative action in the United States) blend sociocultural and economic aspects. Indeed, this latter phenomenon might reflect the awareness of political elites that suffusing right-wing economic policy with cultural undertones might attract some rigid and change-averse people to right-wing economic positions.

Second, the MIDI model highlights some ways in which sample characteristics can influence the relations observed between NSC and political attitudes. In particular, these relations tend to differ across individuals with different degrees of political engagement and across nations that vary in their discursive packaging of political attitudes. Therefore, research using representative and cross-cultural samples is particularly valuable for understanding the psychological basis of political attitudes.

Finally, the MIDI model illustrates a particular way in which political discourse interacts with dispositional characteristics to produce political preferences. Contrasting with the view that exposure to a discursive menu of ideological options increases a person's ability to select a broad ideological package that is need satisfying (Jost et al., 2009), the MIDI model shows how exposure to this menu can potentially lead people to adopt attitudes in certain domains that are substantively unrelated, or even contrary, to their underlying dispositional needs. Thus, one promising avenue for future research is examination of the possibility that framing economic issues in terms of material benefits might promote a left-wing economic shift among high-NSC individuals, whereas framing these issues in terms of ideology might shift these same individuals' attitudes to the right.

A broader strength of the MIDI model is that it may be adapted to distinguish the menu-dependent and menu-independent effects of other psychological dispositions (beyond NSC) on other political attitudes (beyond economic attitudes). For example, characteristics such as racism (Tesler, 2012) and religiosity (Malka & Soto, 2011) may come to predict substantively unrelated political views merely because political elites have bundled these views with others into an ideological package. Across a

range of issues, the ideological structuring of political attitudes compelled by socially constructed discourse might not cohere, and might even sometimes compete, with the structuring compelled by dispositional influences (Hatemi, Eaves, & McDermott, 2012). Thus, the MIDI model provides a framework for systematically examining the historically and culturally conditional nature of relationships between psychological characteristics and political attitudes.

Recommended Reading

- Duckitt, J., & Sibley, C. G. (2009). (See References). A brief overview of the dual-process model of ideology, which posits distinct motivational processes underlying different ideological domains.
- Feldman, S., & Johnston, C. D. (2014). (See References). An article that demonstrates the value of a multidimensional conceptualization of ideology for understanding the psychological origins of political attitudes.
- Hatemi, P. K., Eaves, L., & McDermott, R. (2012). (See References). An article reporting evidence that the genetically based structure of political attitudes is different from the right-left attitude structure brought about by political discourse.
- Hibbing, J. R., Smith, K. B., & Alford, J. R. (2014). (See References). A recent overview of evidence for the rigidity of the right model, with commentaries from other scholars and a response from the authors.
- Iyer, R., Koleva, S., Graham, J., Ditto, P., & Haidt, J. (2012). Understanding libertarian morality: The psychological dispositions of self-identified libertarians. *PLoS ONE*, 7, e42366. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0042366. An article that presents evidence regarding the dispositional correlates of self-identified libertarianism, which theoretically entails the combination of right-wing economic views and left-wing socio-cultural views.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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