

Political Belief Systems are Not Singularly Rooted in Alliance Psychology

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Why do some Americans hold broadly liberal worldviews and why do others hold broadly conservative worldviews? Some of the most influential perspectives in social and political psychology argue that broad-based liberal and conservative attitude packages are rooted in a set of basic human needs, traits, and motives, especially those related to existential needs for security and epistemic needs for certainty (for reviews, see Jost, 2021; Jost, Federico, & Napier 2009; Jost et al. 2003; see also Federico & Malka, 2018, 2023). These perspectives posit that left-wing and right-wing belief systems—encompassing attitudes on a variety of cultural and economic matters—arise organically from fundamental psychological differences among human beings.

In contrast, a long line of theory and research in political science, dating back to Converse (1964), offers an elite-driven view of ideological belief systems. These perspectives argue that left-wing and right-wing ideologies are socially constructed and that the idea-elements within these ideologies do not cohere organically due to common roots in underlying values, principles, or needs (see Federico & Malka, 2023; Kinder & Kalmoe, 2017; Zaller, 1992). Rather, according to this family of viewpoints:

- (a) political elites form partisan and ideological coalitions for strategic reasons;
- (b) elites in these coalitions synthesize and propagate packages of policy preferences along with factual assertions, slogans, rationalizations, and frames that tie these preferences together into marketable ideological options;
- (c) elites alter the value emphases, rhetoric, and sometimes policy positions associated with these ideological packages based on shifting circumstances that change their political incentives; and
- (d) citizens who are well-informed and attentive to elite discourse are more likely to adopt and express beliefs consistent with these ideological packages if they hold one or more politically

relevant identities (most often partisan or ideological) that are associated with these packages, whereas relatively inattentive citizens are less likely to do so.

Table 1 provides a small sample of quotations that illustrate the gist of this long-running perspective. In these types of views, various identity-based, social, and epistemic motives lead a subset of citizens to adopt and justify idea-elements that match the political alignment that they have committed to (see Federico & Malka, 2018, 2023, for reviews).

Table 1: Select Quotations Illustrating the Elite-Driven Perspective on Political Belief System Structure	
Source	Quotation
Converse, 1964	" . . . two simple facts about the creation and diffusion of belief systems. First, the shaping of belief systems of any range into apparently logical wholes that are credible to large numbers of people is an act of creative synthesis characteristic of only a minuscule proportion of any population. Second, to the extent that multiple idea-elements of a belief system are socially diffused from such creative sources, they tend to be diffused in "packages," which consumers come to see as "natural" wholes . . . any set of relatively intelligent consumers who are initially sympathetic to the crowning posture turns out to show more consensus on specific implications of the posture as a result of social diffusion of "what goes with what" than it would if each member were required to work out the implications individually without socially provided cues." (p. 211).
Layman & Carsey, 2002	"When Democratic and Republican elites present distinct viewpoints on multiple issues, those issues are, to some extent, packaged together for public consumption. In other words, the policy positions of the two parties help determine "what goes with what" in public policy debates and in the policy attitudes of citizens who receive political cues from party elites." (p. 788).
Malka and Lelkes, 2010	" . . . identity-based social influence is to an important degree responsible for holding together the substantively diverse attitudes currently packaged under the labels of "conservative" and "liberal". Although dispositional factors likely attract people to narrow ranges of political attitudes, identity-based social influence seems to be responsible for conservative- and liberal-identifiers incorporating newly politicized issue stances into their packages of identity appropriate attitudes." (p. 184).
Noel, 2012	" . . . the content of ideology is the result of some small set of idea organizers, who define what it means to be liberal or conservative." . . . [legislative packages of political attitudes] "gain the appearance of principle as partisans create rationalizations for their joint agendas" . . . "Pundit-induced constraint is enforced by persuasion. If pundits organize themselves into opposing camps, as they seem to do, and if consumers of punditry come to adopt the positions of their favorite pundits, they will internalize a set of positions that makes them look very much like ideologues." (p. 158)
Malka, Soto, Inzlicht, & Lelkes, 2014	"Political discourse refers to the context of political messages that are conveyed through the news media and informal communication, and whose content ultimately stems from the strategic actions of politicians or the preferences of partisan activists or public intellectuals . . . the primary factor driving whatever ideological coherence exists in the population is a set of elite-driven messages from political discourse." (p. 1034).
Johnston, Lavine, & Federico, 2017	". . . members of the mass public take cues about what positions to adopt on specific issues from elected officials who share their partisan or ideological identity. In this way, ordinary citizens are theoretically able to surmount two major challenges to the formation of political preferences—namely, the complexity of many policy debates and the public's chronic political inattentiveness...That is, rather than thinking through issues in isolation, citizens learn 'appropriate' positions from elites who share their political predispositions." (pp. 36-37).
Federico & Malka, 2018	"Ideologies are not facts of nature. The actual networks of values, beliefs, and issue positions implied by abstractions like "liberalism" and "conservatism"—that is, discursive superstructures—are social constructions. Moreover, the work of constructing and disseminating the ideological packages that make up the menu of political discussion is overwhelmingly the province of a narrow group of political elites. . . To the extent that members of the mass public develop organized belief systems, they must learn them from political elites" (p. 23)
Lewis, 2021	"Most scholarship is dominated by the mistaken view that party ideology changes can best be described by parties moving "left" or "right" on a static, ideological, spatial spectrum. In reality, the meaning and content of "left" and "right" ("liberal" and "conservative") constantly evolve along with the issue positions of the two major parties. Thus, it makes no sense to describe parties as moving to the "left" or "right" over time when the very meanings of "liberalism" and "conservatism" change during the same time period." (p. 605).

We believe that Alliance Theory, as expounded by Pinsof, Sears, and Haselton (2023), can be situated within this second family of perspectives. Alliance Theory suggests that the diverse elements of political belief systems are not tied together by logical principles or values or the bottom-up

influence of psychological dispositions. Rather, it suggests that belief systems instead emerge from the political alliance structures that characterize a particular time and place, and that people's motivation to adopt, uphold, rationalize, and propagandize on behalf of elements of a political belief system stem from an evolved "alliance psychology" that predisposes humans to form, maintain, and bolster alliances.

The target article nicely illustrates how and why the arguments, beliefs, and emphases associated with seemingly static ideological packages might change over time in response to elite coalitional activity and the exigencies of the political situation. It also shows that trying to explain the diverse contents of conservative and liberal packages *purely* in terms of consistently applied logical principles or underlying psychological needs, traits, and motives is an uphill fight. Given the lengths to which theorists have gone to posit a fundamental source of the differences between 'liberals' and 'conservatives,' we believe that many of the insights of Alliance Theory offer a useful correction.

At the same time, it is important to consider how Alliance Theory compares to and potentially intersects with extant perspectives on the formation and diffusion of ideological belief systems. As far as we can tell, two points distinguish Alliance Theory from the other elite-driven perspectives on ideology referenced above. First, Alliance Theory posits that alliances are the *only* factor that determine which combinations of attitudes, values, and beliefs characterize the prevailing ideological options in a given time and place. For the most part, the theory leaves little room for other factors that might influence why the dominant belief-system packages are what they are in a particular political context. Second, Alliance Theory proposes that the *only* individual-level motivation for adopting particular political beliefs, attitudes, rationalizations, and so on are motives tied to the evolutionary function of bolstering the coalition one is allied with and opposing its rivals. As the authors put it:

The theory only makes two assumptions: 1) humans possess cognitive mechanisms for forming and detecting alliances, and 2) humans use propagandistic tactics to support their allies and oppose their rivals in conflicts... these assumptions *alone* can explain the diverse contents of political belief systems...(emphasis in original, p. 39).

Parsimony is a good thing, and as social and behavioral scientists we are all in the business of useful, simplifying generalizations. However, by attributing the content and structure of political belief systems to a single cause (alliances) and by portraying the tendency to adopt ideas consistent with a particular belief system as reflecting a single motive (to bolster allies against rivals), the authors overlook contrary evidence and unnecessarily neglect the potential interplay between coalitional psychology and other factors that are likely to shape belief systems. Moreover, they have presented a theory that, depending on how literally one conceives of its distinguishing premise, is either insufficiently specified for precise testing or already has substantial evidence against it. We elaborate on these points below.

Are Alliances the Only Source of Belief System Constraint?

Pinsof and his colleagues provide numerous helpful examples of how many partisans and ideologues often fall into apparent logical contradiction or ethical hypocrisy in the process of actualizing their partisan and ideological commitments as political events unfold over time. The authors argue that this is an unavoidable byproduct of the fact that belief system structure is governed above all by the need to bolster one's political alliance against competing alliances present in a given context: people will uphold logically and/or ethically contradictory assemblages of issue positions when the structure of the alliance they belong to signals that those issue positions 'go together.'

In terms of making the case for why particular socio-cultural attitudes (e.g., abortion attitude) go with particular economic attitudes (e.g., social welfare spending), the authors are on solid ground (Federico & Malka, 2023; Groenendyk, Kimbrough, & Pickup, 2022; Johnston et al., 2017;

Layman & Carsey, 2002; Malka et al., 2014, 2019). The authors are also right to emphasize how the stated principles to which partisans appeal to justify their political alignment are flexibly adjusted based on the nature of the current alliance and the exigencies of the situation (Bisgaard, 2018; Groenendyk, 2013; Malka & Adelman, 2022; Noel, 2014).

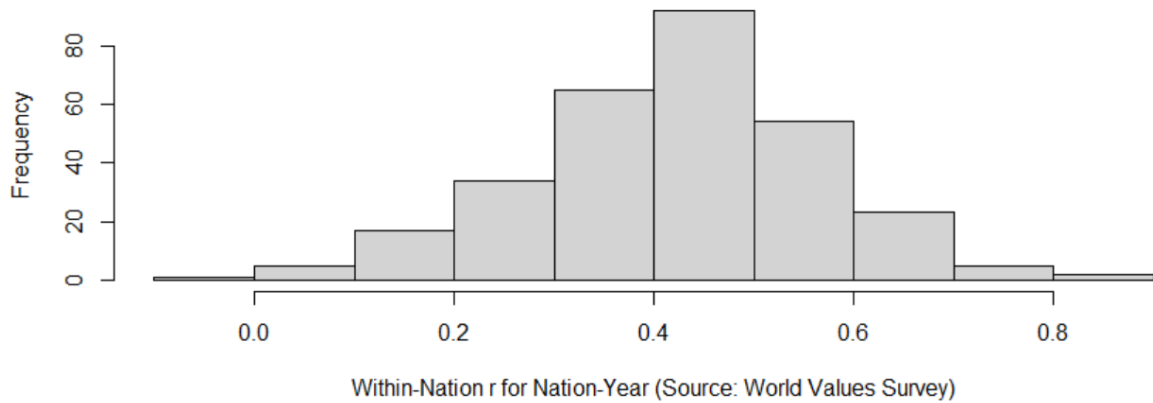
But this does not mean that *every* possible combination of political idea-elements is *equally feasible* for elites to fuse together in their efforts to form and justify coalitions. We do not doubt that elite alliance structure—and signals about it to politically-engaged segments of the mass public (e.g., Converse, 1964; Kinder & Kalmoe, 2017; Zaller, 1992)—is a dominant factor shaping (1) the organization of diverse clusters of attitudes (e.g., toward socio-cultural issues and economic issues) into the competing packages that anchor the poles of the left-right dimension in many societies, and (2) efforts to rationalize and propagandize the arguments made by one’s ideological coalition. But it also seems to be the case that certain clusters of political attitudes—especially those *within* a particular topical domain—are likely to cohere organically, in that they are rooted in common underlying psychological dispositions (Costello et al., 2023; Federico & Malka, 2023; Johnston et al., 2017) or domain-specific values (Goren, 2004, 2012), or in that they exert some type of influence on one another regardless of the alliance structure within a society.

In a practical political sense, the presence of organic psychological constraints on some parts of belief systems is no trivial matter. In fact, it is important for understanding the logic of elite alliance formation in the first place. Elites are motivated to form alliances to enhance their political prospects. In deciding what alliances are useful to form they consider a range of input, much of it stemming from purely elite political activity (Noel, 2014; Sniderman & Bullock, 2004). But one source of input is the degree to which certain combinations of attitudes organically cohere within various human populations and thus make particular alliances a relatively hard or easy sell to the

public. It would be a lot harder for political elites to have success if they attempt to form an alliance that combines two attitudes that are organically opposed regardless of alliance considerations.

Consider distinct attitudes *within* the domain of sexual morality, such as attitudes toward abortion and attitudes toward homosexuality. Do disapproval of legal abortion and disapproval of homosexuality ‘go together’ only because these attitudes reflect an alliance among groups in American society? Figure 1 displays the frequency distribution for within-nation correlations between attitudes toward homosexuality and attitudes toward abortion (with both variables coded so that high scores indicate greater conservatism) for every nation-year in the World Values Survey in which both of these items were administered. The median correlation between these two items is .43 and almost all of the within-nation correlations are positive and statistically significant. To be sure, these correlations do vary substantially in magnitude, and this variation is likely traceable in part to variation in alliance structures across time and place. However, we think it is unlikely that the almost uniformly positive relationship between disapproval of homosexuality and disapproval of abortion reflects coalitional motives alone. Rather, we think it is very likely that this durable within-domain association between distinct attitudes reflects the influence of common (and perhaps genetically-rooted) psychological motives linked to the regulation of sexual behavior in human social groups (Hatemi, Eaves, & McDermott, 2012; Haidt, 2012; Ludeke, Johnson, & Bouchard, 2013; Weeden & Kurzban, 2014).

Within-Nation Correlations Between Homosexuality and Abortion Attitudes



Next, consider the important matter of how anti-democratic sentiment correlates with various kinds of political attitudes. Pinsof, Sears, and Haselton make the case that anti-democratic sentiment is equally likely on the political right and political left, with its relative prevalence in different ideological sectors depending on the nature of the anti-democratic alliance in a particular time and place. This might well be true with respect to general ideological affinity and ideological affinity in the economic domain, but there is evidence that this is *not true* with respect to ideological affinity in the socio-cultural domain. In this vein, recent research suggests cultural conservatism (versus liberalism) is correlated with anti-democratic (versus pro-democratic) sentiment across a range of Western societies (Malka et al., 2020) and among Democrats as well as Republicans in the United States (Malka & Costello, 2023).

Public opinion research on the impact of domain-specific values suggests similar conclusions (Feldman, 1988; Goren, 2004, 2012). For example, Goren (2004) finds that both citizens low and high in political engagement are able to (1) use values related to equal opportunity, self-reliance, and limited government to make consistent judgments in the social welfare domain and (2) use values related to militarism and anti-communism (in Cold War era samples) to be make consistent judgments in the foreign-policy domain. Thus, while the adoption of ideologically consistent

positions across domains requires attention to elite coalitional cues, the adoption of coherent positions within domains does not—suggesting bottom-up sources of constraint in the latter case.

Finally, extant evolutionary models of mass opinion offer other reasons to expect some level of ‘bottom up’ consistency within specific domains, regardless of alliance structure. In this vein, Petersen and Aaroe (2012) note that the portion of our evolved cognitive architecture that makes human beings ‘political animals’ is not unitary. Rather, it consists of multiple behavioral modules that evolved in response to distinct adaptive problems and produce specific behaviors only in response to specific environmental contingencies (e.g., “punish when others fail to reciprocate” as opposed to “always punish”). For this reason, it is perhaps not surprising that left-right ideological consistency is uneven in mass publics; it is unlikely that modern politics would present citizens with informational inputs that cause various evolved behavioral mechanisms to “fire” in an ideologically constrained fashion. However, to the extent that some evolved behavioral mechanisms (e.g., mechanisms for the detection of failures to reciprocate in exchanges) are especially relevant to political judgments in a single domain (e.g., social welfare), then we might expect stronger baseline levels of consistency in that domain regardless of coalitional effects (Petersen, 2015)

In sum, elites lead the public informationally and they often lead partisans on a path of preposterous mental gymnastics to justify political commitments, as described in the target article. But domain-specific psychological constraints on certain attitude combinations likely contribute to the incentive structures that elites face when considering potential alliances. Not all alliances are equally salable.

Individual Differences in Political Engagement are Central to Understanding Political Belief Systems and Their Origins

Alliance Theory is relatively silent about individual differences in political engagement and their relevance to belief system structure. This is a surprising omission. One of the most reliable

findings in public opinion research is that individuals high in political engagement are far more likely to organize their attitudes on the left-right dimension than individuals low in political engagement (Converse, 1964; Federico, 2020; Federico & Malka, 2023; Kinder & Kalmoe, 2017). Indeed, this core finding of the belief systems literature is quite consistent with the general theoretical thrust of Alliance Theory and related perspectives: people high in political engagement are more likely to have been exposed to elite signals informing them of what the prevailing alliances are, how those alliances are justified, and how as a member of a particular alliance one should react to new political information. To the extent that ideological coherence is dependent on political alliance structures, the well-documented effects of political engagement go a long way in explaining why ‘mastery’ of ideology varies so widely in mass publics: some citizens simply never learn what the coalitions that govern ideology are.

That said, the findings of other lines of research on political engagement and attitude structure provide some reason to doubt the key distinguishing tenet of Alliance Theory. For example, consider the argument that a family of dispositions pertaining to needs for security and certainty, mental rigidity and inflexibility, and preference for familiarity, order and structure underlie conservatism (for reviews, see Federico, 2021; Federico & Malka, 2023; Jost, 2021; Jost et al., 2009). Pinsof and colleagues are right to question the universality of this pattern, as there is substantial evidence that these dispositions relate consistently to cultural conservatism but do not relate consistently to economic conservatism (e.g., Costello et al., 2023; Federico & Malka, 2018; Feldman & Johnston, 2014; Malka et al., 2014; Johnston et al., 2017). Whereas political psychologists in this ‘rigidity of the right’ tradition argue that the aforementioned set of needs, traits, and motives underlies a broad-based conservatism, it is much more likely—as posited by Alliance Theory—that the version of ‘conservatism’ that prevails in a time and place stems largely from elite coalition formation and messaging.

But there is even more to the story here. To begin with, research suggests that the link between needs for security and certainty and ideological and partisan identification are contingent on political engagement. Individuals who attend more closely to elite political discourse are more likely to receive enough information about the ideological and partisan packages ‘on offer’ in a given context to select into the groups that best match their underlying needs, traits, and motives (for a review, see Federico & Malka, 2018; see also Federico & Goren, 2009; Federico, Fisher, & Deason, 2011; Federico & Reifen Tagar, 2014). In turn, this has important implications for variation in the relationship between psychological dispositions and attitudes in the domain where there is little evidence for the classic rigidity-of-the-right pattern: economics. Research consistently shows that the link between needs for security and certainty and economic attitudes is *oppositely signed* for Americans low and high in political engagement (Johnston et al., 2017; Ollerenshaw & Johnston, 2022), and that this is the case in some other countries as well (Malka et al., 2014, 2019). Among those high in political engagement, high (versus low) needs for security and certainty are associated with right-leaning (versus left-leaning) economic attitudes, largely because individuals high in these needs are more likely to have sorted into right-wing ideological and partisan groupings on the basis of the durable relationship between high needs for security and certainty and cultural conservatism. Engaged citizens with strong needs for security and certainty thus know that they must adopt right-leaning economic attitudes in order to act in accordance with their partisan and ideological identities. This pattern is more or less what Alliance Theory would expect.

However, among those low in political engagement—who are not highly exposed to elite discourse providing cues about the nature of competing political coalitions—we do not merely see an absence of association between needs for security and certainty and economic attitudes. Rather, we find that high (versus low) needs for security and certainty are associated with left-leaning (versus right-leaning) economic attitudes. This reflects the fact that individuals who prize security and

certainty—but who are less exposed to elite cues about cultural differences between ideologies and parties and less likely to have sorted into an ideology or party—are *directly and organically* attracted to the stability, order, and predictability that accompany interventionist and redistributive economic policy.¹

What these findings suggest is that alliance-based pressures on political belief systems operate in conjunction with—and sometimes in a state of tension with—bottom-up psychological pressures on the structuring of ideological belief systems. Though the structure of political coalitions and coalitional motives are likely to play a large role in the formation of the belief systems that prevail in a given context and the general tendency to identify with a coalition (rather than no coalition at all), the ensemble of psychological needs, traits, and motives identified by political psychologists may still play a role in determining which available belief system (and underlying political coalition) a person sorts into. In turn, variance in the extent to which citizens are engaged enough to sort into different coalitions in this fashion have important downstream consequences for attitudes in domains like economics. Thus, belief systems in mass publics are likely the resultant net

¹ Azevedo et al. (2019) report a failure to replicate the reversal effect, but a close examination of their findings reveals numerous problems with this interpretation of their results. First, they mostly report associations between economic conservatism and other explicitly political measures (such as system justification, social conservatism, and right-wing authoritarianism), which are irrelevant to the reversal effect. Their one test of associations between economic conservatism and an indicator of needs for security and certainty used a child-rearing values measure of authoritarianism (consistent with prior work on the reversal effect; see Johnston et al., 2017). Correlations were reported separately for those high and low on a measure of ‘political sophistication’ (based on a median split), but the sophistication measure consisted of three politicized items that were highly likely to be subject to partisan motivated reasoning effects (i.e., correct awareness that under the Obama administration workers’ earnings increased, the proportion of Americans without health insurance decreased, and illegal border crossings decreased). Since this measure relies solely on factual items whose correct answer Democratic identifiers are less likely to deny for partisan reasons (as opposed to standard factual items querying ‘ideologically-neutral’ facts about government procedure and staffing; see Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), we agree with Ollerenshaw and Johnston’s (2022) conclusion that “it is not clear how to interpret these results” (p. 371, footnote 1). See Ollerenshaw and Johnston (2022) for a pre-registered replication of the reversal effect and Malka et al (2014) for evidence of this effect outside of the United States.

outcomes of the interplay between these coalitional, motivational, and informational factors.

Though this interactive approach clearly implicates alliance structure as *one* of the factors binding belief system elements together, it also suggests the alliances are not the *only* glue holding belief systems together.

The Functions of Adopting Political Attitudes and Beliefs

It is quite clear—as illustrated by the various examples offered by Pinosof and colleagues—that politically engaged citizens with strong ideological and partisan identifications display a remarkable capacity to adopt and justify cued attitudes and beliefs that contradict previously professed values or prior behavior. At the same time, it is not clear that alliance psychology is the only factor motivating individuals to adopt particular political attitudes and beliefs.

First, there is evidence that people are subjected to competing sources of psychological pressure when encountering party-inconsistent political information (Groenendyk, 2013, 2018; Groenendyk & Krupnikov, 2021; see Lavine, Johnston, & Steenburgen, 2012). One is ‘directional’ pressure to toe the party line, consistent with Alliance Theory. But evidence also suggests the operation of competing pressures to feel like a rational, intellectually competent person. This other source of pressure would seem to be rooted in a different type of evolutionary function, perhaps to avoid being manipulated as a pawn in someone else’s machinations. This type of dual-motive framework is useful for explaining a number of empirical phenomena (see Groenendyk, 2013, for a further discussion).

Consider that when faced with negative information about their own party, many partisans, rather than simply dismissing that information altogether, downgrade their impression of their own party but then downgrade their impression of the other party even more, in a ‘lesser-of-two-evils’ justification strategy (Groenendyk, 2018). Or consider that partisans faced with inconvenient facts about a favored politician or policy (e.g., a favored president presiding over a weak economy) often

accept these facts but adjust other views to change the implications of these facts (e.g., by claiming that presidents have limited control over the economy anyway; see Bisgaard, 2019; Khanna & Sood, 2018; see Malka & Adelman, 2022, for a review). And on some occasions partisans simply accept persuasive information even in the presence of countervailing cues from trusted in-party elites (Tappin, Berinsky, & Rand, 2023). None of this is to say that bolstering and justifying alliances is *irrelevant* to political belief systems. Rather, it suggests that motives to be or to at least appear ‘reasonable’ are also relevant to belief system formation and updating.

This brings up a larger point about partisan cue following and what it says about the nature of political belief systems. The most common explanation for partisan cue receptivity is that people follow partisan cues in order to reap the psychological rewards of acting consistently with their political identities, an explanation that is compatible with Alliance Theory’s emphasis on the function of bolstering alliances (Peterson et al., 2013; Cohen, 2003; Huddy et al., 2015; Kahan, 2015). However, party cue receptivity can also reflect a different kind of motivation: the motivation to believe one set of elites and disbelieve a competing set of elites based on prior beliefs that the former are trustworthy and the latter are untrustworthy (Guay & Johnston, 2021; Tappin, Pennycook, & Rand, 2020). Though this might not work well for everyone in practice (i.e., many people trust elites who are not trustworthy), the point is that the motivation underlying decisions to assimilate or reject political messages based on their sources can be rooted in motivation to make ‘good enough’ decisions under cognitive and other resource constraints (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991).

Finally, even when focusing exclusively on social motives to toe the partisan or ideological line, it is not at all clear that these motives are rooted solely in the function of bolstering allies against rivals. Consider the roles of desires for bonding, intimacy, belonging, and sharing reality with close others in motivating adoption, or expression, of political beliefs that are congruent with those

of close others (e.g., Fiske, 2018; Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008; Stern & Ondish, 2018). Scholars have argued for an “expressive rationality” to adopting political ideas that are consistent with those of close others, as the practical political importance of one’s beliefs are relatively minimal at a macro-social level but the interpersonal consequences of one’s political belief expression are potentially large (Kahan, 2015; Malka & Adelman, 2022). Unless *all* social motives to fit in, maintain acceptance, and bond with close others are exclusively rooted in alliance psychology and not in other evolved motives as well, Alliance Theory may be overstating its case—however important that case may be with respect to some portion of the variance in adherence to partisan or ideological beliefs (see Federico & Malka, 2023, for a broader review).

Are the Predictions of Alliance Theory Sufficiently Well-Specified?

Pinsof et al. (2023) offer a seemingly straightforward set of predictions deriving from Alliance Theory. For example, they posit that if Alliance Theory is correct, “then variation in political beliefs will track variation in alliance structures” (p. 39). And in noting associations between individual differences and political beliefs, they state that “Alliance Theory predicts that controlling for group allegiances will eliminate or substantially reduce these relationships” (p. 40). But these and related predictions do not seem to be specified clearly and precisely enough—at least in their present form—to put the distinguishing premises of Alliance Theory to a critical, falsifiable test. Above all, the theory does not specify *how much* of a mismatch between alliance structure and belief system structure it would take for the predictions of Alliance Theory to be disconfirmed. It is well known that substantial numbers of conservative identifiers and Republicans hold economic policy attitudes that are centrist or that lean left (e.g., Ellis & Stimson, 2012). One reason might be that they feel they have a self-interest in interventionist, or not excessively free market, economics. How many of these ‘conflicted conservatives’ must we observe before concluding that factors other than alliance structure may play a role in belief-system organization?

To provide another illustration, in discussing the role of material self-interest in economic attitudes, Pinsof and colleagues propose that career success “reduc[es] allegiance to poor or unemployed people—and decreas[es] support for redistribution” (p. 40). Alliance Theory, they contend, predicts that controlling for these sorts of allegiances should eliminate (or at least substantially reduce) the relationship between career success and economic attitudes. But such a pattern would also be consistent with simple material self-interest exerting some degree of influence on economic attitudes (above and beyond alliance effects) and with affect toward groups (such as the poor) reflecting a rationalization strategy that allows one to comfortably adopt these self-interested attitudes. In cases like this, a pattern consistent with the predictions of Alliance Theory would be observationally equivalent to the pattern predicted by other models of mass opinion.

Thus, while Alliance Theory offers important predictions about variance in belief-system structure, those predictions may require additional refinement in order to make them testable. Per the concerns we raise above, we believe that much of this fine tuning can be achieved by considering how the effect of alliance structure might intersect with or work alongside the effects of other factors known to influence the structure of belief systems in mass publics. Ultimately, if Alliance Theory is best expressed more weakly as “alliance structure is the most central but not the only contributor to belief system structure,” the theory will need to be further developed in order to specify its points of contact and points of departure from other theories of belief systems and to specify the exact boundary conditions of its core predictions.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that elite coalitions exert a strong impact on the ideological belief-system packages that prevail in a time and place, as suggested by Alliance Theory. For this reason, we believe that Pinsof, Sears, and Haselton (2023) have provided an important corrective to approaches that over-emphasize the role of ‘principled’ application of abstract ideological concepts or the

constraining role of citizens' underlying psychological motives. For this reason alone, it is a valuable contribution to the literature on belief systems. At the same time, we believe that Alliance Theory may over-correct in this direction by not specifying clearly how evolved coalitional psychology might work alongside or in interaction with other factors known to shape mass belief systems.

Along these lines, we have argued that the bottom-up influence of psychological factors may hold together certain attitudes within particular domains (e.g., social welfare, the normative regulation of sexual behavior) in a way that could not easily be undone or reversed by novel alliances, even if a dispositional account cannot explain constraint across domains. Elites might be conscious of these 'organic' constraints on attitude organization, which may in turn have implications for elite judgments about the kinds of alliances it would be profitable for them to form, and, consequently, the ideological packages that are on offer to the public. Furthermore, we have argued that political engagement moderates relationships between needs for security and certainty and political identifications and attitudes in important ways. In particular, the relationship between these needs and economic attitudes seems to reverse depending on whether one is or is not politically engaged, suggesting that parts of belief systems result from a complex interplay between bottom-up dispositional and top-down elite coalitional influences. Finally, we have argued that motives to appear competent and rational, to defer to trusted elites in order to make good enough decisions under uncertainty, and to simply bond with close others also impact ideology-consistent belief system adoption, and that it is unlikely that all of these motives are rooted singularly in the evolved psychology of group alliances. Finally, we have argued that Alliance Theory may be insufficiently nuanced in its current form. As noted above, the strong form of Alliance Theory has some difficulty accommodating a number of findings in the belief systems literature, and in many cases its predictions are not sufficiently specified to allow precise tests.

That said, we wish to reiterate our belief that Alliance Theory moves our understanding of belief systems forward, even if we think it could use further elaboration in some respects. Given the credence often given to views explaining liberalism and conservatism as ‘natural’ packages of attitudes that broadly cohere due to underlying individual-level needs, traits, and motives, it is welcome to see a firm accounting of why these other views are also over-simplified. If the target article causes scholars to more critically scrutinize claims implying that the right-wing and left-wing ideological packages found in the subset of societies where most empirical research on ideology has occurred are natural products of human psychological architecture, it will have done a good service.

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