



My country, right or wrong: Does activating system justification motivation eliminate the liberal-conservative gap in patriotism?



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HIGHLIGHTS

- In the absence of system justification activation, conservatives exhibit stronger national attachment than liberals.
- Activating system justification motivation eliminated the ideological gap by strengthening national attachment among liberals.
- This effect was specific to patriotism (vs. nationalism) attachment.
- Converging evidence is provided using diverse samples, contexts, and methodological operations.

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ABSTRACT

Ideological differences in nationalism and patriotism are well-known and frequently exploited, but the question of why conservatives exhibit stronger national attachment than liberals has been inadequately addressed. Drawing on theories of system justification and political ideology as motivated social cognition, we proposed that increased patriotism is one means of satisfying the system justification goal. Thus, we hypothesized that temporarily activating system justification motivation should raise national attachment among liberals to the level of conservatives. Three experiments conducted in New York, Arkansas, and Wisconsin support this hypothesis. In the first two experiments, liberals exhibited weaker national attachment than conservatives in the absence of system justification activation, consistent with prior research. However, exposure to system criticism (Experiment 1) and system-level injustice (Experiment 2) caused liberals to strengthen their national attachment, eliminating the ideological gap. Using a system dependence manipulation in Experiment 3, this pattern was conceptually replicated with respect to patriotic but not nationalistic attachment, as hypothesized. Thus, chronic and temporary variability in system justification motivation helps to explain when liberals and conservatives do (and do not) differ in terms of national attachment and why.

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'My country, right or wrong' is a thing no patriot would ever think of saying except in a desperate case. It is like saying 'My mother, drunk or sober.' (Chesterton, 1901/2005, p. 68)

Introduction

It is a truism of street politics and social science that national attachment is stronger on the political right than the left (e.g., Bealey, 1999; Karasawa, 2002; Schatz, Staub, & Lavine, 1999). Accordingly, a recent Gallup Poll found that 48% of self-identified conservatives in the U.S.

described themselves as "extremely patriotic," in comparison with only 19% of liberals (Morales, 2010). Although these differences are well-known and frequently exploited for partisan gain (e.g., Fahey, 2007), the question of *why* conservatives exhibit greater patriotism than liberals has not been seriously addressed at the level of social, personality, or political psychology. Given that national attachment constitutes an important basis for societal organization (Bar-Tal & Staub, 1997) and exerts profound effects on policy preferences (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989) and social and political attitudes (Billig, 1995; Blank & Schmidt, 2003; Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006; Sidanius, Feshbach, Levin, & Pratto, 1997), the psychological origins and dynamics of ideological differences in national attachment should be of great theoretical and practical interest.

In this article we draw on system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994) and the theory of political conservatism as motivated social

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cognition (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003) to explain the ideological gap in national attachment. Specifically, we propose that conservatives possess an especially strong attachment to their nation insofar as it offers one means of attaining a chronic psychological goal to justify the existing social system and to defend it against criticism or attack (cf. Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Liviatan & Jost, 2014). Furthermore, circumstances that temporarily activate the system justification goal should increase national attachment (especially patriotism) among liberals and others who are not typically as strongly attached to national symbols and institutions. Indeed, Gallup Polls conducted in the years after 9/11—an event that seems to have produced heightened levels of system justification motivation (e.g., see Jost et al., 2010, pp. 183–4; Nail & McGregor, 2009; Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007)—found that 70% of Americans overall (and 57% of liberals) described themselves as “very” or “extremely patriotic” (Carroll, 2005). Although survey data such as these are suggestive of the possibility that conditions that increase system justification motivation would reduce or eliminate the ideological gap, an experimental approach is needed to isolate the causal effects of system justification motivation on national attachment for liberals and conservatives. Using convergent methods to activate system justification motivation, we conducted a series of experiments in New York, Arkansas, and Wisconsin to address just this possibility. These three states differ considerably in terms of their political and cultural contexts. According to the results of extensive Gallup polling, New York is one of the 10 most “liberal” states, Arkansas is one of the 10 most “conservative” states, and Wisconsin is between the two (see Jones, 2011). To the extent that similar effects are observed in these three contexts, the results may be considered to be fairly generalizable, at least in terms of the American frame of reference.

Political conservatism as motivated social cognition

Political conservatism is associated with system justification motivation, that is, the desire to defend, bolster, and justify existing social, economic, and political arrangements (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). More specifically, conservatives score higher than liberals on various scales designed to measure system justification tendencies (including the rationalization of inequality), and they also exhibit implicit as well as explicit preferences for order, stability, tradition, and conformity over chaos, flexibility, progress, and rebelliousness (Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008; Matthews, Levin, & Sidanius, 2009; Napier & Jost, 2008). Presumably, these ideological differences in system justification are linked to individual differences in epistemic, existential, and relational needs to regulate uncertainty, threat, and social belongingness (e.g., see Hennes, Nam, Stern, & Jost, 2012).

Indeed, Jost and colleagues (2003) conducted a meta-analytic review of 88 studies, which were carried out in 12 countries over a 44-year period, and found that left-right (or liberal-conservative) political orientation was linked to situational and dispositional variability in epistemic and existential needs to reduce and manage uncertainty and threat. For example, the adoption of a conservative (vs. liberal) orientation was associated with greater intolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity, less openness to new experiences, and stronger needs for order and structure (see also Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling, & Ha, 2010). Conservatism was also associated with more intense perceptions of danger, threat, and death anxiety. These basic findings have since been replicated and extended in a variety of ways with respect to attitudinal, behavioral, and physiological (including neurocognitive) orientations toward uncertainty and threat (e.g., Amodio, Jost, Master, & Yee, 2007; Federico, Ergun, & Hunt, in press; Jost et al., 2007; Kanai, Feilden, Firth, & Rees, 2011; Matthews et al., 2009; Nail, McGregor, Drinkwater, Steele, & Thompson, 2009; Oxley et al., 2008; Shook & Fazio, 2009).

Situational activation of system justification motivation

While system justification tendencies differ between individuals, such as between liberals and conservatives, contextual variability in system justification motivation has also been observed. Several experiments have shown that criticisms of the social system (i.e., threats to its stability and legitimacy) lead people to display more conservative, system-justifying tendencies, such as the use of stereotypes to explain and justify inequality in society (Jost, Kivetz, Rubini, Guermendi, & Mosso, 2005; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005; Lau, Kay, & Spencer, 2008; Ledgerwood, Mandisodza, Jost, & Pohl, 2011; Liviatan & Jost, 2014; Wakslak, Jost, & Bauer, 2011). Similarly, threats to the perception that the social system is fair and just tend to stimulate compensatory efforts to justify or rationalize extant outcomes, consistent with just world theorizing (e.g., Feinberg & Willer, 2011; Hafer & Bègue, 2005; Lerner, 1980; Nail et al., 2009). Finally, situational manipulations of system dependence (e.g., emphasizing the extent to which one's quality of life depends upon the nation or government) also activate system justification motivation and produce effects that are parallel to those elicited by criticisms of the system (e.g., Kay et al., 2009; Laurin, Shepherd, & Kay, 2010; van der Toorn et al., 2014; see also van der Toorn, Tyler, & Jost, 2011).

In line with a person-by-situation interactionist framework of social behavior (e.g., Higgins, 1990; Lewin, 1935), the temporary activation of system justification motivation should have a greater impact on the behavior of those whose levels of motivation are chronically low (vs. high). That is, situational triggers (such as exposure to system criticism, system-level injustice, and system dependence) are unlikely to make much of a difference in the behavior of individuals who are chronically high in system justification motivation. By contrast, the presence vs. absence of situational triggers should affect the behavior of individuals who are chronically low in system justification motivation. More specifically, situational triggers should elevate considerably the strength of system justification motivation for individuals who are chronically low, and under these circumstances they should behave similarly to individuals who are chronically high in justification motivation. It follows, then, that although there are rather strong individual differences between liberals and conservatives in terms of system justification tendencies, the situational activation of system justification motivation may reduce or even eliminate such ideological differences.

Indeed, some evidence already suggests that system justification goals may be triggered momentarily and lead those who are chronically low on system justification motivation to exhibit the same system-justifying tendencies as those who are chronically high (Banfield, Kay, Cutright, Wu, & Fitzsimons, 2011; Cutright, Wu, Banfield, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2011; Jost et al., 2005; Ledgerwood et al., 2011). Most notably, Banfield et al. (2011) showed that exposure to system criticism caused low (but not high) system-justifiers to be more supportive of the organizational status quo and more likely to prefer domestic over foreign consumer products (see also Cutright et al., 2011). A parallel set of observations has emerged in research on authoritarianism. Specifically, Hetherington and Suhay (2011) found that perceived threat from terrorism is associated with greater support for restrictions on civil liberties and the “war on terror” for low but not high authoritarians (the latter of whom are already in favor of restrictive, aggressive policy stances). In addition, Nail and colleagues (2009) found that liberals' convictions concerning capital punishment, abortion, and regarding homosexuality were more “reactive” to (i.e., more affected by) mortality salience primes, in comparison with the convictions of conservatives, for whom death anxiety may be more chronically salient (Jost et al., 2003, 2007). Our present line of thinking is comparable in nature. Given that political conservatism and confidence in the legitimacy of the status quo are positively correlated (e.g., Jost, Nosek, &

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