



# Verbal intelligence is correlated with socially and economically liberal beliefs

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## ABSTRACT

Research has consistently shown that intelligence is positively correlated with socially liberal beliefs and negatively correlated with religious beliefs. This should lead one to expect that Republicans are less intelligent than Democrats. However, I find that individuals who identify as Republican have slightly higher verbal intelligence than those who identify as Democrat (2–5 IQ points), and that individuals who supported the Republican Party in elections have slightly higher verbal intelligence than those who supported the Democratic Party (2 IQ points). I reconcile these findings with the previous literature by showing that verbal intelligence is correlated with both socially and economically liberal beliefs ( $\beta = .10-.32$ ). My findings suggest that higher intelligence among classically liberal Republicans compensates for lower intelligence among socially conservative Republicans.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last few years, scholarly interest in the relationship between intelligence and political beliefs has grown considerably. A consistent finding is that people with higher intelligence tend to be more socially liberal (Deary, Batty, & Gale, 2008a, 2008b; Stankov, 2009; Kanazawa, 2010; Schoon, Cheng, Gale, Batty, & Deary, 2010; Heaven, Ciarrochi, & Leeson, 2011; Hodson & Busseri, 2012). Another consistent finding is that people with higher intelligence tend to be less religious (Bell, 2002; Lynn, Harvey & Nyborg, 2009; Nyborg, 2009; Ganzach, Ellis, & Gotlibovski, 2013; Zuckerman, Silberman, & Hall, 2013). Given that Republicans tend to be both more religious and more socially conservative than Democrats (Newport, 2007; Saad, 2012), these two findings should lead one to expect that Republicans have lower intelligence. Consistent with this

hypothesis, Republicans are less likely to believe in widely accepted scientific ideas such as climate change and the theory of evolution (Kohut, Doherty, & Dimmock, 2009). Indeed, Mooney (2005) argues that, over the last couple of decades, members of the Republican Party have attempted to systematically undermine certain fields of scientific research. And in his latest book, Mooney (2012, pp. 59–126) contends that Republicans' denial of science stems not only from perceived political advantage, but from psychological traits that incline Republicans to prize certainty above all else.

However, there is evidence pointing in the other direction. To begin with, education is correlated with the tendency to think like an economist, which could be considered a centre-right characteristic (Caplan, 2001; Caplan, 2007, pp. 50–93; Caplan & Miller, 2012). More importantly, intelligence itself is correlated with the tendency to think like an economist, at least in the United States (Caplan & Miller, 2010). For example, Americans with higher intelligence are less likely to agree with statements such as “it is the government's responsibility to provide a job for everyone who wants one”, and “corporations should pay more of their profits to workers

Abbreviations: OLS, Ordinary Least Squares; PCA, Principal Components Analysis.

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and less to shareholders". They are also less likely to agree with the statement, "it is the government's responsibility to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes" (Kanazawa, 2010). Furthermore, Rindermann, Flores-Mendoza, and Woodley (2012) analyzed data from Brazil, and found that mean IQ was highest among individuals who described themselves as centre-right. In addition, there is evidence that libertarians, who are more likely to vote for the Republican Party (Kirby & Boaz, 2010), have higher intelligence than both conservatives and progressives (Kemmelmeier, 2008; Iyer, Koleva, Graham, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012). Finally, Republicans have better objective political knowledge than Democrats (Kohut, Doherty, Dimmock, & Keeter, 2012). And just like conservatives, progressives are prone to logical fallacies and unscientific thinking (Berezow & Campbell, 2012).

Pinker (2011, pp. 662–664), drawing on some of the evidence outlined above, argues that intelligence is actually correlated with classically liberal beliefs. According to McLean and McMillan (2009, pp. 306–308), classical liberalism is "the belief that it is the aim of politics to preserve individual rights and maximise freedom of choice" (see also Miller, 2003, pp. 55–73). Classical liberals define 'liberty' in the negative sense, as freedom from coercion and interference (Berlin, 1969, pp. 123–4). They hold both socially and economically liberal beliefs (Friedman, 1962, pp. 5–6). Socially liberal beliefs are predicated on the idea that an individual should be free to pursue his own values and make his own lifestyle choices. Economically liberal beliefs are predicated on the idea that an individual should be free to engage in voluntary transactions with others and to enjoy the fruits of her labour. Pinker's (2011) hypothesis predicts that intelligence should be associated with economically liberal beliefs, as well as socially liberal beliefs.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Data

I analyze data from the General Social Survey (GSS), a public-opinion survey that has been administered to a nationally representative sample of American adults every 1–2 years since 1972. The GSS contains questions on respondents' socio-economic characteristics, behaviours, and social attitudes. It has been used by numerous previous studies to examine intelligence (e.g., Kanazawa, 2010; Caplan & Miller, 2010; Carl & Billari, 2014). Each wave of the GSS provides data on a cross-section of the U.S. population in a particular year. Sample sizes range from 1372 respondents in 1990 to 4510 respondents in 2006; the mean sample size is just under 2000 respondents.

### 2.2. Measures

The primary measure of intelligence available in the GSS is a 10-word vocabulary test in which the respondent is asked to identify which of five phrases supplies the correct definition of a given word (see Smith, Marsden, Hout, & Kim, 2012). Notwithstanding its brevity, the test has a correlation of .71 with the Army General Classification Test (Wolfe, 1980). In addition, there is a huge amount of psychometric evidence

that individuals with higher IQs have larger vocabularies (Jensen, 2001). Vocabulary tests load more strongly onto the crystallized factor of intelligence than onto the fluid factor, so the test included in the GSS is most appropriately described as a measure of verbal intelligence, rather than problem-solving ability (Cattell, 1963; Horn & Cattell, 1966). For a longer discussion of the measure's validity, see Caplan and Miller (2010). Prior to analysis, I transform the measure so that it has a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15, which is the convention for normalizing IQ scores.

In the GSS, party identity is assessed with the question, "Do you think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or what?" (Smith et al., 2012). There are eight response categories: "strong Democrat", "not strong Democrat", "Independent, near Democrat", "Independent", "Independent, near Republican", "not strong Republican", "strong Republican", and "other". I create three binary variables, corresponding to three alternative definitions of party identity. The first variable, which uses a narrow definition of party identity, takes the value '1' if a respondent answered "strong Republican" and takes the value '0' if he answered "strong Democrat". The second, which uses an intermediate definition, takes the value '1' if a respondent answered "strong Republican" or "not strong Republican" and takes the value '0' if he answered "strong Democrat" or "not strong Democrat". The third, which uses a broad definition, takes the value '1' if a respondent answered "strong Republican", "not strong Republican" or "Independent, near Republican" and takes the value '0' if he answered "strong Democrat", "not strong Democrat" or "Independent, near Democrat".

For each presidential election that took place between 1968 and 2008, the GSS contains at least one wave in which respondents were asked how they voted in that election or how they would have voted if they did not (Smith et al., 2012). For example, respondents interviewed in 1987, 1988 and 1989 were asked how they voted or would have voted in the 1984 election, while those interviewed in 1989, 1990, 1991 and 1993 were asked how they voted or would have voted in the 1988 election. Notice that respondents interviewed in 1989 were asked about the 1984 election, as well as the 1988 election. I create two binary variables, corresponding to those who voted

**Table 1**  
Difference in mean verbal intelligence between those who identify as Republican and those who identify as Democrat for three definitions of party identity.

|                    | Narrow definition   | Intermediate definition | Broad definition    |
|--------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| Without covariates | 5.48 <sup>***</sup> | 3.47 <sup>***</sup>     | 2.47 <sup>***</sup> |
| With covariates    | 1.26 <sup>**</sup>  | 0.52 <sup>*</sup>       | –0.00               |
| Observations       | 5985                | 14,887                  | 20,025              |

Notes: Each value is the Republican advantage in IQ points. Estimates are from weighted OLS models of verbal intelligence. Covariates: age, age squared, gender, race, language, marital status, education, log of real household income, region effects, year effects.

\* 5% Significance level, based on robust standard error.

\*\* 1% Significance level, based on robust standard error.

\*\*\* 0.1% Significance level, based on robust standard error.

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