



# Verbal ability as a predictor of political preferences in the United States, 1974–2012



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## ABSTRACT

The relationship between cognitive ability and stated political preferences in the United States is examined with data from the General Social Survey, which includes a brief vocabulary test (Wordsum) as a measure of verbal ability. Since the 1970s, liberal and conservative self-identification became increasingly identified with the Democratic and Republican parties, respectively. Liberal self-identification has increasingly been related to higher Wordsum scores since the 1970s, but liberal-conservative differences rarely exceed the equivalent of 3 IQ points. Among Whites, those identifying themselves as “moderate” or “independent” have lower average Wordsum scores than those with stated ideological or political party preferences, contrary to the hypothesis that higher intelligence is related to less extreme political positions. The relationship between Wordsum and Democratic Party affiliation has moved from negative to neutral since the 1970s. In presidential elections, the most consistent finding is that voters scored substantially higher than non-voters. Those voting for the Democratic candidate had higher average scores than those voting for his Republican opponent since 2000. In regression models that control for demographics, higher Wordsum scores are associated with liberal self-identification but not with political party preferences. In conclusion, higher vocabulary scores are associated with a greater likelihood that people place themselves on the ideological and political spectrum and that they vote in presidential elections, but have only small relationships with liberal-versus-conservative self-identification.

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## 1. Introduction

A large literature has investigated relationships of intelligence with constructs such as social conservatism, right-wing authoritarianism or social dominance orientation, which are measured with specially designed scales. A frequent result of this research in the United States, Britain and Australia is a relationship of more conservative or authoritarian attitudes with lower cognitive ability. These studies used a variety of cognitive measures including vocabulary tests (Kanazawa, 2010), SAT scores (Stankov, 2009), the British Ability Scales (Deary, Batty, & Gale, 2008), general ability tests (Schoon, Cheng, Gale, Batty, & Deary, 2010), and curriculum-based tests

of numeracy and verbal ability (Heaven, Ciarrochi, & Leeson, 2011). Reviews of earlier results are found in Harvey and Harvey (1970) and in Jost, Glaser, Liberal Kruglanski, and Sulloway (2003). Harvey and Harvey (1970, p. 569) conclude: “...the bulk of the findings indicating that radicals or left-wing individuals are more intelligent than right-wing, conservative individuals.” They proceed to show that among adolescents from a high school in a working class neighborhood, those with lower intelligence score higher on anti-communism, militarism and “super-patriotism,” have a lower sense of the relevance of government, and a lower sense of citizen duty. Also at the country level, correlations of conservative or authoritarian attitudes with intelligence (Meisenberg, 2004, 2008) and PISA scores (Stankov, 2009) are generally negative. The main source of inconsistency in these studies is not the choice of cognitive measures, but inconsistency in the measurement of

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conservatism and related constructs. With “intelligently” worded measures of conservatism or authoritarianism, these constructs can have positive associations with intelligence (e.g., Martin & Ray, 1972).

The usual explanation of these results – though rarely stated explicitly – is that liberalism is the product of high-level cognitive processing while conservatism is the default state in the absence of cognitive effort. The most recent incarnation of this view is Kanazawa’s hypothesis that intelligence is required not only for the cognitive processing of situations that are *personally* novel for the individual, but that human intelligence evolved for the processing of situations that are *evolutionarily* novel for the species. In this view, conservative attitudes represent the use of evolved cognitive routines, especially those that enable humans to function in social dominance hierarchies. Liberal attitudes are antithetical to these evolved mechanisms and can be generated only through extensive cognitive processing (Kanazawa, 2010, 2012). However, this theory makes the implausible assumption that desires for freedom and equality, which are the defining features of liberalism, are not evolved preferences in the way that social dominance is.

Not all empiric studies find the expected association of higher intelligence with more liberal attitudes. Early survey research in the United States indicated an association of higher education and intelligence with social conservatism in the “traditional socially responsible personality” (Berkowitz & Lutterman, 1968). More recently, mild positive associations of intelligence with conservative social attitudes or political preferences were reported from “non-standard” samples such as Brazilians (Rindermann, Flores-Mendoza, & Woodley, 2012) and white South Africans (Katz, 1990). Much of the work reporting negative associations between intelligence and conservatism does not measure actual political preferences. It rather relies on rating scales of attitudinal constructs that reflect the preoccupations of the academics who designed the scales and who administer them, usually to psychology undergraduates who are unrepresentative of the general population (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010).

The reasons for predominantly positive associations of intelligence with liberalism in modern societies are debatable. A genuine effect of knowledge or reasoning ability on political attitudes is plausible. Another possibility is formulated in Woodley’s (2010, 2011) cultural mediation hypothesis, which states that more intelligent people are better at recognizing and internalizing the values that prevail in their social environment. As a result, the more intelligent will endorse “liberal” choices on questionnaires if they believe that these represent the consensus of their social reference group. With liberals being a large majority among college and university professors (Gross & Fosse, 2012; Inbar & Lammers, 2012; Rothman, Lichter, & Nevitte, 2005), the cultural mediation hypothesis predicts positive associations between cognitive ability and liberalism in studies of university professors and their students, but not necessarily in general population samples.

Another hypothesis, originated by Eysenck (1999/1954), proposes that lower intelligence is associated with more radical political views because such views tend to be crude, simplified and one-sided. Consideration of multiple sides of an issue will, in most cases, lead to moderate rather than radical positions. Empiric support for this hypothesis is mixed. While Rindermann

et al. (2012) find evidence for an association of intelligence (but not education) with centrist and center-right preferences in a Brazilian population sample, a positive association of intelligence with political radicalism has been reported by Kemmelmeier (2008) at a selective university in the United States. The latter observation conforms to a hypothesis by Sidanius (1985), who argued that greater cognitive effort is required to acquire and defend radical as opposed to mainstream opinions.

The main limitation of many earlier studies is the use of convenience samples that may or may not be representative of larger sections of the population. There is also a high probability that the important relationships are different in different countries and that they change over time. The present study addresses the time dimension by investigating the relationship of cognitive ability with political self-identification and voting behavior in a representative sample of the US population across four decades.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Data source

Data from the cumulative General Social Survey (GSS) data file for the years 1972–2012 were used, available at <http://www.norc.org/Research/Projects/Pages/general-social-survey.aspx>. This cross-sectional survey had been conducted either yearly or every two years, with sample sizes ranging between 1372 (1990) and 4510 (2006) in different years.

### 2.2. Cognitive tests

The most useful cognitive test in the GSS is Wordsum, a 10-item vocabulary test that was included in most waves of the GSS, starting in 1974. In some years it was administered to the entire sample, and in others to only part of the sample. Wordsum is a multiple choice test with 5 answer choices each. Internal scale reliability is satisfactory, with Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of 0.71 in the GSS. Originally constructed by Robert Thorndike (Thorndike & Gallup, 1944), it is a subset of the original WAIS vocabulary test. It is a steeply graded test consisting of 6 easy words (78% to 95% correct answers) and 4 difficult words (25% to 37% correct answers). The average score (number of words correct) is  $6.00 \pm 2.14$  ( $N = 26,916$ ), with almost perfectly symmetric distribution (skewness  $-.215$ , kurtosis  $-.159$ ). Ceiling effects are mild, with 5.6% obtaining the maximum score of 10. Females outscore males by 0.10 words (equivalent to 0.7 IQ points). All gender/ethnic subgroups showed a slightly rising trend which was stronger in the non-white than the non-Hispanic white groups (equivalent to 4.0 and 1.9 IQ points, respectively), confirming earlier observations by Huang and Hauser (1996). This trend occurred although, according to Google Ngram, average usage frequency of the Wordsum words in American English declined by an average of 1.6% from 1974 to 2008 (cf. Roivainen, 2014). However, the overall average score increased by only 0.11 words (equivalent to 0.8 IQ points) from 1974 to 2012 because lower-scoring groups formed a rising proportion of the surveyed population. These trends parallel those in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) as described in Rindermann and Thompson (2013), and confirm earlier findings about the remarkable

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