



# The relationship between sexual preferences and political orientations: Do positions in the bedroom affect positions in the ballot box?



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## ABSTRACT

Sex provides a strong and enduring drive in humans, infusing attitudes and influencing behavior far beyond its immediate activity. Issues involving sex are among the most prevalent and divisive in modern political discourse. However, little is known about whether the actual sexual behaviors of the public align with their political values. Using a web-based US sample, we assess the relationship between individual sexual practices and political preferences. We find that those who engage in more traditional sexual behaviors, such as missionary position sex and kissing, generally have more socially conservative attitudes, ideologies, and partisan leanings, while those who engage in more masturbation, more adventurous sex, such as using sex toys, and those who engage in more risky sex, such as having sex with someone they met on the same day, and who have more lifetime partners, generally hold more liberal positions. Though they engage in a narrower band of activities, those with more conservative orientations tend to be more satisfied with their sex life. We also find substantial heterogeneity across political attitudinal dimensions. For example, individuals who hold more conservative outgroup/punishment attitudes appear similar to those who hold liberal social attitudes when it comes to risky sex behaviors.

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## 1. Introduction

There is little doubt that sexual conduct penetrates both personal and political spheres. Enduring and highly explosive debates surrounding sexual mores remain prevalent in public discourse. Contentious issues such as abortion, the appropriate age of intercourse, birth control, transgender rights, pornography, prostitution, same-sex marriage, sex education, and others have been extensively documented in terms of their alignment with right-left political preferences. Those left of center show greater support for LGBT rights, a women's right to choose on all fronts, and sex education. Those right of center, particularly social conservatives, usually express opposite values. Theoretical justifications and empirical study of these divergences have largely focused on partisan identities, morality, and religion.

The continued significance of sex related issues is evidenced by the increase of referenda on state ballots including “defense of marriage” and “equal protection” acts, as well as the numerous Supreme Court petitions needed to reconcile conflicting state and federal legislation. Intense media coverage shows the pervasive and heated nature of debates surrounding sexual issues including the (de)criminalization of homosexuality; “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” policies; and legislation against

transgender individuals tied to the use of public bathrooms. Possibly the best-known and enduring application of personal sexual values to public policy can be found in issues surrounding the reproductive rights of women. The attempt to de-fund Planned Parenthood represents the most recent manifestation of this debate (Rovner, 2015). The public's endless fascination with sex scandals, and the propensity for such revelations to bring down politicians, demonstrates how sex penetrates politics in contemporary democratic societies beyond the realm of policy initiatives (Flynt & Eisenbach, 2011). Despite many pressing problems – including the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, terrorism, ISIS, a rising deficit, gun violence, global instability, and economic recession – sex-related issues remain among the most important issues to a substantial portion of the American electorate (PEW, 2008).

The relationship between *personal* sexual preferences and behaviors in guiding political orientations, however, has received almost no attention in comparison. This is surprising, given the amount of scholarly attention directed toward rational self-interest, and linking personal attitudes to political behaviors more generally (Boninger, Krosnick, & Berent, 1995). Hans Eysenck (1954), one of the forefathers in the application of psychology to modern political orientations, provided an important exception. His book *Sex and Personality* (1976), examined many facets of sexual behaviors, including their relationship to social and political orientations. Eysenck found that in the UK, social conservatism in males was negatively correlated with sexual permissiveness

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(losing one's virginity, kissing in public, sex before marriage, participating in orgies, birth control, viewing pornography, visiting prostitutes, views toward abortion, low age of first intercourse, etc.), and physical sex (e.g., sex is important, higher sex thoughts, sex is the greatest pleasure, sex is the most important part in marriage, being good in bed is important, physical attraction, multiple partners). However, conservatives were also more satisfied with their sex life. According to Eysenck "this may reveal the more satisfactory nature of old-fashioned family-based mores." He also noted, that "...this finding is not strong enough to deserve much credence until replicated" (p 174). For females, social conservatism was negatively correlated with permissiveness, physical sex and dominance (e.g., preferring to dominate/be dominated), but positively correlated with guilt and anxiety about sex. In women, economic liberalism was also found to be negatively correlated with physical sex, but positively with dominance-submission (e.g., take pleasures where found). Anti-government views were positively correlated with aggressive sex (e.g., feel aggressive and hostile toward partner), but pacifism was found to be negatively correlated with sexual dominance. Individuals who endorsed discriminatory attitudes were also found to be positively correlated with permissiveness, physical sex and dominance. Eysenck found that Conservative party supporters were lowest on permissiveness and sexual shyness, yet highest on satisfaction and libido. In examining a wide range of specific sexual behaviors and positions (e.g., oral sex, anal sex, threesomes), those left of center (Liberals) scored the lowest on things they have done and enjoyed, and the highest on things they have done and did not like.

Eysenck's findings have largely gone unexamined. There have been no other scholarly studies we could identify that focused on the relationship between personal sexual preferences and political orientations in the mass publics. It has remained unknown whether individual beliefs on regulating and legislating the political behavior of others is consistent with one's personal sexual preferences and whether such patterns exist in modern democracies. This is an important question because political attitudes are not only restricted to how individuals feel about their own behavior, but also extend to how individuals believe others should act.

## 2. Materials and methods

Data was collected through a web-based study ( $n = 1074$ ) via Amazon's MTurk. All participants were US residents aged at least 18 years. No identifying information was collected. Only participants with at least a 99% HIT (Human Intelligence Task) approval rate were included, suggesting participants would carefully complete the survey (Casler, Bickel, & Hackett, 2013). Qualification questions were embedded in the survey to ensure the validity of responses. For example, respondents that could not correctly identify the current month were removed from the study. Respondents who answered "not very open" or "not open at all" to "To what extent do you feel you were able to be completely open in answering this questionnaire?" were also removed from the analyses. The final sample used in our analyses thus consists of 1058 participants. Data was collected in the Summer and Fall of 2013 and on different days and times of day to reduce potential biases created by external events.

All procedures contributing to this work complied with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2008. All participants provided informed consent. In order to take the survey, participants had to read, and respond to, a consent form, which advised participants that 1) they would be asked questions on politics and personal sexual related topics 2) they did not have to take the survey 3) all answers are completely anonymous and no identifiable information will be collected 4) participation is voluntary, they may end participation at any time, and choose not to answer any question 5) that anyone who is a survivor of sexual abuse or those who feel that questions about their sex life might be offensive or cause them discomfort should not take the survey

and 6) they would receive full credit if they chose not to answer questions. Respondents then had to select the second statement to continue:

"No, I do not want to proceed"

"Yes, I am at least 18 years of age and feel comfortable about answering questions about my political and sexual behaviors and I want to proceed."

MTurk samples are not random, and have their limitations. However, the data quality of MTurk samples are found to be on par with other non-random samples, and more representative than student populations (Weinberg, Freese, & McElhattan, 2014). In addition, MTurk samples have proven to be representative of the relationships between traits, which is the focus of the current study (Levy, Freese, & Druckman, 2016). For example, our MTurk sample provides comparable correlations as the American National Elections Studies (NES) between self-reported party identification and vote choice in the 2012 election (MTurk sample,  $r = 0.742$ , NES 2012,  $r = 0.795$ ).

### 2.1. Dependent variables

Political orientations are measured by attitudinal indices or self-report questions. Supplementary information (S1–2) provides the descriptive statistics, and variable distributions. The first set of measures are created by summing the scores from specific political attitudes and rescaled so that all values fall between [1, 3] with lower values indicating more liberal positions. Factor analyses show that our attitude items reliably cluster into four factors (S3). *National Security Ideology* is measured by attitudes on military spending, warrantless searches, drone strikes, government monitoring phone and text messages, and offshore drilling ( $\mu = 1.619$ ,  $\sigma = 0.469$ ). *Economic/Libertarian Ideology* is measured by attitudes on government size, tax rate, foreign aid, global warming, environmental protection, education spending, affirmative action, gun control, the United Nations, Obama Care, federal housing, universal health care, food stamps, and welfare ( $\mu = 1.715$ ,  $\sigma = 0.448$ ). *Out-Group/Punishment Ideology* is measured by attitudes on Middle Eastern immigration, English-only legislation, death penalty, longer jail-terms, and stricter immigration ( $\mu = 2.034$ ,  $\sigma = 0.601$ ). *Social Conservatism* is measured by attitudes on Bible truthfulness, school prayer, Wiki-leaks, sex education, birth control, legalizing marijuana, separation of Church and State, gays in the military, evolution, stem-cell research, euthanasia/assisted suicide, gay marriage, pre-marital sex, and abortion ( $\mu = 1.724$ ,  $\sigma = 0.415$ ).

Participants answered a second type of ideological measure modeled after the American National Election Studies (ANES) 7-point liberal-conservative scale. This *Self-Reported Ideology* measure ranges from "extremely liberal" to "extremely conservative" ( $\mu = 3.381$ ,  $\sigma = 1.625$ ). The third political orientation measure is developed from the ANES 7-point party identification (PID) scale. This scale ranges from "Strong Democrat" to "Strong Republican" ( $\mu = 3.440$ ,  $\sigma = 1.610$ ). Higher values for these variables represent more conservative or Republican identification respectively. The fourth measure asked respondents to report their vote choice in the 2012 US presidential election. This *Vote for Romney* measure was coded as 0 if they voted for "Barak Obama," 1 if they voted for "Mitt Romney," and NA otherwise ( $\mu = 0.298$ ,  $\sigma = 0.458$ ). S4 provides a correlation plot of all dependent variables.

### 2.2. Independent variables

Five sets of widely used questions designed by leading sex researchers (Bailey, Dunne, & Martin, 2000; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991) measure participant *sexual behaviors and preferences* (see S5 for full text of questions). These questions assess: 1) whether and how much participants had engaged in a range of specific sexual behaviors; 2) whether and how much they had engaged in a range of risky sexual behaviors; 3) the number of sexual partners participants had and expect

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