

The Need for Closure and Political Attitudes: Final Report for ANES Pilot

Christopher M. Federico, *University of Minnesota*

John T. Jost, *New York University*

Antonio Pierro, *Universita di Roma, "La Sapienza"*

Arie W. Kruglanski, *University of Maryland, College Park*

Introduction and Theoretical Rationale

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in the cognitive and motivational underpinnings of attitudes toward social and political systems (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). In this spirit, we proposed a short individual-difference measure of cognitive style for the 2006 ANES pilot study. In doing so, we specifically drew on the theory of *lay epistemics* to address politically-consequential variations in styles of information processing, judgment, and opinion formation (Kruglanski, 1989, 1996). This theory proposes a general cognitive-motivational orientation toward the social world that is either open and exploratory, on the one hand, or closed and immutable, on the other hand. Jones and Gerard (1967) describe this tension as a "basic antinomy" (p. 227), and they argue that although "there is an undeniable tendency toward conservatism reflected in the economizing principle of applying past solutions to present problems, there must also be countermeasures that make for openness and flexibility" (p. 228). One upshot of this argument about human cognitive motivation that individuals differ in their *need for cognitive closure*, or the manner and extent to which they are motivated to possess knowledge that is secure, stable, and permanent (Kruglanski, 1996).

Whether evoked situationally or measured as a stable personality dimension, the need for closure has been found to produce the same consequences. Specifically, it fosters the tendency to "seize" on information that affords closure and to "freeze" upon closure once it has been attained. Accordingly, the need for closure is associated with tendencies to engage in social stereotyping, to succumb to primacy effects in impression formation, to exhibit the correspondence bias in attitude attribution, to resist persuasive influence, and to reject opinion deviates (Kruglanski & Freund, 1983; Kruglanski, 1989, 1996; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994; see also Jost et al., 2003). Thus, in its focus on the role of the need for closure, the lay-epistemics approach suggests that individuals differ from one another and from situation to situation in the extent to which *they are open to novel information and are willing to consider cognitive alternatives to the status quo*.

Importantly, this suggests that the need for closure may have important consequences for predispositions, attitudes, and judgments in the political realm. In particular, there may be a kind of "matching process" whereby people adopt political predispositions (e.g., liberalism or conservatism), political attitudes, and styles of political judgment that are most likely to satisfy the psychological needs associated with their location on the need-for-closure continuum (Jost et al., 2003; see also Golec & Federico, 2004). In order to understand the hypothesized relation between the need for closure and these political variables, it is important to draw a distinction between the process of obtaining cognitive closure, and the specific *contents* of the predispositions, attitudes, or judgments that allow individuals to obtain closure. On one hand, the need for closure suggests an acceptance of the orientation toward politics that is salient or

dominant in particular context or to a particular individual, *whatever its contents happen to be*. Thus, the need for closure may be associated with increased conservatism in environments or among individuals where conservative politics is the dominant response, and with increased liberalism where liberal politics is the dominant response. In this sense, the need for closure may be associated with a more rigid adherence to beliefs of all sorts, whether they be of the right or the left.

On the other hand, persons at various points along the need for closure continuum are hardly indifferent to the specific contents of particular predispositions, attitudes, and judgments. Specifically, contents that promise stability, clarity, order, and uniformity should be preferred by high-need-for-closure persons over contents that promise their opposites (that is, instability, ambiguity, chaos, and diversity). In this sense, a need for closure that is *nonspecific* (i.e., content-free) becomes *specific* with regard to contents that are explicitly related to closure (Kruglanski, 1989). Thus, to the extent that there is a “match” between the need for closure and certain attitudinal contents, then we might expect conservative predispositions, attitudes, and judgments to be particularly attractive to people who are high in the need for closure. This hypothesis is, of course, an old one in political psychology, which can be traced back most prominently to early research on the authoritarian personality (Adorno et al., 1950). Among other things, this line of work looked at cognitive rigidity and intolerance of ambiguity – constructs that have some kinship with the need for closure – as key antecedents of support for right-wing extremism.

Consistent with this general argument, a great deal of accumulated evidence suggests that there is a correlation between the need for closure (and similar indices of cognitive style), on one hand, and right-wing predispositions, attitudes, and political judgments, on the other. Among other things, a high need for closure appears to be associated with (1) right-wing political predispositions (i.e., along the dimensions of ideology and partisanship); (2) right-wing policy attitudes (e.g., strong support for the death penalty, hawkish foreign-policy positions, etc.); (3) greater authoritarianism; (4) higher levels of nationalism and militarism; and (5) greater religious conservatism (see Jost et al., 2003, for a thorough review; see also Adorno et al., 1950; Federico, Golec, & Dial, 2005; Golec & Federico, 2004; McClosky, 1958; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). Thus, an extensive body of research suggests that the need for closure is associated with support for right-wing political content, given its ability to satisfy needs for an orientation toward the world that is stable, clear, and orderly. Importantly, it is worth noting that the “right wing” content that accomplishes this need not correspond to what is seen as “conservative” in the American context. For example, in studies involving Polish respondents, Golec (2001) found that the need for closure was *negatively* correlated with economic conservatism, i.e., support for a free-market economy with minimal social provision. This is the opposite of what is found in American samples (Jost et al., 2003), but it makes sense in terms of what the dominant response in each context is: while support for the market is the dominant stance in American culture, it is not in Polish culture, where the legacies of both communism and Catholic social teaching provide a conventional basis for a solidaristic stance.

Inspired by this growing body of work, we proposed last year to include a short measure of the need for closure in the 2006 ANES pilot. Given the survey format of ANES, we opted for an individual-difference approach to studying the political consequences of the need for closure.

In doing so, we followed the lead of Webster and Kruglanski (1994), who developed and validated an individual difference measure of the need for cognitive closure. Using an adapted form of this Need for Closure Scale, we had hoped to provide an important tool with which to examine the psychological antecedents of citizens' political predispositions, attitudes, and judgments in mass publics. Unfortunately, the version of the scale piloted here did not display adequate psychometric properties. Before turning to our results, we briefly summarize the construction of our measure.

Adapting the Need for Closure Scale for the ANES

In its original form, the Need for Closure Scale is a well-validated and widely-used measure of individual differences in the “seizing” and “freezing” tendencies associated with the need-for-closure construct (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994; see also Neuberg, Judice, & West, 1997; Kruglanski et al., 1997). This 42-item instrument usually scales well according to classical test theory criteria (i.e., with Cronbach’s α estimates in excess of .75). Structurally, the scale consists of five correlated factors: (1) preference for order and structure, (2) discomfort with ambiguity, (3) impatience or impulsivity with regard to decision-making, (4) desire for predictability and security, and (5) closed-mindedness. Moreover, given the aforementioned theoretical considerations, the scale has excellent criterion validity, both in political settings and elsewhere (Jost et al., 2003; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). However, despite its positive attributes, a 42-item scale is obviously too lengthy for inclusion in the ANES or any other general survey. Therefore, we used a series of latent-trait analyses to isolate items for a short scale. On the basis of these results, and in consultation with the ANES principal investigators and staff, we developed a short 5-item form of the scale. As a final adjustment, we modified the original response scales for these items. In place of the old agree-disagree Likert format, we substituted “construct-specific” response options. All of the resulting options were labeled with words rather than numbers. Moreover, rather than having four responses, the final items were given five. These changes were made on the basis of prior results suggesting that they maximize the reliability and validity of short scales like the one we are creating (see Saris, Krosnick, & Schaeffer, 2005; see also Bizer et al, 2004). The full text of the final items is displayed below in Table 1.

Table 1: Need for Closure Scale Items from the 2006 ANES Pilot

Q5-7-10	How disorganized are the rooms that you personally live and work in most? Extremely disorganized, very disorganized, moderately disorganized, slightly disorganized, or not disorganized at all?
Q5-7-40	Do you like unpredictable situations (GO TO Q5-7-50), dislike them (GO TO Q5-7-55), or neither like nor dislike them (GO TO Q5-7-60)?
Q5-7-50	Do you like unpredictable situations...a great deal, a moderate amount, or a little?

- Q5-7-55 Do you dislike unpredictable situations... a great deal, a moderate amount, or a little?
- Q5-7-60 Do you... lean toward liking unpredictable situations, lean toward disliking unpredictable situations, or do you not lean either way?
- Q5-7-70 How many of your important decisions do you make quickly and confidently? All, most, about half, a few, or none?
- Q5-7-80 When you don't understand the reason why something happens in your life, how uncomfortable does that make you feel? Extremely uncomfortable, very uncomfortable, moderately uncomfortable, slightly uncomfortable, or not uncomfortable at all?
- Q5-7-90 In the situations when you see two people in a conflict with one another, how often can you see how both sides could be right? Always, most of the time, about half the time, once in a while, or never?
-

Psychometric Evaluation

Having developed a short form of the Need for Closure scale, we turned to a psychometric evaluation of the measure. Unfortunately, initial analyses using the 2006 ANES Pilot data revealed that this 5-item scale had less than adequate psychometric properties. Most importantly, reliability analyses using Cronbach's α revealed that no combination of two or more of the Need for Closure items produced a reliability coefficient greater than .30. Naturally, this raises serious concerns about the extent to which our items adequately and consistently tap variance in the underlying need for closure construct.

The next step of our validation analysis would have consisted of examining the relationship between our need for closure measure and several clusters of criterion variables from the 2004 ANES: (1) criteria related to cognition and information search (Kruglanski, 1996); (2) criteria related to various dimensions of political belief (Jost et al., 2003); (3) criteria related to Group-Centrism (Federico et al., 2005; Golec & Federico, 2004; Kruglanski, 1996; Kruglanski et al. in press; Shah, Kruglanski, & Thompson, 1998); and (4) criteria related to worldview and religiosity (see Jost et al., 2003). However, in light of our failure to obtain a reliable Need for Closure scale, we cannot proceed to this validation step.

Conclusion

Measures of psychological variables have made important contributions to the study of political attitudes in mass surveys like the ANES. In particular, the inclusion of two other personality measures – the need to evaluate and the need for cognition – in the 2000 and 2004 ANES surveys has already paved the way a number of useful contributions to the literature (e.g., Bizer et al., 2004; Federico, 2004). In our opinion, the inclusion of a short-form measure of the

need for closure has the potential to make similarly-valuable contributions to a variety of literatures in political science, social psychology, and the other social sciences. As noted above, a wealth of research has already demonstrated the relationship between aspects of psychological functioning encompassed by the need for closure and a variety of important political predispositions, such as ideology, partisanship, authoritarianism, and national attachment (for a review, see Jost et al., 2003). This literature has highlighted the potentially important role of the need for closure in determining citizens' support for right-wing predispositions, attitudes, and political judgments. As such, including a measure of the need for closure in a large national survey like the ANES would allow us and other researchers to expand this line of work in several important ways.

Unfortunately, the short version of the Need for Closure scale piloted here failed to attain adequate psychometric properties. In particular, no combination of the items produced a scale reliable enough for substantively meaningful analyses of the relationship between the need for closure and other critical variables. This disappointing result points to a need for more intensive efforts to develop a Need for Closure scale appropriate for use in adult samples. Most work involving the Need for Closure scale has been conducted in student samples (see Kruglanski, 1996; see also Jost et al., 2003), raising the possibility that the need for closure items may form less of an obvious unit for certain adult respondents. This may be due to a lower familiarity with psychological tests among adult respondents or the presence of subgroups that are underrepresented in student samples (for whom the scale may have different psychometric properties). Future work may wish to consider presenting adult respondents with more of the original Need for Closure items to begin with, allowing researchers to go through the full process of isolating a smaller scale in an adult sample.

References

- Adorno, T. W., Frenkel-Brunswik, E., Levinson, D. J., & Sanford, R. N. (1950). *The authoritarian personality*. New York: Harper.
- Bizer, G. Y., Krosnick, J. A., Holbrook, A. L., Wheeler, S. C, Rucker, D. E., & Petty, R. E. (2004). The impact of personality on cognitive, behavioral, and affective political processes: The effects of the need to evaluate. *Journal of Personality, 72*, 995-1027.
- Campbell, A., Converse, P., Miller, W., & Stokes, W. (1960). *The American voter*. New York: Wiley.
- de Dreu, C. K. W., Koole, S. L., & Oldersma, F. L. (1999). On the seizing and freezing of negotiator inferences: Need for cognitive closure moderates the use of heuristics in negotiation. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin, 25*, 348-362.
- De Grada, E., Kruglanski, A. W., Mannetti, L., & Pierro, A. (1999). Motivated cognition and group interaction: Need for closure affects the contents and processes of collective negotiations. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 35*, 346-365.
- Embretson, S. E., & Reise, S. P. (2000). *Item response theory for psychologists*. Mahwah, NJ:

LEA.

- Federico, C., Golec, A., & Dial, J. (2005). The Relationship Between Need for Closure and Support for Military Action Against Iraq: Moderating Effects of National Attachment. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31, 621-632.
- Golec, A. (2001, July). *Need for cognitive closure and political conservatism: Studies on the nature of the relationship*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology, Cuernavaca, Mexico.
- Golec, A., & Federico, C. M. (2004). Understanding responses to political conflict: Interactive effects of the need for closure and salient conflict schemas. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 87, 750-762.
- Federico, C. M., & Schneider, M. (2005). Political expertise and the use of ideology: Moderating effects of evaluative motivation. Revision under review, *Public Opinion Quarterly*.
- Jones, E. E., & Gerard, H. B. (1967). *Foundations of social psychology*. New York: Wiley.
- Jost, J. T., Glaser, J., Kruglanski, A. W., & Sulloway, F. (2003). Political conservatism as motivated social cognition. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129, 339-375.
- Kruglanski, A. W. (1989). *Lay epistemics and human knowledge: Cognitive and motivational bases*. New York: Plenum.
- Kruglanski, A. W. (1996). Motivated social cognition: Principles of the interface. In E. T. Higgins & A. W. Kruglanski (Eds), *Social psychology: A handbook of basic principles* (pp. 493-522). New York: Guilford Press.
- Kruglanski, A. W., & Freund, T. (1983). The freezing and unfreezing of lay inferences: Effects of impressional primacy, ethnic stereotyping, and numerical anchoring. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 19, 448-468.
- Kruglanski, A.W., Pierro, A., Mannetti, L. & DeGrada, E. (in press). Groups as epistemic providers: Need for closure and the unfolding of group centrism. *Psychological Review*.
- McClosky, H. (1958). Conservatism and personality. *American Political Science Review*, 52, 27-45.
- Pierro, A. & Kruglanski, A. W. (2006). *Validation of a revised need for cognitive closure scale*. Unpublished data, Universita di Roma, "La Sapienza".
- Saris, W. E., Krosnick, J. A., & Schaeffer, E. M. (2005). *Comparing questions with agree/disagree response options to questions with construct-specific response options*. Unpublished manuscript, Political, Social, Cultural Sciences, University of Amsterdam

Schuman, H., & Presser, S. (1996). *Questions and answers in attitude surveys*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Shah, J. Y., Kruglanski, A. W., & Thompson, E. P. (1998). Membership has its (epistemic) rewards: Need for closure effects on ingroup bias. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *75*, 383-393.

Webster, D. M., & Kruglanski, A. W. (1994). Individual differences in need for cognitive closure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *67*, 1049-1062.

Zaller, J. (1992). *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. New York: Cambridge.