

The End of the End of Ideology

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I've started to get the feeling very recently that political psychology is becoming a hot topic, which has never really happened in my career. I am extremely excited for that, and I think that Jon Krosnick joining Skip Lupia as co-PI of the American National Election Study is one sign of that, and this conference is another, so I am grateful and very, very pleased. Thank you for allowing me to be part of it, too.

As most of you probably know, the end of ideology was declared more than a generation ago by a small but esteemed group of sociologists and political scientists who, after the ideological struggle in the middle of the 20th Century between Fascism and Communism, were more than glad to see it go. The general thesis of their work – and this really grew out of the work of Daniel Bell, Philip Converse, Seymour Lipset, Raymond Aron, and Edward Shils — was that by the 1950s both the political right and the left had been equally discredited, and that a kind of “exhaustion of political ideas” had taken place in the West.

Ideological distinctions — it was suggested — were devoid of social and psychological significance for most people, especially in the United States, but also elsewhere. There is a voluminous end of ideology literature, including the four books shown in this slide and lots of other articles and book chapters, but my reading of this voluminous literature has led me to distill four major claims, which I have sought to address in an *American Psychologist* article that just was published this last week, so when you get back home it might be in your mailbox.

The first of these four claims grew out of Converse's famous argument – and people made allusions to it yesterday — that ordinary citizens' political attitudes lack the kind of logical consistency and internal coherence that would be expected if those attitudes were neatly organized according to ideological schemata.

The second and related claim is that most people are unmoved by ideological appeals and that abstract labels associated with liberalism and conservatism lack motivational potency and behavioral significance. The third claim is that there are really no substantive differences in terms of philosophical or ideological content between liberal and conservative points of view. Shils, for example, famously mocked the left-right distinction as “rickety, spurious and obsolete.” (That was fifty years ago.)

The fourth claim, which first emerged as a criticism of Adorno's book on the authoritarian personality, is that there are no important differences in the psychological processes or styles that underlie ideological orientations such as liberalism and conservatism. These four claims have had an extraordinary degree of impact -- and I would suggest an excessive degree of impact -- on the social and behavioral sciences.

My belief, my thinking is that it is time to revisit these claims in light of changing political realities, especially, but not exclusively, since 9/11 and recent data, and especially, but not exclusively, psychological data. The end-of-ideologists were so successful that my students often ask me now, more than forty years later, whether ideological constructs such as left and right or liberalism and conservatism are relevant, meaningful and useful. My answer, as you will see is, “Yes.” So I basically have been trying to deal with the massive skepticism that Jon Krosnick mentioned, and, I think, correctly summarized yesterday.

So I want to say at least a bit about each of these four claims, recognizing, of course, that each is very complicated and has a long history in political science. I obviously cannot do the issues total justice here in thirty minutes. Those of you who are interested in more details of the argument can check out the *American Psychologist* article, and I would be happy to email it to you, if you would just send me a reminder.

Okay, concerning the first claim I do think that it is relevant to point out that the strong version of Converse’s thesis applies much better to the 1950s, which is the period in which the public opinion data that he analyzed were collected than to subsequent historical period—

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Although Converse believed that no more than 15 percent of the population in 1956 satisfied the criteria for being ideological, others including Chick Judd and Jon Krosnick have obtained higher estimates, with some estimates – not theirs, but other estimates – as high as 50 percent.

The increased prevalence of ideological coherence in the decades after Converse’s original essay was published has been attributed largely to methodological improvements in survey items, and to increased political polarization in certain elections — including the famous 1972 Nixon-McGovern race, and again in very recent elections. In addition, as educational levels in the American public have risen, we have also seen greater ideological interest and consistency.

Converse is clearly right that a sizeable minority, and sometimes as much as one-third of the population, appears to be unable or unwilling to locate their political attitudes on a scale of liberalism-conservatism. But on the flipside, if you look at the American National Election Study’s data from 1972 to 2004, you see that two-thirds of respondents since 1972 and three-fourths of respondents since 1996 can and do organize their

attitudes according to referents such as liberalism and conservatism. I am going to suggest in a couple of minutes that they appear to do so in a relatively accurate and behaviorally congruent way.

Much of survey research in the 1980s concluded that the American public was much more ideologically inclined than it had been in the 1950s. It also seems to many observers that the American public today is more ideologically inclined than it was in the 1980s. Party loyalty, for example, has increased, and so has the proportion of strict party line votes in Congress. Ticket splitting -- in which voters simultaneously cast ballots for Democratic and Republican candidates -- has dramatically decreased, and so has political competitiveness in most districts (and not only because of partisan gerrymandering).

Political segregation is occurring more rapidly than racial segregation, and it appears to many observers that the nation is currently in the midst of the most partisan era since reconstruction, that is, immediately following the abolition of slavery.

A final point that I would like to make with respect to work on ideological coherence is that the question of whether the electorate can be both highly ideological and generally uninformed, in my opinion, remains untouched by most of the political science literature — in part because of the way that they have defined ideology. So, from the perspective of a “motivated social cognitive” approach like the one that we have been advocating in the last few years, one would expect that rather than solely organizing information accurately and logically, ideology would encourage distortion and selective processing of political information. There is, in fact, as many of you know, a wealth of experimental evidence that illustrates the biasing role of ideology, and there is anecdotal evidence as well.

One-fourth of American citizens, between one and two million people per day, watch the ideologically laden Fox News. But surveys show that these viewers, while politically engaged, are significantly less informed than others about the Iraq War and other important political issues. So it seems to me that the strongest criticism of Converse’s work may be conceptual rather than empirical. It is that by equating ideology with internal consistency and internal consistency with sophistication, he and his adherents may have mischaracterized the role of ideology in people’s lives altogether.

A related, and perhaps a more constructive suggestion, is that people’s attitudes may be, at least to some degree, structured around a left-right or liberal-conservatism dimension for psychological reasons. These are psychological reasons having relatively little to do with needs for consistency or reason *per se*, but rather because of other epistemic and existential motives pertaining to, for example, the management of uncertainty and threat. I will come back to this issue later, but first I want to say a bit more about the other “end of ideology” claims.

So the second claim was that ordinary people do not care about ideology, and that it plays no important role in motivating their political behavior. Again, I suspect that there was a time in which this generalization may have applied to the majority of the population, but there is at least anecdotal, archival, and some survey evidence that suggest that people are more passionate about political ideology these days than in previous eras — for better or for worse. (I'll leave that to you to decide for yourselves.)

In the 2004 American National Election Study, for example, 44 percent of respondents reported listening to political talk radio. According to a study by the Pew Center, Rush Limbaugh draws more than 15 million listeners per week. They call themselves the “ditto heads” as you may know, and Bill O'Reilly counts eight percent of the public as regular viewers.

In terms of Internet media, there are now more than 17,000 political websites maintained by thousands of individual bloggers, and visited by at least 25 million Americans. It is estimated that the top 100 political blogs attract 100,000 American adults each day. So although liberal pundits may finally be starting to catch up, it seems to me that conservatives in the last decade or so have found ways of capitalizing on ideological passions that, according to the end of ideologists, simply didn't exist.

With regard to voting behavior, it appears that ideological self-placement on a scale of liberalism-conservatism does predict voting intentions and behaviors to a very strong degree in the 1972 to 2004 presidential election. So here is the ANES item, which has been much maligned in the literature, but it turns out to be pretty powerful, in my opinion. The item reads, “We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?” I didn't realize until yesterday that this question contains a Richard Petty type of manipulation of attitude uncertainty thrown in there at the end of it. That -- along with the fact that there are three alternatives to actually answering this question -- may help us to better understand why 25 percent of the respondents still are not answering this question.

But let's talk about those people who do answer it. In this figure, I have aggregated American National Election Study data from 1972 to 2004 and plotted the percentage of respondents at each point on this seven-point ideological self-placement scale — again, ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative who reported voting for Democratic and Republican presidential candidates in the United States.

Collapsing across the nine presidential elections and over 7,500 respondents, what you see here is that 80 percent of respondents who described themselves as liberal or extremely liberal reported voting for the Democratic candidates, and 80 percent of respondents who described themselves as conservative or very

conservative reported voting for the Republican candidates. The correlation between ideological self-placement and voting intentions is over .9. Responses to this single item explain 85 percent of the statistical variance in self-reported voting behavior over the last 32 years!

Let me know if you can come up with one, but I find it difficult to think of another single survey question in the entire social and behavioral sciences that is as useful and as parsimonious as the liberalism-conservatism self-placement item for predicting any outcome that is as important as voting behavior. It also predicts, in our various research programs, a great many other things about an individual's thoughts, feelings and behaviors. I'm afraid that I am only going to be able to mention a few of these today.

On the question of whether there are meaningful, substantive differences between left-wing or liberal and right-wing or conservative ideologies — my colleagues and I, including Jack Glaser, find it useful to distinguish between core and peripheral features of an ideology. Peripheral features are those that are somewhat loosely connected to an ideology, and are therefore more likely to show historical and cultural variability. So one example, I think, of a peripheral feature of conservative ideology is opposition to big government, and we're already seeing that conservatives' attitudes on this issue are changing, now that big government is Republican government rather than Democratic government.

Core features, by contrast, are more stable across time and place. We have proposed that, as Brian Nosek mentioned yesterday, two core dimensions have distinguished left and right over the last 200 years or so in most societies and these two dimensions are first, attitudes concerning change or tradition, and second, attitudes concerning social and economic equality or inequality. So, for example, as you know, conservatives tend to hold significantly more favorable attitudes than liberals towards traditional cultural and family values, including religious forms of morality. Conservatives are also more likely to support conventional authority figures, and to oppose activists who are seeking to change the status quo — especially if change is towards greater egalitarianism.

Liberals generally place a higher priority on achieving social and economic equality through policies such as welfare, social security, and affirmative action. Liberals are also significantly less likely to hold prejudicial attitudes towards racial minorities, homosexuals, women and members of other disadvantaged groups, as Brian Nosek showed us yesterday, with respect to implicit as well as explicit attitudes.

I also think that there is some evidence that political attitudes are more stable and more highly inter-correlated or tightly constrained — to use Converse's language — around core than peripheral attitude objects. So, in general, my conclusion is that if you look in the right place, you will find meaningful differences at the level of ideological content between liberal and conservative ideologies.

So, it seems to me that the intriguing possibility — or at least a possibility that's intriguing to me — is that ideological preferences are derived, in part, from the psychological needs of individuals and groups. This has not really been seriously considered by sociologists and political scientists, I think, over the last 40 years or so, perhaps because they've not really taken seriously the notion that individuals have genuine ideological preferences at all.

From my point of view, the question of whether or not there are consistent psychological differences between liberals and conservatives is a legitimate and important empirical issue for the social and behavioral sciences. So my colleagues — again, Jack Glaser, Arie Kruglanski, and Frank Sulloway — and I adopted a quantitative, meta-analytic approach to these issues, which I think had been obscured, and to some extent even suppressed, during the “end of ideology” era.

The meta-analysis that we published in 2003 in *Psychological Bulletin* included studies published between 1958 and 2002 involving 88 different research samples from 12 different countries listed here, and altogether there were 22,818 individual cases or participants, as diverse as we could find.

The most general theoretical proposition that we assessed is that there is a better match between both dispositional and situational factors leading to managing uncertainty and threat, and conservative or right-wing ideologies than liberal and left-wing ideologies. This would explain, among other things, why 9/11, which served to increase general needs to manage uncertainty and threat in the general population, precipitated a conservative shift.

Again, we focused on the two core aspects that differentiate conservative and liberal ideologies, and these occur repeatedly in historical and conceptual definitions of conservatism — mainly resistance to change or traditionalism, and acceptance of inequality. So, consistent with prior theorizing, we hypothesize that there would be an especially good fit between needs to reduce uncertainty and threat on one hand, and resistance to change and acceptance of inequality on the other — insofar as preserving the status quo allows one to maintain what is familiar and known, while rejecting the risky, uncertain prospects associated with social change.

So the broader argument really is that the ideological differences between right and left emerge, at least in part, because of psychological reasons. Stability and hierarchy inherently provide reassurance and structure, whereas change and inequality imply greater chaos and unpredictability — at least with respect to reasonably large social systems, although it might even be true in families and other smaller systems.

So, obviously, this is a very ambitious theoretical project (I realize that) to try to ground left and right in aspects of human nature such as underlying psychological needs for — stability versus change, order versus

complexity, familiarity versus novelty, conformity versus creativity and loyalty versus rebellion — and we are certainly not there yet by any means, but we are making some progress.

In terms of operational definitions, our dependent variable, political orientation — that is, conservatism versus liberalism — was operationalized in three ways. First, we looked at scales emphasizing resistance to change, of which there are several listed here. Second, we included scales emphasizing acceptance versus rejection of inequality, and third, there were also direct self-report indicators of political orientation. The results were generally consistent across these three types of measures. We found that several variables pertaining to epistemic needs or motives to reduce uncertainty were associated with political orientation. For instance, integrative complexity was negatively associated with conservatism (or positively associated with liberalism). Intolerance of ambiguity was positively associated with conservatism, negatively with liberalism. Openness to experience and uncertainty tolerance were both negatively associated with conservatism and positively associated with liberalism. Needs for order, structure and closure were also significant and positively associated with political conservatism.

We also found, again, aggregating across many different studies that certain existential needs or motives pertaining to the management of threat were associated with political orientation, and so fear of threat and loss was positively associated with conservatism and negatively associated with liberalism. The smallest effect size was for self-esteem, with a slight tendency in the years that the studies were conducted for lower self-esteem to be more associated with political conservatism — although we have seen that go away in the last few years in our research during the Bush years.

The two largest effect sizes that came out of our meta-analysis were for death anxiety and system threat, each of which were correlated at about .5 positively with political conservatism. Again, I think that it's no accident that the events of 9/11 obviously affected people's levels of death anxiety and perceptions of system threat. It also appears to have precipitated a kind of conservative shift.

Several recent studies, including experimental and quasi-experimental studies reinforce and extend, I think, the basic conclusions arising from our meta-analysis. These are particularly important, because they shed further light on the direction of causality demonstrating that heighten needs to manage uncertainty and threat lead to an increased affinity for conservatism, and a decreased affinity for liberalism. However, I also do think that the other direction of causality is also plausible, for a number of reasons, perhaps including reasons of social identification, as Geoff Cohen was just talking about, and perhaps other forms of socialization and party organization.

Let me tell you about some of these more recent studies. Time series analyses conducted by the sociologist, Rob Willer, show that every time the Bush administration raised the terror alert levels during their first term in office, public approval ratings of Bush increased — even on dimensions unrelated to his handling of terrorism such as economic issues. Second, although terror management theorists initially expected that mortality salience would increase liberalism among liberals, they, too, have recently begun to show that priming people with thoughts of death or 9/11 tend to increase support for conservative opinions and leaders, including President Bush, and even in relatively liberal college samples.

Third, I have been working with George Bonanno, who is conducting a longitudinal study on trauma and resilience among people who were in or near the World Trade Center buildings on the morning of 9/11, and 18 months after 9/11 we simply asked these survivors if they had grown more liberal, more conservative or stayed the same since the attack. Here are the results: 38 percent of the sample overall reported that they had become more conservative in the 18 months following 9/11, which was about three times as many people who had said that they had grown more liberal. If you break it down by political party here, you see that 50 percent of Republicans, 50 percent of independents and 35 percent of Democrats reported that they had become more conservative in the 18 months after 9/11, and no Republicans, no independents and only 23 percent of Democrats said that they had become more liberal in their 18 months following 9/11.

If you look just at those people who said that they had voted for Al Gore in 2000, of those people, 40 percent of them reported that they had become more conservative in the 18 months following 9/11, and only 12 percent had become more liberal. So it really doesn't matter how you break it down, there is more conservative than liberal shift here.

We also found in this sample that the survivors' symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression predicted both a conservative orientation and also the likelihood of becoming more conservative in response to the attacks. So, in this particular case at least, although we are arguing that people may be turning to conservative solutions — in part to minimize threat and uncertainty — in this particular case it does not seem to have been effective. (But there is survey evidence out there indicating that in the general population conservatives do report being happier, on average, than liberals.)

Finally, I do want to mention one more thing. There were some built-in limitations of the meta-analysis that we are now trying to address in follow-up research. For one thing, we did not have uncertainty and threat variables in the same data sets, so we could not really tell whether they are contributing independently and equally to political orientation, or if one type of variability seems to be more important than the other. Given that we were relying mainly on previously published studies, we were also dependent on how other authors had reported their data. So we had a limited ability to rule out the

alternative hypothesis that heightened needs to manage uncertainty and threat would be associated with becoming more ideologically extreme in either direction — right or left.

Finally, some of the DVs that we included in the meta-analysis such as right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation may include authoritarian characteristics that may be separable from conservatism, at least in principle. However, there are generally rather high correlations between conservatism and authoritarianism, although there is some range as well in the magnitude of the correlations.

In any case, we used ideological self-placement as the dependent variable in three studies and used structural equation models methods on data taken from student samples from Texas, Massachusetts and New York. The results are highly consistent across the three samples, despite geographical and other differences among the samples.

So I will just describe briefly one of the studies as a kind of illustration. We created here second order latent variables of uncertainty avoidance and threat management based on multiple scale indicators of each. To estimate uncertainty avoidance we administered items pertaining to ambiguity intolerance, openness, and the need for order subscale of Webster and Kruglanski's need for closure scale, which will be represented in the ANES pilot study, thanks to Jon and Skip. To estimate threat management, we administered items from the perceptions of a dangerous world scale, along with other items gauging system threat. We were able to investigate the effects of these psychological variables on both liberalism-conservatism and ideological extremity, adjusting for the other.

What we found was that, in all three studies, uncertainty avoidance and threat management each contributed independently and significantly to political conservatism, accounting for between 28 percent and 38 percent of the statistical variance in political orientation.

Furthermore, these paths remain significant after adjusting for ideological extremity. When we allow uncertainty avoidance and threat management to predict political extremity rather than political orientation, we find no evidence that heightened epistemic or existential needs are associated with increased extremity. Rather, uncertainty avoidance was associated with the holding of centrist as well as conservative views, and threat management was unrelated to extremity in all three studies. This pattern holds after adjusting for the negative effect of conservatism on ideological extremity -- that is, for the liberal skew in this particular sample.

My overall conclusion today is that while ordinary people by no means pass the strictest tests imaginable for ideological sophistication, most of them I think do think, feel and behave in ideologically meaningful and interpretable terms. Millions of Americans now actively seek out ideologically charged talk radio, televised

news programs and political blogsites. Between two-thirds and three-quarters of the American population currently locates their attitudes on a liberalism-conservatism dimension, and these attitudes do reliably predict voting behavior and other important outcomes including beliefs, opinions, values, traits, behaviors and perhaps even mental health characteristics.

I have also suggested and shown some evidence that political and psychological differences between the left and the right do exist, especially with respect to core dimensions pertaining to stability versus change and equality versus inequality, and that both situational and dispositional needs to manage uncertainty and threat are associated with conservatism and not with ideological extremity.

Finally, I think that we may be starting to witness in psychology a return to some of the questions that were deferred almost half a century ago by the “end-of-ideologists.” I also think that the emerging psychological paradigm is distinguishable from, and hopefully complementary to political science approaches to ideology, which have stressed among other things, coherence, stability and political sophistication rather than other human needs and motives. *(End of Jost_2 file)*