Conservative Self-Enhancement

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Abstract

Political conservatism has been linked to motivated forms of social cognition, sensitivity to threat, and defensive cognitive styles. The present research examined whether liberal-conservative political ideology was associated with self-enhancement using large Internet samples across eight studies (N = 13,002). Meta-analysis of these results revealed that the tendency to make overly positive self-evaluations was positively associated with general political conservatism, social conservatism, economic conservatism, and conservative patterns of moral foundation endorsement ($.12 \leq r_{random} \leq .13$; $.07 \leq r_{fixed} \leq .10$), even after controlling for key demographic variables ($.08 \leq r_{random} \leq .16$; $.03 \leq r_{fixed} \leq .09$). These findings suggest that, above and beyond previously studied variables, multiple forms of political conservatism predict a strengthened tendency to evaluate the self in an overly positive way.

Keywords: *Political ideology, self-enhancement, self-assessment, meta-analysis.*

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Conservative Self-Enhancement

Most people view themselves as better than average, although this phenomenon defies statistical probability (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989). Self-enhancement, or the tendency to evaluate oneself in an unrealistically favorable light, is more pronounced among the psychologically well-adjusted (Taylor & Brown, 1988), the religious (Sedikides & Gebauer, 2009), and Westerners who live in unequal, individualistic societies where there is heightened motivation to stand out from others (Hamamura, Heine, & Takemoto, 2007; Loughnan et al., 2011).

Past research hints that self-enhancement might also be more pronounced among political conservatives than political liberals. Historically, conservatism has been linked to defensive cognitive styles (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Hibbing, Smith, & Alford, 2014). Further, there are reasons to believe that both economic and social dimensions of conservatism might predict self-enhancement. Economic conservatism involves a hierarchical, competitive worldview, potentially heightening motivations to view oneself as superior to others (Loughnan et al., 2011). Social conservatism, greater religiosity, and conservative patterns of moral foundation endorsement are related to more favorable views of similar others and ingroup members (Graham et al., 2011). Conservative views have also been linked to beliefs that are indicative of self-enhancement, including flattering self-assessments of physical attractiveness, social status, life satisfaction, optimism, and personal control (Belmi & Neale, 2014; Brown-Iannuzzi, Lundberg, Kay, & Payne, 2015; Schlenker, Chambers, & Le, 2012).

However, the limited literature directly assessing ideological differences in self-enhancement provides mixed findings. Conservatism is associated with stronger degrees of self-

deceptive enhancement and impression management (Wojcik, Hovasapian, Graham, Motyl, & Ditto, 2015a; Jost et al., 2010), but liberalism has been associated with the "truly false uniqueness" effect (Stern et al., 2013). The present research aimed to clarify whether, and to what extent, the tendency to self-enhance differed across the liberal-conservative political spectrum.

Method

We assessed relationships between four operationalizations of liberal-conservative political ideology and eight components of self-enhancement using large Internet samples.

Participants

Participants from the United States were included in the present research if they completed one or more self-enhancement measures from either of two online research platforms. Five measures were posted on YourMorals.org (n = 12,605; mean age = 38.7; 48.2% female). The remaining measures were posted on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (n = 397; mean age = 30.0; 36.0% female). Due to continuous, ongoing data collection, sample sizes were capped when data analysis began in December, 2014.

Political Ideology

Participants separately reported general, social, and economic political ideology along 7-point scales (1 = *Very Liberal*, 7 = *Very Conservative*). Because of our specific interest in the liberal-conservative dimension, a minority of individuals who identified as non-political, libertarian, and other were excluded. We also assessed liberal-conservative patterns of moral foundation endorsement among YourMorals.org participants who completed the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (n = 8,533; Graham et al., 2011), which assesses sensitivity to five foundations of morality. Moral liberalism-conservatism was operationalized by subtracting the

average "individualizing foundation" score (Harm, Fairness) from the average "binding foundation" score (Loyalty, Authority, Sanctity). Higher scores indicated more conservative patterns of moral judgment.

Self-enhancement measures

Separate questionnaires assessed public and private forms of self-enhancement (Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding; Paulhus, 1991), socially desirable responding (Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960), direct-comparison better-than-average effects (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989), indirect-comparison better-than-average effects (Hamamura et al., 2007), false-uniqueness effects (Hamamura et al., 2007), actual-ideal self-discrepancies (Pelham & Swann, 1989), and both family member and nation-level enhancement (Heine & Lehman, 1997).

Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR; Paulhus, 1991). Participants rated the extent to which 40 statements about the self were true. Each item consisted of unrealistically positive statements about the self that were unlikely to be true, thus higher scores indicate greater degrees of desirable responding bias. The BIDR assesses two components of desirable responding bias: self-deceptive enhancement (SDE) and impression management (IM). The SDE subscale reflects the extent to which participants privately believe unrealistically favorable self-assessments, and the IM subscale reflects the extent to which participants publicly report positive self-assessments to impress an audience. BIDR scores were computed using the continuous scoring method outlined by Paulhus (1994).

Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (MC-SDS; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). Participants indicated whether 33 self-descriptive statements consisting of positive but unlikely self-appraisals were true or false. The MC-SDS was scored by summing the total number of

times participants responded with "true", resulting in higher scores indicating greater socially desirability bias.

Direct social comparative judgments (direct better-than-average effect scale; Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989). Participants rated whether 20 traits and abilities[1] (polite, observant, cooperative, creative, imaginative, perceptive, reliable, intelligent, mature, friendly, insecure, uncivil, deceptive, maladjusted, gullible, unpleasant, mean, lazy, vain, spiteful) describe the participant more, less, or to the same degree as the average person along 5 point scales (-2 = Much less than the average person, +2 = Much more than the average person; negative trait items reverse scored prior to analysis).

Indirect social comparative judgments (Hamamura, Heine, & Takemoto, 2007). Individuals separately rated the extent to which 15 traits and values (competent; enjoy life in regards to recreation, work, and family; friendly; modest; persistent; responsible; value friendship; well-liked; affable; bold; caring; cheerful; competitive; easy-going; meticulous) described themselves, a fictitious, specific other person, and "most other people" along 7-point scales (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much). These separate sets of ratings allow for the assessment of indirect social comparisons to nonspecific others (i.e., the indirectly measured "better-than-average effect"), indirect social comparisons to a specific other (i.e., the "better-than-a-random-other effect"), and participants' tendencies to provide globally positive evaluations to all specific individuals (i.e., the "everyone-is-better-than-average" effect). The latter effect is not an indicator of self-enhancement and is not included in analyses.

[1] For some of the self-enhancement measures (direct and indirect social comparative judgments, false uniqueness, group member and nation-level enhancement), we also included items related to our other research areas for exploratory purposes (i.e., subjective well-being and moral foundations related items). Inclusion/exclusion of these traits in analyses did not alter the overall pattern of results. We have decided to report results for each measure using only the original trait/ability dimensions from the cited sources to maximize validity of the scores attributed to each scale and to facilitate future meta-analyses.

False uniqueness (Hamamura et al., 2007). Participants estimated the percentage of the population of the same age and gender that they were superior to across ten traits, including five independent traits (attractive, interesting, independent, confident, intelligent) and five interdependent traits (cooperative, loyal, considerate, hard-working, dependable), using 19-point scales ranging from the 5th to the 95th percentile. Scores on this measure indicate the extent to which participants rated themselves as above average (computed by subtracting 50 from each participant's mean score).

Actual vs. ideal self-discrepancies (Pelham & Swann, 1989). Participants first rated themselves on eight self-concept dimensions (intellectual ability, social competence, artistic ability, musical ability, athletic ability, physical attractiveness, leadership ability, common sense), and then rated where they would ideally like to fall on each dimension, on 19-point scales ranging from the 5th to 95th percentile, relative to their peers. Actual-ideal discrepancies were assessed by subtracting participants' ideal self-ratings from their actual reported ratings. Self-enhancement was operationalized as stronger correspondence between these ratings (i.e., smaller difference scores).

Family member enhancement (Heine & Hamamura, 1997). Participants were asked to write the initials of, and their relation to, a family member to whom they felt closest, and to indicate how close they felt to that person on a 10-point Likert scale. They next estimated the percentage of the population of the same age and gender that their family member was better than across the same ten traits as the False Uniqueness measure.

Nation-level enhancement. Participants rated the extent to which each of 10 traits and abilities (reliable, mature, driving ability, polite, sense of humor, insecure, uncivil, maladjusted, unpleasant, lazy) described the average American more than, less than, or to the same degree as

the average non-American, on 5-point scales (-2 = Much less than the average non-American, +2 = Much more than the average non-American; negative items reverse scored prior to analysis).

Results

We examined the pairwise correlation between each measure of political ideology and each measure of self-enhancement, and then examined these relationships after controlling for demographic characteristics. Effect sizes for each association are shown in Table 1. After controlling for demographic indicators, general conservatism significantly predicted a stronger self-enhancing response style on eight of ten self-enhancement measures ($.01 \leq r_{partial} \leq .40$), social conservatism significantly predicted seven of ten measures ($.00 \leq r_{partial} \leq .31$), economic conservatism significantly predicted seven of ten measures ($.06 \leq r_{partial} \leq .29$), and moral conservatism significantly predicted four of the six measures for which data were available ($-.06 \leq r_{partial} \leq .26$). In all cases, greater political conservatism predicted stronger self-enhancement.

Meta-analysis

We meta-analyzed the pairwise correlations and partial *r*-effects to calculate random and fixed effects for each ideology measure (Table 1). Meta-analysis revealed small but significant associations between self-enhancement and general political conservatism, social conservatism, economic conservatism, and moral conservatism, both before and after controlling for demographics (random effects: $.08 \leq r_{partial} \leq .16$; fixed effects: $.03 \leq r_{partial} \leq .10$).

Discussion

Eight studies including thousands of participants from two diverse populations revealed that political conservatism consistently predicted the tendency to evaluate oneself favorably. This phenomenon was found across multiple dimensions of political ideology and multiple components of self-enhancement. Relative to liberals, conservatives were more likely to endorse

favorable but unlikely self-evaluations, to provide socially desirable self-reports, to view themselves as better than average, unique, and ideal, and to rate family members and fellow countrymen as superior to others. Meta-analysis confirmed that self-enhancement was associated with general, social, economic, and moral dimensions of conservatism, above and beyond demographic variables known to predict self-enhancement.

One limitation of our findings is that we only analyzed Internet users from the United States. Although our results were consistent across two different populations and after statistically controlling for key demographic characteristics, but future research should investigate this phenomenon with nationally representative samples from multiple nations.

Our results contribute to a growing body of research linking specific dimensions of political ideology to motivational influences on social cognition (Adorno et al., 1950; Pratto et al., 1994; Jost et al., 2003; Graham et al., 2011; Hibbing et al., 2014). It is not yet clear if conservatives' stronger self-enhancement confers more advantages or disadvantages. Some researchers have argued that unrealistically positive self-views are adaptive for mental health (Taylor & Brown, 1988), while others have argued the opposite (Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995). Reviews of this protracted debate have found that the adaptiveness of self-enhancement is likely to vary as a function of context (Kurt & Paulhus, 2008; Kwan et al., 2011). In one recent paper highlighting the ambiguity of self-enhancement's benefits, conservatives' stronger self-deceptive enhancement appeared to explain their stronger life satisfaction judgments, but the adaptive value of this "ideological happiness gap" was questioned because conservatives did not appear happier in behavioral measures where self-enhancement effects were less likely to influence happiness expression (Wojcik et al., 2015a; 2015b). Certainly, it is too soon to portray our findings as flatly beneficial for either liberals or conservatives.

The correlational nature of the studies in our meta-analysis prohibits definitive conclusions about the causal direction of the association between self-enhancement and conservatism. Does possessing politically conservative views predispose one to view the self in an overly positive way, or are self-enhancers particularly drawn to politically conservative views? Either of these explanations seems plausible. Several studies offer some support for the latter interpretation, in that they have linked experimentally manipulated positive self-views with ideologically conservative policy preferences (e.g., Belmi & Neale, 2014; Loughnan et al., 2011; Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2015).

Research on self-enhancement has transformed social psychology's understanding of mental health (Taylor & Brown, 1988), social cognition (Dunning et al., 1989), and cultural psychology (Hamamura et al., 2007). Understanding self-enhancement's relationship with political ideology—above and beyond other known demographic predictors—may yield similar dividends for political psychology. Continued research into this area will reveal whether our political preferences fundamentally affect our views of our selves, or whether our political views are fundamentally motivated by how favorably we view our selves.

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Table 1.
Effect Sizes and Meta-Analysis of Political Ideology Variables Predicting Self-Enhancement

				Political Ideology							
				General Liberalism-Conservatism		Social Liberalism-Conservatism		Economic Liberalism-Conservatism		Moral Liberalism-Conservatism	
Sample	*N*	Self-Enhancement Scale	Subscale	Pairwise *r* (*p*)	Partial *r* (*p*)	Pairwise *r* (*p*)	Partial *r* (*p*)	Pairwise *r* (*p*)	Partial *r* (*p*)	Pairwise *r* (*p*)	Partial *r* (*p*)
YM	2,567	Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding	SDE	0.12 (<.001)	0.12 (<.001)	0.10 (<.001)	0.10 (<.001)	0.14 (<.001)	0.13 (<.001)	0.11 (<.001)	0.08 (<.001)
			IM	0.14 (<.001)	0.07 (.001)	0.16 (<.001)	0.09 (<.001)	0.09 (<.001)	0.06 (.013)	0.07 (.002)	-0.01 (.613)
YM	4,347	Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale	-	0.07 (<.001)	0.04 (.013)	0.06 (<.001)	0.03 (.076)	0.08 (<.001)	0.06 (.001)	0.01 (.583)	-0.06 (.006)
YM	4,959	Direct Social Comparisons	BAE	0.10 (<.001)	0.06 (<.001)	0.11 (<.001)	0.07 (<.001)	0.09 (<.001)	0.06 (<.001)	0.06 (<.001)	0.02 (.449)
MT	125	Indirect Social Comparisons	BAE	0.13 (.147)	0.1 (.275)	0.14 (.128)	0.11 (.222)	0.18 (.047)	0.15 (.111)	-	-
			BROE	0.05 (.579)	0.01 (.921)	0.04 (.695)	0.00 (.965)	0.09 (.312)	0.06 (.541)	-	-
MT	135	Actual-Ideal Self-Discrepancies	-	0.23 (.006)	0.24 (.007)	0.20 (.020)	0.20 (.022)	0.12 (.166)	0.12 (.187)	-	-
YM	292	False Uniqueness Effect	-	0.16 (.005)	0.40 (.001)	0.09 (.134)	0.25 (.056)	0.15 (.016)	0.29 (.025)	0.18 (.001)	0.1 (<.001)
MT	138	Family Member Enhancement	-	0.26 (.003)	0.20 (.018)	0.26 (.002)	0.21 (.015)	0.26 (.002)	0.25 (.004)	-	-
YM	439	Nation-Level Enhancement	-	0.26 (<.001)	0.24 (<.001)	0.32 (<.001)	0.31 (<.001)	0.21 (<.001)	0.17 (.001)	0.32 (<.001)	0.26 (<.001)
				Meta-Analyzed *r*-Effect Sizes							
				General Liberalism-Conservatism		Social Liberalism-Conservatism		Economic Liberalism-Conservatism		Moral Liberalism-Conservatism	
				Pairwise	Regression	Pairwise	Regression	Pairwise	Partial *r*	Pairwise	Partial *r*
Random effects *r*				0.13	0.16	0.13	0.13	0.12	0.12	0.13	0.08
95% CI				[.092, .175]	[.087, .221]	[.083, 184]	[.073, .188]	[.086, .155]	[.063, .181]	[.048, .207]	[-.005, .163]
p				< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	0.065
Fixed effects *r*				0.10	0.09	0.10	0.08	0.10	0.07	0.07	0.03
95% CI				[.086, .120]	[.066, .104]	[.083, .184]	.058, .096]	[.086, .122]	[.048, .086]	[.055, .094]	[.006, .053]
p				< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	0.014

Note: Each partial *r*-effect was dertived from a separate regression equation with the political ideology variable predicting the self-enhancement measure, controlling for available demographics. Moral liberalism-conservatism data were only available for studies conducted at YourMorals.org. Meta-analyses included one subscale per scale (SDE for BIDR, BROE for Indirect Social Comparisons).
YM = YourMorals.org, MT = MTurk, SDE = Self-Deceptive Enhancement, IM = Impression Management, BAE = Better than Average Effect, BROE = Better than Random Other Effect.