

## **Overconfidence in Radical Politics**

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### **Overconfidence in Radical Politics**

In the past decade, radical political movements have done well electorally. Populist movements have gained significant levels of public support in many EU countries including Italy, France, Hungary, Poland, Denmark, the Netherlands, and the UK. Also across many Latin American countries – including Brazil, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua – political movements that are populist, nationalist, or extremist can rely on substantial levels of public support. This global momentum of radical political movements appears to be taking place at both the left and the right. For instance, not too long ago it would be considered unthinkable in the US that the radical right-wing (e.g., anti-immigrant) rhetoric of Donald Trump could get him elected President; but also, it would be considered unthinkable that a congress member who publicly proclaims to be a “Democratic Socialist” (i.e., Bernie Sanders) could be a serious contender for the Democratic party’s presidential nomination. The present chapter seeks to contribute to understanding the psychological appeal of relatively radical political movements among the public.

Although many different radical political movements exist around the world, here I define radical political beliefs in terms of political extremism and/or populism. Political extremism can take place at both the left and the right, and is defined as the extent to which regular citizens are polarized into, and strongly identify with, generic left- or right-wing ideological outlooks on society (Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019). Populism refers to a political mentality that construes society as an ongoing struggle between the “corrupt elites” versus the “noble people”. It more specifically consists of various underlying dimensions such as anti-elitism (i.e., the belief that societal elites are corrupt), anti-pluralism (i.e., the belief that only populist viewpoints reflect the true “will of the people”, and that other viewpoints should hence not be tolerated), and people-centrism (i.e., the belief that the “will of the people” should be the leading principle in political decision-making) (e.g., Bergmann, 2018;

Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2016; Müller, 2016; Van Prooijen, 2018; see also Kreko; Marcus, this volume).

Political extremism and populism do not necessarily converge: While political extremism by definition occurs at the extreme left or right, populism can occur across the entire political spectrum—the left, the right, and the center (see also Petersen et al., this volume). Various politicians are ideologically not at the edges of the political spectrum yet articulate rhetoric consistent with populist leadership (e.g., Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, and Boris Johnson in the UK, who both are center-right but not far-right). At the same time, on average populist sentiments tend to be higher among supporters of politically extreme parties at both the left and right (Akkermans, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014; Rooduijn, Van der Brug, & De Lange, 2016; Schumacher & Rooduijn, 2013). Furthermore, anti-elitist beliefs tend to be high at both the left- and right-extreme as reflected in institutional distrust (Inglehart, 1987; Kutiyiski, Krouwel, & Van Prooijen, 2020) and belief in conspiracy theories (Imhoff, 2015; Krouwel, Kutiyiski, Van Prooijen, Martinsson, & Markstedt, 2017; Van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Pollet, 2015). Here, I focus on the converging elements of political extremism and populism, and therefore use the overarching term radical political ideologies.

What explains the appeal of radical political ideologies? Various theoretical perspectives suggest that radical political ideologies help people cope with distress, by offering them a sense of meaning and purpose through a set of strong and clear-cut convictions about the world (e.g., Kruglanski et al., 2014; McGregor, Prentice, & Nash, 2013; Van den Bos, 2018; see also Bar-Tal & Magal; Kruglanski et al., this volume). Central in these psychological mechanisms is the assumption that people endorse radical ideological beliefs with high levels of confidence. But to what extent is this assumption supported by evidence? The present chapter will examine the role of belief confidence in radical politics by pursuing two specific goals. As a first goal, the chapter is designed to illuminate the

psychological processes that connect radical political ideologies to belief confidence. In doing so, the chapter will also review empirical evidence that radical political beliefs indeed are associated with increased belief confidence.

As a second goal, the chapter will examine how warranted or unwarranted such high belief confidence is among people with radical political ideologies. Across judgment domains, people sometimes experience high confidence that is grounded in actual knowledge or expertise. When a psychology professor teaches an introductory psychology class to undergraduate students, s/he likely feels confident about the contents of the course due to years of extensive study, research, and experience. Likewise, in the political domain, party elites with high levels of political sophistication (“ideologues”) hold their political beliefs with high confidence (Converse, 1964; see also Zaller, 1994). And while ideologues of different parties may fundamentally disagree about policy issues, it might be expected that independent of party affiliation, ideologues can articulate a relatively sophisticated argument to defend their beliefs. Belief confidence among people with radical political ideologies hence may be justified, in that it is rooted in actual understanding or knowledge of a particular judgment domain.

An alternative possibility, however, is that people with radical political ideologies are confident about their beliefs because they overestimate their actual understanding or knowledge of a particular judgment domain. Research suggests that large discrepancies between self-ascribed and actual knowledge or understanding may exist in people. For instance, feelings of belief superiority are associated with a large gap between self-perceived and actual knowledge (Hall & Raimi, 2018). Furthermore, particularly people who are incompetent lack the metacognitive ability to realize their incompetence, leading them to overestimate their own competence (Kruger & Dunning, 1999; see also Krueger & Gruening, this volume). Put differently, belief confidence may also reflect *overconfidence*. In the second

part of the chapter, I will review recent studies assessing whether the belief confidence that is associated with radical political ideologies reflects justified confidence, or rather, overconfidence.

### **Radical Political Ideologies and Belief Confidence**

Various theoretical perspectives highlight feelings of distress as a root cause of radical ideological beliefs (see also Ditto & Rodriguez, this volume). One important framework to explain radicalization is significance quest theory (Kruglanski et al., 2014; this volume). This theory has emphasized that radical ideologies are grounded in a quest for significance – a desire to matter and be respected, in the eyes of oneself or important others. While in everyday life people may acquire a sense of significance through a multitude of sources (including, but not limited to, family, friends, work, and meaningful goals), sometimes people may experience grievances such as humiliation, fear, or insecurities, that cause feelings of significance loss. If this happens, people can become focally committed to a range of specific ideological goals, which they pursue with high levels of confidence. As such, radical ideologies help people regain a sense of significance through the feeling that they matter by passionately pursuing a range of meaningful ideological goals.

While significant quest theory was primarily designed to understand violent extremism (Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, & Orehek, 2009), its underlying processes also appear to be relevant for understanding regular citizens' adherence to radical political movements (Webber et al., 2018; see also Van Prooijen & Kuijper, 2020). Meanwhile, also other theoretical frameworks highlight feelings of distress as a root cause of radical political beliefs. For instance, it has been argued that feelings of anxiety and uncertainty stimulate compensatory conviction, meaning that distressed feelings in one life domain increases people's conviction in other (usually ideological) judgment domains (McGregor, Prentice, & Nash, 2013; see also Hogg & Goetsche-Astrup, this volume). Furthermore, other perspectives

have focused on feelings of unfairness as driver of ideological radicalization. One key moderator of this relationship, however, is uncertainty. Specifically, unfairness increases radicalization particularly in anxious or uncertain circumstances, suggesting that radical ideological beliefs help people cope with such aversive feelings, presumably by offering a sense of certainty (Van den Bos, 2018).

Various lines of research support a link between radical political beliefs and distress. A meta-analysis of mortality salience effects on political ideology reveals that reminding people of their own mortality may yield shifts to the political right, as well as shifts to both the left and right extremes (Burke, Kosloff, & Landau, 2013). Many of the right-wing shifts in this research domain are susceptible to alternative explanations, however, notably increased nationalism: Most mortality salience studies revealing exclusively right-wing shifts were conducted in the US during the aftermath of 9/11, increasing citizens' tendency to "rally around the flag" and support their conservative president (Crawford, 2017; see also Huddy & Del Ponte, this volume). Furthermore, feelings of distress increase people's preference for radical leaders (Hogg, Meehan, & Farquharson, 2010), and the fear that own or collective well-being is compromised by social or economic developments is higher at both the left- and right-extremes than in the political center (Van Prooijen, Krouwel, Boiten, & Eendebak, 2015). Finally, both the left- and right- extremes experience increased threat by political opponents, leading them to use more emotional and angry language (Frimer, Brandt, Melton, & Motyl, 2018). In sum, empirical research supports the notion that radical political ideologies are associated with feelings of distress (Kruglanski et al., 2014; McGregor et al., 2013; Van den Bos, 2018; Marcus, this volume).

### ***The Role of Epistemic Clarity***

One core assumption of these perspectives is that feelings of distress prompt a desire for epistemic clarity, that is, the experience of having a meaningful understanding of the

world (see also Fiedler, this volume). Radical political movements offer such epistemic clarity through a set of straightforward and simple assumptions about society (Greenberg & Jonas, 2003). Put differently, radical movements tend to oversimplify complex societal problems and processes, which provides perceivers with the feeling that they have a solid understanding of the causes and necessary interventions to address these issues. This notion is important for the present arguments, as increased epistemic clarity is likely related to belief confidence: People will feel more confident about their beliefs to the extent that they subjectively experience more understanding of the assumptions underlying those beliefs (Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019). Radical political ideologies hence may predict decreased cognitive complexity in various domains, including reasoning about politics, solutions for complex problems, and perceptions of social life.

A classic study on these issues content-analyzed speeches about slavery of 19<sup>th</sup> century politicians shortly before the US civil war (Tetlock, Armor, & Peterson, 1994). The results indicated that integrative complexity was lower among politicians who strongly favored or opposed slavery than among politicians who were more oriented towards compromising about the issue. This study is interesting because it underscores that reduced integrative complexity does not have to imply moral inferiority—indeed, articulating some moral truths (e.g., about the wrongness of oppression and inequality) requires little complexity. Likewise, not all movements that are, or have been, considered politically radical—according to scientific definitions or public opinion—are necessarily destructive to society, and indeed may change society for the better (e.g., various human rights movements). Of relevance for the present purposes, however, the study by Tetlock and colleagues indicates that politicians who take a relatively extreme position in a political debate articulate less complicated arguments than politicians who take a relatively centrist position.

Recent studies yielded results consistent with these findings. In a Dutch survey about

the 2016 EU refugee crisis, participants indicated to what extent they supported an inclusionary solution to this crisis (i.e., provide shelter to all refugees) or an exclusionary one (i.e., refuse all refugees at the border) (Van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Emmer, 2018).

Unsurprisingly, participants supported the inclusionary solution more to the extent that they were more strongly left-wing, and they supported the exclusionary solution more to the extent they were more strongly right-wing. Of interest for the present purposes, however, were their responses to a third question, assessing to what extent they believed that the solution to the EU refugee crisis was actually quite simple. The results revealed a symmetric U-shape on this item, indicating that participants at both the left and right-extremes perceived the solution to this crisis as more simple than political moderates. Apparently, the left and right extremes in the Netherlands endorsed diametrically different solutions for the refugee crisis, yet they converged in a belief that there were simple solutions for this complex geopolitical problem.

Such decreased cognitive complexity may reflect more generally simplistic ideas about political or societal reality. In two Dutch nationally representative samples, both political extremes – at both the left and right – again endorsed more simple solutions for complex problems. Such belief in simple solutions mediated the links of both left- and right-wing extremism with belief in conspiracy theories, however (Van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Pollet, 2015; see also Kreko, this volume). The finding that both the left and right extremes are more susceptible to conspiracy theories than political moderates has been replicated in various other EU countries with a multiparty system, where both radical left- and right-wing parties have received considerable support in recent years (i.e., Sweden, Krouwel et al., 2017; and Germany, Imhoff, 2015). Furthermore, populist attitudes predict increased belief in conspiracy theories (Silva, Vegetti, & Littvay, 2017), a finding that has been replicated in 13 EU countries (Van Prooijen et al., 2020). Finally, qualitative content analyses reveal that conspiracy theories are common in the documentation and speeches of extremist (and



sometimes violent) fringe groups, independent of ideological orientation (i.e., left-wing extremist, right-wing extremist, religious fundamentalist, and other; Bartlett & Miller, 2010).

Besides decreased cognitive complexity and a relatively simplistic construal of political policy, the entire political and social domain appears simpler to the political extremes as opposed to moderates (Lammers, Koch, Conway, & Brandt, 2017). Participants were asked to categorize political and societal stimuli (e.g., politicians; societal groups) on a computer screen, spatially grouping similar stimuli and separating distinct stimuli. In this task, the left and right extremes produced more dense clusters – grouping stimuli judged as similar closer together, and stimuli judged as distinct further apart – than moderates. Complementary studies revealed that the political extremes perceive social categorizations as more homogeneous, as for instance reflected in judgmental probabilities overestimating support for election winners in Red vs. Blue states, and higher perceived likelihoods that people with the same political ideology also share other preferences (e.g., for movies, books, newspapers, and so on; Lammers et al., 2017). In sum, the political extremes perceive the social and political world in more clear-cut and sharply defined categories than moderates do.

Such a relatively simple perception of the social and political world also has implications for stereotyping, which are homogeneous – and oversimplified – perceptions of social groups. Traditional theoretical perspectives have assumed that particularly the political right is prone to stereotyping, due to common research findings that the political right is more prejudiced of ethnic minority groups than the political left (e.g., Sears & Henry, 2003). Accumulating research suggests that the link between stereotyping and political ideology is more complex than previously assumed, however: People can form stereotypes and experience prejudice about any social group, not just ethnic minorities. According to the Ideological Conflict-Hypothesis, people across the political spectrum hold negative attitudes about groups of people that have different values than their own. Consistent with this idea, the

political left and right are both prejudiced: The political left has relatively high levels of prejudice about groups commonly assumed to be right-wing (e.g., Christian fundamentalist, business people, the military, anti-abortionists), and the political right has relatively high levels of prejudice about groups commonly assumed to be left-wing (e.g., ethnic and sexual minorities, environmentalists, feminists; for an overview, see Brandt, Reyna, Chambers, Crawford, & Wetherell, 2014).

While research on the ideological conflict hypothesis only draws a comparison between the political left versus right, one study examining differences between the political extremes versus moderates included a measure of derogation of societal groups. Participants specifically rated for a range of societal groups (e.g., police officers, politicians, millionaires, Muslims, scientists, and so on) dichotomously if they believed that the group made a positive or negative contribution to society. Both the left and right extremes listed more groups as making a negative contribution to society than moderates (Van Prooijen, Krouwel, Boiten, & Eendebak, 2015). Furthermore, a recent study investigated the link between populist attitudes and xenophobia across 13 countries, and found that higher populist attitudes predicted stronger xenophobic sentiments. Importantly, these effects emerged also after controlling for (right-wing) political orientation, suggesting that across the political spectrum people high in populist attitudes are more xenophobic than people low in populist attitudes (Van Prooijen et al., 2020; see also Forgas & Lantos; and Golec de Zavala et al.; this volume).

In sum, these findings support the idea that radical political beliefs are associated with epistemic clarity, that is, a clear-cut and straightforward perception of the social and political world. Such increased epistemic clarity among political radicals is manifested in decreased cognitive complexity, increased belief in simple solutions to complex problems, increased belief in conspiracy theories, a tendency to mentally classify political and societal stimuli in clear and sharply defined categories, and increased stereotyping and prejudice.

***Belief confidence***

Belief confidence is a natural implication of epistemic clarity. It stands to reason that when one sees the world as relatively simple and straightforward, people hold their beliefs about the world with high confidence (Van Prooijen et al., 2018). Yet, research findings on epistemic clarity provide indirect evidence at best for a relationship between radical political ideologies and belief confidence. Here, I review empirical studies that have more directly investigated this relationship.

In a direct test of these issues, US participants rated a range of contentious issues in the US political debate (e.g., affirmative action; abortion; illegal immigration). Besides indicating their attitudes about these issues, however, participants also rated their feelings of belief superiority, operationalized as the belief that one's own viewpoint is objectively more correct than other viewpoints. Results revealed curvilinear effects on each of these issues (as well as on the aggregated belief superiority score), indicating that both the left and right extremes considered their political beliefs about these issues as superior than moderates (Toner, Leary, Asher, & Jongman-Sereno, 2013). Other studies found a similar curvilinear pattern on dogmatic intolerance, defined as the tendency to reject, and consider as inferior, any belief that differs from one's own (Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2017; see also Rollwage, Dolan, & Fleming, 2018; Van Prooijen & Kuijper, 2020).

One implication of such belief confidence is belief stability: Attitudes held with high confidence are less likely to change over time than attitudes held with low confidence (Howe & Krosnick, 2017). Hence, extreme political beliefs can be expected to be more stable over time than moderate political beliefs. Two cross-sectional studies found that self-reported stability of political beliefs was higher among participants at the political extremes than among participants at the political center. A third study, then, longitudinally assessed participants' political ideology during a political election, with three measurement points (i.e.,

6 weeks before the election, 4 weeks before the election, and three days after the election). Results revealed that political extremism predicted lower standard deviations of political ideology over time, suggesting higher temporal stability. Moreover, this effect was particularly pronounced in the comparison of ideology measures before versus after the election, suggesting that the heavy campaigning shortly before an election changes political attitudes particularly among moderates, and less so among extremists (Zwicker, Van Prooijen, & Krouwel, in press).

The findings discussed here so far suggest that the political extremes have higher belief confidence specifically in the political domain. Complementary findings suggest, however, that political extremism is associated with increased judgmental confidence more generally. In a series of studies, participants responded to a range of non-political estimation tasks for which experimenter-generated anchor values were provided. The studies varied whether or not participants received a low or high anchor value (e.g., “The distance from San Francisco to New York city is longer than 1500 miles / shorter than 6000 miles; how far do you think it is?”). Besides replicating a standard anchoring effect (with high anchors leading to higher estimates than low anchors), the results revealed a political extremism effect: Politically extreme participants made estimates further away from the experimenter-generated anchors than politically moderate participants. These findings are consistent with the idea that political extremists have relatively high judgmental confidence, in that they are more likely than moderates to reject other people’s estimates and form their own independent judgments. Indeed, in one of the studies these findings were mediated by belief superiority (Brandt, Evans, & Crawford, 2015). In sum, radical political ideologies are associated with relatively high levels of judgmental confidence, both in political and non-political judgment domains.

### **Warranted confidence or overconfidence?**

After establishing the relationship between radical political beliefs and judgmental

confidence, a next question is how warranted or unwarranted such high confidence is.

Confidence can be rooted in actual knowledge or expertise, and people may consider their own beliefs superior than others because they actually do know better. University trained and formally accredited medical doctors are likely to consider their own understanding of the human body as superior than that of new-age spiritual healers, and rightfully so. In contrast, high confidence may also reflect overconfidence: People may consider their skills or beliefs superior than others because they overestimate their actual knowledge or abilities. Narcissists often believe to be highly effective leaders, yet such presumed effectiveness is not visible in observer ratings of narcissist leaders (Grijalva, Harms, Newman, Gaddis, & Fraley, 2015). Both warranted and unwarranted judgmental confidence appears to be common (Kruger & Dunning, 1999; see also Hall & Raimi, 2018). How warranted or unwarranted is the high level of judgments confidence that political radicals display?

The previous sections have emphasized that the high levels of confidence associated with radical political beliefs is rooted in a desire for epistemic clarity, leading people to mentally oversimplify reality. These oversimplifications, then, provide perceivers with the subjective experience of accurate understanding, increasing judgmental confidence. Given the actual complexities of political and social life, however, it is likely that such oversimplifications particularly stimulate *over*confidence. Actual knowledge or expertise is more likely associated with an appreciation of the complexities of reality instead of with a tendency to oversimplify it (see also Kruger & Gruning, this volume). To establish such overconfidence in radical political beliefs, it is necessary for studies to combine measures of judgmental confidence with actual knowledge tests, or measures testing participants' belief in highly implausible epistemic claims.

### ***Evidence for overconfidence in radical politics***

The previously discussed study on the 2016 EU refugee crisis – showing that the

political left and right extremes shared a belief that the solution to this geopolitical crisis is simple – also contained measures of their factual knowledge of the refugee crisis, and their judgmental confidence (Van Prooijen et al., 2018). Specifically, participants rated 10 statements about the refugee crisis as either “true” or “false”. Moreover, after each factual knowledge statement, participants indicated on a 5-point scale how certain they were of their answer, yielding a 10-item measure of judgmental certainty. Results revealed no linear or quadratic relationships between political ideology and factual knowledge; hence, there were no differences in factual knowledge about the refugee crisis between the political left versus right, or between the political extremes versus moderates. A subsequent analysis, then, analyzed judgmental certainty while statistically controlling for factual knowledge. This analysis showed a symmetric U-shape, indicating more judgmental certainty among left- and right-wing extremists as opposed to moderates. Put differently, participants at the political extremes were overconfident in their knowledge of the EU refugee crisis: As compared with moderates they had increased confidence in their judgments, yet those judgments were not more likely to be factually accurate. Furthermore, these findings were mediated by belief in simple solutions for the refugee crisis, supporting the assumption that extremists’ judgmental overconfidence is rooted in increased epistemic clarity.

A study conducted in a different political context yielded even more straightforward evidence for overconfidence in radical politics. This study raised the question how overconfidence would predict anti-establishment voting in the context of a Dutch referendum about an EU treaty with Ukraine. Anti-establishment sentiments and voting are core elements of populism (e.g., Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2016; Müller, 2016), and this particular referendum had a clear pro- versus anti-establishment voting option. Specifically, anti-establishment parties at both the Dutch political left and right uniformly campaigned against the treaty, appealing to widespread Euro-skeptic sentiments among the public; all other parties

uniformly campaigned in favor of the treaty. Empirical findings underscore that anti-establishment sentiments were much higher among citizens who voted against the treaty than among citizens who voted in favor of the treaty (Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2020).

In a first wave (six weeks before the referendum), a questionnaire included measures of self-perceived understanding of the treaty, assessing how qualified and well-informed to judge the treaty citizens considered themselves to be. After the measure of self-perceived understanding (and with no option of backtracking), participants completed a factual knowledge test of the treaty and the referendum, including a “true”, “false”, and “do not know” response format. Finally, the questionnaire included a general overclaiming measure that assessed participants’ familiarity with 25 persons, objects, ideas, or places. But while 17 of these terms were existing stimuli (e.g., “Houdini”; “Bay of Pigs”), 8 terms were “foils” of non-existing stimuli (e.g., “Queen Shattuck”; cf. Paulhus, Harms, Bruce, & Lysy, 2003). Hence, this measure assessed general overclaiming, operationalized as the extent to which people recognize stimuli that they actually see for the first time. A second wave, shortly after the referendum, included the question what participants had voted.

What predicted an anti-establishment vote in this context? Logistic regression analyses revealed that *increased* self-perceived understanding of the treaty predicted an increased likelihood of voting against the establishment; in addition, however, *decreased* factual knowledge of the treaty, and *increased* general overclaiming, also predicted an increased likelihood of an anti-establishment vote. Put differently, judgmental overconfidence – operationalized as both domain-specific and generalized knowledge overclaiming – predicted anti-establishment voting six weeks later. Moreover, a separate analysis focused on how often participants answered the factual knowledge questions with “do not know”. After statistically controlling for their factual knowledge, judgmental confidence (i.e., a decreased number of “do not know” responses) also predicted an anti-establishment vote. Finally, an analysis of

political ideology revealed that although overconfidence occurred at both extremes, it was particularly pronounced at the extreme right (Van Prooijen & Krouwel 2020).

The findings in the context of the EU refugee crisis (Van Prooijen et al., 2018) and the EU treaty with Ukraine (Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2020) both reveal that the gap between confidence in knowledge or understanding, versus actual knowledge, is particularly wide among citizens with radical political beliefs. A different way of showing overconfidence in radical politics, however, would be to relate measures of confidence with increased belief in implausible epistemic claims. A recent set of studies investigated the relationship between populist attitudes and credulity in general, and results supported the notion of “populist gullibility”: An increased tendency for people high in populist attitudes to accept any epistemic claim that is compatible with their worldview as true, independent of its plausibility (Van Prooijen et al., 2020). More specifically, populist attitudes positively predicted increased conspiracy beliefs, increased credulity of politically neutral news items, increased acceptance of nonsense statements (i.e., “Bullshit receptivity”; Pennycook, Cheyne, Barr, Koehler, & Fugelsang, 2015), and increased paranormal beliefs. Of importance for the present discussion, these findings were mediated by participants’ faith in their own intuition. Apparently, populist attitudes are associated with relatively high trust in one’s own hunches, which in turn predicts a tendency to uncritically accept a wide range of implausible epistemic claims as true. Taken together, these studies support the idea that the high levels of judgmental confidence associated with radical political beliefs reflect overconfidence, and not warranted confidence.

### ***A qualification and rejoinder***

The conclusion that radical political beliefs are rooted in overconfidence contains a paradox: People with highly polarized political beliefs consider these beliefs important (Kruglanski et al., 2014; Van Prooijen & Kuijper, 2020), and are therefore likely interested in news related to politics. Moreover, political extremism predicts increased ideological



constraint, that is, a consistency between one's general identification on a political left-to-right dimension and their support for specific policy proposals (Federico & Hunt, 2013). It is therefore likely that political extremism is associated with excessive political news consumption, and hence, it would be reasonable to assume that this increases their understanding and knowledge of political issues.

Empirical findings offer some support for this idea. In various surveys political extremism was associated with increased political sophistication, operationalized as participants' factual knowledge about politics. Moreover, political sophistication and political extremism were associated with an increased interest in politics, and an increased tendency to scan print media to gain information about political issues (Sidanius, 1988; see also Sidanius & Lau, 1989). At first blush, these findings appear inconsistent with the notion that the increased confidence among political extremists is actually overconfidence. How may these findings be reconciled with the arguments of the present chapter?

It is important to keep in mind that the findings suggesting political sophistication among political extremists were based on survey results from the 1980s (Sidanius, 1988; Sidanius & Lau, 1989), a time where citizens necessarily had to rely mostly on mainstream news channels for acquiring information about politics. Society, and the way that people consume news, has changed dramatically in the meantime. Alternative online news sites proliferate, and it is easier than ever before to find information that support one's own political values. This is relevant for the present discussion, as political extremists tend to trust information only if provided by their own political ingroup (Hardin, 2002). Correspondingly, the more politically extreme people are, the more likely it is that they acquire news from the Internet instead of (or as a supplement to) mainstream news sources (Nie, Miller, Golde, Butler, & Winneg, 2010). Social media analyses also suggest that people online are exposed to both information and misinformation that support their already existing political beliefs

(Del Vicario et al., 2016). Finally, it is quite possible that even mainstream news channels have grown more partisan over the years (e.g., Fox News).

This would suggest that the information overload of modern society provides fertile soil for polarized political beliefs through the confirmation bias: Citizens selectively expose themselves to information that validates their existing political beliefs, which polarizes – and increases confidence in – those beliefs. While in the 1980s citizens interested in politics necessarily were exposed to multiple perspectives—stimulating warranted confidence in one’s political beliefs—the current digital society enables people to bolster their political views through a one-sided stream of information. One implication of this line of reasoning is that in modern society, radical political beliefs are related not necessarily with a *lack* of information, but instead, with exposure to *misinformation* that is either inaccurate or incomplete. This implication needs to be tested in future research.

### **Concluding remarks**

Radical political currents that are extremist, populist, or both, have gained significant electoral momentum in many countries around the world. While some of these movements contribute positively to social change (Tetlock et al., 1994), others pose a liability to well-being and progress through conspiracy theories, science denialism, protectionism, and exclusion of vulnerable groups. The widespread support for radical movements therefore has posed important questions for political scientists and psychologists, which include identifying the causes and correlates of radical political beliefs. The present chapter sought to contribute to these issues by highlighting that radical political ideologies are associated with belief confidence. Moreover, this belief confidence often actually is overconfidence, as it is rooted in a relatively simplistic construal of the complexities of societal problems. While this insight contributes to understanding the psychology of radical political beliefs, it also underscores the difficulties of implementing meaningful interventions designed to depolarize the political

debate. Attitudes held with high confidence are relatively resilient to change (Howe & Krosnick, 2017), and information overload through Internet and social media provides unique opportunities for citizens to validate their views through a one-sided assessment of relevant information. Reducing radical political beliefs hence may require a transformation from overconfident to well-informed citizens, which could be quite a challenge in practice.

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