Political Extremism

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Political ideology is an important part of people's values and identity. It involves people's beliefs of how society should be governed, their moral sense of right and wrong, and it provides an interpretational framework to understand past and present societal events. Political ideology hence informs people how to cope with the challenges of our time, including climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic, immigration, globalization, terrorism, international conflict, and so on. While people may have specific ideological beliefs on any of these issues, quite commonly they also have a more general political orientation that can be classified somewhere on a dimension ranging from the political "left" to the political "right". Several other salient dimensions of the political mindset have been identified, most crucially a moral, non-economic dimension juxtaposing progressive attitudes versus conservative attitudes (Krouwel 2012). These different orientations are associated not only with specific policy preferences but also with a different underlying psychology. For instance, a core focus of political psychologists has been to examine how people at the left and right may differ in their cognitive style, revealing relationships of political orientation with for instance authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, dogmatism, and xenophobia (e.g., Jost, 2017).

Political orientation is just one aspect of political ideology, however, as it specifically addresses ideological *content*; we propose that ideological *strength* also matters for a range of important variables (Greenberg & Jonas, 2013; Hoffer, 1951; Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019). Some people may be relatively centrist, or lean slightly towards the left or right, both generally and in relation to specific policy issues. For instance, some people may doubt how to best address the problem of climate change, and such political moderates for instance struggle with the question how to balance efforts to reduce climate change with other, potentially conflicting concerns (e.g., perceived threats to the economy). Other people may be more outspoken about these issues, however, and take either a passionate position in favor of

combating climate change at any cost, or a passionate denial that climate change is even real (see Geiger & Swim, this Volume). Put differently, people differ in how politically extreme they are, both in general (i.e., the extreme left versus the extreme right) as well as in their ideological beliefs about specific societal or political issues.

A working definition of political extremism is the extent to which citizens polarize into, and strongly identify with, generic left- or right-wing (or other) ideological outlooks on society, or in their position regarding more specific policy issues (Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019). This definition conceptualizes political extremism in broader terms than underground radical groups that regularly break the law, and even commit violence in service of their political goals—instead, it predominantly focuses on regular citizens that ideologically are at the fringes of the political spectrum. We hence conceptualize political extremism in a relative sense, as compared with the general political culture in a given community. For instance, according to this definition, both left-wing socialist parties in the EU (e.g., "Podemos" in Spain; "Syriza" in Greece; the "Socialist party" in the Netherlands; "die Linke" in Germany) and anti-immigration parties at the right (e.g., "Front Nationale" in France; "Vlaams Belang" in Belgium; "PVV" in teh Netherlands; "AfD" in Germany) are more extreme and radical than moderate left-wing parties (e.g., Social-Democrats) or moderate right-wing parties (e.g., Christian Democrats).

While the extreme left and right may endorse different societal and economic goals, it is likely that they do share a range of psychological similarities. We propose that while valuing order and tradition (on the political right), or valuing inclusiveness and diversity (on the political left), certainly may satisfy a unique set of psychological needs (cf. Jost, 2017), so does having a strong ideological conviction independent of its content (see also Skitka, 2010). Hence, while we do not deny psychological differences between people at the political left versus right (or the left versus right extreme), the political extremes at both sides of the

spectrum also share a number of important similarities that distinguish them from political moderates. The current chapter is designed to illuminate some of these similarities. We first clarify how extreme political beliefs enable people to cope with feelings of distress by providing them with epistemic clarity. We then argue that political extremism, although sometimes a driver of important social change, often is a problem for societies. We specifically examine its relationship with overconfidence, unfounded beliefs, and intolerance.

The Role of Distress

The basis of our argument is that feelings of distress contribute to a mindset that prefers a straightforward and unambiguous understanding of the social and political world. Embracing extreme political attitudes contributes to such epistemic clarity, as strong and passionate beliefs about political issues offer a clear demarcation between right and wrong, and leave relatively little room for ambiguity (e.g., Greenberg & Jonas, 2003; Kruglanski, Pierro, Manneti, & De Grada, 2006; Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019). For instance, once experiencing distress citizens may become more susceptible to the (often) clear yet arguably simplistic one-liners of extreme leaders.

This line of reasoning is consistent with prominent theoretical perspectives on the psychology of political extremism. Significance quest theory proposes that extremist ideologies are rooted in people's *need for significance*, that is, a desire to matter and be respected towards oneself or important others (Kruglanski et al., 2014). This relationship becomes apparent particularly when people experience distress, in the form of significance loss through humiliation, injustice, feelings of relative deprivation, or other negative life experiences. In such situations, people try to regain a sense of significance through focal goal commitment, which involves a passionate pursuit of ideological goals that they perceive as meaningful. While originally designed as a theory to explain violent extremism, empirical

findings suggest that significance quest theory is also relevant to understand political

extremism among regular citizens (Van Prooijen & Kuijper, 2020; Webber et al., 2018).

Other theoretical perspectives have examined subjective uncertainty as predictor of

political extremism. Paradoxically, uncertainty about one life domain increases people's

certainty in other domains, usually their ideological beliefs – a process referred to as

compensatory conviction (McGregor et al., 2013; see also Van den Bos, 2018). While the

exact assumed underlying processes may differ across these various theoretical perspectives,

the broader overarching assumption that they all share is that feelings of distress (in the form

of significance loss, or subjective uncertainty) increases extreme ideological beliefs.

The key to this process is *subjective* feelings of distress, and not necessarily objective

life circumstances. Challenging the common truism that "harsh times produce harsh

attitudes", radical political parties can do well not only during economic recessions but also

during times of prosperity; moreover, voters of right-wing populist parties are not necessarily

poorer – and depending on the specific country investigated, are sometimes even richer – than

average in a given population (Mols & Jetten, 2017). While this "Wealth paradox" at first

blush appears inconsistent with our argument, a closer look reveals that also these findings are

grounded in subjective feelings of distress. Sometimes, economic prosperity can install

anxiety particularly among affluent people that their status and wealth might deteriorate in the

future, which inspires relatively radical beliefs about perceived threats to their well-being

(e.g., immigrants) (cf. Currie & Krouwel, submitted). Political extremism is not exclusive to

people that need to cope with detrimental life circumstances, as also wealthy people may

experience their own specific forms of distress.

In sum, our theoretical argument consists of two parts: (1) feelings of distress predict

political extremism, and (2) extreme ideologies are more likely than moderate ideologies to

satisfy a need for epistemic clarity. We will now discuss empirical evidence for both of these

propositions. As to the first proposition, one large-scale study in the Netherlands (over 5000 respondents) measured participants' socio-economic fear, defined as fear that the well-being of oneself or one's group will be compromised by ongoing political and societal developments (example items are "I frequently worry about the future of the Netherlands", and "I am afraid that there will be major food shortages in the near future, which may threaten our existence"). The data showed a clear U-shaped relationship with political ideology: Both the left and the right extreme experienced stronger socio-economic fear than political moderates (Van Prooijen, Krouwel, Boiten, & Eendebak, 2015). Also, other negative emotions appear more common among the political extremes: Both the left and right extremes use more angry language, as evidenced in analyses of online tweets, published materials of radical organizations, speeches of politicians, and media news articles (Frimer, Brandt, Melton, & Motyl, 2019).

While these findings are correlational, accumulating research underscores that feelings of distress can causally contribute to more extreme political attitudes. An important source of distress in daily life is feeling excluded from social relationships, as social exclusion thwarts the basic need for belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). One experiment manipulated whether participants (university students) did or did not have an online exclusion experience ("Cyberball"). Subsequently, participants read a description of an activist group on campus that sought to reduce tuition fees. The group clearly was prepared to take extreme action in service of their ideological goals, as it proclaimed ready to "blockade campus with loud rallies, organize lecture walkouts, and even disrupt classes in protests". As compared with their included peers, participants who previously had an exclusion experience were more willing to attend a meeting of this group, and also rated this group as less extreme (Hales & Williams, 2018).

Another source of distress that psychologists frequently operationalize in experimental research is mortality salience, where participants are reminded of the fact that, sooner or later, their death will be inevitable. A meta-analysis has examined the effects of mortality salience on people's political ideology to contrast two possible hypotheses (Burke, Koslov, & Landau, 2013). The first hypothesis is that mortality salience necessarily produces ideological shifts to the political right, in line with the idea that threatening experiences promote conservative ideologies ("conservative shift hypothesis"); the second hypothesis is that mortality salience promotes more extreme responses towards both the left and the right ("worldview defense hypothesis"). Interestingly, the data supported both hypotheses. It has been noted, however, that the conservative shifts in this research domain are subject to alternative explanations: For instance, many of the studies supporting the conservative shift hypothesis were conducted shortly after 9/11 (and often were explicitly connected to this event), and may represent "rally around the flag effects" such that death reminders increase support for national leaders and symbols (e.g., former President Bush; for a more detailed argument, see Crawford, 2017).

The second proposition entails that politically extreme ideologies satisfy a need for epistemic clarity. If this is true, political extremism should be associated with a relatively straightforward and unambiguous understanding of the social and political world. Various studies support this proposition. For instance, a content-analysis of speeches by 19th century US politicians found that relatively extreme politicians displayed lower integrative complexity in their argumentation as compared with relatively moderate politicians (Tetlock et al., 1994). Likewise, present-day citizens who are at the edges of the political spectrum are more likely to believe that simple solutions for complex problems exist (Van Prooijen, Krouwel & Pollet, 2015). One study examined how the political left and right in the Netherlands perceived the EU refugee crisis in 2016. While the political left and right (unsurprisingly) differed in the type of solutions that they endorsed – with the left supporting

more inclusionary solutions (i.e., provide shelter to refugees) and the right more exclusionary

ones (i.e., reject refugees at the border) – both extremes converged in a belief that the solution

to this crisis was simple (Van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Emmer, 2018).

Additionally, other evidence suggests that the political extremes perceive the social

and political world in simpler terms, which is functional to satisfy a need for epistemic clarity.

One study asked participants to spatially group similar stimuli (e.g., politicians) together, and

separate dissimilar stimuli, on a computer screen (Lammers et al., 2017). Results revealed that

as compared with moderates, the left and right extremes grouped 'similar' stimuli closer

together, and 'different' stimuli further apart. Other findings indicated that as compared with

moderates, the political extremes perceived members of specific social categories as more

homogeneous: For instance, they considered it more likely that people with the same political

ideology also share other preferences (e.g., for books, movies, and so on). In sum, the political

extremes perceive the social and political world in more clear-cut and sharply defined

categories than moderates do.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that extreme political beliefs may serve an

important psychological need, notably epistemic clarity. When people experience distress,

they are drawn to the clear-cut answers that politically extreme movements provide for the

pressing problems of our time. Even beyond the political domain, political extremism appears

associated with a preference for simplicity (Lammers et al., 2017).

Is Political Extremism a Problem?

Following our definition, many citizens are currently extreme in their political

attitudes. Indeed, societies appear to be polarizing: Throughout the EU electoral support for

left- and right-extreme parties has increased over the past few decades at the expense of

moderate parties (Krouwel, 2012). Should this be considered problematic? In answering this

question, we first acknowledge that historically, not all forms of political extremism have

been harmful to societies. Many political movements that were once considered "extreme" in a particular time or culture have stimulated positive social change (Tetlock et al., 1994). For instance, human rights movements in the US during the 1960s, or the South African ANC under Nelson Mandela when it struggled against Apartheid in the 20th century, were considered politically extreme in their time by many citizens of these respective countries. Yet, nowadays few people would dispute that these movements changed the societies in which they were active for the better. The conclusion of the previous section – that political extremism is associated with a relatively simplistic perception of societal problems – hence does not have to be problematic in all cases: Some moral truths are not particularly complex to articulate (e.g., "oppression is wrong"). But putting examples of these constructive forms of political extremism aside, in this section we argue that quite often political extremism is associated with a range of psychological phenomena that are unlikely to have a constructive impact on society. We specifically propose that political extremism is associated with impoverished decision-making due to overconfidence, unfounded beliefs, and intolerance of competing views.

Overconfidence

One general insight from attitude research is that people endorse strong attitudes with high conviction (Howe & Krosnick, 2017). This insight certainly seems to generalize to the political domain. Political extremism is associated with a coherent set of moralized political attitudes, and it stands to reason that people endorse these attitudes with high confidence. Indeed, both extreme liberals and conservatives in the US evaluate their beliefs on a range of contentious issues (e.g., health care; abortion; illegal immigration) as superior – that is, as more likely to be factually correct – than moderates (Toner et al., 2013). Even on non-political numeric estimation tasks political extremists are more confident than moderates (Brandt, Evans, & Crawford, 2015). Consistent with these insights, a recent longitudinal study

revealed that, over the course of an election campaign – with measurement points six weeks

before the election, four weeks before the election, and three days after the election – political

ideology changed less over time among extremists than moderates. This effect was most

pronounced among left-wing extremists (see Figure 1), although the effect emerged more

symmetrically at both extremes in additional cross-sectional data measuring ideological

stability. This suggests that as compared with moderates, citizens at the political extremes

were less susceptible to social influence during an election campaign, suggesting higher levels

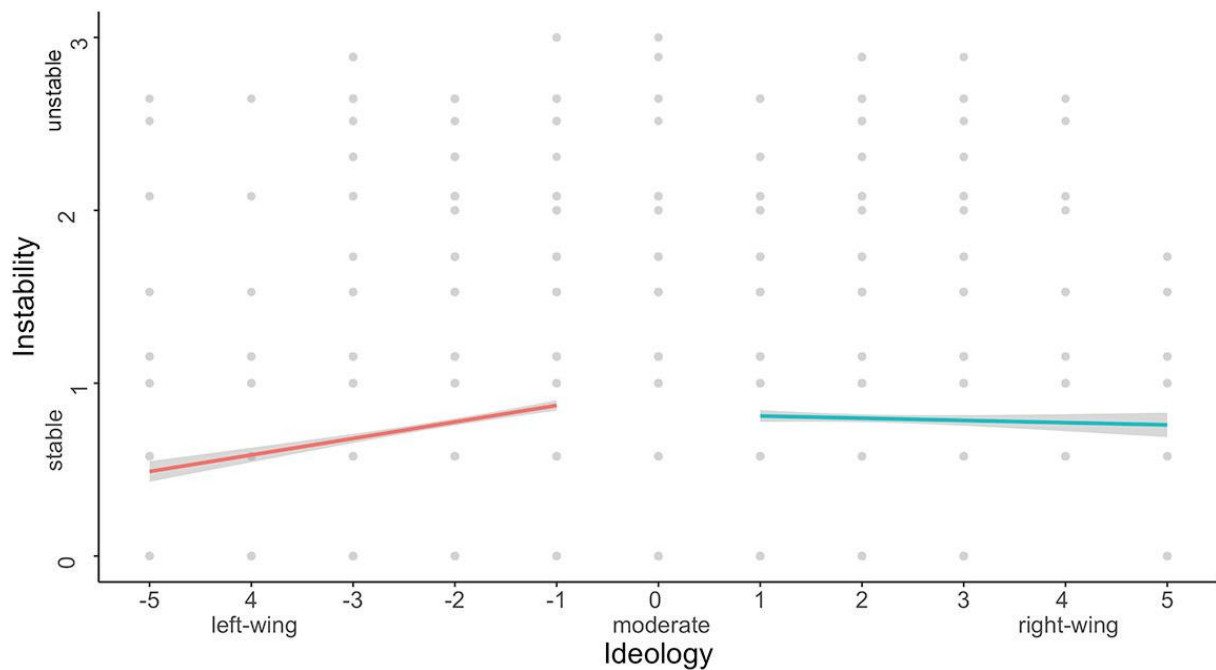of conviction (Zwicker, van Prooijen, & Krouwel, in press).

Figure 1. The relationship between ideological instability – that is, the extent to which

ideology changed over time – and political ideology. Instability is the standard deviation of

ideology at three measurement points; ideology is participants' self-placement on a left-right

dimension at T1. Published previously in Zwicker, Van Prooijen, & Krouwel (in press).

Showing that people at the political extremes are more confident does not prove that

they are *over*confident, however: After all, confidence may be warranted, in the sense that it is

rooted in actual knowledge or expertise. As an analogy, compare two people giving medical advice to a sick patient. One of them is a certified medical doctor with years of medical training, and happens to be specialized in the illness that the patient is suffering from; the other has no formal medical training, and relies a set of evidence-free interventions including herbal treatment and homeopathy. While both of these people may be confident in their advice, only the confidence of the first person is warranted as it is based on an actual understanding of the disease. The confidence of the second person is unwarranted (i.e., overconfidence), as it is based on a set of unfounded hunches. Also, in the political domain, judgmental confidence can be warranted and unwarranted. Well-informed party-elites ("ideologues") tend to be confident about their political beliefs (Converse, 1964) – and while ideologues from different political parties may fundamentally disagree with one another, it may be expected that most party elites can provide a coherent line of reasoning to justify their political views.

But how warranted or unwarranted is the high levels of confidence observed among citizens who endorse relatively extreme political beliefs? Our line of reasoning would suggest that such confidence often actually is overconfidence. In particular, political extremism satisfies a need for epistemic clarity by providing simple and straightforward answers to important problems. This also yields high levels of confidence, as societal problems appear easy to understand when portrayed in simple terms (Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019, 2020). Most societal problems are in fact not simple, however, and emerged through a complex mix of macro-economic, political, cultural, and psychological factors. Perceived "easy fixes" for societal problems often are an illusion, as most policy decisions involve trade-offs such as competing interests between various societal groups, budget restraints, and risks of unforeseen side-effects.

To show overconfidence among political extremists, research would have to establish

high levels of judgmental confidence that is not rooted in actual knowledge or expertise. Various recent studies have tested this idea. In the previously discussed study on people's perceptions of the 2016 EU refugee crisis (Van Prooijen et al., 2018), participants were asked a range of factual knowledge questions about the EU refugee crisis, with a "true / false" response format. After each knowledge question, participants rated how confident they were of their answer. Results revealed no relationship between political ideology and factual knowledge about this crisis: Neither the left versus the right, nor the extremes versus moderates, differed in their performance on the knowledge test. The results did indicate differences between the political extremes and moderates (but not between the political left and right) on judgmental confidence, however: Despite not having higher levels of factual knowledge, the political extremes reported higher levels of confidence in their knowledge than moderates did. Moreover, their overconfidence was mediated by their belief that the solution to the refugee crisis is simple. Oversimplifying complex societal problems predicts overconfidence in one's understanding of those problems.

Such overconfidence among extremists was even more pronounced in a different study that took place in the context of a Dutch referendum about an EU treaty with Ukraine (Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2020). This setting provided a clash between pro- versus anti-establishment sentiments among the Dutch public. Specifically, anti-establishment political parties at both the extreme left and right in the Netherlands campaigned to vote against the treaty (which was widely regarded as an EU-skeptic vote) while all the relatively moderate parties in parliament—from the moderate left to the moderate right—campaigned to vote in favor of the treaty. The study took place in two waves. Six weeks before the referendum, a questionnaire first asked participants for their self-perceived understanding of the treaty (e.g., "I consider myself sufficiently qualified to judge the association treaty between Ukraine and the EU"), followed by questions testing their actual knowledge of the treaty. The

questionnaire also contained a general, nonpolitical measure of overclaiming, asking participants how familiar they were with a range of persons, objects, ideas, or places that did not actually exist (Paulhus et al., 2003). Then, a few days after the referendum, a second questionnaire asked participants what they had voted.

Results revealed that *increased* self-perceived understanding of the treaty, yet *decreased* actual knowledge of the treaty, and a general tendency to overclaim knowledge, predicted anti-establishment voting. Additional analyses also tested the role political extremism more directly. Consistent with our line of reasoning, overconfidence was associated with both left- and right-wing extremism, although in this setting it was more pronounced at the right than at the left extreme. Specifically, at the left extreme respondents reported higher self-perceived understanding of the treaty than moderates, yet showed no difference with moderates on actual knowledge or general overclaiming. At the right extreme, respondents also showed higher self-perceived understanding of treaty than moderates; but unlike the left extreme, they performed *worse* on the knowledge test, and reported higher familiarity with non-existing stimuli (i.e., general overclaiming), than moderates.

These findings suggest one way in which political extremism often can be problematic for societies. Political extremism is associated with high levels of confidence in the accuracy of one's beliefs. Such confidence often actually is overconfidence, however, which may lead to poor judgment and impoverished decision-making.

Unfounded beliefs

Some of the most pressing problems of our time – including the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change – require solutions that are based on rational, evidence-based reasoning, and scientific evidence. Sometimes evidence-based reasoning, or scientific research, suggest policy recommendations that do not align with a perceiver's pre-existing values or beliefs, however. For instance, recommendations to restrict the freedom of citizens and businesses to

decrease the spread of the corona virus (e.g., prohibitions of public gatherings; closing down bars and restaurants) may be particularly difficult to accept for citizens who believe that Covid-19 is comparable with seasonal flu. What determines if people accept or reject the conclusions of logic, reason, and scientific research, even when that would require them to update their initial beliefs?

As political extremism implies a strong conviction in the correctness of one's beliefs (Toner et al., 2013), and politically extreme beliefs are relatively central to a perceiver's identity (Van Prooijen & Kuijper, 2020), it follows that politically extreme beliefs are relatively resistant to change (Zwicker et al., in press). Furthermore, evidence suggests increased mental rigidity at both the left and right extremes, as political extremism is associated with reduced cognitive flexibility on a range of psychological tests (e.g., the Wisconsin Card Sorting Test; Zmigrod, Rentfrow, & Robbins, 2019). The political extremes hence may be less likely than moderates to update their ideological beliefs when confronted with novel and conflicting information.

An important mental process through which extremists may uphold their beliefs is motivated reasoning. The current digital era provides unprecedented opportunity for people to selectively embrace information that calls unwanted conclusions into question. It is nowadays quite easy to find discussion groups or professionally designed websites in support of almost any proposition, including the view that Covid-19 is harmless, that vaccines cause autism, that anthropogenic climate change is not really happening, or even that the Earth is flat (see Miller, this Volume, for further discussion). People have lower evidentiary standards for preferred as opposed to non-preferred conclusions; furthermore, they can easily find support for the values and beliefs that are central to their identity (Epley & Gilovich, 2016).

Accumulating research indeed suggests that people often dismiss ideologically inconvenient scientific findings (e.g., Rutjens, Sutton, & Van der Lee, 2018). One study found

that both liberals and conservatives endorse motivated interpretations of scientific results, and deny a correct interpretation of those results, when it conflicts with their values. Moreover, this effect was equally strong among liberals and conservatives (Washburn & Skitka, 2018). Also other studies confirm that ideologically inconvenient science messages produce negative responses, and decrease trust in the scientific community, among both liberals and conservatives (Nisbet, Cooper, & Garrett, 2015). People have various mental strategies at their disposal to maintain their ideological beliefs while dismissing incompatible scientific findings. For instance, extreme conservatives who are convinced that anthropogenic climate change is not real may deny the evidence, believe that the scientists conducting the research are incompetent and/or untrustworthy, or perceive the scientific evidence about this issue as more controversial than it really is. Indeed, people's cultural values shape their perception of consensus (or the lack thereof) among experts (Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, & Braman, 2011).

Another strategy for people to dismiss inconvenient facts or scientific conclusions is to endorse conspiracy theories that support their values, stipulating for instance that climate change is a hoax, that Covid-19 is a military bioweapon, or that pharmaceutical companies suppress evidence that vaccines cause autism. Conspiracy theories are beliefs that assume secret and hostile plots among enemy groups, and are therefore particularly relevant in settings with multiple ideologically conflicting groups (Van Prooijen, 2016, 2020; for a cross-cultural illustration, see Van Prooijen & Song, in press). Evidence indeed suggests that political values drive the conspiracy theories that people believe in. Extreme Republicans are more likely to believe Democratic conspiracy theories (e.g., beliefs that Obama was not born in the US), and extreme Democrats are more likely to believe Republican conspiracy theories (e.g., beliefs that the 9/11 terrorist strikes were an inside job committed by the Republican administration of George W. Bush; Miller, Saunders, & Farhart, 2016; Uscinski, Klofstad, & Atkinson, 2016). Furthermore, conspiracy theories are stronger at both political extremes than

in the political center (Krouwel, Kutiyski, Van Prooijen, Martinsson, & Markstedt, 2017; Van Prooijen et al., 2015). Apparently, the strong convictions that are associated with political extremism predispose people to a range of unfounded beliefs, including unscientific beliefs and conspiracy theories.

Intolerance of competing views

People endorse extreme political beliefs with high moral conviction, making it relatively difficult to accept competing views. It has been noted that people experience strong moral convictions as objective and universal truths that should apply to everyone (Skitka, 2010). As a consequence, people easily perceive alternative beliefs as immoral when they have strong moral convictions about a particular political or societal issue. This reduces people's willingness to cooperate with others that do not share their beliefs. For instance, people with strong moral convictions socially distance themselves from attitudinally dissimilar others, both in their personal relationships (e.g., a preference to not form friendships with them) as well as in distant relationships (e.g., a preference not to visit a shop owned by an attitudinally dissimilar other; Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005).

The term "intolerance" admittedly has a negative ring to it, and we should qualify that not all intolerance necessarily is detrimental to society. It is well-accepted that criminal behaviors such as murder, rape, and theft should not be tolerated. Also, one may wonder how constructive it is to be overly tolerant of some forms of intolerance (e.g., racism). Various forms of intolerance exist, which have different societal implications (Verkuyten, Adelman, & Yogeeswaran, 2020). Politically extreme beliefs often pertain to contentious and difficult political and societal issues, however, including immigration, income distribution, health care, and so on (e.g., Toner et al., 2013). These are topics that require an open debate in order to establish sensible policy. Hence, the intolerance associated with political extremism may imply an unwillingness to accept disagreement for these topics, which may silence important

debates and reduce opportunities for compromise.

One study tested the relationship between political extremism and dogmatic intolerance, defined as a tendency to reject, and consider as inferior, any ideological belief that differs from one's own (Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2017). Example items to measure dogmatic intolerance were "I believe that everyone should think like me about political issues" and "People who think differently than me about political issues are of lesser value than I am". In two studies the results revealed a U-curve, such that both the left and right extreme expressed stronger dogmatic intolerance than political moderates. A third study, then, manipulated strength of people's political beliefs: Specifically, participants were asked to either describe a political opinion that they felt strongly about, or a political opinion that they did not feel particularly strongly about. People expressed more dogmatic intolerance about strongly held political beliefs than weakly held political beliefs. Moreover, dogmatic intolerance mediated relationships of political belief strength with participants' willingness to protest in favor of their political belief, their willingness to deny free speech to people who disagree with them (e.g., by punishing them), and their support for antisocial behavior (an example item being "I can imagine feeling sympathy for people who use violence in support of the issue I described"). These findings were not moderated by political orientation. Moreover, the U-shaped relationship between political ideology and dogmatic intolerance has been replicated in various other studies (Rollwage, Doling, & Fleming, 2018; Van Prooijen & Kuijper, 2020).

Extremists' dogmatic intolerance may also have implications for their tendency to reject dissimilar outgroups. Contrary to the truism that only the political right is intolerant of outgroups (e.g., Jost, 2017), research on the ideological conflict hypothesis suggests that both the political left and right reject outgroups that they perceive as ideologically dissimilar (Brandt, Reyna, Chambers, Crawford, & Wetherell, 2014). Put differently, politically right-

wing people often are intolerant of groups such as ethnic and sexual minorities, environmentalists, and feminists, because they expect the members of these groups to be largely left-wing; likewise, however, politically left-wing people often are intolerant of groups such as Christian fundamentalists, the military, and business people, because they expect the members of these groups to be largely right-wing.

But while this suggests that the relationship of outgroup intolerance with political orientation is more complicated than often assumed (see also Duckitt, this Volume), its relationship with political extremism may be quite straightforward. One study presented participants with 12 societal groups (e.g., Politicians; Police officers; Muslims; Lawyers; Soldiers) and asked them to rate dichotomously whether they believed each group made a positive or negative contribution to society (Van Prooijen et al., 2015). Results revealed that both the left and right extremes evaluated a larger number of groups negatively than moderates. In sum, as compared with moderates the political extremes are less tolerant of competing beliefs, and are more likely to reject outgroups that they expect to be attitudinally dissimilar.

Limitations and conclusions

Before drawing conclusions, here we first articulate various conceptual limitations, and hence future research challenges, of this research domain. A first limitation is that empirical measurements of political orientation and political extremism are generally based on a crude and generalized set of items assessing how left- or right-wing people feel, which does not capture many of the underlying complexities of people's political orientation. As a case in point, the Dutch PVV is widely regarded to be an extremely right-wing party for its anti-immigration and anti-Islam stance, and their supporters indeed tend to self-identify as right-wing. Yet, this party's positions on (for instance) health care for the elderly aligns more with Dutch left-wing parties than with centrist or moderate right-wing parties. Relatedly,

Italy's five-star movement takes a number of extreme positions at specific policy issues, yet some of them are widely seen as extremely left-wing (e.g., a universal basic income for all citizens), and others as extremely right-wing (e.g., relatively harsh policies on immigration).

More generally, while the radical left and right are often treated as diametrically opposed ideological strands, throughout Western Europe many voters actually combine left-wing positions on economic issues with conservative, nativist and authoritarian stances on cultural issues. Voters that are driven particularly by economic considerations are more inclined to shift to the left extreme, while those that are concerned with immigration and law and order are more inclined to shift to the right extreme; yet these voters may find both the radical left and right appealing due to a number of converging themes such as economic protectionism, EU-skepticism, and maintaining non-redistributive welfare arrangements (e.g., state pensions, unemployment benefits; see Krouwel, 2012). In sum, while empirical research typically tries to capture political orientation and political extremism in a single score, in reality people's political beliefs are far more complex as they may feel left-wing on some issues yet right-wing on others, and likewise, moderate on some issues yet extreme on others.

While this first limitation suggests conceptual challenges when studying political extremism within a single culture, the second limitation suggests additional challenges when making cross-cultural comparisons. Important differences in political cultures exist across nations, arguably leading to different understandings of what people refer to as "left-wing" versus "right-wing", or "moderate" versus "extreme". Somewhat universally, the political left has been associated with issues such as a preference for relatively egalitarian and redistributive economic policies, equal rights for minorities, a relatively big role of the government in the economy, and so on. The political right, in turn, has been commonly associated with issues such as a preference for order and tradition, protection of private property, and respect for authority.

But how that manifests itself can differ substantially across societies. Some political topics may be contentious – and form the basis of a person's political identity – in one society, yet these same issues may not be a defining part of a person's political identity in other societies. As an example, the strength of political orientation of many US citizens may be shaped substantially by how they feel about gun control laws, the death penalty, abortion, and gay marriage. Yet in our own country, the Netherlands, these same issues are much less of a divisive or polarized issue in the political debate, and also do not clearly define a person's ideological position as left-wing or right-wing. Most political parties that have seats in Dutch parliament—from the far left to the far right—agree that owning guns is illegal for private citizens, and that there is no death penalty. Two small Christian parties (Christian Union and SGP) are outspoken in their opposition of abortion and gay marriage; yet, in a Dutch political landscape these parties are considered center-left and center-right, respectively, given their positions on a range of other issues such as health care, immigration, and income distribution.[1]

Put differently, what people see as left-wing or right-wing differs across cultures. Accordingly, what people consider to be "extreme" or "moderate" is also likely to differ across cultures. Imagine a Dutch person who votes for the currently biggest center-right party in the Netherlands (the VVD). Consistent with her party's positions, she is against private gun ownership and the death penalty, and in favor of women's right to choose and gay marriage. Now imagine that she would move to the US. Her opinions about these issues would not define her position on a left-right political dimension in the Netherlands, yet in the US they

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[1] This is not to imply that there is no discussion at all about these issues in Dutch parliament, of course. The Dutch far-right PVV did argue for legalizing pepper spray as self-defense weapon in 2016, which did not reach a majority, and currently still is illegal. The small fundamentalist Christian party SGP explicitly supported reintroduction of the death penalty up until 2017. For the latter two topics, there has been debate about questions such as whether a five-day reflection time should be mandatory before women can get an abortion, and whether individual public officials can refuse to personally perform the wedding ceremony of a gay or lesbian couple for religious reasons.

would place her squarely in a left-wing liberal category, and possibly extremely so. Likewise, support for private gun ownership is relatively mainstream in the US (particularly within the Republican party), and indeed, it is a basic constitutional right (2nd amendment); yet, in the Netherlands owning a gun is highly illegal for regular citizens (punishable with a prison sentence), and accordingly, many Dutch citizens would consider a person arguing for a right to privately own guns to be an extremist. These issues are important for political psychologists to keep in mind when trying to generalize findings obtained in one country to other countries.

These limitations notwithstanding, the current state of the literature suggests that holding extreme political beliefs can hold important implications for a range of variables, independent from the specific content of those beliefs. We reiterate that we do not deny effects of political orientation on a range of variables, also in light of the overwhelming evidence suggesting that the political left and right differ in their cognitive style (Jost, 2017). We do argue, however, that in the past few decades the field of political psychology has excessively focused on political orientation (i.e., ideological content), and has placed much less emphasis on political extremism (i.e., ideological strength). The present chapter was designed to illuminate how feelings of distress increase the appeal of political extremism, because straightforward beliefs that one can hold with high conviction satisfy the human need for epistemic clarity. Furthermore, we also sought to clarify that political extremism—in either direction—can pose a problem for societies. Accumulating evidence suggests that the political extremes are more likely than moderates to be overconfident, to embrace unfounded beliefs, and to be intolerant of competing viewpoints. These conclusions suggest that political extremism should be high on the agenda of political psychologists and policy makers.

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