

The motivation for political attitudes: The relationship between behavioral approach and  
inhibition systems and political orientation

Honors Senior Thesis

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### Abstract

Issues surrounding the upcoming presidential election season highlight the need for a better understanding of the relationship between human motivation and political orientation. The neurophysiological trait systems of approach (BAS) and avoidance (BIS) are crucial to understanding human motivation (Gable, Mechin, Hicks, and Adams, 2015). The behavioral inhibition system (BIS) is sensitivity to punishment, non-reward, and unusual stimuli (Gray, 1994). The behavioral activation system (BAS) is motivated by positive and negative reinforcement, and higher positive affectivity. In this study, undergraduate students from the University of Wyoming (n=317) were measured on approach/avoidance tendencies and political orientation in a two-part study. BAS-drive was scored separately for the purpose of this study. Across both studies, BAS-drive was positively correlated with conservatism. BIS was not significantly correlated with BIS or BAS. BAS was only correlated with conservatism in the second study when the moral motive items of self-reliance and self-restraint were controlled. Implications about moral motives and politics are discussed.

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Political orientation is the form of conscious political thinking of a group or individual, which includes ideology (liberal versus conservative) and partisanship (Democrat or Republican). Political orientation is typically measured as self-reported conservatism versus liberalism. Social scientists from various disciplines have studied the factors that influence political orientation. Psychologists pose the question: is political orientation influenced by unconscious psychological factors?

There is a large body of research that suggests that political orientation is related to differences in the five dimensions of personality: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Motivation and temperament are central factors that may drive political attitude differences among people. The neurophysiological trait systems of approach and avoidance are crucial to understanding human temperament (Gable, Mechin, Hicks, and Adams, 2015). The behavioral inhibition system (BIS) refers to sensitivity to punishment, nonreward, and unusual stimuli (Gray, 1994). The behavioral activation system (BAS) is motivated by positive and negative reinforcement, and higher positive affectivity. Studies on the effect of BIS and BAS on political orientation are relatively rare, which are discussed below. This area of research has important implications for figuring out what motivates peoples' political beliefs, but it has received relatively little attention thus far. Current political and social events are reminders that it is imperative to continue to figure out what motivates people to make certain political decisions.

Many studies on personality and political orientation have been well established and replicated in political psychology. Carney, Jost, Gosling, and Potter (2008) conducted a three-

part study on the relationship between personality dimensions and political orientation. The first study measured the effect of Big Five Personality traits (extraversion, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism) on political orientation. Two of the five personality traits were found to correlate with political orientation; openness and conscientiousness. The researchers found that the main difference in political orientations had to do with peoples' variation in experiences involving openness. Participants who identified as liberal scored higher on openness to new experiences. Conservative participants scored higher on conscientiousness. The second part of the study measured nonverbal behavior differences among participants. The results showed that liberal-identifying participants scored significantly higher on smiling behavior, body orientation toward confederates, and slightly higher on expressiveness. Conservatism did not significantly predict any non-verbal behavior. Conservative participants acted more disengaged from conversations with confederates in general. The third part of the study observed the style and décor of the living and working spaces of participants. Conservative participants had bedrooms that had significantly more organizational items and more conventional decorations. Liberal participants had bedrooms that had significantly higher variety of books, CDs, and cultural items. The authors provided caution about interpretation of the results of the third part of the study. The results could have been due to chance and need to be replicated. Overall, the three-part study confirms the findings of the research discussed below that suggest that there are measurable and replicable differences among the personalities of conservative and liberal individuals.

Another study that confirmed the results of Carney, Jost, Gosling, and Potters' study added a novel personality dimension, altruism. Zettler and Hilbig (2009) found that there was a significant correlation between openness to experience and left-wing politics; they also found

that altruism was significantly correlated with left-wing political views. Furthermore, altruism was correlated with political orientation more strongly than the other six personality dimensions tested in the HEXACO-PI: honesty-humility, emotionality, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness to experience. The researchers concluded that altruism plays a critical role in political orientation and should be considered when testing personality in relation to social issues in politics.

Social dominance orientation is another variable that may be related to political orientation. Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, and Malle (1994) tested the correlation between social dominance orientation (SDO) and political orientation. The researchers found that SDO was more important than other personality constructs when studying political ideologies because it is more closely related to the social lives of groups of people. SDO was negatively correlated with concern for others, altruism, and tolerance. Social dominance orientation was negatively correlated with tolerance, measured with the JPI tolerance subscale. The study found that SDO was positively correlated with conservatism. Specifically, the researchers found that SDO drives political-economic conservatism. In addition, the researchers found a significant positive correlation between SDO and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA). The researchers also tested SDO in relation to new social policies. Social dominance orientation was positively correlated with belief in sexism, patriotism, cultural elitism, conservatism, and a just world. The results of the study revealed a strong correlation between SDO and opposition to social programs, racial policies, and women's rights.

A study done by Wolak and Marcus (2007) looked at the relationship of four personality dimensions (neuroticism, extraversion, openness, and authoritarianism) related to the level of peoples' political engagement. The researchers concluded that neuroticism, extraversion, and

openness (but not authoritarianism) predicted aversion to policy changes. Neuroticism and extraversion were significantly, positively associated with anger in response to policy change. The researchers also measured emotional response to policy changes. Extroverts were more likely than introverts to show anger about political policy changes. The study concluded that openness to experience was negatively correlated with anger due to policy change. Personality factors were not as good at predicting policy anger as emotional reactions such as anxiety and enthusiasm. Enthusiasm was found to be significantly, negatively correlated with policy change aversion and high anxiety scores predicted high policy aversion. The researchers concluded that personality factors were modest predictors of emotional engagement in political policy issues.

Findings from studies on the correlation between personality variables and political orientation are well replicated and enduring. Personality has repeatedly been found to have an effect on political ideology. However, there are incomplete results in the current literature on the association between BIS/BAS and political orientation, and the existing literature is limited. Therefore, it is important to continue replicating and designing studies, to determine if the designs of the studies could be improved or whether individual motivations and attitudes are shifting. After reviewing the existing literature, a hypothesis will be developed with regard to the relationship between BIS/BAS and political orientation.

A review of the previous findings in the area by Janoff-Bulman (2009) suggests that politically conservative people tend toward protecting group members from danger, thus they are motivated to avoid threats. Politically liberal individuals tend toward providing for the welfare of group members and society, which is a form of approach motivation. This phenomenon is especially apparent in times where nations face serious danger and people in them tend to become more conservative (Bonanno and Jost, 2006). Multiple studies on SDO have concluded

that liberals are bigger proponents of equal opportunity and are less inclined to organize hierarchically than conservatives are (Janoff-Bulman, 2009). People from both political orientations have strong opinions on how to regulate society, but their motivations differ. Conservatives typically aim to prohibit behavior that may pose threats to society. They focus on prohibiting certain activities, such as abortion, stem cell research, and same-sex marriage. Conversely, liberals focus on actively promoting welfare in society. They focus on intervention and change to improve the wellbeing of societal members. Intervention and action on behalf of society is driven by activation motivation, action performed to achieve a goal. Research in the area is in general agreement that different motivations play a part in peoples' political orientations.

The existing literature suggests that there is a connection between BIS/BAS and political orientation, but the results are mixed about which activating system is related to which type of political orientation. Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, and Baldacci (2007) conducted a study on psychology students at the University of Massachusetts to see if political orientation is associated with approach and avoidance orientations. First, they compared moral motives and political orientation, to see if they were related. The types of moral motives studied were self-restraint, social order, self-reliance, and social justice. Self-restraint is a self-focused measure that focuses on self-control for the good of oneself. A self-restraint item is "I demonstrate I'm a better person every time I exercise self-restraint rather than give into my desires". Social order measures the level of threat resistance people would use to benefit the larger society. An example of a social order item is "giving people the freedom to choose the way they live threatens the societal bonds that hold us together". Self-reliance is a self-oriented measure of providing for and advancing oneself. A self-reliance statement is "I value hard work and personal commitment when it comes

to making decisions in my life”. Social justice is a measure of participants’ focus on positive outcomes for others in a society. An example of a social justice item is “If we look after ourselves, we still need to look after others in our society”. Self-restraint and social order are avoidance-orientated measures and self-reliance and social justice are approach-orientated items. The researchers found that conservative students had significantly higher avoidance motives scores and lower scores on social justice motives. The results showed that self-reliance was not significantly correlated with political orientation, but was related to social justice. Self-reliance was positively associated with social justice for liberal students, and negatively associated with social justice for conservative students. The researchers also found that providing for oneself was associated with providing for others among liberal students. Providing for oneself was not associated with providing for others among conservative students. The findings generally suggest an approach orientation for liberal students but not conservative students.

Political conservatism and liberalism were the two forms of political orientation studied (Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, and Baldacci, 2007). Right-wing authoritarianism and SDO were studied in relation to political orientation. The students completed a moral motives scale and a social issues questionnaire. Questions about lifestyle (abortion and gay marriage) were significantly predicted by the avoidance the two items, self-restraint and social order. Economic and equality issues (affirmative action and welfare) were significantly predicted by an approach motive: social justice. Self-restraint and social order were positively associated with right-wing authoritarianism. The two activation measures, self-reliance and social justice were negatively correlated with social dominance orientation. The researchers included a final component in their study, which compared the responses of four groups with differing social and political policies on the campus at the University of Massachusetts. Two conservative student groups had the



highest scores on self-restraint and social order (avoidance items). Two liberal student groups had significantly lower scores on social order than the conservative groups. Additionally, self-reliance and social justice were positively correlated for both liberal groups, when the two items were added together. Across all three components of the study, conservatives scored highest on the two avoidance measures, whereas the approach motives associated with liberalism. The results of the study imply a BIS orientation characterizes politically conservative people and a BAS orientation characterizes liberals.

The literature supporting the correlation between personality factors and political orientation is extensive and well replicated, but research on BIS/BAS and political orientation is extremely limited. In addition, the studies in the area have not been replicated in the past five to six years. It is imperative that the studies are repeated, especially considering the current political climate in the United States. The current study was performed with current political issues in mind. The majority of previous studies in this area have proposed that BIS is correlated with liberalism and BAS is correlated with conservatism. The current two-part study will add to the current body of literature because it proposes that one component of BAS, BAS-Drive, is actually positively correlated with conservatism. It is important to test this hypothesis to figure out what underlies human motivations in relation to political orientation. Previous studies have not separated the types of behavioral activation into subcategories to see how they relate to BIS/BAS separately. The general purpose of doing studies in this area is to increase the overall understanding of why people are motivated to follow one political ideology over another. I propose a model of interaction between BIS/BAS and political orientation that suggests that BAS-drive is positively correlated with conservatism and BIS is positively correlated with liberalism. Specifically, I predict that when people score high on BAS (specifically BAS-drive),

they will also score high on political conservatism and when people score high on BIS, they will score high on liberalism. The components of BAS-drive such as “I go out of my way to get things I want” and “when I want something I usually go all-out to get it” (Carver and White, 1994) reflect self-interest, so they would be expected to correlate positively with conservatism. BIS items such as “criticism or scolding hurts me quite a bit” and “I feel worried when I think I have done poorly at something important” (Carver and White, 1994) reflect avoidance of unpleasant outcomes, so they would be expected to correlate positively with liberal views. This study will advance previous knowledge in the area because most studies have predicted and confirmed the opposite correlation. It is important to test new hypotheses in the face of changing political ideologies in the United States.

## Methods

### Study 1

The study was exploring the relationship between political orientation and BIS/BAS. Are BIS and BAS associated with political liberalism or political conservatism?

#### *Participants and Procedure*

Undergraduate students at the University of Wyoming (n=317) participated in the study online through SurveyMonkey. Students who participated were compensated with a half hour of extra credit for completing the study.

### Study 2

The second part of the study explored the relationship between political orientation and BIS/BAS in more depth. Scales were added to obtain additional information about participants' political

ideologies and affiliations. Scales to measure participants' motives, social-dominance orientation, and level of right-wing authoritarianism were added to gain a deeper understanding of morals and attitudes.

### *Participants and procedure*

Study 2 contained a total of 113 participants. One-hundred and eleven participants completed the survey online through SurveyMonkey. They completed the questions in March 2016 at a location of their choice. Participants who completed the survey received a half hour of extra credit through the University of Wyoming. The survey was also posted on Mturk and participants were compensated \$0.50 for their participation. There were two participants who participated in the study through Mturk.

### *Materials*

*Moral Motives Scale (MMS)*: A 20-item measure of moral motives or social rules that individuals live by (Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, and Baldacci, 2007). MMS includes 4 subscales, which correspond to four moral motives (self-restraint, social order, self-reliance, and social justice). Items in the scale included ratings from 1-7, 1 being strongly disagree and 7 being strongly agree. Sample items from the scale include: "We should all be responsible for improving the welfare of others beyond our immediate circle of friends and family" (social justice); "I demonstrate I'm a better person every time I exercise self-restraint rather than give into my desires" (self-restraint); "Giving people the freedom to choose the way they live threatens the societal bonds that hold us together" (social order); and "When things get tough, I apply myself and work even harder to overcome difficulties" (self-reliance).

*The Final Conservatism-Liberalism scale:* A 7-item measure of self-rated political orientation (Mehrabian, 1996). Items in the scale include “I am politically more liberal than conservative” and “In any election, given a choice between a Republican and Democratic candidate, I will select the Republican over the Democrat”. Another seven-point scale was used to measure Democratic or Republican affiliation. Participants were asked to rate their level of affiliation with one party over the other, on a scale of 1 to 7. Two additional items were used to measure political orientation. Participants were asked “How much do you tend to like or dislike political liberals?” and “How much do you tend to like or dislike political conservatives?” The answers to the two scales ranged from 1 to 7, 1 being dislike extremely and 7 being like extremely. Additionally, there was a fill-in-the-blank question: “How would you describe your political affiliation?” Participants could identify however they chose to.

*Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA):* A 22-item measure of an individual’s preference for an authoritarian world, where there are defined leaders and a clear chain of command (Altmeyer, 1996). The RWA scale was used to measure right-wing ideologies. The scale ranged from 1 to 9, with 1 being “very strongly disagree with the statement”, 5 being “feel exactly and precisely neutral about this statement”, and 9 being “very strongly agree with the statement”. Sample questions include: “Our country will be great if we honor the ways of our forefathers, do what the authorities tell us to do, and get rid of the “rotten apples” who are ruining everything”; “There are many radical, immoral people in our country today, who are trying to ruin it for their own godless purposes whom the authorities should put out of action”; and “This country would work a lot better if certain groups of troublemakers would just shut up and accept their group’s traditional place in society”. Participants ranked their level of agreement with twenty-two items

in the RWA scale. The first two items in the scale were removed (see Altmeyer, 2006). The other items were added together for a scores ranging from 20-180.

*Behavioral inhibition system (BIS)/ behavioral approach system (BAS) Personality Survey:* A 20 item measure that tests individual differences in terms of how participants solve problems (Carver & White, 1994). BIS is a single measure and BAS has three components: BAS-Drive, BAS-Fun Seeking and BAS-Reward Responsiveness. BIS/BAS was measured on a four-point scale: 1= very true for me, 2= somewhat true for me, 3=somewhat false for me, and 4= very false for me. The scale included 24 items, including BAS statements such as “I go out of my way to get things I want”; “I have very few fears compared to my friends”; and “When I want something I usually go all-out to get it”. BIS includes statements like “I feel pretty worried or upset when I think or know somebody is angry at me” and “I worry about making mistakes”. Participants ranked their level of agreement with each statement. All items except for 2 (“Even if something bad is about to happen to me, I rarely experience fear or nervousness”) and 22 (“I have very few fears compared to my friends”) were reverse-scored.

*The Big Five Personality Scale:* A 44-item scale that measures personality differences among people in five main dimensions (John and Benet-Martinez, 1998). The five personality dimensions tested are openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Questions were rated on a scale of 1 to 5, one being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. Sample questions include “I see myself as someone who is talkative”, “I see myself as someone who is relaxed, handles stress well”, and “I see myself as someone who is curious about many things”.

*Social Dominance Orientation:* A 16-item measure of participants’ level of inclination toward group based hierarchy and inequality (Ho et al., 2015). The subscales indicate a pro-social

dominance versus anti-social dominance orientation and pro-egalitarian versus anti-egalitarian orientation. Social Dominance Orientation was measured as dominance of certain groups (SDO-D) and egalitarianism of intergroup relationships (SDP-E) (Ho, Sidanius, Pratto, Levin, Thomsen, Kteily, and Sheehy-Skeffington, 2012). Eight items measured SDO egalitarianism. Items included statements such as: “It would be good if all groups could be equal” and “No one group should dominate in society”. Participants ranked their level of agreement with the statements from 1-7, 1 being strongly disagree and 7 being strongly agree. The SDO-D scale included either items including: “Some groups of people are just more worthy than others” and “Inferior groups should stay in their place”. Participants ranked each statement from 1 to 7, 1= strongly disagree and 7= strongly agree.

### Results

In order to test the hypothesis that people who score high on BAS (specifically BAS-drive) will also score high on political conservatism and when people score high on BIS, they will score high on liberalism, Pearson’s correlations were obtained. Pearson’s correlations were also calculated to determine whether significant correlations existed between political orientation and any of the personality traits tested.

The original hypothesis was partially supported. I predicted that when people score high on BAS (specifically BAS-drive), they will also score high on political conservatism and when people score high on BIS, they will score high on liberalism. Study one found that there was a positive relationship between BAS-drive and a more conservative orientation  $r(317) = .218, p = .020$ . The findings from study two revealed a more complex relationship than hypothesized in study one. The second part of the hypothesis was not supported because there was not a significant relationship between BIS and liberalism  $r(317) = .049, p = .608$ .



Study two confirmed the findings of study one, but the relationship was found to be affected by other variables. Table 1 summarizes the correlations from Study 2. BAS-Drive was correlated with both self-restraint and self-reliance as well as a pro-social dominance orientation. The relationship between BAS-drive and conservatism may be mediated by self-restraint and self-reliance. The correlation between BAS-drive and self-restraint was  $r(113) = .449, p = .000$ . The correlation between BAS-drive and self-reliance was  $r(113) = .293, p = .002$ . The correlation between BAS-drive and pro-social dominance orientation was  $r(113) = .283, p = .002$ .

Political orientation was found to correlate significantly with two aspects of the Big 5 Personality traits: openness and conscientiousness. Openness was significantly positively correlated with liberalism  $r(113) = .255, p = .006$ . Conscientiousness was significantly positively correlated with conservatism,  $r(113) = .327, p = .000$ . The other three personality traits tested, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism were not significantly related to political orientation.

### Discussion

The findings of this study show that the relationship between conservatism and the BAS-Drive component of temperament was influenced by the conservative motives of self-reliance and self-restraint. The results suggest that conservatives may be more likely to be motivated by self-focused interests which leads them to endorse BAS-Drive items such as “I go out of my way to get things I want” and possibly that this has roots in biological aspects of personality. I expected there to be a positive relationship between BIS and liberalism. There might not have been a significant relationship between BIS and liberalism because liberals may be motivated by



reward seeking, but they are also motivated in different ways than conservatives, such as promoting the welfare of humanity and seeking social justice causes.

Openness was positively correlated with liberalism, and conscientiousness was positively correlated with conservatism, which has been found in many past studies. Carney, Jost, Gosling, and Potter (2008) conducted a three-part study on the relationship between personality dimensions and political orientation. The first study measured the effect of Big Five Personality traits (extraversion, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism) on political orientation. The researchers found that the main difference in political orientations had to do with peoples' variation in experiences involving openness. Participants who identified as liberal scored higher on openness to new experiences. Conservative participants scored higher on conscientiousness. The study confirms other findings that suggest that there are measurable and replicable differences among the personalities of conservative and liberal individuals. Another study done in 2009 by Zettler and Hilbig found that there was a significant correlation between openness to experience and left-wing politics.

There are limitations of the current study. The method of the study should be replicated. The population studied was limited to university students in Wyoming, so the participants included in the study should be expanded. Additionally, there were many questions in the same questionnaire, so participants may have been fatigued by the end of it and not as invested in their responses.

Since there are unclear results in the existing literature, more research should be done. The majority of past studies have not studied the components of BAS individually in relationship to political orientation, so more research should be done that breaks BAS down into its three subparts (BAS drive, BAS fun-seeking, and BAS reward responsiveness). Janoff-Bulman,

Sheikh, and Baldacci (2007) found that conservatives scored highest on the two avoidance measures (BIS), whereas the approach motives (BAS) were associated with liberalism. The researchers only looked at BAS as approach motivation for moral motives, but they did not break BAS down into its three components. The results of the study also found a BIS orientation characterizes politically conservative people and a BAS orientation characterizes liberals. Since other studies have found a significant relationship between BAS and liberalism before BAS was broken down, and the current study did not, further research should be done to investigate the relationship.

EEG data could be collected on the participants in the current study, to see if EEG measures of BIS/BAS and the survey data collected were positively correlated like they should be. This study advances previous knowledge in the area because it did break down BAS into its components and the findings were different from previous research, as a result. Other studies have found that overall BAS is correlated with liberalism, but when we broke down BAS, we found that the drive component was actually correlated positively with conservatism. The findings of the study should be replicated, to see if the same results are found by other researchers. This remains important because the general purpose of doing studies in this area is to increase the overall understanding of how temperament and personality can affect people's political orientation, and current events continually remind us that political issues are important. Thus continuing to study the motivations behind political decisions is vital.

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