

Understanding Committed Leftists in the United States right before the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

Abstract

We used both quantitative and qualitative methods to compare Leftists and Liberals we recruited from online political spaces and Prolific ($N = 621$). Rather than identifying as more extreme Liberals, people recruited from Leftist spaces see Leftists as a distinct group, defined by their anti-capitalist ideology, and desire for radical societal change. This is part of a general moral opposition to the status quo, which negatively predicted support for Joe Biden, by committed Leftists but not convenience-sampled Liberals, right before the 2020 election. In sum, committed Leftists see themselves as a distinct and meaningful political identity group that lies outside the liberal-conservative ideology spectrum. Implications for coalition building among the left are discussed.

Keywords: leftism, anti-capitalism, radicalism, system-justification, harm reduction, moral opposition

Highlights

- We surveyed Leftists from strongly identified groups right before the 2020 U.S. presidential election
- Committed Leftists understand their identity as separate from Liberals, characterized by anti-capitalist ideology and the need for radical change
- Committed Leftists morally oppose the status quo, and conceptualize voting for Joe Biden as a form of harm reduction; as with other harm reduction policies those with strong moral opposition are less likely to support the solution
- Leftists and Liberals may be able to forge a more effective coalition if ideological and identity differences are recognized

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Political ideology in the United States is typically conceptualized, described and measured as a spectrum. This metaphor implies that the people who place themselves along the spectrum differ in degree from each other; an individual who places themselves all the way on the left of the spectrum, is an extreme version of another individual closer to the middle. But this metaphor is limited, and does not capture the complexity of political preferences (see Costello et al., 2022). Yet, the relevance of the spectrum metaphor has only increased with the rise of affective polarization (e.g., Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018) and political sectarianism (see e.g., Finkel et al., 2020), suggesting that the people who are differing in degree along the spectrum are getting further apart; there is an increasing number of people who identify at the extreme ends of this spectrum. It would follow then, that to better understand the current political climate in the United States, then, we must better understand the people on the “ends.”

In this paper, we sought to characterize the political identities associated with the extreme “liberal” end of the political ideology spectrum. We find that those who, from the outside, we might understand as identified as extremely liberal, see themselves not as liberals but as Leftists who do not see themselves as belonging on the scale at all. We focus here on the Left to complement prior work on the “alt-right” or extreme conservative end (or off the end) of the spectrum (Forscher & Kteily, 2020), and to complement existing work on left-wing authoritarianism which suggests that there are extreme left-identified authoritarians as well as right-identified ones (Conway et al., 2018; Costello et al., 2022). This work, in contrast with prior work, seeks to understand Leftists from their own perspective.

The Extreme Ends of the Political Ideology Spectrum

There is reason to think that individuals who appear to be on the extreme ends of the traditional political ideology spectrum in the United States actually see themselves as distinct political groups. For example, research on people who identify on the extreme right (i.e., “alt-right”) shows that the alt-right have a greater preference for anti-globalist and anti-establishment views (Forscher & Kteily, 2020). Other researchers show that the alt-right are distinct from other right-leaning groups (i.e., Trump supporters) on a number of factors, including their high enthusiasm for suspicion of mainstream media, trust in alternative media, and desire for collective action on behalf of Whites (Forscher & Kteily, 2020). Relatively more research has been dedicated to understanding the extreme right, a focus driven by the propensity for violence within these groups (Faragó et al, 2019; Jasko et al., 2022) and the desire to understand right-wing authoritarianism (Adorno et al., 1950, Altemeyer, 1998).

Our objective was to characterize and describe the views and identities of individuals in the United States who self-identify as Leftists. This project stands apart from studies that have profiled individuals on the extreme Left as proponents of left-wing authoritarianism. There is some debate as to whether Left-wing authoritarianism exists, is appropriately named, or logically possible (Conway et al., 2018; Costello et al., 2021; Badaan & Jost, 2020; Manson, 2020; Nilsson & Jost, 2020; Stone, 1980). However, by comparing the most extreme people on the Left to those on the Right, this approach has sidestepped a longstanding distinction that exists among politically left-leaning individuals in the U.S.--that between Leftists and Liberals (e.g., see Menand, 2021). Our work is in keeping with efforts to characterize potentially distinct political

identities among the Left that do not revolve around questions of authoritarianism (see also Proulx et al., 2023). Here, we sought to better understand and characterize the, albeit permeable, boundary between Leftists and Liberals.

Understanding Leftist Ideology

To begin the discussion of how Leftists in the United States differ from their Liberal counterparts, we first focus on beliefs about capitalism. Like Liberals, Leftists' values are tied to progressive change. However, unlike Liberals, Leftists tend not to have mainstream political power (e.g., Camejo, 1970; Mikkelsen, 2012; Robinson, 2017), and are against capitalism, the predominant economic ideology in the United States (to the point of invisibility; Fisher, 2009). Leftists see themselves as cohering around a distinct ideology from Liberalism—one that is anti-capitalist and endorses radical social change (e.g., Ture, 1966).

Leftists' rejection of capitalism and endorsement of radical change may also extend to what they think about the political status quo in the United States. That is, the urgency around radical (vs. incremental) social change for Leftists suggests they may *morally oppose* the political status quo more than Liberals. When people morally oppose (vs. dislike) an idea or an action they tend to be less tolerant of dissent and more confident in their own beliefs (Bennett, 2002; Fernbach et al., 2019; see Bauman & Skitka, 2009 for review), to experience moral emotions like anger, disgust, and outrage (Brandt et al., 2015; Feinberg et al., 2019; Skitka & Wisneski, 2011), and to experience their judgments as more objective (Goodwin & Darley, 2008; Heiphetz & Young, 2017), and universal (Van Bavel et al., 2012), and as requiring action (Skitka & Morgan, 2014) – often in terms of institutional validation, laws, taxes, and funding (Rozin, 1999; Rozin et al., 1997; for an overview, see Wylie et al., 2022). Moreover, when people are

morally opposed to an action (e.g., premarital sex), they also tend to oppose strategies (e.g., sex education) that allow people to carry on with an immoral (in their eyes) behavior, at reduced harm to themselves (MacCoun, 2013; Wylie et al., 2022). We suspect that Leftists morally oppose the status quo, and so a presidential candidate (eg., Joe Biden) who will perpetuate it is akin to a harm reduction strategy about the state of the country. In other words, as with other harm reduction strategies aimed at behaviors that some morally oppose (MacCoun, 2013; Wylie et al., 2022) we might expect a negative relationship between moral opposition to the status quo and support for Biden's policy agenda for Leftists, but not for Liberals.

We should also note that the terms “radical” and “extremist” are sometimes used interchangeably in scholarship and in daily life. But these terms refer to meaningfully different constructs: While extremism refers to a reactionary ideological position organized around the belief in a dominance hierarchy, radicalism refers to an ideology which values anti-authoritarianism and egalitarian conditions (Bötticher, 2017). That is, radicals seek complete restructuring of society, but are concerned with eradicating oppression, and individuals on the left side of the political spectrum are less likely to use violence to achieve their aims relative to extremists on the right side of the political spectrum (Badaan & Jost, 2020; Bötticher, 2017). Thus, we suspect that Leftists define themselves as radicals, but not as extremists.

Present Research

The current exploratory research sought to characterize the ideology and psychology of strongly identified Leftists in the United States at a very particular moment in time: right before the 2020 U.S. presidential election. We employed a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to characterize Leftists and compare them to a convenience sample of Liberals recruited from

Prolific. We asked about identity (self-identification as Leftist vs. Liberal, self-labeling from many options, and more traditional Likert measures), ideology (e.g., support for capitalism, desire for radical change), morality (especially moral opposition to the status quo), and political preferences (support for Joe Biden and other policy preferences).

There are benefits and drawbacks to our approach. We opted to recruit Leftists from highly involved spaces and recruited Liberals from Prolific. This provided a snapshot of how highly identified, committed Leftists were feeling leading up to a presidential election, but it does not let us compare apples-to-apples with highly identified Liberals. As a result, we have a snapshot comparing Leftists to a typical left-leaning psychology sample, but not to equally committed individuals who identify as Liberal. Further, this tense moment in time may have exaggerated differences among these two groups, which allowed us to locate and describe the points of tension (and the points of connection) between these two groups.

Methods

Participants and Design

The week before the 2020 United States presidential election, we used systematic recruitment from Prolific and snowball sampling from non-Prolific sources. We recruited from Leftist Reddit communities, mutual aid groups (see Spade, 2020), community organizing collectives, and various social media platforms (e.g., Facebook; 283 Prolific, 539 Non-Prolific). On Prolific, we advertised our study for left-leaning participants; our total sample yielded 60 self-identified Leftists on Prolific, and 196 Liberals on Prolific. We pre-registered that the following quantitative analyses would only include participants who passed both attention checks, however this would lead us to exclude 374 participants, and would reduce our power

significantly. To mitigate this issue, we report our quantitative analyses with our full sample (excluding three participants who were under 18) everywhere unless the analysis adhering to our exclusion criteria drastically changed the interpretation of the findings. We report our full pre-registered exclusions in the Supplemental Materials on our OSF page: <https://osf.io/chz89/>. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 75 ($M = 29.97$, $SD = 9.98$; 43% Female, 33% Male). Of the total participants, 408 identified as White, 48 identified as Asian, 36 identified as Latino(a), 25 identified as Black or African American, and 6 identified as Native American or Native Hawaiian. Participants recruited via Prolific were paid approximately \$12.58 per hour for their time. Participants recruited through snowball sampling were compensated by being entered into a raffle for a \$100 Visa gift card and were provided an additional ideologically aligned charity incentive for community fridges in New York City.

We pre-registered that we would be collecting this data, but at its core this is an exploratory endeavor. Our pre-registration was largely done for transparency and record-keeping rather than confirming our hypotheses, and we take care in our results to distinguish between our exploratory and confirmatory analyses. All data exclusions, relevant hypotheses, and analyses were pre-registered on the Open Science Foundation (OSF). To take advantage of this unique dataset, we also collected and pre-registered other variables that are beyond the scope of this paper. All materials, code for analyses, and supplemental materials (except for the potentially-identifying free responses), are available on the project's OSF page: <https://osf.io/chz89/>

Materials

Political Identity

Political Identity Labels. Participants indicated whether they identify as either a Leftist or a Liberal in a two-alternative forced-choice question. They also chose identity labels from a set list to identify with (e.g., Democrat, Socialist; see Supplement), and selected all that applied; of these, they then selected the single label that best describes them. At the end of the survey, participants filled out the traditional political orientation measure of three 7-point scales (from 1 = *Extremely conservative* to 7 = *Extremely liberal*) measuring overall political orientation, social issues, and economic issues ($\alpha = .86$).

Identity Centrality and Attitude Strength. Two scales used participants' selected best political identity to measure centrality and strength of the identity. We used the Identity Centrality Scale (sample item: "The fact that I am [political identity label] is an important part of my identity", Leach et al. (2008); $\alpha = .91$) and the Attitude Strength Scale (sample item: "How strongly do you feel about being [political identity label]?", Skitka et al., 2005; $\alpha = .89$).

Attitudes Toward the Political and Economic Status Quo

We hypothesized that Leftists' dislike for the current political and economic system and desire for radical (vs. incremental change), would differentiate them from Liberals. Accordingly, we measured system justification motivation (Kay & Jost, 2003), incrementalism, free market mentality index (i.e., how much people support free market ideology; Newland, 2018), and structural explanations for poverty (Bullock et al., 2003).

System Justification. System justification is a scale designed to measure the tendency to justify the current political system ($\alpha = .82$). A representative item is "Society is set up so that

people usually get what they deserve”, rated on a scale from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree* (Kay & Jost, 2003).

Incrementalism. We generated a scale designed to test support for incremental societal change, ($\alpha = .81$). A representative item is “Gradual change can be a good thing when it means more immediate improvements in people’s lives”, rated on a scale from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*.

Free-Market Mentality Index. The Free-Market Mentality Index measures agreement with pro-capitalist or pro-market ideology. One item was removed, given its low inter-item correlation with other scale items ($\alpha = .76$). Example items include “Private ownership of business and industry should be increased”, and “Competition is good; it stimulates people to work hard and develop new ideas” rated on scales from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree* (Newland, 2018).

Structural Explanations for Poverty. Six items from the Attributions of Poverty Questionnaire (Bullock et al., 2003) were used to measure structural attributions of poverty. The items involved rating the importance of different factors in contributing to poverty (1 = *Not at all important* to 7 = *Very important*). One item was removed due to low inter-item correlation ($\alpha = .80$, Leftists: $\alpha = .76$, Liberals: $\alpha = .78$). A representative item is “A capitalist society in which the wealth of some is contingent on the poverty of others.”

Moral Opposition to the Status Quo

We hypothesized that Leftists would experience greater moralization of the political status quo and the Democratic establishment and that this would influence their voting preferences, relative to Liberals.

Moral Opposition. We used a moral opposition scale adapted from previous research on moralization (Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Rozin, 1999; Skitka, 2010; Skitka & Mullen, 2002; Skitka et al., 2005; Smetana, 1985, Tetlock et al., 2000; Turiel 1983; see Wylie et al., 2022). This measure used the status quo as the target of moral opposition with representative items including “it is morally wrong to push an agenda in line with the political status quo” rated from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* ($\alpha = .94$). The same items were used to measure moral opposition of the Democratic Establishment. All items were again rated from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* ($\alpha = .97$).

Free Response Items

Participants completed three free response measures, each asking them to define either a Liberal, Leftist, and Conservative. The prompt(s) read, “In a few sentences, please define what a [Liberal/Leftist/Conservative] is to you.” Here, we report only Leftists and Liberals writing about themselves and each other.

Grounded theory content analysis

Codebook Development. We also used grounded theory content analysis to investigate the free response data. The codebook was developed by the primary coder using a grounded theory approach (e.g., Charmaz, 1983; Charmaz, 2006; for a review of process and sensitizing concepts, as well as final codebook see Supplementary Materials). As a result of this procedure,

we are able to identify both how often a concept (like capitalism) was invoked in the responses, as well as particularly ascriptions (e.g., describing Liberals as pro-capitalism).

Coding Procedure. A team of five researchers convened to analyze the data. The primary coder trained the other four researchers on how to use the codebook and conduct the analyses. To establish inter-rater reliability (IRR), the research team independently coded a set of 75 responses and the primary coder calculated an IRR score (see Miles & Huberman, 1994), measured against the suggested standard of 80% agreement on 95% of codes. The team resolved conflicts, until final IRR was high ($> 80\%$), and then the team independently coded each text response. Moreover, we found that for some analyses there were empty cells, such that for example, Leftists never referred to Leftists as capitalists. To make it possible to run the analyses, we selected a cell at random to recode from a 0 to a 1 (for a similar strategy see Nam et al., 2013).

Results

To describe our results we will refer to committed Leftists and convenience-sample Liberals to avoid glossing over the substantial differences in recruitment techniques between the groups. To analyze the free-response items, we used R statistical analysis software (R Core Team, 2020) to preprocess, compare frequencies, and implement an algorithm to compare the language used when committed Leftists described Leftists, committed Leftists described Liberals, convenience-sample Liberals described Leftists, and convenience-sample Liberals described Liberals. We first present results from the Natural Language Processing of committed Leftists and convenience-sample Liberals writing about themselves and each other to give a sense of the general differences between the two groups. Then, we confirm the utility of our

Leftist and Liberal dichotomous political identity measure by examining psychological and policy support differences between the two groups. All scale analyses were conducted using general linear models in R (R Core Team, 2020). Target analyses were conducted with our full sample and with our pre-registered sample of participants who passed basic attention checks. We report our analyses with our full sample everywhere unless the analysis adhering to our exclusion criteria drastically changed the interpretation of the findings (see Supplement for analyses conducted with pre-registered exclusions). Correlations between the dependent variables are also included in the Supplementary Material. Whenever possible, we support data from questionnaires with content-coded analyses of committed Leftists and convenience-sample Liberals talking about themselves and each other.

Leftists and Liberals talking about themselves and each other

First, to get an overall snapshot of the differences between our sample of committed Leftists and convenience-sample Liberals, we used a natural language processing approach to analyze their free response writing, comparing frequency statistics of word usage (tf-idf) and modeling latent topics for each of the pairs. While the total number of words used by convenience-sample Liberals and committed Leftists differs slightly ($WC_{\text{liberal}} = 19.76$; $WC_{\text{left}} = 24.72$), this method assesses the importance of a word given the document it occurs within. And though these methods also require interpretation from the researcher, the initial algorithmic nature permits a robust and rich comparison of language use between the target groups (see Jackson et al., 2021). Here, we compared language used to describe Liberals and Leftists based on an individual's self-reported ideology. The breakdown of the top 5 words associated with each author-target pair are listed below in Figure 1. The most common term used when

committed Leftists write about Leftists is anti-capitalism, and when they write about Liberals, it is incremental change. When convenience-sample Liberals write about Leftists they most commonly refer to them as anti-capitalist, socialist, and as extreme. When convenience-sample Liberals talk about themselves, themes of choice and science come up most frequently. We can see from this general approach that the two self-identified groups see differences between them, and do not always agree about what the other stands for. Additionally, we also used latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) to investigate which topics were most common among the different pairings from a bottom-up approach (that assesses importance of words across the documents they appear). The top 10 topics are reported in the Supplemental Materials.

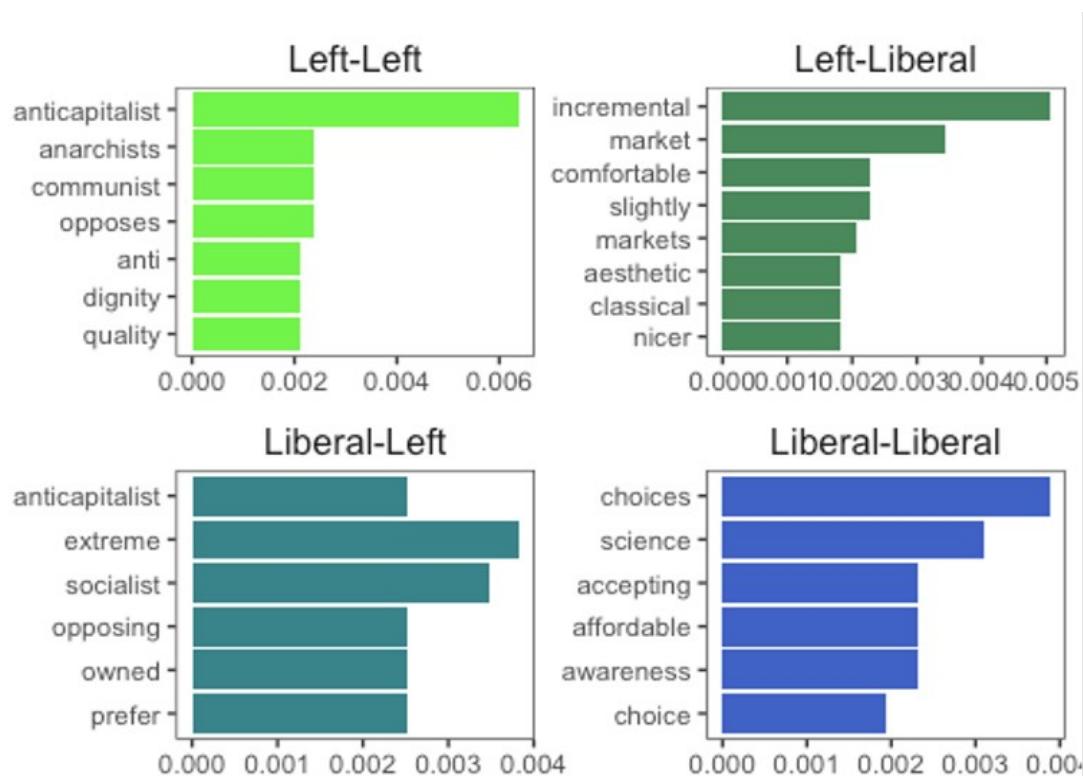


Figure 1. List of top 5 most important words used by each author-target pair, calculated using tf-idf, which quantifies importance of a word across a document using both frequency and a weighting term.

Source and Target Group	Theme	Sample Quotation
<i>Committed Leftists talking about Leftists</i>	Anti-capitalism	"A leftist is anyone who sees the inherent flaws in capitalism and seeks to sanction or abolish it"
	Radical change	"A leftist is someone who recognizes the primary role of racial capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and imperialism in our world. They believe that the system must be uprooted and made unrecognizably different to address human needs and wants in a way that rectifies past and current oppression"
	Status quo	"A general term to signify an array of radical politics which seek to disrupt the status quo."
<i>Committed Leftists talking about Liberals</i>	Capitalism	"Someone who believes in the Ideology of Liberalism, believing in free markets, capitalism, and viewing society through an individualistic lens"
	Incrementalism	"A person who wants to keep society largely the way it is, with most proposed changes being gradual, incremental, and/or minor"
	Status quo	"Someone who generally supports social justice & progressive policies but believes in incremental reform and has faith in the Democratic status quo."
<i>Convenience-sample Liberals talking about Liberals</i>	Incrementalism	"Seeking significant changes that speak to minimizing oppression in our world, via channels that currently exist -- as opposed to starting over."
	Status quo	"Someone pushing for progressive evolution of laws to address current challenges." "Someone who believes that constant growth is needed to progressively bend the arc of the universe toward justice." "Very progressive views often striving for change now."
<i>Convenience-sample Liberals talking about Leftists</i>	Anti-capitalism	"A leftist is someone who doesn't believe in private property. Someone who wants government to take over businesses."
	Radical change	"Someone who wants to have a revolution instead of stable steps to change, someone who may support communism"

	Status quo	“Someone who supports more expansive overhauling of current systems with heavy government involvement/support/regulation.”
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Table 1. Representative quotations of major themes in participants’ writing, including committed Leftists writing about Leftists and Liberals, and convenience sample Liberals writing about Leftists and Liberals. Major themes include anti-capitalism, desire for radical vs. incremental change, and opposition to the status quo.

Leftist vs. Liberal Political Identity

Testing Leftist vs. Liberal Identity Measure

For the previous and all following analyses, we used our Leftist vs. Liberal self-identification variable, which predicted differences on the classic 3-item political ideology scale, such that Leftists were more to the left than Liberals on political ideology ($M_{Left} = 6.60$, $SD_{Left} = 0.78$; $M_{Lib} = 5.91$, $SD_{Lib} = 0.80$; $t(538) = -10.07$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.87$). We prefer the self-identified Leftist vs. Liberal variable because we think it better captures how members of the Left understand themselves. And Leftists do not find this scale to be meaningfully reflective of their political identity. As one Leftist participant wrote in the overall comments section at the end of the survey: “I put liberal but LOL.”

Moreover, when participants indicated the identity labels they identify with from a larger set, (e.g., Democrat, Socialist; see Appendix A), the most commonly chosen labels among our committed Leftists were “Leftist” and “Anti-capitalist”, and the most common label among our convenience-sample Liberals was “Liberal” (see Figure 1). As expected, the most frequently chosen *best* label among our committed Leftists was “Leftist” and the most frequently chosen among our convenience-sample Liberals was “Liberal” further validating our primary predictor. There were distinct patterns in label usage, such that some labels were popular among committed

Leftists but not convenience-sample Liberals (e.g., Communist, Anarchist) and some were popular among Liberals but not Leftists (e.g., Democrat; for frequency of all label choices, see Figure 2).

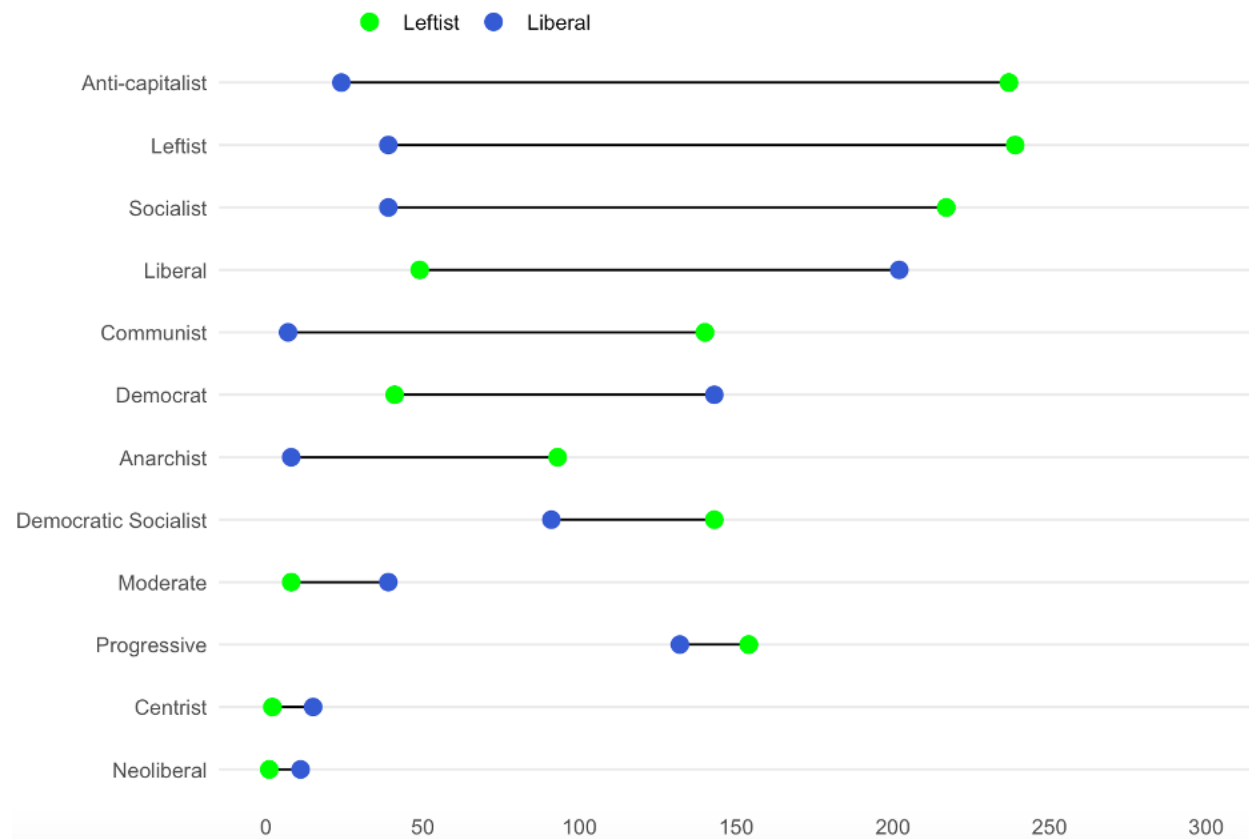


Figure 2. Frequency of freely chosen labels among sampled Leftists and Liberals.

When we content-analyzed participants' own writing about 'what makes a Leftist' and 'what makes a Liberal', we found that participants talked about whether Leftists and Liberals are separate groups. Using a standard generalized linear model, we found a significant participant (sampled Leftist vs. sampled Liberal writer) by target identity (writing about Leftists vs. Liberals) interaction, primarily driven by convenience-sample Liberals, $z = -2.31, p = .021$. Liberals (8%) were more likely to describe the two groups as similar, compared to Leftists (2%). For example, one of our sampled Liberals wrote "[A Leftist is] a liberal to the extreme."

Convenience-sample Liberals referred to this comparison more often when describing Leftists (12%) than Liberals (4%), ($1, N = 511$) = 8.54, $p = .003$, and sampled Leftists were unlikely to say that the groups were the same regardless of who they were describing (Leftist = 2%; Liberal = 3%), $p = .404$ (see Figure 3). This, taken together with the Natural Language Processing analysis, suggests that the boundary between the two groups is more salient for our committed Leftists than convenience-sample Liberals.

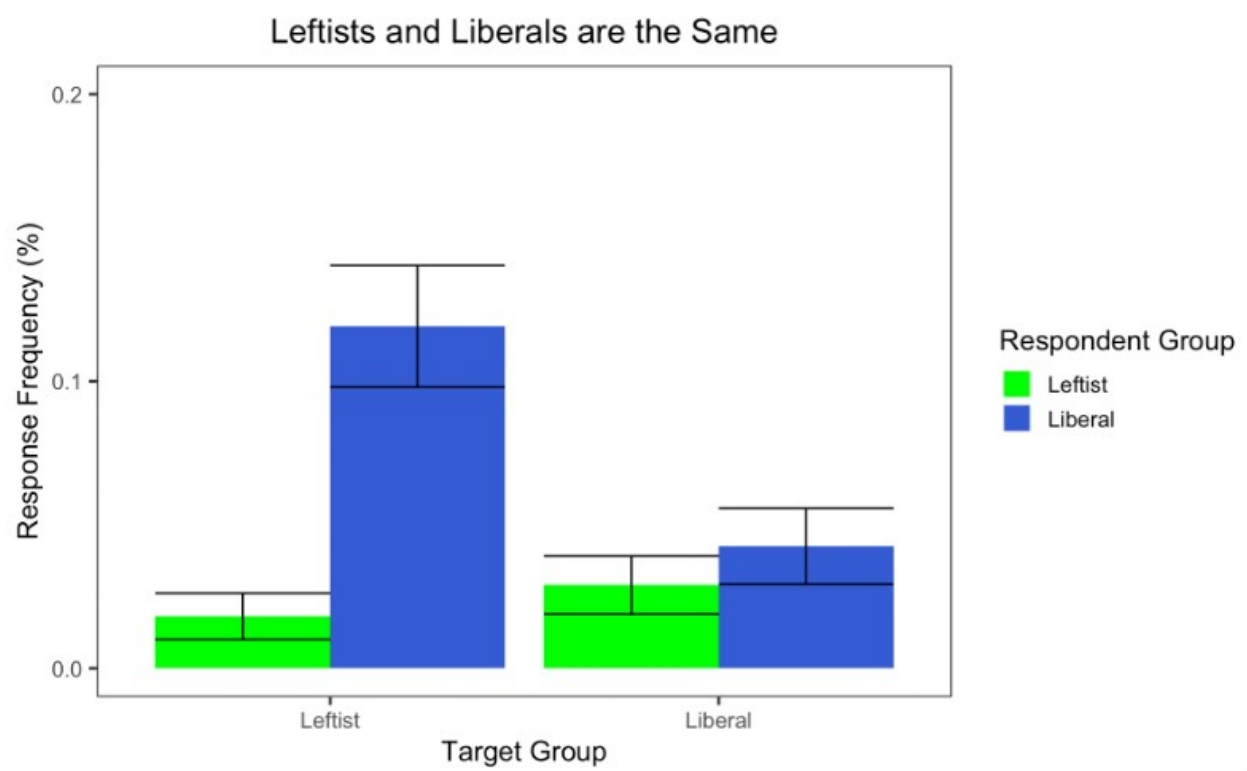


Figure 3. Frequency of language use when sampled Leftists and Liberals described themselves as similar or the same. Graph is scaled for clarity. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Political Identity Centrality and Attitude Strength

Committed Leftists rated their political identity as more central to their identity ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.47$) compared to convenience-sample Liberals ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.66$), $t(615) = -6.68$, $p < .001$, $d = .54$. Similarly, our sampled Leftists showed greater strength in their

identification with their political labels ($M = 5.49$, $SD = 1.30$), compared to sampled Liberals ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.51$), $t(612) = -6.67$, $p < .001$, $d = .54$. However, clearly these results must be interpreted with some skepticism since the majority of our Leftists were recruited from spaces *about* being a Leftist, whereas the majority of our Liberal participants were recruited from Prolific (see Supplement for differences between Leftists recruited from community samples compared to Leftists recruited on Prolific; sampled Liberals were similar across both sampling methods, but we did not reach out to Liberal special interest groups). Because of this, all subsequent analyses are reported alone and with identity centrality included as a covariate. We recognize that differences between sampled Leftists and Liberals cannot be fully explained by the observed differences in identity centrality that likely stem from differences in recruitment.

Leftist vs. Liberal Ideology

Attitudes Towards the Economy

Committed Leftists made more structural attributions for poverty ($M = 6.52$, $SD = 0.71$) compared to convenience-sample Liberals ($M = 5.87$, $SD = 0.97$), $t(515) = -8.83$, $p < .001$, $d = .79$, and this effect remains when we adjust for identity centrality, $t(513) = -7.83$, $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = .01$. Sampled Liberals, on the other hand, endorsed free-market mentality ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.97$), whereas committed Leftists did not ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 1.05$), $t(521) = 15.63$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.40$ (see Figure 4). This effect remains when we adjust for identity centrality, $t(519) = 14.37$, $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = .04$.

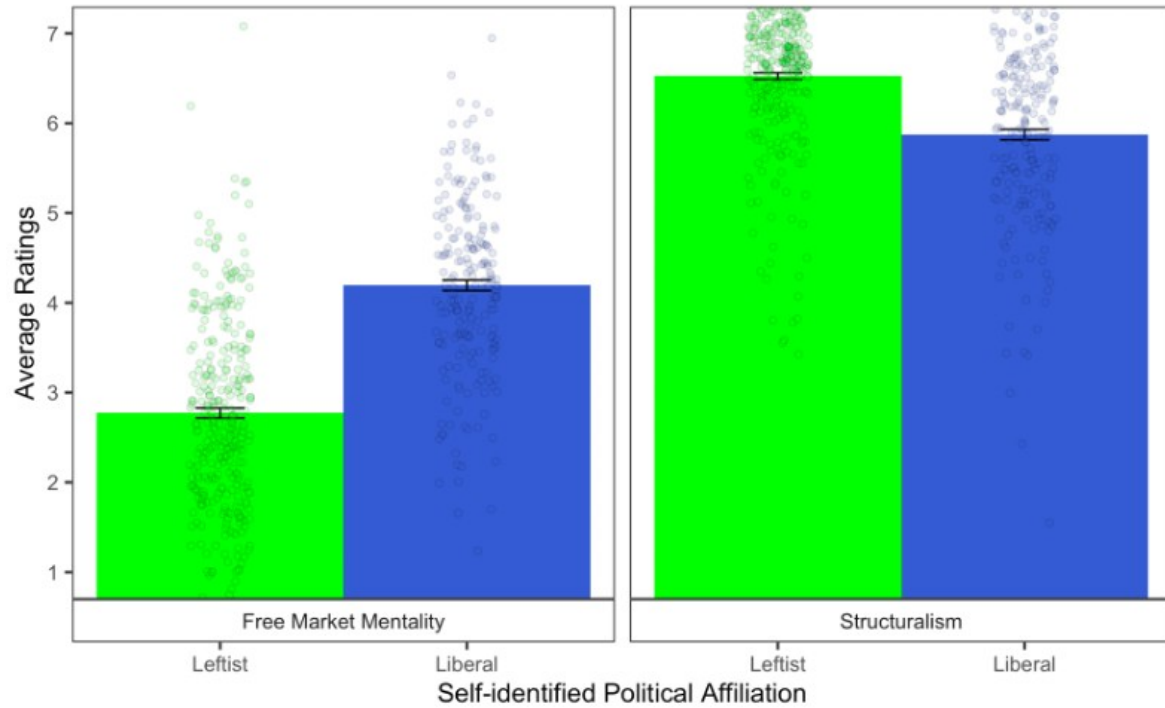


Figure 4. Mean differences between sampled Leftists and Liberals in terms of endorsement of free market principles (left), and structural attributions for poverty (right). Error bars represent $\pm 1 SE$.

Sampled Leftist and Liberals also spontaneously mentioned differences in economic ideology when describing themselves and each other. Specifically, in their free responses, we found a significant participant (committed Leftist vs. convenience-sample Liberal writer) by target identity (writing about Leftists vs. Liberals) interaction, $z = -3.25, p = .001$. Simple effects analyses revealed that committed Leftists made references to capitalism and anti-capitalism at roughly the same rate when describing both targets (Leftists = 33%, Liberals = 34%), $z = 5.83, p < .001$ while convenience-sample Liberals mentioned capitalism least when describing other Liberals (4%) compared to Leftists (13%), $(1, N = 511) = 41.41, p < .001$. Capitalism is in the background for sampled Liberals, but the foreground for committed Leftists.

We also found that participants described Leftists (24%) but never Liberals (0%), $z = 5.86, p < .001$ as anti-capitalist, and described *only* Liberals as capitalists (20%), $z = -4.81, p$

< .001. Only one person, a self-identified Liberal, described Leftists as capitalists. Many committed Leftists' description of what it means to be a Leftist included mention of anti-capitalism. For example, one sampled Leftist wrote, "A leftist is anyone who in theory opposes the capitalist mode of production and the free market system." Taken together, these results suggest that economic ideology (specifically, anti-capitalist ideology) is a guiding difference in how people understand Leftists and Liberals.

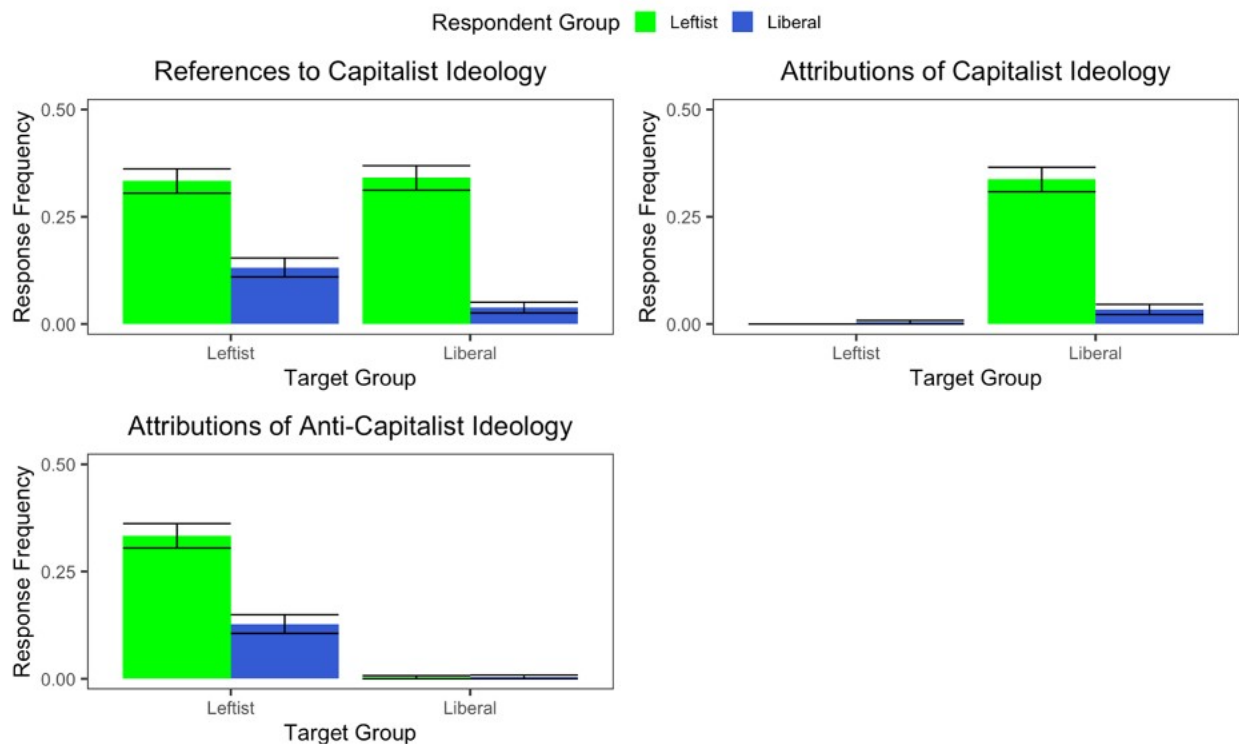


Figure 5. Frequency of language use of sampled Leftists and Liberals describing themselves and each other. Specifically, how often they reference capitalism (including anti-capitalism; top left) and specific attributions of holding capitalist (top right) and anti-capitalist ideology (bottom). Error bars represent 95% CI.

Attitudes Toward Change and the Status Quo

Sampled Liberals endorsed incrementalism ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 0.87$), more than sampled Leftists did ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.01$), $t(511) = 15.13$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.37$, and were more likely to

justify the current system ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 1.05$) compared to committed Leftists ($M = 1.81$, $SD = 0.80$), $t(523) = 9.87$, $p < .001$, $d = .88$, though both were below the midpoint (see Figure 4).

Differences remain, though are smaller, after adjusting for identity centrality for both incrementalism, $t(509) = 13.79$, $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, system justification, $t(521) = 9.08$, $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = .00$.

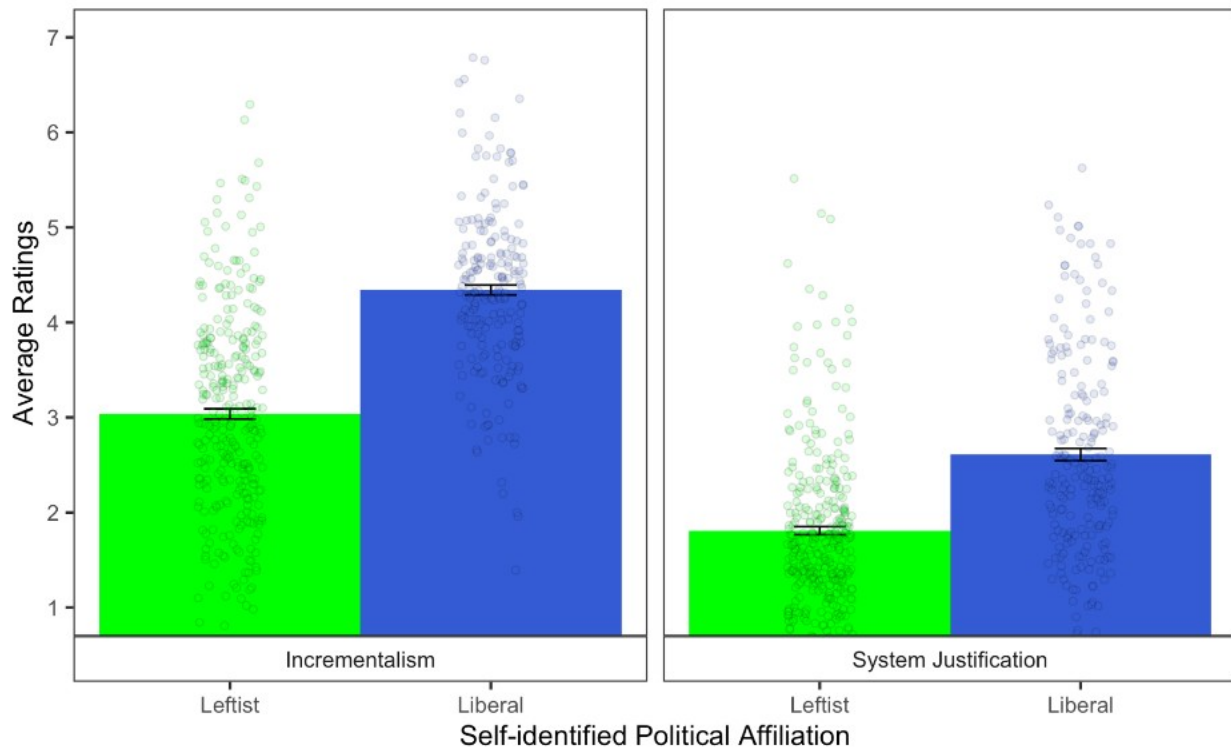


Figure 6. Mean differences between sampled Leftists and Liberals in terms of desire for incremental change (left) and system justification (right). Error bars represent ± 1 SE.

We first tested for differences in overall frequency of language discussing radical (vs. incremental) change in society. We found a significant participant (sampled Leftist vs. Liberal writer) by target identity (writing about Leftists vs. Liberals) interaction effect, $z = -2.22$, $p = .027$. Simple effects analyses revealed that committed Leftists were equally likely to reference incrementalist ideology when talking about Leftists (40%) compared to Liberals (43%), $p = .354$.

However, convenience-sample Liberals referenced radical change more frequently when talking about Leftists (32%) compared to Liberals (24%), ($1, N = 511$) = 4.56, $p = .033$.

There was also a main effect of target identity on attributions of radicalism, $z = 6.52$, $p < .001$. Participants identified Leftists as radicals (25%) but not Liberals (0.4%; see Figure 6). For example, one participant who self-identified as Leftist wrote, “[A Leftist is] someone who believes we aren’t progressing fast enough and need to be more radical because non-radical methods aren’t working.” Radicalism is perceived as positive among committed Leftists, but negative among convenience-sample Liberals.

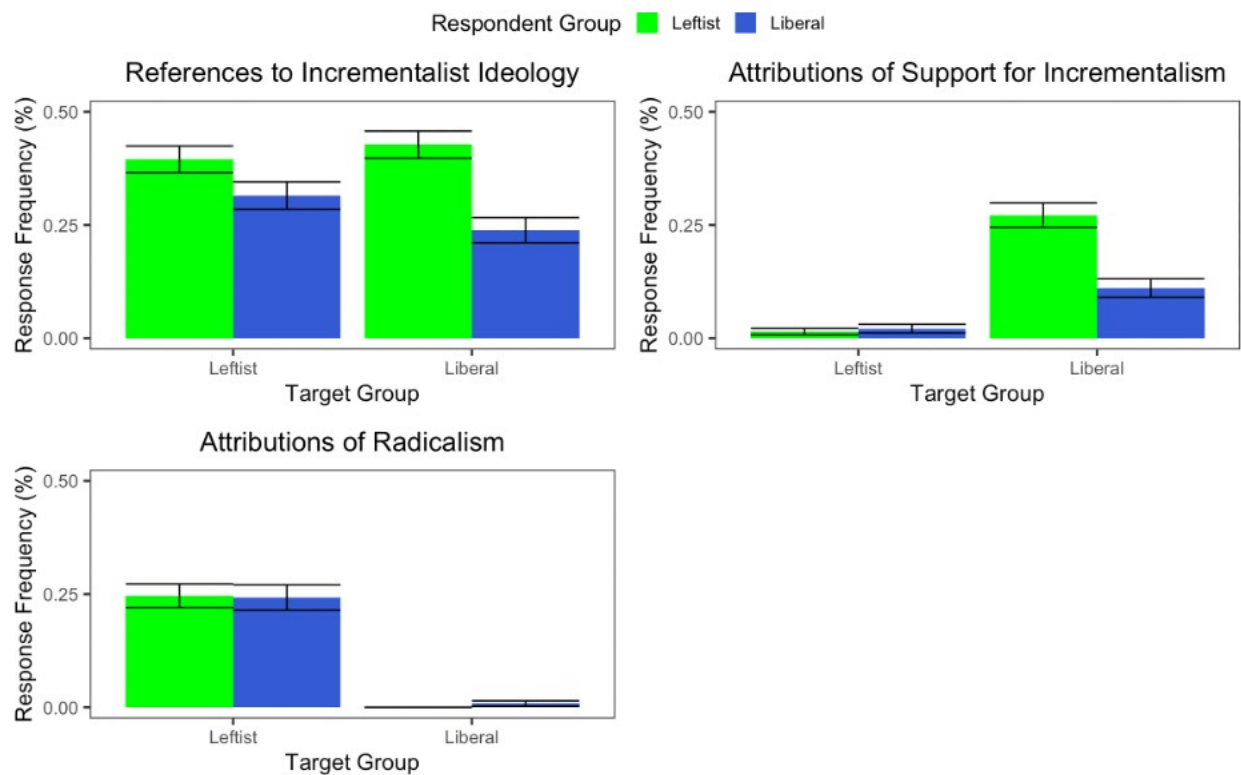


Figure 7. Frequency of language use when sampled Leftists and Liberals talk about themselves and each other. Specifically, how often ideas of incremental or radical change are referenced (top left), and how often Leftists and Liberals are described as supporting incremental change (top right) and radicalism (bottom). Error bars represent 95% CI.

Committed Leftists and convenience-sample Liberals both mentioned opposition to the status quo to a similar extent, $z = -0.23$, $p = .794$, and both groups described Leftists as rejecting the political status quo more frequently than Liberals, $z = 7.41$, $p < .001$. However, committed Leftists do not believe that Liberals oppose the status quo, as qualified by a significant interaction, $z = 4.42$, $p < .001$. Committed Leftists describe Leftists as rejecting the status quo more than any other pairing (38%), and they describe Liberals as opposing the status quo less than any other pairing (6.8%). On the other hand, the only mention of supporting the status quo came from committed Leftists describing Liberals (19%), $z = -2.39$, $p = .017$.

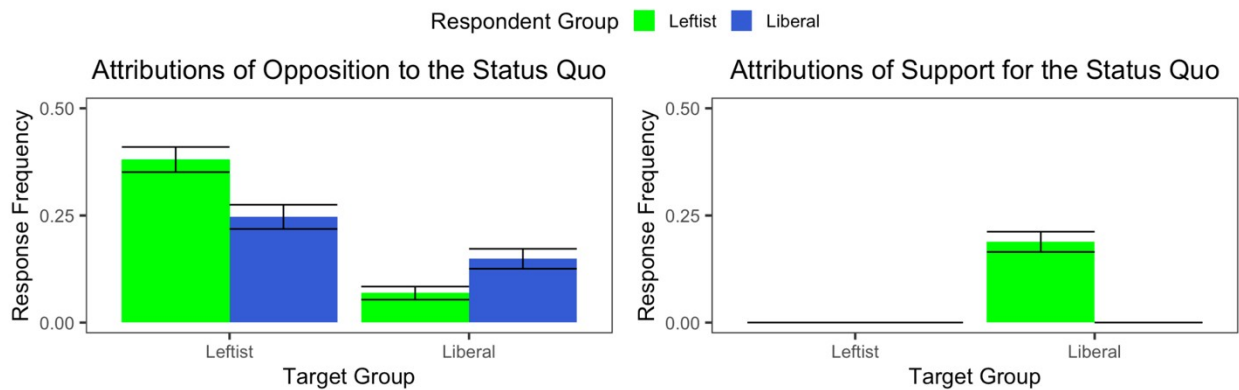


Figure 8. Frequency of language use when Leftists and Liberals talk about themselves and each other. Specifically, how often Leftists and Liberals are described as opposing or supporting the status quo. Error bars represent 95% CI.

Being extreme/extremist was mentioned only when talking about Leftists (8%; Liberals 0%), as indicated by a main effect of target identity, $z = 3.40$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 8). A few committed Leftists made references to their ideology being *extreme*; convenience-sample Liberals made references to Leftists being *too extreme* or *extremist*. While both groups believe that opposition to the status quo is a necessary feature of their progressive ideology, committed Leftists see themselves (and not Liberals) as radicals whereas convenience-sample Liberals see

Leftists as both radicals and extremists. This suggests that our sampled Liberals may not see a difference between radicalism and extremism, which are both seen negatively, while committed Leftists see their radicalism in a positive light.

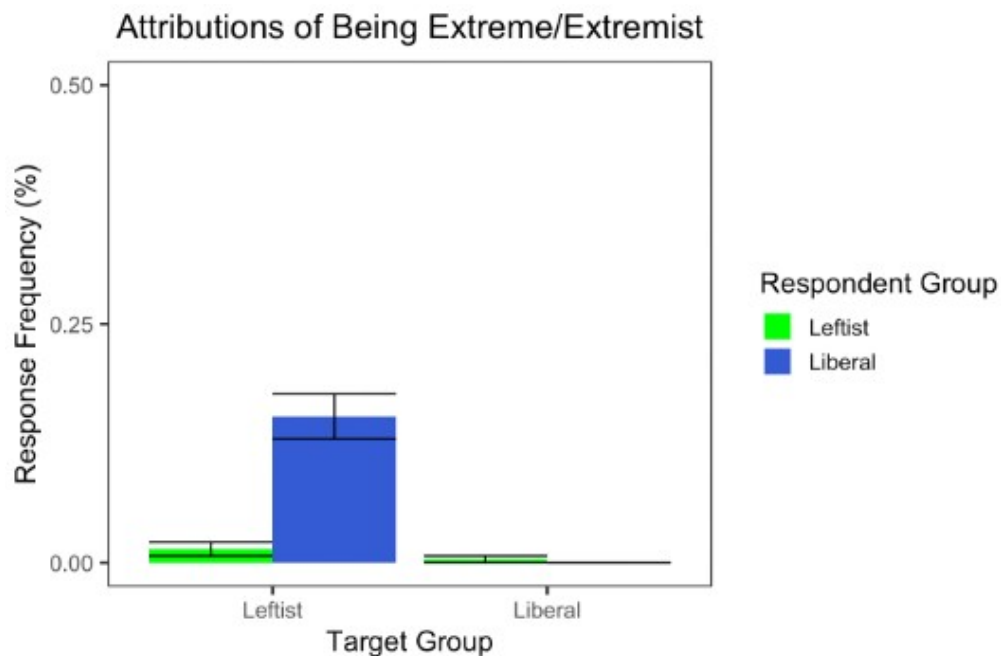


Figure 9. Frequency of language use when Leftists and Liberals talk about themselves and each other. Specifically, how often ideas of being extreme/extremism are mentioned. Error bars represent 95% CI.

Moral Opposition to the Status Quo

With these ideological differences in mind, we hypothesized that committed Leftists specifically would evince *moral opposition* to the status quo, and we set out to explore whether those differences had consequences for their support for Joe Biden. Akin to opposition to harm-reduction strategies for moralized behaviors (e.g., MacCoun, 2013; Wylie et al., 2022), we pre-registered analyses testing whether moral opposition to the status quo predicts support for Joe Biden's candidacy in the 2020 U.S. election. Specifically, we expected that moral opposition to the political status quo would both be greater for sampled Leftists than for sampled Liberals, and

that more moral opposition to the political status quo would predict less support for Biden's candidacy. We also predicted that moral opposition to the status quo would predict abstaining from voting in the 2020 election, but, contrary to our pre-registered predictions, the total number of abstainers was too low to analyze ($N = 32$; 24 Leftists, 11 Liberals)¹. For each of these analyses, we used ordinary least squares regression unless otherwise specified.

As predicted, we observed that committed Leftists were more morally opposed to the political status quo ($b = -0.94$, $SE = 0.10$, $t(615) = -9.09$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-1.14, -0.73]) and the Democratic establishment ($b = -2.18$, $SE = 0.12$, $t(617) = -17.48$, $p < .001$, 95%CI[-2.42, -1.93]) than convenience-sample Liberals (see Figure 9).

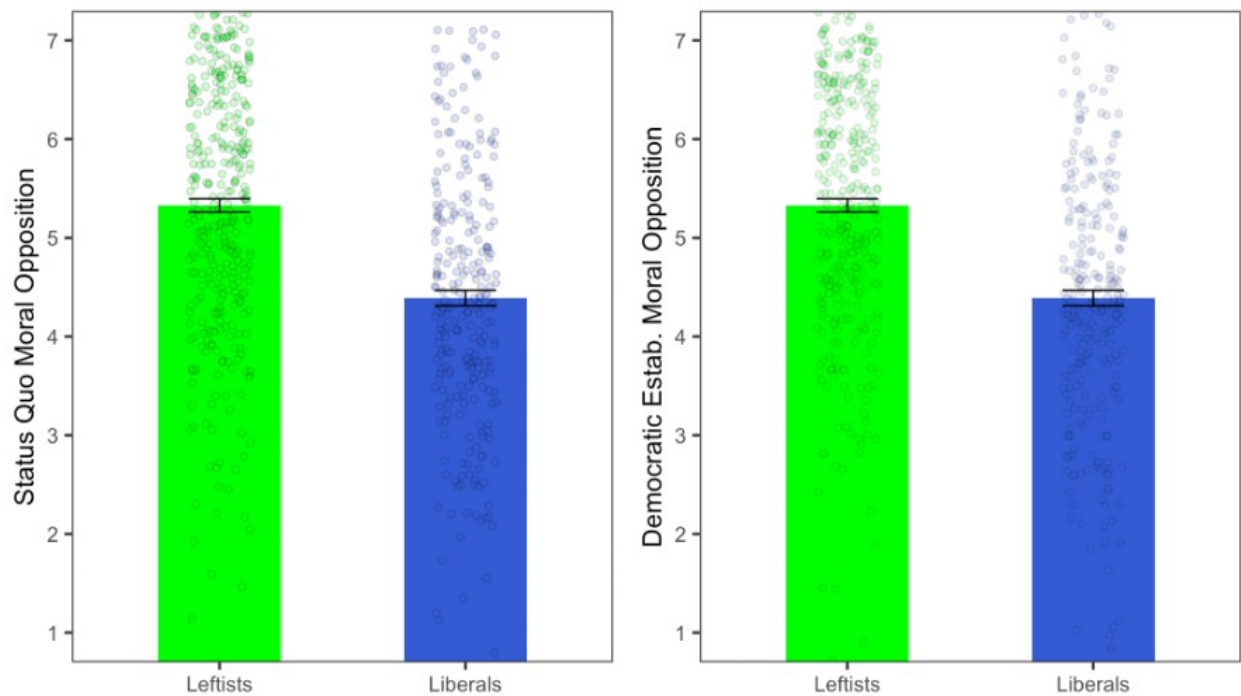


Figure 10. Differences in moral opposition to the political status quo and Democratic establishment between sampled Leftists and Liberals. Error bars represent $\pm 1 SE$.

¹ We also pre-registered exploring the relationship between normative alignment and moral opposition on Biden support, but we excluded that measure in the final survey due to length constraints.

Moral opposition and 2020 presidential candidate support of Leftists and Liberals

Next, we tested whether differences in moral opposition predicted differences in attitudes towards the 2020 presidential election, and whether this pattern of results differed for sampled Leftists and Liberals. For moral opposition to the political status quo, we found support for one of our main hypotheses: Greater moral opposition of the status quo predicted less support for Biden's candidacy ($b = -0.48$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(613) = -7.21$, $p < .001$, $95\%CI [-0.61, -0.35]$), even when controlling for age, gender, harmfulness judgments² of the status quo, and attitude strength ($b = -0.45$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .001$, $95\% CI [-0.63, -0.27]$). This effect was also qualified by a significant exploratory interaction, $b = 0.60$, $SE = 0.10$, $t(613) = 6.03$, $p < .001$. Simple slopes analyses revealed that this was true for committed Leftists only, the more moral opposition to the political status quo that was endorsed, the lower the support for Biden's candidacy ($b = -0.48$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$). The slope for convenience-sample Liberals trended in the expected direction: greater moral opposition predicted greater support for Biden ($b = 0.12$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = 0.10$).

² We also pre-registered testing whether harmfulness predicts increases in Biden support. We found a similar pattern to what we found for moral opposition and so we report the results in the supplemental materials.

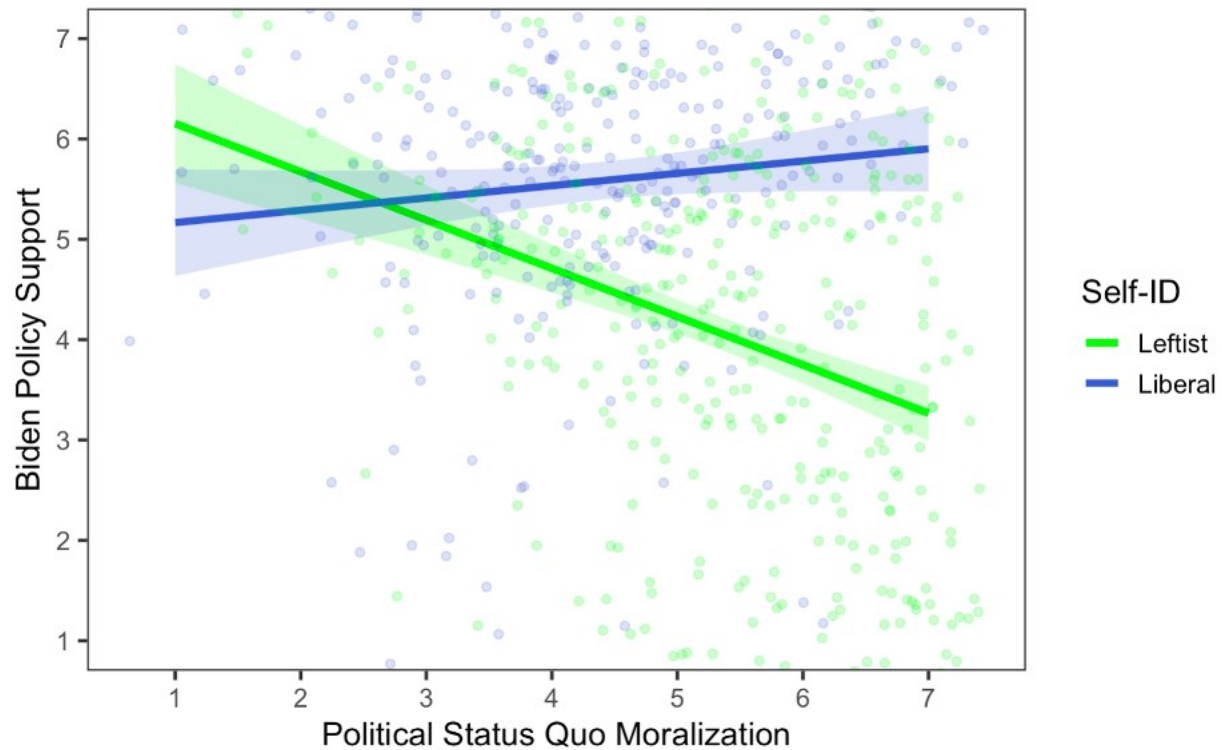


Figure 11. Relationship between moral opposition to the political status quo and support for Joe Biden’s 2020 candidacy for sampled Leftists and Liberals. Shading reflects 95% CI.

Leftist vs. Liberal Policy Support

Finally, despite these psychological differences, there is considerable overlap in policy support in our sample. We measured differences between sampled Leftists and Liberals by measuring endorsement of seven policy issues that we thought would be more strongly endorsed by Leftists than Liberals. Indeed, we found that committed Leftists supported all policies more than Liberals, $t(617) = -17.53, p < .001$ (individual policy support differences, all p ’s $< .001$, see Table 1). These differences remained when accounting for identity centrality, $t(613) = -15.78, p < .001, \Delta R^2 = .05$, but they are notably small in magnitude, and really represent a point of relative agreement.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Self-Reported Policy Support Between Sampled Leftists and Liberals

<i>Policy</i>	Political Identity				<i>P-value</i>
	Leftist		Liberal		
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Universal Healthcare	6.85	0.56	6.41	1.06	< .001
Green New Deal	6.68	0.72	6.13	1.18	< .001
Abolishing ICE	6.61	1.03	5.18	1.72	< .001
Abolishing the Police	5.84	1.70	3.48	1.86	< .001
Decriminalizing Sex Work	6.49	1.15	5.69	1.48	< .001
De-privatizing Private Property	6.01	1.33	4.38	1.61	< .001
Nationalizing Big Business	5.91	1.39	4.38	1.63	< .001

Note. Larger values indicate greater policy support. Alternating policies are bolded for ease of reading.

General Discussion

The current research investigated the psychology of highly committed Leftists in the United States during the weeks preceding the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election and compared them to a convenience sample of self-identified Liberals in the United States. Using a mix of quantitative and qualitative data, we found that committed Leftists see themselves as a distinct political identity group from Liberals, defined primarily by their anti-capitalist ideology and their desire for radical societal change. We also found that committed Leftists express greater moral opposition to the status quo and the Democratic establishment than Liberals, which negatively predicts support for Joe Biden's 2020 candidacy for Leftists only. Importantly though, we found

very little evidence of actual abstention from voting as a result. This finding, in combination with the relative agreement in policy support among the two sampled groups, suggests that there is much room for coalition building and cooperation among these two groups, though our data suggests some issues may remain contentious, such as racial equity, police brutality, and ultimate goals for the structure and breadth of government. From these findings, we can see that traditional measures of political ideology do not fully capture the range of political identities in the United States leading up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election between incumbent Donald Trump and Joe Biden (see also Costello et al., 2023). Consistent with extant theorizing (e.g., Jost, 2021), Liberals might perceive Leftists as different only in degree and a part of the same ingroup, whereas Leftists perceive Liberals as a different political identity group. Perhaps increased alignment on this, would better foster cooperation among Leftists and Liberals.

We think it is especially important to correctly characterize these subgroups (and others) within the left-leaning ideology. The boundaries between Leftists and Liberals are psychologically real to committed Leftists. Prior work has shown that when different subgroups within a larger group are properly acknowledged, this can promote cooperation and maximize collective outcomes (Dovidio et al., 2007). It is possible to think about different ideologies on the Left (e.g., Democratic Socialists, Marxists, Anarchists) as a form of ideological diversity within the larger group, which can improve team outcomes with creative and innovative solutions or lead to conflict depending on the circumstances (Roberge & van Dick, 2010). One worry is that moralized ideological differences between Leftists and Liberals obstruct potential positive interactions between the groups, consistent with literature on other intergroup interactions

(Blinded under review; Green et al., 2021; Murphy et al., 2011;). Indeed, we think that moral opposition to the political status quo, and its relation to both the need for radical change, and its relation to policy preferences, may be an important factor for understanding the psychological differences between Leftists and Liberals. On a more positive note, these differences could potentially provide an avenue for optimal distinctiveness within the Left and in opposition to the Right (Leonardelli et al., 2010).

One aim of better characterizing committed Leftists in the United States as we did here, is to try to put forward the possibility of ideological diversity on the Left, to promote cooperation among left-wing group members, and to answer a call for greater ideological diversity in psychological science (Inbar & Lammers, 2016). We want to note that we are highlighting a difference between Leftists and Liberals, but it is, of course, a matter of scale. At least from a policy support perspective, Liberals and Leftists are much closer to each other than either is to a Conservative.

Limitations and Future Directions

This research is meant to be generative rather than an exhaustive investigation into Leftists in the United States. A significant limitation of the current research is the representativeness of the sample. We recruited our Leftist participants primarily from online Leftist communities, while the majority of our Liberal participants came from Prolific. We think this comparison is valuable because many psychological studies are run on Prolific, and this allows us to understand committed Leftists compared to a typical sample. Yet, it does not allow us to compare committed Leftists and committed Liberals, which would be extremely valuable to

do. To partly compensate, we report all analyses with identity centrality as a covariate to show that none of our analyses hinge on this difference. But, nonetheless, this difference between the two samples also restricts the generalizability to the group dynamics that exist between these two subgroups of liberal-leaning ideology in the United States. Future research would benefit from a more representative sample of each, and measuring the political behavior of Leftists and Liberals. It is also important to note that we collected this data at a moment of heightened political salience, in the weeks before the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Future research would also benefit from measuring entitativity, which research suggests is related to group identification (Hogg et al., 2007; Yzerbyt et al., 2000) and may help to better delineate the values and beliefs of highly identified Leftists and Liberals.

Conclusion

We sought to characterize self-identified Leftists in terms of how they see themselves and what policies they support. We compared them to a Liberal convenience sample recruited from Prolific. On quantitative scales and in their own words, highly committed Leftists see themselves as a distinct identity subgroup within Left-wing political ideology in the United States and outside the traditional ideology spectrum—defined by their rejection of capitalism and their preference for radical (vs. incremental) change.

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