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The Personality Basis of Political Preferences

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Why do individuals differ in their political preferences? Answers to this question have often focused on the *social contexts* individuals find themselves living in. At the broadest level, people are assumed to adopt positions that reflect the interests, identity, or values of the groups they belong to (Mason, 2018) and to shift their beliefs in response to situations (e.g., recession or growing inequality) that arise at particular times. Political preferences are also generally thought to be learned in the context of various *social relationships*. One example of this is the tendency for people to acquire the political identities and preferences held by their parents (Jennings & Niemi, 1991; Sears & Levy, 2003) or others in their social networks (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004; Newcomb, 1943). In the study of mass belief systems, an even more important example is the phenomenon of top-down ‘elite opinion leadership’ in which citizens who identify with particular parties or ideologies adopt the sets of beliefs and issue attitudes modeled by leaders who share their partisan and/or ideological affiliations (Converse, 1964; McClosky & Zaller, 1984; Zaller, 1992; see also Abramowitz, 2010; Levendusky, 2009).

Recently, researchers have pointed toward a different answer: the bottom-up consequences of personality differences. A burgeoning literature suggests that individual differences in psychological traits, needs, and motives reliably predict variance in political preferences (e.g., Federico & Malka, 2018; Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2011; Hibbing, Smith, & Alford, 2014; Jost, 2017; Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009; Jost, Sulloway, Glaser, & Kruglanski, 2003; Mondak, 2010). As we shall see, a core finding is that individuals with traits that lead them to prefer certainty, security, and simplicity lean toward the right, whereas those whose traits are more tolerant of uncertainty, ambiguity, and complexity lean toward the left (Federico, 2015; Hibbing et al., 2014; Jost et al. 2003, 2009; Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2013).

This key pattern has led many observers to characterize the interface between personality and politics in terms of a “rigidity of the right” model (Malka, Lelkes, & Holzer, 2017). Though this

captures an important element of what the literature on personality and politics can tell us, recent work suggests a more nuanced picture. In this chapter, I review current research on the relationship between personality and political preferences, with an eye to its complexities and the ways in which it is conditioned on other variables—including the contextual factors mentioned at the outset. To provide context, I briefly review research on the structure of political preferences. Next, I summarize a now-substantial body of work suggesting a relationship between rigidity in personality and right-wing political preferences, and then describe moderators of and boundary conditions to this relationship. Finally, in an effort to reconcile increasingly-varied findings on political differences in cognition and motivation, I offer an integrative perspective on when the relationship between rigidity and political differences will be ideologically asymmetric and when it will be symmetric.

The Structure of Political Preferences

The Left-Right Dimension

In making sense of the relationship between personality and politics, it is first necessary to look at how political preferences are themselves organized (see Chapter 14 of this volume for a more thorough review). The most-common organizing principle is the *left-right* ideological dimension (Jost et al., 2009). This dimension discursively organizes preferences around a conflict between left-wing preferences for greater equality and change and right-wing preferences for greater social hierarchy and less social change (Bobbio, 1996; Federico, 2015; Jost et al., 2003; Lipset, 1960). The left-right divide structures political conflict in many nations (Benoit & Laver, 2006; Kitschelt, Luna, Rosas, & Zechmeister, 2010; Knight, 1999; McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006). At the same time, it may have limited reach as an organizing principle in mass publics (Kinder & Kalmoe, 2017). Research suggests that most citizens do not fully understand or think in terms of the left-right distinction and do not hold ideologically-consistent issue positions (Baldassari & Gelman, 2008; Converse, 1964; Kinder & Kalmoe, 2017). Though the left-right divide organizes the preferences of

political elites (at least in Western nations; see Malka, Lelkes, & Soto, 2019), it shapes the views of everyday citizens mainly among the relatively-few who are interested in and informed enough to absorb elite cues about ‘what goes with what’ ideologically (Converse, 1964; Federico, 2015; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991; Zaller, 1992). From this perspective, ideology in the left-right sense is not wholly intrinsic to how humans think about politics. Rather, it is socially constructed by competing political leaders who do the creative work of assembling different values, beliefs, and positions into ideological packages (Converse, 1964; Noel, 2013; Sniderman & Bullock, 2004), and it diffuses (only partially) to the mass public in a top-down fashion.

Multidimensional Models of Political Preferences

Though the left-right dimension has somewhat limited reach, political preferences have some level of bottom-up psychological structure. Research suggests that attitudes are structured by two spontaneously-emergent (but not always correlated) value dimensions corresponding to (1) preferences for less versus more equality and (2) preferences for tradition and order versus openness to change and cultural diversity (Braithwaite, 1997; Duckitt, 2001; Schwartz, 1992; Stangor & Leary, 2006). This bidimensional structure is mirrored in research suggesting that attitudes toward economic issues (e.g., redistribution) and toward social issues (e.g., immigration) reflect separate dimensions (Carmines, Ensley, & Wagner, 2012; Feldman & Johnston, 2014; Fleishman, 1988; Knoke, 1979; Shafer & Claggett, 1995; Treier & Hillygus, 2009). Reinforcing the functional relevance of the two value dimensions, the economic dimension is more strongly linked to preferences regarding equality, whereas the social dimension is more closely tied to preferences regarding tradition versus change (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). Preferences on each of these two dimensions appear to have unique personality correlates as well, suggesting a partial psychological basis for attitude coherence *within* the economic and social domains (Federico & Malka, 2018).

The nature of the correlation between these two dimensions varies across political contexts and individuals (Malka et al., 2019; Petersen, 2015). In some nations, the traditional left-right organization of the dimensions prevails (e.g., Western Europe and the United States; Malka et al., 2019), especially among political elites and members of the mass public who are attentive to elite discourse that packages right-wing economic views with cultural conservatism (Feldman & Johnston, 2014; Jennings, 1992; Layman & Carsey, 2002). At the same time, the left-right pattern of constraint is relatively uncommon at the global level; if anything, there are more nations in which right-wing economic views correlate slightly *negatively* with cultural conservatism than nations where left-right constraint prevails (Malka et al., 2019).

In sum, findings suggest that sociopolitical attitudes are psychologically organized into two basic content dimensions, as opposed to being strictly unidimensional in the left-right sense. To the extent that the traditional left-right organization of preferences across the two dimensions prevails, it is because political elites in a given context package left-wing (versus right-wing) positions in one domain together with left-wing (versus right-wing) positions in other domains and provide mass publics with clear cues about what belongs with what. As later sections of this chapter will suggest, the multidimensional nature of political preferences is crucial for understanding how different kinds of personality characteristics relate to different kinds of political attitudes.

‘Rigidity’ in Personality and Left-Right Differences

Research on the link between personality and political preferences has a long history in the social and behavioral sciences (Jost et al., 2009). Sociologists like Max Weber noted early on that different kinds of people were attracted to different political positions (Weber, 1948; see also Gerth & Mills, 1953; Lasswell, 1948), and the rise of totalitarianism in the 20th century inspired many to examine the traits that attract people to different worldviews and movements. The first wave of research on personality and politics focused especially on isolating the traits that predisposed

individuals to fascist and racist ideologies (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik,, Levinson, & Sanford, 1949; Allport, 1954; see also Chapters 19 and 20) or general ideological extremism (Eysenck, 1954; Lipset, 1960; Rokeach, 1960; see also Chapter 16), but it also examined the antecedents of left-right variation among non-extremists (McClosky, 1958; Tomkins, 1963; Wilson, 1973).

After lying fallow for some time, this area of research was reinvigorated near the beginning of this century and remains an active topic of inquiry (Jost et al., 2003, 2009). Though there are a variety of needs, traits, and motives that predict political preferences, both past and present work on personality and politics has focused heavily on dispositions related to *existential concerns* about security and safety in the face of threat and *epistemic concerns* about attaining certainty and closure (Federico & Malka, 2018; Jost et al., 2003, 2009, 2013; Jost, 2017). On the dependent-variable side, this literature typically focuses on simple left-right differences in preferences. Its key take-home message is that individuals whose traits incline them to more (versus less) strongly emphasize security and certainty are more likely to hold right-wing (versus left-wing) preferences (Federico, 2015). In other words, it suggests an association between ‘rigidity’ in personality (i.e., strong needs for security and certainty) and conservatism—the so-called *rigidity-of-the-right* pattern (Malka et al., 2017).

On the independent-variable side, a number of individual psychological differences have been highlighted (see Federico & Malka, 2018; and Jost, 2017, for reviews). For example, among traits related to existential needs for security and safety, perhaps the oldest and most theoretically important is *authoritarianism* (Adorno et al., 1950; Altemeyer, 1998; Duckitt, 2001). Authoritarianism is a tendency to value deference to group authority and conventional ingroup norms, along with a propensity to respond with hostility to those who depart from said norms (Altemeyer, 1998; see also Duckitt & Bizumic, 2013; Stenner, 2005; Chapter 19). Individuals who are high in authoritarianism are especially sensitive to threat and danger (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Feldman, 2003; Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; Lavine et al., 1999; Lavine, Lodge, Polichak, & Taber et al., 2002), and they gravitate

toward conservatism in an effort to seek the clarity and security provided by established forms of political order (Federico, Fisher, & Deason, 2011; Federico, Hunt, & Ergun, 2009; Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; Jost et al., 2009).

Similarly, among traits related to epistemic needs for certainty and clarity, a key construct is the *need for cognitive closure* (Jost et al., 2003, 2009). Individuals with a high need for closure avoid uncertainty by “seizing” more strongly on available information to reach firm conclusions about the world and by “freezing” on those conclusions even when faced with contrary information (Kruglanski, 2004; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & DeGrada, 2006). A high (versus low) need for closure consistently predicts right-leaning (versus left-leaning) political preferences, both in terms of identification (e.g., partisanship and ideology) and social-issue positions (Federico, Deason, & Fisher, 2012; Federico & Goren, 2009; Jost et al., 2003; Van Hiel, Pandelaere, & Duriez, 2004; Van Hiel et al., 2010).

Analogous patterns have been found for general dimensions of personality linked to rigidity (McCrae, 1996). In this vein, two factors from the “Big Five” model of personality—*Conscientiousness* and *Openness to Experience*—have especially robust relationships with political preferences, and both of them include content that is relevant to needs for security and certainty. Conscientiousness reflects an inclination toward self-discipline and attention to duty (i.e., motives which seek to avoid insecurity by stabilizing social relations), whereas Openness to Experience incorporates a comfort with novelty and aesthetic complexity that implies stronger tolerance of uncertainty (McCrae & Costa, 2003). Consistent with the content of each trait, Conscientiousness predicts right-wing political preferences, while Openness to Experience predicts relatively liberal preferences (e.g., Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; Gerber et al., 2010, 2011; Mondak, 2010).

Finally, the rigidity-of-the-right pattern emerges in research on values and moral intuition (Goren, 2012; Haidt, 2012). For example, Schwartz’s (1992) influential model of human values

identifies a set of *conservation values* (i.e., tradition, conformity, and security) and a functionally-opposed set of *openness values* (i.e., stimulation and self-direction). A preference for conservation values over openness values in this model reflects a concern for security and certainty over social exploration and change (Malka, Soto, Inzlicht, & Leikes, 2014). More importantly, preferring conservation over openness reliably predicts conservatism (Caprara, Schwartz, Capanna, Vecchione, & Barbaranelli, 2006; Goren, 2012; Malka et al., 2014; Schwartz, 2007; Thorisdottir et al., 2007). Similarly, individuals who prioritize *binding moral concerns* linked to ingroup loyalty, respect for authority, and the maintenance of moral purity—all of which reflect a desire for the security and certainty provided by cohesive social relations—are more likely to adopt conservative political identities and socially-conservative issue positions (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt, 2012; Koleva, Graham, Iyer, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012).

These patterns for specific rigidity-linked psychological constructs are reinforced by meta-analytic examinations of the literature on relationships between existential and epistemic variables and political preferences (Jost, 2017). In the case of existential variables, Jost, Stern, Rule, and Sterling (2017b) aggregated findings from 134 studies incorporating 369,525 individual observations and found modestly-sized correlations between sensitivity to and awareness of fear and threat and right-wing preferences. Similarly, in the case of epistemic variables, Jost, Sterling, and Stern (2017a) examined data from 181 samples incorporating 133,796 individual observations. They found reliable links between the need for closure, the need for structure, intolerance of ambiguity, and rigidity, and right-wing preferences (on one hand) and between integrative complexity, stronger inclinations to analytic thinking, a high need for cognition, and greater uncertainty tolerance and left-leaning preferences (on the other hand). In sum, individuals with more-rigid personalities tend to lean to the right politically, whereas those with less-rigid personalities often lean to the left.

Is Rigidity in Personality Always Associated with Right-Wing Preferences?

Though the rigidity-of-the-right pattern is prominently emphasized in both academic (Jost, 2017) and popular (Mooney, 2012) synopses of research on personality and politics, recent work suggests a more complex picture of how traits related to rigidity correlate with political preferences. In this vein, studies increasingly suggest that the relationship between needs for security and certainty and political preferences is subject to a number of boundary conditions. In this section, I review three of these conditions: *ideological domain*, *discursive context*, and *type of personality measure*.

Ideological Domain

As noted above, political preferences cannot always be characterized in terms of a simple left-right divide. While unidimensional left-right ideological constraint is rare, there is evidence that political attitudes and beliefs exhibit a two-dimensional structure corresponding to economic preferences and sociocultural preferences (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). Importantly, most research in this area suggests that traits indicative of needs for security and certainty are more strongly and consistently related to right-wing preferences in the sociocultural domain than in the economic domain (Federico, Johnston, & Lavine, 2014; Johnston et al., 2017; Malka & Soto, 2015; for a review, see Federico & Malka, 2018). This difference across ideological domains is found with respect to numerous rigidity-related traits, including authoritarianism (e.g., Cizmar et al. 2014; Federico et al., 2011; Feldman & Johnston, 2014), need for closure (e.g., Chirumbolo, Areni, & Sensales, 2004; Federico, Ergun, & Hunt, 2014; Kossowska & Van Hiel, 2003; Van Hiel et al., 2004; Yilmaz & Saribay, 2016), and support for conservation versus openness values (Duckitt, 2001; Duriez, Van Hiel, & Kossowska, 2005; Malka et al., 2014). The Conscientiousness and Openness dimensions of the Big Five also appear to be more strongly related to sociocultural attitudes than

economic ones, though the pattern is less-clear-cut in this case (Carney et al., 2008; Mondak, 2010; but see Clifford, Jewell, & Waggoner, 2015).¹

What accounts for this asymmetry? One factor is the difficulty of the judgments demanded in each domain (Carmines & Stimson 1980). In this respect, social issues are relatively “easy” to form opinions about, given the symbolic, emotive nature of issues relating to traditional morality, religion, and ethnic and national identity (Malka & Soto, 2015). Economic issues, in contrast, are “hard” issues. They deal with technical matters that many citizens do not have a firm grasp on, and they often do not have a clear symbolic meaning apart from the ones imparted to them by political leaders (Johnston & Wronski, 2015). While one can draw a clear, intuitive link between needs for security and certainty and the preservation of traditional values, beliefs, and identities in the social domain, the same is not true with respect to judgments about redistribution and government intervention in the economic domain (Johnston et al., 2017). A second, related factor has to do with the unique characteristics of opinion formation in the economic realm. As I discuss in more detail below, a growing body of research suggests that the relationship between rigidity in personality and preferences in the economic domain may vary in some nations as a function of political engagement, such that needs for security and certainty are associated with right-wing economic views among those high in political engagement and left-wing economic views among those low in engagement (Federico & Malka, 2018). These opposing effects cancel out in full samples, leading to a weaker zero-order relationship between rigidity and economic preferences.

If the relationship between rigidity and economic preferences is weak and inconsistent, then are there meaningful personality correlates of preferences in the economic realm? Among other things, the dual-process model of ideology and prejudice suggests that attitudes in the economic and

¹ For differing perspectives on the limits to this pattern of asymmetry, see Federico and Malka (2018) and Jost et al., 2017b; see also Azevedo et al., 2019; Hennes, Nam, Stern, & Jost, 2012).

sociocultural domains may have different motivational bases (Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). Whereas conservative sociocultural preferences are driven by needs for security and certainty in social life, right-wing economic preferences are driven by a need to establish competitive dominance. Thus, right-wing economic preferences should be associated with traits reflecting dominance, competitiveness, and tough-mindedness (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). Consistent with this prediction, studies suggest that individuals who score low on the Agreeableness dimension of the Big Five—who are less inclined to prosocial behavior—are more likely to hold right-wing economic attitudes (Bakker, 2010; Bardeen & Michel, 2019; Gerber et al., 2010). Similarly, individuals who are prone to anger (an emotion associated with self-enhancement goals) are more economically right-wing, a relationship that is mediated by competitiveness (Kettle & Salerno, 2017). Finally, dispositional sadism is associated with right-wing economic preferences, as is trait Machiavellianism (especially those who are low in social conservatism in the latter case; Bardeen & Michel, 2019).

Discursive Context

Much of the literature on personality and politics has assumed that the ‘elective affinities’ linking psychological traits and motives to different political orientations are intuitively obvious to the average person (e.g., Jost et al., 2003; Jost, 2006). This may be relatively true of the relationship between rigidity and social conservatism; there is a clear conceptual kinship between desires for security and certainty and traditional values and conventional norms (Johnston et al., 2017; Malka & Soto, 2015). However, research suggests that the symbolic meanings of other kinds of preferences are less intuitively clear and must be socially constructed to a greater extent in the context of discourse in specific political contexts (Federico, 2020; Federico & Malka, 2018). This is the case not only for economic preferences, but also for broad affinities like partisanship and ideology.

In this vein, even if they reliably correlate with trait dimensions common to all humans, “ideologies are not facts of nature” (Federico & Malka, 2018, p. 23). Ideological belief systems do

not arise on the basis of inherent logical consistency between the sets of positions associated with labels like liberalism, conservatism, or socialism (Converse, 1964). Moreover, the symbolic reputations and agendas of different parties are not givens. Rather, ideologies and partisan affiliations acquire much of their content and meaning from the histories of the societies in which they exist—and from the creative discursive activity of a relative narrow spectrum of “political elites” (i.e., party leaders, elected officials, and pundits; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Kinder, 1998; Zaller, 1992; see also Noel, 2013). The same is true for preferences in “harder” issue domains like economics (Johnston et al., 2017). Thus, the extent to which rigid traits predict various political positions may also depend on how well the meanings those positions acquire in specific discursive contexts align with individual needs for security and certainty.

This is illustrated by cross-cultural differences in the relationship between needs for security and certainty and political identity (see Federico & Malka, 2018, for a review). Though traits related to needs for security and certainty are reliably associated with right-wing ideological identification in Western nations where the “left” has historically been associated with social change (Jost et al., 2003), this pattern disappears or even reverses in post-communist nations with relatively-recent histories of governance by authoritarian-left parties that emphasized both economic security and social conformity. In these nations, the left as well as the right can claim the symbolism of “tradition” and order, resulting in a pattern where rigidity is unrelated to ideology or associated with a preference for the left. This pattern has been found with respect to a number of variables, including desires for security, order, and conformity (Malka et al., 2014, 2019; Piurko, Schwartz, & Davidov, 2011; Schwartz et al., 2014; Thorisdottir et al. 2007), need for closure (Kossowska & Van Hiel, 2003), and low Openness to Experience (Roets, Cornelis, & Van Hiel, 2014).

Similar cross-cultural differences appear when comparing nations where the alignment of the economic and social dimensions of ideology differs. Not all political cultures reliably package social

conservatism together with right-wing economic preferences (Malka et al., 2019). The two dimensions are more likely to align not only outside the post-communist world, but also in nations that are high in economic development. In the latter countries, basic material survival is less of an issue, allowing a relaxation of traditional social restraints (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). This liberalization is resisted more strongly by political factions with relatively-conservative positions on other issues, leading to an alignment of economic and social conservatism in wealthier countries (Benoit & Laver, 2006; Lefkoridi, Wanger, & Willmann, 2014). Given the strong intuitive link between needs for security and certainty and social conservatism, the grafting of social-issue differences onto existing divides makes it easier for individuals varying in dispositional rigidity to sort into different ideological and partisan camps in these nations. As a result, needs for security and certainty predict conservative identification more strongly in highly-developed nations where sociocultural preferences have become a more visible topic of disagreement among ideologically-opposed elites and parties (Federico & Malka, 2018; Malka et al., 2014, 2019). Parallel results have been found for the relationship between authoritarianism and partisanship and voting in the United States, where authoritarianism has become more strongly predictive of support for the (conservative) Republican Party and its candidates as the Democratic and Republican parties have diverged in their views on sociocultural issues (Cizmar et al., 2014; Hetherington & Weiler, 2009).

Even within single nations, citizens vary in the extent to which they receive signals about (1) the symbolic reputations of different ideological labels and parties and (2) “what goes with what” politically (Converse, 1964; Federico, 2015). The menu of political options on offer in any society and the content associated with those menu options are predominantly the work of political elites (Sniderman & Bullock, 2004), but not all members of the mass public pay attention to what those elites have to say. Some citizens are politically informed and interested enough to learn what it means to identify with a specific party or ideological label (Converse, 1964; Delli Carpini & Keeter,

1996; Kalmoe, 2020; Kinder & Kalmoe, 2017; Sniderman, et al., 1991) and to care what their preferences say about who they are (Kahan, 2015). But many are not. This implies that rigidity in personality may predict political preferences more strongly among those aware of enough of elite political discourse to know how well different stances align with their underlying traits.

Consistent with this prediction, a wide variety of studies suggest that high (versus low) dispositional needs for security and certainty are more strongly related to conservative (versus left-wing) political preferences among those high in political engagement. This is especially the case with respect to broad political identifications like ideological and party identification, at least in nations where political elites and parties differ in the sociocultural views that are most strongly associated with rigidity-related traits (Federico, 2020; Federico & Malka, 2018). This pattern has been demonstrated for the relationships between authoritarianism and identification with the Republican Party in the United States (Federico & Reifen-Tagar, 2014; Johnston et al., 2017) and authoritarianism and ideology (Federico et al., 2009; Johnston et al., 2017). Similar patterns have been found for partisanship and ideology with respect to the need for closure (Federico & Goren, 2009; Johnston et al., 2017; see also Federico & Ekstrom, 2018), endorsement of conservation (versus openness) values and binding moral concerns (Johnston et al., 2017; Malka et al., 2014, 2019), and the Openness to Experience and Conscientious dimensions of the Big Five (Johnston et al., 2017; Osborne & Sibley, 2012, 2015).

This moderating effect of political engagement takes an especially interesting form with respect to economic preferences. As noted previously, zero-order relationships between rigidity and economic preferences tend to be weak and/or inconsistent (Johnston et al., 2017). Recent work suggests that this is because the direction of the relationship between needs for security and certainty and economic attitudes *reverses* across engagement levels, with the opposing effects canceling each other out at the population level. Recall that economic issues tend to be “hard” issues, with technical

content that does not connect as easily with existential and epistemic needs as social issues do. This means that economic matters can more easily be assigned a symbolic or ideological meaning by political elites. In Western nations, support for redistribution and government intervention has historically been framed as “left-wing” and congruent with a desire for social change, whereas free-market positions have represented the “conservative” status quo (Malka et al., 2019). For this reason, we might expect those high in rigidity to support right-wing free-market positions in economics. However, this is most likely to be the case among those high in political engagement, who are most likely to have received elite signals that define market-oriented positions as “conservative.” Among those in low in engagement, this pattern should reverse. These individuals are less likely to have absorbed elite signals defining redistribution and government intervention as “left-wing” or contrary to established ways of organizing social life. Without these symbolic cues, left-wing economic policies may be seen as a form of *protection* against economic exploitation and unavoidable risks. As a results, needs for security and certainty should (if anything) predict left-leaning economic preferences among the less-engaged.

A growing body of evidence provides support for this *reversal hypothesis*. In multiple American samples, Johnston, Lavine, and Federico (2017) find support for it with respect to several variables indicative of trait rigidity, including authoritarianism, need for closure, dispositional risk aversion, conservation versus openness values, and the Openness and Conscientiousness dimensions of the Big Five. Among those high in engagement, needs for security and certainty were associated with right-wing economic preferences; among those low in engagement, needs for security and certainty were more often associated with left-wing economic preferences. Using cross-national data from 51 nations examined as part of the World Values Survey, Malka et al. (2014) replicate this pattern, finding that individuals who favored conservation over openness values were more likely to hold

right-wing economic positions if they were high in political interest and left-wing economic positions if they were low in political interest.

Consistent with the argument that the reversal effect depends on how economic positions are ideologically packaged by leaders, it is found only in political contexts where left-wing economic preferences for greater redistribution and government intervention are conventionally regarded as a challenge to the status quo and where they are packaged together with socially-liberal positions. In this vein, the reversal effect is weaker in post-communist nations (where communism was the status quo for a long time) and nations where elites do not consistently pair left-wing economics with social liberalism (Malka et al., 2014, 2019). Similarly, Czarnek and Kossowska (2019) find that the reversal effect is weaker in nations where high levels of welfare provision by the state are normative and unlikely to be seen as a challenge to the status quo even among engaged citizens with high needs for security and certainty (e.g., in Nordic and Eastern European nations).

Type of Personality Measure

The observed relationship between trait rigidity and political preferences also varies as a function of whether personality is assessed using *subjective* or *objective* measures. Subjective measures rely on self-reports and require respondents to explicitly indicate how well various declarative statements describe them (e.g., “I don’t like situations that are uncertain”; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994), whereas objective measures of rigidity rely on behavioral responses to tasks aimed at assessing flexible, integrative responses to various stimuli (Van Hiel, Onraet, & DePauw, 2010). In a series of meta-analyses, Van Hiel and colleagues (Van Hiel et al., 2010; Van Hiel, Onraet, Crowson, & Roets, 2016) find that subjective self-report measures of rigidity are more strongly related to right-wing political preferences than objective behavioral measures are. This finding is reinforced by recent large-N studies that have failed to find reliable correlations between objective physiological measures of threat sensitivity and political conservatism (e.g., Bakker, Schumacher, Gothreau, & Arceneaux,

2020; Osmundsen et al., 2020; Smith & Warren, 2020), shedding doubt on earlier findings that had suggested such a relationship (Oxley et al., 2008).

What for this asymmetry between subjective and objective measures? One possibility is that objective measures of rigidity and standard measures of political attitudes may elicit responses that are relatively unmatched in terms of compatibility (Federico, 2020). Subjective measures—like most self-report measures of political preferences—present respondents with semantic, evaluatively-laden content with which they must explicitly agree or disagree. Objective measures, in contrast, usually take the form of tests or tasks that require introspection or an explicit evaluative judgment (Van Hiel et al., 2016). Given that subjective measures of needs for security and certainty and most self-report measures of political attitudes are similar in their reliance on explicit semantic judgments, it may simply be easier for people to connect self-perceptions of personality to self-perceptions about one's political preferences, especially if they regard their political attitudes, values, and beliefs as an important part of the self-concept (Federico & Ekstrom, 2018). However, another explanation centers on the lower reliability of objective psychological measures compared to self-reports. Whereas subjective measures of personality are usually designed to maximize between-person variance and minimize within-person variance across situations, the opposite is true of objective measures (which are usually designed to detect changes resulting from experimental manipulations; see Dang, King, & Inzlicht, 2020). Since the reliability of a measure increases with its ability to tap between-person differences, this difference typically reduces the reliability of objective measures compared to subjective ones. In turn, this reliability difference may attenuate the correlation between objective measures and other constructs (such as political preferences). Whatever its cause, the objective/subjective asymmetry requires further study.

The Limits of Ideological Asymmetry

Thus far, this chapter has painted a fairly *asymmetric* picture of the relationship between rigidity and political preferences. This focus on the “rigidity of the right” is not without justification: even with the qualifications described above, a great deal of research indicates that traits related to rigidity are more likely to be found among those with right-wing political preferences (Jost, 2017). That said, other lines of work suggest that the relationship between some forms of psychological rigidity and political preferences may be symmetric rather than asymmetric—and that rigid, defensive, or intolerant behavior in the context of politics may not always boil down to differences in traits. Importantly, most of the research reviewed in this chapter has focused on *dispositional* rigidity—i.e., stable, global individual differences in needs for security and certainty (Federico, 2020; Federico & Malka, 2018). However, rigidity can be *situational* as well as dispositional: it may manifest itself as a contextual *reaction* to perceived challenges to one’s political identities or attitudes (Brandt & Crawford, 2020; Harper, 2020). Rather than being stable individual differences, rigidities of this sort can be thought of as the *result* of holding self-relevant political commitments (Federico, 2020).

A careful look at emerging findings suggests that the ideological-asymmetry model may be most applicable the relationship between dispositional rigidity and political preferences, whereas the relationship between situational forms of rigidity and political preferences may be more symmetric in nature (Ditto et al., 2019; Federico, 2020; Harper, 2020). In this vein, there is considerable evidence that individuals on both the left and the right are motivated to ‘rigidly’ defend their political commitments and view the political world in a ‘rigid’ us-versus-them fashion (see Chapter 16). For example, an extensive program of research on worldview conflict suggests that both liberal and conservative identifiers show greater prejudice toward those in political out-groups (see Brandt & Crawford, 2020, for a review; see also van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2017; van Prooijen, Krouwel, Boiten, & Eedebak, 2015). Moreover, recent meta-analytic work indicates that individuals with ideological and partisan commitments on both sides of the spectrum exhibit motivated reasoning in

defense of their worldviews when challenged (Ditto et al., 2019; see also Cohen, 2003; Washburn & Skitka, 2017)—a tendency that might even increase with knowledge (Kahan, 2015). Similarly, both conservatives and liberals avoid opinions that diverge from their own (Collins, Crawford, & Brandt, 2017; Frimer, Skitka, & Motyl, 2017; but see Nam, Jost, & Van Bavel, 2013, and Rodriguez et al., 2017, for evidence that this tendency is somewhat stronger on the right).

This symmetry extends to other forms of motivated rigidity as well. Extremists of both the right and left tend to be overconfident. Compared to those with more moderate views, those with extreme opinions are more likely to claim knowledge that they do not actually possess (van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019) and to prefer simple solutions to problems and feel more judgmental certainty about those solutions (van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Emmer, 2018). Finally, both right and left extremists are more likely to cognitively represent the political world in a simple, undifferentiated fashion. This pattern can be seen as far back as Tetlock's (1984) classic work on integrative complexity in the political reasoning of ideologically-diverse British parliamentarians, and it is reinforced by recent results suggesting that individuals on both extremes of the political spectrum are more likely to rigidly categorize political stimuli (Lammers, Koch, Conway, & Brandt, 2017).

Thus, when rigidity is conceptualized as a defensive outcome of holding a particular set of political commitments, ideological symmetry often prevails. Given that politics is organized around social identity and competition between identity groups, we should not be surprised by this (Huddy, 2001). As social identity theory has long emphasized, group identities become an important part of the self, motivating group members to see the ingroup in the most positive terms possible (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). These social identity processes are central to identifications like partisanship and ideology (e.g., Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002; Mason, 2018; Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018; see also Campbell et al., 1960; Kahan, 2015). Similarly, there is abundant evidence that other kinds of preferences that become central to the self (beyond social identities) are defended more strongly in

the face of attack (e.g., Krosnick, 1988; Kunda, 1990; Lodge & Taber, 2013). There is no reason to expect that these motivations will operate on only one side of the political spectrum—even if there are left-right differences in *dispositional* rigidity (Cohen, 2003; Huddy, Mason, & Aaroe, 2015).

Indeed, crystallized political identities may even condition the effect of dispositional needs for security and certainty. Once a particular political identity has become an important part of the self, evidence suggests that trait measures of need for closure and cognitive inflexibility are associated with greater strength of partisan identification among members of parties on both the right and the left (Luttig, 2018; Zmigrod, Rentfrow, & Robbins, 2020).

The possibility that social-identity processes and motivated-reasoning tendencies may elicit political symmetries in situational rigidity alongside equally-significant asymmetries in dispositional needs for security and certainty points raises another important question: can all observed political asymmetries in rigidity be chalked up to underlying personality differences? Though this is often implied (Mooney, 2012), it has only rarely been tested. One recent exception is a study by Eichmeier and Stenhouse (2019) who examined the relationships between various dispositional measures of rigidity, partisanship, and the extent to which respondents dismissed the strength of evidence opposed to their issue positions. Confirming the usual ideological-asymmetry finding, their results indicated that individuals high in dispositional rigidity were more likely to identify as Republicans (versus Democrats). However, they also found that these differences in dispositional rigidity explained little of the partisan divergence in ratings of the strength of counter-attitudinal messages. Though the question requires further investigation, this finding reinforces the aforementioned distinction between dispositional and situational variance in rigidity, and it also implies a need to be cautious about attributing political asymmetries in rigidity solely to personality differences.

Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter, I have provided an overview and integration of various strands of research on the connection between personality and political preferences. As we have seen, a core finding in this literature is that personality traits indicative of rigidity are associated with right-wing preferences. However, a careful examination of this burgeoning literature suggests that the personality/politics nexus cannot simply be boiled down to this rigidity-of-the-right finding. The structure of political preferences is complex, and not all individuals have views that can be characterized in simple left-right terms. Belief systems also vary considerably as a function of both culture and level of attention to elite political signals (Federico & Malka, 2018). In turn, the link between ‘rigid’ personality traits varies across issue domain, political cultures, and political engagement. In addition, not all individual differences in rigidity reliably predict political preferences; the relationship is notably stronger with respect to subjective self-reports of personality, as opposed to objective measures of rigid thinking. Finally, while the ideological-asymmetry model provides a good account of how *dispositional* rigidity (i.e., individual differences in needs for security and certainty) relates to political preferences, the relationship between *situational* forms of rigidity (e.g., motivated defense of political identities and attitudes) and political preferences appears to be more symmetric in ideological terms.

Given the complexity of these findings, researchers should think carefully about the precise functional role of individual differences in personality in the structuring of political preferences. Though the link between the traits most commonly examined in this literature—those related to individual differences in rigidity—and right-wing preferences is relatively clear, it is also clear that this link is not universal and that individuals on both the right and left can exhibit situational forms of psychological rigidity when challenged. Perhaps the best way to understand the role of dispositions is that they provide a basis for *sorting* into different political identities. Partisan and ideological identities vary in their attractiveness to those differing in needs for security and certainty, and individuals may follow these elective affinities if they are attentive enough to politics to receive

signals from political elites indicating which identities are most symbolically congruent with their own dispositions (Federico, 2020; Federico & Malka, 2018). In turn, individuals who dispositionally sort into different political identities may take cues about what to believe about other matters and how to approach politics from leaders who share those identities (e.g., Johnston et al., 2017). This account, while in need of further exploration, does comport with a more general line of thought in personality psychology suggesting that people select situations that match their dispositions, and that those situations then influence people in ways that bring out their basic traits (e.g., Funder, 2010).

This perspective also implies that left-right differences may not always flow *directly* from underlying personality differences. Specifically, the actual genesis of some partisan and ideological differences may be institutional and top-down in nature, *conditional* on prior personality-based political sorting. To reiterate an earlier point, there is much evidence that partisan and ideological differences in attitudes in the mass public are shaped by disagreement among competing political elites. When leaders of different parties diverge more in their views, those views diffuse to the public at large in the form of greater polarization—especially among the politically-engaged (Abramowitz, 2010; Levendusky, 2009; Zaller, 1992). To the extent that opposed partisan elites differ in their explicit or implicit endorsement of rigid, black-and-white ways of relating to the political world, those tendencies may spread to partisans in the mass public for reasons not *directly* connected to personality. This may be especially relevant in the American context, where most analyses suggest that the Democratic and Republican parties are institutionally different creatures. The Democratic Party is best understood as a congeries of diverse interest groups that need to cooperate to achieve power, whereas the Republican Party is organized around a demographically-homogenous right-wing ideological movement that identifies itself in insurgent contrast to many social institutions (e.g., the media, the civil service, and so on; see Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016; Mason & Wronski, 2018). In other words, the relatively strong emphasis in the Republican Party on uncompromising pursuit

of ideological goals may send a top-down message that rigidity is normatively appropriate for conservative Republicans, thereby bringing out the implications of underlying personality differences. This broad question, along with others, awaits further investigation.

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