

Research report.

Exploring psychological dimensions
of liberal and conservative worldviews
in national General Social Survey samples

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Abstract: Analysis of data from General Social Survey (GSS) studies of large random samples of Americans compares strong liberals with strong conservatives on many trait measures of major dimensions of political discourse. The results confirm studies by the author on smaller, local samples which show that while correlations document that liberals and conservatives are significantly different on these traits, they are relatively close together when mean scores are compared. The proportion of citizens that fall in the moderate range between those who self-identify clearly as liberals and conservatives constitutes about two-thirds of the population sampled, suggesting that this substantial majority may deserve more attention than typically addressed in media discussions.

Over the past 10 years the author has conducted a series of studies measuring traits such as warmongering endorsement, positive foreign-policy endorsement, fundamental and kindly religious beliefs, gender attitudes, and attitudes about preferred types of government (see McConochie references 36 and 37). These studies have shown that the liberal and conservative worldviews are significantly different based on correlation coefficients on trait measures definitive of virtually all major dimensions of political discourse, consistent with international studies of such traits over as many as 40 nations (see four Jost, et al references). However, when mean item scores on these same traits are compared for strong liberals and strong conservatives, both groups are remarkably close together.

The author wrote up his many findings as a book manuscript for a lay audience and shared copies of the manuscript with several local citizens who expressed interest. One of them, a retired building contractor with strong interest in political service, was so impressed with the ideas that he expressed a desire to share them with interested political leaders both locally and in states across the country as he drove to a family wedding on the East Coast. He shared the highlights of

the manuscript with local political leaders and then started across the country from Oregon, making stops in Montana and Colorado, including a visit with the Secretary of State of Colorado. He also met with staff members of Vote Smart in Montana. He reported that everyone with whom he shared the findings of the manuscript expressed considerable interest, including members and representatives of both the major political parties, Republicans and Democrats.

However, he heard one major repeated challenge from those with whom he shared this information. They were concerned that the research studies upon which the manuscript was based needed to be replicated on a large random sample of Americans, as they had been done primarily on citizens in Oregon and of limited sample size, ranging up to only a few hundred.

The author realized that because his studies are done online at his nonprofit website, Politicalpsychologyresearch.com, such a study could be relatively easily done, simply by replicating one or two of his most recent studies. Research subjects from anywhere in the nation could go to the website and complete one or two questionnaires in less than an hour. The contractor was confident that with persistence one could find an organization to conduct a replication on a large random sample of Americans and individuals or organizations willing to fund such a study. While this was an encouraging idea, the author was eager for a quicker solution.

By coincidence, soon after this, the author received from a professional colleague a reference to a study done by a university professor using the General Social Survey data sets to demonstrate research skills to his students (General Social Survey, two references). This reminded the author that this large GSS random sample of data of repeated interviews with Americans over many years, beginning in 1972 and replicated every two years, was available to all researchers at no cost. The author was vaguely familiar with this data set, having studied it briefly for a project when a student at the Stanford Summer Institute in Political Psychology 2007.

He went to the GSS website, became familiar with its resources, and downloaded material, including data sets of over 1500 cases for the 1987, 2008 and 2012 studies.

These data sets include several hundred variables each. The data had been gathered by interviews with random samples of Americans. The size of the samples was sufficient to provide confident generalization to the whole national population. The data set included measures of many variables similar to those included in the author's studies, such as political orientation (liberal or conservative), and attitudes about religion, militarism, foreign policy, gender, minority groups, economics, the environment and preferred types of government and leadership. The 2012 data set was studied along with the first two for political orientation frequency data.

Method. GSS data files and the related Codebook were examined. A drawback of these data sets is that apparently limited effort had been made to include enough items on each specific topic to provide reliable measures of the traits in question. For example, to measure the big five personality traits, only two items were included for each of the five dimensions, and only in the 2006 survey. Only one measure, a bimodal one, was included to measure liberalism and conservatism. Another drawback of the data is that items on a given topic do not necessarily

appear near each other in any given survey, adding to the difficulty of finding groups of items that could be tested for their similarity as a reliable measure of a given trait, such as religious fundamentalism.

However, with persistence and reference to surveys for different years, the author was able to tease out meaningful results that provided a reasonable replication of his studies on smaller samples.

Statistics were run to create reasonably reliable scales, when possible, of traits of interest. The focus was on creating measures for traits similar to those in the author's prior studies. Efforts were made to produce reasonably reliable clusters (e.g with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .70 or better). If this failed, usually single items of interesting content were analyzed. Correlations were run between the resulting measures and the GSS item (POLVIEWS) that measures political orientation on a seven-point scale from extreme liberalism on the low end to extreme conservatism on the high end and a seven-point scale of political party orientation (low end Democrat, high end Republican) (PartyID). Items were chosen especially if they correlated significantly with these measures to check for differences as found in the author's prior studies. The resulting basic statistics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Statistics for GSS variables and clusters on some dimensions of political discourse. ** = significant at .01 level, two-tailed. * = .05 level.

Dimension	Sample size	Pearson correlations with liberalism – conservatism, partyid (dem-rep)	Mean item score .	Lib/con means consistent with prior studies?	Standard deviation	Range	Alpha reliability
GSS 1987:							
Constrained Economics (five items: five-item scale: govedop, govequinc, govjobs, goveminc, govunemp)	1379	.23**, .37**	2.85	Yes	.85	1-5	.82
Strong liberals	211		2.47		.81	1-5	
Strong conserv.	200		3.17		.94	1-5	
Constrained Welfare (five-item scale: natfare, natrace,natsoc, helpblk, helpoor)	495	.26**, .39**	11.27	Yes	3.25	5-19	.66
Strong liberals	81		9.77		3.24	5-19	

Strong conserv.	59		12.17		3.55	5-18	
Too much National Arms funding (one item: natarms)	570	-.21**, -.16**	2.29	Yes	.73	1-3	n/a
Strong liberals	92		2.53		.69	1-3	
Strong conserv.	65		2.02		.72	1-3	
Too much National Environment funding (one item: natenvir)	569	.12**, .16**	1.35	Yes	.57	1-3	n/a
Strong liberals	92		1.25		.48	1-3	
Strong conserv.	66		1.47		.64	1-3	
Too much National Parks funding (one item: natpark)	1727	.09**, .11**	1.72	Yes	.58	1-3	n/a
Strong liberals	273		1.62		.54	1-3	
Strong conserve.	239		1.79		.60	1-3	
Too much Foreign Aid funding (one item: nataid)	934	.03, -.03	2.47	Yes and No	.71	1-3	n/a
Strong liberals	159		2.25		.62	1-3	
Strong conserv.	174		2.55		.63	1-3	
GSS 2008:							
Religious fundamentalism (2 items: fund & fund16) 1=yes, 2=no	1894	-.19**, .01	1.98	Yes	.68	1-3	.73
Strong liberals	283		2.21		.66	1-3	
Strong conserv.	376		1.80		.66	1-3	
God Beliefs (3 items: god, godchange, godmeans)	1309	.26**, .06*	12.08	Yes	2.88	3-15	.75
Strong liberals	189		10.56		3.61	3-15	
Strong conserv.	257		13.02		2.32	3-15	

Heaven/hell beliefs (2 items: heaven, hell). Low score endorses literal places.	1314	-.26**, -.09**	1.71	Yes	.91	1-4	.84
Strong liberals	190		2.23		1.09	1-4	
Strong conserv.	257		1.42		.74	1-4	
Prayer should be in public schools? (One item: prayer). (1= no, 2 = yes)	1275	.18**, .02	1.59	Yes	.49	1-2	
Strong liberals	194		1.45		.50	1-2	
Strong conserv.	259		1.71		.45	1-2	
Pistol or revolver in one's home? (One item: pistol). 1=yes, 2=no, (3= refused...omitted, as N < 1% of sample).	1156	-.15**, -.17**	1.75	Yes	.43	1-2	n/a
Strong liberals	201		1.85		.36	1-2	
Strong conserv.	207		1.65		.48	1-2	

“Strong liberals” were considered to be those persons who self-identified on the POLVIEWS measure as “Liberal” or “Extreme liberal” (1 or 2) and “Strong conservatives” as those who self-identified as “Conservative” or “Extreme conservative” (6 or 7). Most participants in the studies had scores between these two, having given as their political orientations “Moderate leaning toward liberal” (3), “Moderate” (4), or “Moderate leaning toward conservative” (5).

In general, the resulting correlation statistics in the second column are consistent with those of the author and other researchers on prior measures of similar personality trait or attitude dimensions. The correlations with liberal and conservative political orientation document significant differences between these groups. While statistically significant, these correlations do tend to be lower than in the author's studies of similar variables, perhaps because of the lower reliabilities of the GSS variables and perhaps because the author's prior studies measure liberal and conservative orientations as separate variables, not as ends of a bipolar trait, “liberalism/conservatism”, as in the GSS studies. Separate measures correlate only in the range of -.40 with each other, suggesting that liberalism and conservatism are not opposite ends of a single bipolar trait but two separate traits. If they were simply opposite ends of the same trait, one would expect a much higher negative correlation, e.g. -.90.

In addition to correlations between liberal and conservative worldviews and other variables similar to those in the author's prior studies, the GSS mean scores for strong liberals and strong conservatives are relatively close together on the overall dimensions measured (third column).

This consistency is identified in the fifth ("Yes/No") column. One exception is foreign policy, for which the correlations of .03 and -.03 are not statistically significant, as they are in the author's prior studies, so "No" is indicated. However, the mean scores for both groups (2.25 and 2.55) are close together, earning a "Yes".

Table 2 presents the means for strong liberals and strong conservatives for each of the dimensions presented in Table 1, along with the difference between these means and the standard deviation and range of total sample scores. The fifth column is the percent of the total range of scores (from Table 1) represented by the mean of the differences score. The last column is the fraction of the standard deviation represented by the mean of differences score ((liberal mean – conservative mean) / standard deviation of total sample).

Table 2. Comparisons of strong liberal and strong conservative scores.

Dimension	Liberal mean	Conservative mean	Difference of means	Percent of range	Standard deviation total sample	Difference fraction of standard deviation
Economics	2.47	3.17	.70	18	.85	.82
Welfare	9.77	12.17	2.4	17	3.35	.72
National arms spending	2.53	2.02	.51	26	.73	.70
Environment spending	1.25	1.47	.22	11	.57	.39
National parks spending	1.62	1.79	.17	9	.58	.29
Foreign aid spending	2.25	2.55	.30	15	.71	.42
Female subservience	8.99	11.57	2.58	17	2.65	.97
Fundamentalism	2.21	1.80	.41	60	.68	.60
God beliefs	10.56	13.02	2.46	21	2.88	.85
Heaven/Hell beliefs	2.23	1.42	.81	27	.91	.89
Prayer in school	1.45	1.71	.26	53	.49	.53
Pistol in home	1.85	1.65	.20	20	.43	.47

None of the mean differences between the strong liberals and strong conservatives (column 4) is greater than one standard deviation of the total group score distribution. The mean of these differences is .64, a bit more than half a standard deviation.

This information is presented graphically in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Graphic representation of mean scores for strong liberals (L) and strong conservatives (C) on dimensions of political discourse. * indicates approximate location of total sample mean, as given in Table 1, above. For example, the total sample (N =1375) mean on Economics is 2.85.

Dimension	Range		of		scores.
Economics	1	2.47L *	3.17C		5
Welfare	5		9.77L * 12.7C		19
National arms spending	1		2.02C * 2.53L		3
Environment spending	1	1.25L * 1.47C			3
National parks spending	1	1.62L * 1.79C			3
Foreign aid spending	1	2.57C *	2.64L		3
Female subservience	3	8.99L	* 11.59C		19
Fundamentalism	1	1.80C *	2.21L		3
God beliefs	3		10.56L *	13.02C	15
Heaven/Hell beliefs	1	1.42C	* 2.23L		4
Prayer in school	1		1.45L *	1.71C	2
Pistol in home	1		1.65C *	1.85 L	2

These findings are considered to be consistent with the author's findings in prior studies: while conservatives and liberals tend to differ to a statistically significant degree on many traits related to or constituting their political worldviews *when measured by correlation coefficients*, these differences are not very great when measured by *mean scores* of strong liberals and strong conservatives.

Indeed, citizens function quite cooperatively in business, club, recreational and church activities for the most part in their day-to-day lives, even though some are liberal and some conservative. Overdramatizing differences between liberals and conservatives seems counterproductive in light of these research findings. This is especially important when considering that the majority of citizens hold political attitudes between those of strong liberals and strong conservatives, as indicated by the asterisks in Figure 1.

Indeed, if we consider all the citizens that fall between what are defined in the present studies as strong liberals and strong conservatives, we find that about two thirds of citizens fall in this middle group, as reflected in the data in Table 3. In the third column 68 percent, 64 percent and 63 percent of citizens fall in the mid-range for the 1987, 2008 and 2012 GSS samples respectively.

Table 3. Proportions of liberals, moderates and conservatives in GSS samples.

	Number/Percent	Number/Percent	Number/Percent
GSS Sample	“Strong” liberal	Moderates: central, and some leaning to lib and con slightly	“Strong” conservative
1987, N = 1679 total	281, 17%	1145, 68%	253, 15%
2008, N = 1933	309, 16%	1229, 64%	395, 20%
2012, N = 1872	325, 17%	1187, 63%	360, 19%

If democratic government is best manifested by serving well-informed majority citizen opinion, then mean scores on reliable and valid measures of citizen opinion could be a primary guideline for government legislation and policy. While the GSS survey items are probably too few on most topics to provide adequately reliable measures, they give a taste of what could be accomplished with reliable polling questionnaires. Such questionnaires could provide reliable measures of general citizen government policy preferences and also measures of their preferences on specific policy options, such as which of three possible national health insurance programs they prefer, how much to spend on military and foreign aid and how much to tax and in what manner.

Basing government policy more on citizen polls rather than exclusively on the results of Congressional debates might have advantages, such as quicker attention to issues and more citizen cooperation with policies enacted. Recent public ratings of confidence in Congress are near or at all-time lows, a condition that does not augur well for the future of the nation and for attention to problems that are best solved via government.

Thus, journalists and politicians who espouse democratic government are encouraged to note citizen poll findings such as those presented above, which provide insights into the political worldviews of citizens and the differences and similarities between them.

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