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A Comparative Study of Psychological Mechanisms Underlying Political Orientation in an Old and a New Democracy

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Introduction

Lately there has been a renewed interest for elucidating the determinants of political ideology. A two component model of political ideology representing a social and an economic dimension has been suggested (e.g. Feldman & Johnston, 2014; Van Hiel & Kossowska, 2007). The individual political orientation can be conceptualized along two dimensions: acceptance versus rejection of social change, and acceptance versus rejection of economic inequality (Jost et al., 2009). Both components can be seen as orthogonal with separate measures for each (Duckitt et al., 2002).

In our research project, we are interested in a more detailed examination of structures and contents of political orientation in an old (Sweden) and a new (Latvia) democracy. We propose a theoretical model where the social dimension is represented as acceptance versus avoidance of uncertainty, and the economic dimension is represented as high versus low tough-mindedness (Figure 1). We suggest that a underlying psychological mechanisms are based on the needs of epistemic and existential certainty (Jost et al., 2008), values (Schwartz, 2006), morals (Graham et al., 2011), and worldviews (Nilsson, 2014).

Research shows that social conservatism is strongly correlated with economic rightist attitudes in Western democracies (Jost et al., 2003) whereas this pattern is not always replicated in other (e.g. post-communist) cultures (Thorisdottir et al., 2007). For example, psychological mechanisms like needs of security and certainty are more prevalent in post-communist countries and predict left-wing economic attitudes (Malak et al., 2014). This pattern can perhaps be explained by the influence of socialist ideology, where the state was expected to regulate both social and economic processes.

Aim

In this study, political orientation was conceptualized on two dimensions: high versus low uncertainty avoidance, and high versus low tough-mindedness. In the first step, we investigated a number of variables as valid indicators (Study 1) of the dimensions (Figure 1). Then, we tested the proposed theoretical model in two cultures, representing an old (Sweden) and a new (Latvia) democracy. Our hypothesis was:

- The same underlying structure of psychological variables would appear in both cultures, despite differences in political culture and in understanding of terms denoting political orientation in both countries.

Results

In both Swedish and Latvian samples, the hypothesized two-dimensional model of political ideology was confirmed. The collected measures were subjected to multidimensional scaling (ALSACL, using z-transformed values as input) separately for each sample.

Discussion

The results of multidimensional scaling analysis confirm our hypothesis that the same psychological mechanisms are underlying a two dimensional model of political ideology in two countries with different democratic traditions and political discourse.

It should be noted that variables related to social conservatism and economic rightist ideology are more closely related in the Swedish sample than in the Latvian sample, replicating previous studies on Western and post-communist countries. This finding can be explained by the established party structure in Sweden where social conservatism and economic rightist ideology are relatively often associated in the party programs along the political rightist line. In Latvia, the main factor affecting voter choice is ethnic identification, and the relationship between ideological dimensions is often opposite (people can endorse economically leftist attitude along with social conservative ideology).

In the next step, the results from the present study will be compared with a larger randomized comparative study with Swedish (n=1000) and Latvian (n=1000) samples in Spring 2015 with the aim to study in depth how the expression of the same psychological preferences and behaviors can vary depending on the political culture in a society.

Method

Study 1: Swedish students and professionals (n=287, 61% female, mean age = 28); Study 2: Swedish (n=320, 77% women, mean age 23.9) and Latvian (n=264, 67% women, mean age 27.5) students.

Measurements: Both studies included measures on social conservatism and rightist economic orientation, SDG (Pratto et al., 1999), RWA (Zakrisson, 2005), economic system justification (Jost & Thompson, 2000), dependence on others and PVQ (Schwartz, 2006).

Reference


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