

Liberals are more emotion-driven than conservatives

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Emotions are powerful motivators of human behavior and attitudes. Emotions also play an important role in guiding policy support in conflict and other political contexts. Researchers at Tel Aviv University and the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya have studied the interaction between emotion and political ideology, showing that the motivating power of emotions is not the same for those on different ends of the ideological spectrum. Their research is published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

Design of the study

The researchers conducted six studies to examine emotions, ideology, and how they act together to affect support for policies. The first two studies focused on intergroup empathy, while the third study examined the interactive influence of ideology and despair on support for policies. Participants self-identified as being at different points of the right-left ideological spectrum.

Specific scenarios were selected for the six studies relating to current events in Israel, mainly surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and possible steps towards its resolution. Lead researcher Ruthie Pliskin elaborates on why the specific scenarios were chosen; "We selected our different scenarios with the aim of tackling both positive and negative developments in intergroup conflicts, eliciting a range of different emotions towards the out-group and the situation, referring to different

types of out-groups, and among different in-groups. Furthermore, we wanted to utilize both contrived, controlled scenarios, and major real-world developments, reflecting real and possible political developments."

Studies 4 through 6 were designed to alleviate some of the limitations in the first three studies. Study 4 utilized a correlational design addressing real-life developments—renewed peace negotiations—and a representative sample of Jewish Israelis. Study 4 allowed the researchers to examine whether the effect in the first three studies could be replicated in a real-world scenario, and also generalized to anger—a negative intergroup emotion brought on by the perception of another group's actions as unjust, and associated with a desire to confront or attack the anger-evoking group.

Study 5 followed a similar design as Study 4 and was conducted during wartime. The study controlled for various measures of attitude strength and group identification, ruling out the possibility that the previous findings simply reflect right-left differences in attitude strength rather than in the rigidity with which they hold a specific attitude. Study 6 went a step further and examined a novel population—Palestinian citizens of Israel—to eliminate the possibility that the findings are population-dependent, and expanded the examination to include fear—an emotion often related to rightist ideology.

Results of the study

In line with previous scientific knowledge on the relative rigidity of rightist ideological beliefs, the first three studies illustrate that induced emotions have a greater influence on leftists' positions than on rightists' positions, even though the experimental manipulations affected levels of emotion similarly for all participants. Even the third study, in which a negative emotion was induced, led to changes in policy support only among leftists, as was the case with empathy in the first two studies.

Induced empathy toward both Palestinians (study 1) and asylum-seekers (study 2) led to increased support for conciliatory and humanitarian policies among leftists, whereas induced despair (study 3) decreased support for conciliatory policies only among leftists.

Studies 4 through 6 looked at real-world scenarios, and found that Jewish-Israeli leftists' policy support was more related to both empathy and anger than rightists', at times of both peace efforts (study 4) and war (study 5). The final study found the same pattern of results with regard to fear among a different population, demonstrating that the interactive effect of ideology and emotion on policy support is not limited to a given population nor to emotions typically associated with leftist ideology.

Ms. Pliskin and her colleagues believe that these results may apply to other cultures, including liberals and conservatives in the U.S. "We would expect to find similar results among rightists and leftists in other cultures, including conservatives and liberals in the U.S., because of the cross-cultural similarities in the superstructure of ideology and the needs associated with rightist versus leftist ideology—and because of how these factors relate to [emotional](#) processes and their outcomes." But Ms. Pliskin does caution that more research would need to be done to determine if there are cultural factors that may limit or increase observed left-right differences.

Future research directions

The current research reveals that similar emotions can produce very different emotional outcomes for people of different ideologies. The findings help to illuminate how ideology and emotions work together to shape positions, and why we find that political events often push leftists more to the right, but rarely push rightists more to the left. The researchers were unable to determine in the current research under what circumstances emotions may in fact motivate changes in rightists'

positions, to the same extent as leftists'. More research is necessary to address that question.

Ms. Pliskin and her colleagues are already broadening their research to comparing Israeli and Dutch societies. Their research is also comparing the outcomes of fear in light of events either related or unrelated to the dominant ideological divides in society.

More information: Pliskin, R., Bar-Tal, D., Sheppes, G., & Halperin, E. (2014). Are Leftists More Emotion-Driven than Rightists? The Interactive Influence on Ideology and Emotions on Support for Policies. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 40(12).

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