The self-control consequences of political ideology

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Evidence from three studies reveals a critical difference in self-control as a function of political ideology. Specifically, greater endorsement of political conservatism (versus liberalism) was associated with greater attention regulation and task persistence. Moreover, this relationship is shown to stem from varying beliefs in freewill; specifically, the association between political ideology and self-control is mediated by differences in the extent to which belief in freewill is endorsed, is independent of task performance or motivation, and is reversed when freewill is perceived to impede (rather than enhance) self-control. Collectively, these findings offer insight into the self-control consequences of political ideology by detailing conditions under which conservatives and liberals are better suited to engage in self-control and outlining the role of freewill beliefs in determining these conditions.

This potential discrepancy in freewill beliefs is critical to the proposition that conservatives demonstrate greater self-control than liberals. Recent work, for instance, demonstrates that freewill beliefs are intricately linked to basic motor processes critical to effective self-control (15, 16). Indeed, discouraging a belief in freewill decreases activation in brain regions associated with intentional—and arguably goal-directed—action (i.e., readiness potential) (16). Similarly, the belief in freewill appears critical to individuals’ ability to overcome the temptation to engage in self-detrimental and antisocial behavior (6, 17, 18). In fact, hallmark indicators of self-control are the abilities for individuals to regulate their attention and to persist at challenging tasks (19, 20), and the belief that individuals possess the ability to monitor and regulate their vigilance on a given task (e.g., attention regulation, persistence) would seem inherently beneficial to self-control.

Three studies, then, tested the hypotheses that (i) political ideology is associated with individuals’ self-control performance and (ii) freewill beliefs are central to these performance differences. Of note, we investigated this framework across a distinct mix of well-documented indices of self-control. Finally, all survey materials and informed consent procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the researchers’ home institutions. [A priori power analyses were computed to estimate appropriate sample sizes for each study using standard criteria: power of .8, medium effect sizes, and an alpha level of .05 (21). However, to take into account the specifications of the analyses—a single-item predictor of ideology (22) and multiple covariates (23, 24)—we elected to use more conservative minimum sample size estimates by increasing the power to .95.]

Significance

Surprisingly little is known about the self-control consequences of individuals’ political ideologies, given the centrality of political ideology to people’s self-identity and the vitality of self-control to human functioning. This research addresses this unexplored gap by offering insight into the processes (freewill beliefs) and factors (the value of freewill for effective self-control) that lead both conservatives and liberals to demonstrate greater self-control. In doing so, these findings provide a platform by which to broaden our understanding of the underlying mechanisms impacting self-control as well as an alternative perspective for interpreting previously documented differences between conservatives and liberals (e.g., intelligence, academic success).


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Study 1

Description. One hundred and forty-seven undergraduates completed a modified Stroop task where only incongruent trials were presented, given the attentional demands required to identify words that mismatch (versus match) the background (25). The average response latency across trials served as our index of self-control (26). Participants also reported their political ideology, along with standard demographics (i.e., sex, age, race), which we controlled for in the analysis to isolate the unique influence of ideology on freewill beliefs and self-control performance.

Results/Discussion. Given that the latency scores were highly skewed, we first performed a log transformation on the response latency scores before submitting the values to a simple linear regression, with political ideology as the predictor and demographic variables as covariates. Results revealed an association between political ideology and response latency (β = −0.21), t(142) = −2.59, P = 0.011, R² = 0.14; as political conservatism increased, response latencies on the Stroop task decreased. Importantly, we also assessed the number of correct solutions identified by participants as an index of response accuracy. However, analysis of the response accuracy data revealed no association between political ideology and response accuracy (P = 0.79). Political conservatives, then, showed greater self-control than did political liberals—a difference that did not occur at the expense of response accuracy.

Study 2

As noted, we propose these ideological differences in self-control are due to discrepancies in the endorsement of freewill beliefs. We therefore directly tested the possibility not only that conservatives will show greater belief in freewill than liberals but also that this difference in freewill beliefs will mediate this association between political ideology and self-control performance.

Description. One hundred and seventy-six undergraduates completed the Stroop task described in the initial study. Participants reported the Freewill Subscale of the FAD—Plus (5) before reporting their political ideology along with demographics.

Results. We again performed a log transformation on the response latency scores before submitting the transformed response latencies and freewill beliefs to a simple linear regression (with demographic variables as covariates). The results revealed an association of political ideology with both response latencies and freewill beliefs to a simple linear regression (β = −0.20), t(171) = −2.62, P = 0.009, R² = 0.071, and scores on the freewill subscale (β = 0.18), t(171) = 2.29, P = 0.024, R² = 0.043; as political conservatism increased, response latencies decreased and belief in freewill increased. Subsequent bootstrapped mediation tests (27) revealed an indirect path of political ideology on Stroop performance through freewill beliefs [95% CI (−0.099, −0.008)] (see Fig. 1 for full path model). [We also included measures of both task effort (28) and resource conservation (29) at the same time as freewill beliefs to ensure any differences in participants’ endorsement of freewill were independent of potential motivational differences. Political ideology was unrelated to either task motivation (β > .23) or resource conservation (β > .11). That liberals and conservatives were equally motivated to perform the self-control task (and conserve mental resources) suggests that the diverging task performances cannot be explained by motivational differences between liberals and conservatives. Indeed, the path analysis through freewill beliefs remained significant even after controlling for both motivation indices (95% CI [−0.036, −0.003]).]

Discussion. As in the initial study, conservatives showed better self-control performance than liberals; however, here we demonstrate that individuals’ freewill beliefs mediated the relationship between political ideology and self-control. Moreover, these effects occurred despite any differences in motivation, suggesting the ideological differences in self-control performance observed cannot be explained by differences in task motivation or effort (see Study 2, Results).

Study 3

The findings of the prior studies provide consistent evidence that conservatives exhibit greater self-control relative to liberals due to their enhanced endorsement of freewill. However, this effect presumes that individuals hold the theory that freewill is beneficial for self-control; if individuals held the theory that freewill is detrimental to self-control, then we would expect liberals rather than conservatives to demonstrate greater self-control performance.

To address this possibility, study 3 directly manipulated participants’ theories about the value of freewill for effective self-control (following the procedures used in past research to vary self-control theories) (30–32). Specifically, we told one group that freewill beliefs are associated with feelings of progress and peace of mind, feelings that enhance self-control. The other group was told that freewill beliefs are associated with feelings of frustration and anxiety, feelings that impede self-control. Given that conservatives demonstrate greater belief in freewill than liberals (see Study 2), we predicted that conservatives should show greater self-control when told that freewill beliefs facilitate self-control, whereas liberals should show greater self-control when told that freewill beliefs inhibit self-control.

Description. One hundred and thirty-five recruits from Amazon Mechanical Turk were led to believe either the presence or absence of freewill benefits self-control. Specifically, participants read that belief in freewill has consistently been associated with feelings of either progress and peace of mind (which enhances self-control) or frustration and anxiety (which impedes self-control) (for full wording, see SI Text). Participants then responded to multiple solution anagrams, with the amount of time participants persisted on the task serving as our index of self-control (29, 33). Finally, participants reported their political ideology along with demographics.

Results. The persistence data were log-transformed and then submitted to a hierarchical regression, with political ideology (continuous, mean-centered) and freewill theory (0, belief in freewill impedes self-control; 1, belief in freewill enhances self-control) as predictors in the first step (along with demographics) and their interaction term in the second step (34). Neither main effect was significant (F < 1). However, the results revealed a Political Ideology × Freewill Theory interaction (β = 0.68), t(126) = 3.25, P = 0.002, R² = 0.19 (Fig. 2). Conservatives (+1 SD on the ideology scale) persisted longer when induced to believe that freewill enhances (versus impedes) self-control (β = 0.22), t(127) = 1.84, P = 0.068. Liberals (−1 SD on the ideology scale), on the other hand, persisted longer when induced to believe that freewill impedes (versus enhances) self-control (β = −0.32), t(127) = −2.70, P = 0.008.

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Discussion. These findings support the importance of individuals’ lay beliefs regarding the effects of freewill on self-control performance. In particular, conservatives showed greater self-control when led to believe that freewill benefits self-control, whereas liberals showed greater self-control when led to believe that freewill undermines self-control. Moreover, the lay theory manipulation did not affect individuals’ endorsement of freewill (see SI Text), a finding that only further supports the claim that the self-control success of conservatives and liberals stems from the value attributed to freewill beliefs for effective self-control. Said differently, these findings are consistent with the documented discrepancy in endorsement of freewill beliefs and demonstrate the importance of these lay beliefs in determining when conservatives and liberals will exhibit greater self-control.

Summary of Findings

Three studies document a clear difference in self-control as a function of political ideology, as political conservatism (versus liberalism) was consistently related to greater self-control. Indeed, this enhanced self-control manifested in the form of greater task persistence and attention regulation. Moreover, these effects occurred across not only different indices of self-control but also different paradigms and different participant samples (see Table S1 for demographics by study). Indeed, these effects occurred across different dimensions of ideology (35). That is, we included assessments of both social and economic dimensions of ideology (36) in studies 2 and 3, and analysis of both dimensions mirrored the results for the global ideology measure in those studies (see Table 1 for intercorrelations).

Importantly, this relationship was shown to stem from differences in freewill beliefs, a finding consistent with work on the attributional proclivities of conservatives and liberals (9). Moreover, this association held when we experimentally induced the theory that freewill is beneficial to self-control and reversed when we experimentally induced the theory that freewill undermines self-control. Thus, freewill beliefs appear central to understanding differences in self-control performance of conservatives and liberals.

Table 1. Correlations between different dimensions of ideology in studies 2 and 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Political-social ideology</th>
<th>Political-economic ideology</th>
<th>Social-economic ideology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study 2</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 3</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All correlations are significant at P < 0.001.
unidentified lens to better understand the conditions under which both conservative and liberal individuals can elicit greater self-control.

Concluding Remarks

This research offers insight into the processes (freewill beliefs) and factors (the value of freewill for effective self-control) that lead both conservatives and liberals to demonstrate greater self-control. In doing so, these findings provide a platform by which to broaden our understanding of the underlying mechanisms impacting self-control as well as an alternative perspective by which to promote greater self-control in individuals as a function of their political ideology.

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