Article

Liberals Possess More National Consensus on Political Attitudes in the United States: An Examination Across 40 Years

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Abstract

Do liberals or conservatives have more agreement in their political attitudes? Recent research indicates that conservatives may have more like-minded social groups than do liberals, but whether conservatives have more consensus on a broad, national level remains an open question. Using two nationally representative data sets (the General Social Survey and the American National Election Studies), we examined the attitudes of over 80,000 people on more than 400 political issues (e.g., attitudes toward welfare, gun control, same-sex marriage) across approximately 40 years. In both data sets, we found that liberals possessed a larger degree of agreement in their political attitudes than did conservatives. Additionally, both liberals and conservatives possessed more consensus than did political moderates. These results indicate that social–cognitive motivations for building similarity and consensus within one's self-created social groups may also yield less consensus on a broad, national level. We discuss implications for effective political mobilization and social change.

Keywords

political ideology, consensus, political attitudes

After Hillary Clinton won a close Democratic primary election in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, many liberal supporters of Bernie Sanders (her Democratic political contender) refused to align with the Democratic nominee as the United States moved into the general election. After Hillary Clinton lost the general election to Donald Trump in the following November, many political commentators noted that her inability to invigorate and unite the left-leaning voter base contributed to her eventual loss (Graves, 2016). Ironically, decades earlier in his own tenure as U.S. president, it was Bill Clinton—Hillary Clinton's husband—who apocryphally quipped that working with liberals was "like herding cats." This issue of "herding cats" is perhaps less of a hurdle for political conservatives. For example, conservative pundit Rush Limbaugh maintains a hugely successful radio talk show, whose callers often begin their airtime by simply saying "ditto" to express agreement with previous statements made by Limbaugh and other callers. For this reason, many of Limbaugh's listeners have come to identify themselves as "Ditto Heads" (Zasky, 2012).

Recent research seems to support this anecdotal evidence that conservatives are better at forming a united front than are liberals. For example, Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, and Bonneau (2015) demonstrated that conservatives were less likely than liberals to retweet and disseminate information from ideologically dissimilar others in their networks. Similarly, Boutyline and Willer (2017) found that conservatives tend to have more densely structured and like-minded Twitter networks in general. This broad pattern of relatively higher levels of homophily among conservatives suggests that conservatives may have more attitude consensus within their social networks than do liberals. However, this previous research was conducted in contexts where individuals were able to continuously engage with others and self-select into specific social networks. As such, conservatives' greater homogeneity is possibly attributable to conservatives actively conforming and choosing social groups that echoed their political attitudes.

Currently, the question of whether liberals or conservatives possess more agreement in their political attitudes on a *national* level (rather than being examined in small scale, self-selected social networks) remains unaddressed. In other words, when a nationally representative sample of liberals and conservatives are asked about their social and political attitudes, who possesses more agreement? The issue of consensus on a national level is of considerable importance, as agreement on issues on a broad level is required for political groups to mobilize, win elections, and pass successful legislation. We examined this question in the present research using two nationally

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representative, longitudinal data sets. We test two competing theoretical perspectives on whether liberals or conservatives would have more consensus at the national level, which we outline below.

Conservatives' Motivations Might Foster More National Consensus

Previous research suggests that conservatives are more group oriented compared to liberals. Conservatives possess stronger epistemic motivations for order, certainty, and predictability (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Jost, Sterling, & Stern, in press); existential motivations to avoid threatening circumstances (Jost, Stern, Sterling, & Rule, 2017); and relational motivations to connect, affiliate, and remain loyal to their in-group and like-minded others (Feldman, 2003; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). This constellation of epistemic, existential, and relational motivations might be most readily satisfied through adopting the attitudes that like-minded others hold and in turn forming consensus in one's groups. Specifically, sharing attitudes with others in one's social groups and networks leads individuals to feel that their attitudes are legitimate and valid reflections of reality (i.e., their attitudes are objective; Festinger, 1950; Hardin & Higgins, 1996), dampens concerns over death and the fleetingness of human existence (Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Schimel, 1999; Simon et al., 1997), and allows for the development and solidification of important social relationships and group ties (Festinger, Back, & Schachter, 1950). In turn, conservatives' motivations might lead them to adopt the attitudes that other conservatives possess and build consensus in their groups.

Liberals, on the other hand, are more tolerant of uncertainty (Jost et al., 2003) and more willing to consider and integrate multiple perspectives into their political attitudes (Tetlock, 1983, 2007). Additionally, liberals are more motivated to develop a unique sense of self that is distinct and individuated from others in their social network (Stern, West, & Schmitt, 2014). In turn, liberals' motivations might lead them to contrast away from the attitudes that others' in their social groups hold and ultimately undermine the development of consensus within their political ranks. Overall, this theoretical perspective suggests that conservatives will possess *more* consensus on a national level than will liberals.

Conservatives' Motivations Might Foster Less National Consensus

On the other hand, the social–cognitive motivations for conformity and in-group cohesion that yield homogeneity within smaller, self-created social groups might result in conservatives showing *less* consensus on a broader, national level. Specifically, past research has argued that conservatives are more likely than liberals to turn to their immediate friends, family, and community (e.g., churches, Parent Teacher Association [PTA] meetings) as a source of information (Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008; Putnam, 2000). In turn, when conservatives strive for consensus within their communities, they potentially do so on a smaller scale relative to the larger national population.

Building consensus within one's immediate social group contrasts with the development of consensus on a larger scale. Conforming to and developing similarities within one's social network shifts focus away from those outside of the network. In other words, when similarities within a specific group increase, similarities across the broader population tend to inevitably decrease (Henrich & Boyd, 1998; Newson, Richerson, & Boyd, 2007). We propose that conservatives' motivations that lead them to more strongly value their immediate social networks and build consensus within those communities (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015; Boutyline & Willer, 2017; Feldman, 2003; Graham et al., 2009) will in turn produce *more* differences (less consensus) among conservatives on the national level. Overall, this theoretical perspective suggests that conservatives will possess *less* consensus on a national level than will liberals.

The Present Research

In the present research, we examine the question of whether liberals or conservatives possess more in-group consensus in their political attitudes at the national level. In doing so, we move past potential fluctuations in social and political attitudes that arise from temporal aberrations (e.g., current political events and election cycles) by testing our research question with two nationally representative data sets spanning approximately 40 years. Testing our research question with two representative and longitudinal data sets is particularly useful, given the competing predictions that liberals or conservatives may show more in-group consensus. By doing so, we are able to replicate findings across multiple representative samples and shed light on what otherwise would be a theoretically contentious topic.

Study 1

In Study 1, we examined whether conservatives or liberals possess more in-group consensus in their political attitudes on a national level. We examined this question using a nationally representative panel survey—the General Social Survey (GSS).

Method

Participants

Participants were 53,081 individuals ($M_{age} = 45.93$, $SD = 17.44$) who participated in the GSS (Smith, Marsden, & Hout, 2017) between the years of 1974 and 2016 and who indicated their political ideology. The sample consisted of 29,363 (55.3%) women and 23,718 (44.7%) men. Of all, 43,024 (81.1%) individuals identified as White, 7,215 (13.6%) as Black, and 2,842 (5.4%) as other and mixed races. Additional data about the sample demographics are available in the Online Supplemental Material. Maintained by the University of

Chicago's National Opinion Research Center, the GSS project is a publicly available national data repository consisting of a wide range of items measuring attitudes and behaviors. The project was started in 1972, with national surveys being administered every 1–2 years.

Measures

Political attitude items. Questions from the GSS were included in our analysis if they were political in nature. We defined items as "political" if they reflected participants' personal attitude toward an issue, and the issue could in theory either be legislated on or voted on by the public (e.g., "Should hospitals be run by private organizations, companies, or by the government").

To determine whether variables met these criteria, the authors independently reviewed the items and jointly solved disagreements. This process resulted in 356 items, spanning political issues related to (among others) government spending, social services, crime and punishment, international relations, defense and military, and social issues such as abortion and firearms. A full list of the items and information about when each was asked can be found in the Online Supplement. Because (1) items were asked on different scales (e.g., 5 point, 7 point) and (2) social and political attitudes in the United States have shifted drastically over the last several decades (Gallup, 2015), we standardized variables within each year of the GSS to allow for a clearer comparison between ideological groups at a given point in time.

Political orientation. In the GSS, political orientation was assessed with a single item that was described as a continuum ranging from 1 (*extremely liberal*) to 7 (*extremely conservative*), with a midpoint of 4 (*moderate, middle of the road*). Although a *don't know* option was not explicitly provided, some participants indicated this option on their own (4.1% of the total sample). These individuals were removed from analyses. A single-item ideology scale such as this is commonly used in psychological research and reliably correlates with many core liberal–conservative differences (Graham et al., 2009; Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008; Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1991). Furthermore, both liberals and conservatives are typically able to understand and locate their ideology on a single-item measure (Robinson et al., 1991). Additionally, the single-item political orientation measure was most consistently asked between the two data sets.

Analytic Strategy

Assessing consensus. We estimated participants' level of consensus within their political group (i.e., in-group consensus) using Kenny's (1994) Social Relations Model (SRM). While the SRM is often used in dyadic analyses, Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006) developed a model that extends the paradigm to a "one-with-many" design to capture agreement (i.e., consensus) of individuals across many targets. Adapting this model to the current context, targets are social–political items. In the present research, "one" refers to the individual participant and "many" refers to the social–political items.

The SRM is a componential analysis that decomposes each participant's responses into three sources of variance: *target variance*, which captures agreement among participants through assessing whether there is consistency in how an item is responded to by multiple participants; *perceiver variance*, which captures individual differences in responding through assessing whether there is consistency in how a participant responds to multiple items; and *relationship/error variance*, which estimates the meaningful and nonmeaningful variance that is left unexplained. For example, consider two liberals reporting their attitudes on two different items. High *target variance* would represent Liberal #1 and Liberal #2 both reporting higher numbers on Item #1 and lower numbers on Item #2, as the *target* (i.e., item) accounts for much of the response variance. High *perceiver variance* in this context would represent Liberal #1 consistently reporting lower numbers to the items and Liberal #2 consistently reporting higher numbers to the items, as the *perceiver* accounts for much of the response variance. Higher estimates indicate that the source (i.e., perceiver or target) *accounts* for more of the response variance (see Back & Kenny, 2010, for an extended discussion). We were most interested in target variance because it captures the degree of actual consensus in judgments (Kenny, 1994). The SRM automatically calculates estimates of perceiver variance simultaneously with target variance, so for interested readers, we also report results for perceiver variances in the Online Supplemental Material.

Other methods have been employed in the past to assess consistency and consensus. Horizontal constraint (Barton & Parsons, 1977) measures consistency by estimating, for example, the standard deviation of responses within an individual. Other methods to assess consensus involve, for example, calculating the correlation of responses for items across individuals (Kenny, 1994). However, these types of methods possess major limitations and are unable to accurately model relationships among individuals and targets (see Kenny, 1994, for extended discussion). The analytic approach of the SRM is highly advantageous and overcomes previous issues in consensus estimation for several reasons. First, ignoring the multilevel nature of data greatly distorts standard error estimates and results in inaccurate Type 1 error rates (Snijders & Bosker, 1999). The SRM allows for the estimation of consensus across multiple items while accounting for the multilevel nature of the design. Second, by separately estimating variance that is attributable to perceiver and target/item effects, the SRM estimates levels of attitude agreement that is independent from response bias (Kenny & West, 2010). Systematic response bias across individuals could create the illusion of consensus and needs to be partitioned out (as the SRM does) to obtain an accurate estimate of consensus.

Comparing consensus between ideologies. The SRM estimates perceiver and target variances by analyzing responses among a

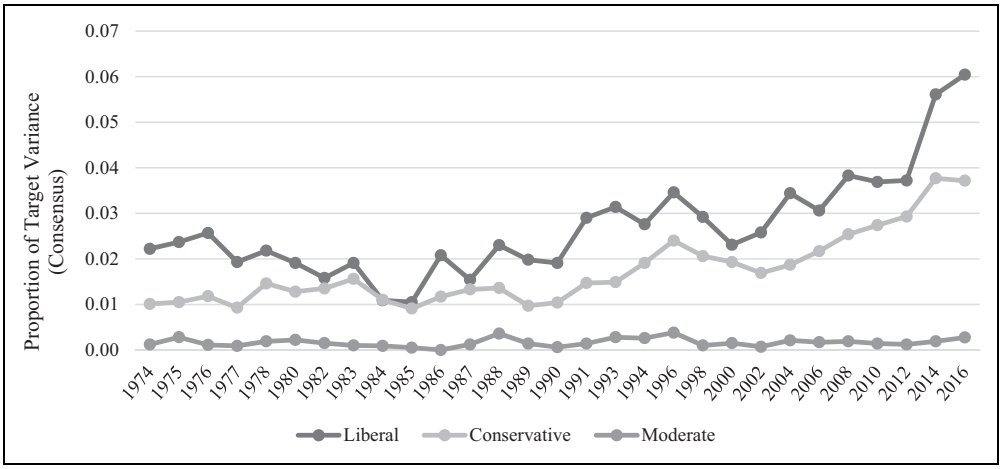

Figure 1. Proportion of target variance (in-group consensus) in the GSS data set by year and ideology. GSS = General Social Survey.

group of individuals. As such, the model requires that individuals be separated into groups to calculate consensus estimates within those groups. To create ideological groups, we conducted a tertile split on the continuous ideology measure for these analyses. Individuals responding 1–3 were categorized as "liberal," 4 as "moderate," and 5–7 as "conservative" (see Stern, West, Jost, & Rule, 2014, for a similar approach). This resulted in 14,550 (27.4%) liberals, 20,515 (38.6%) moderates, and 18,016 (33.9%) conservatives.

We conducted SRM analyses separately for each year and for each ideological group. In turn, we obtained estimates of in-group consensus for liberals, moderates, and conservatives within each year (e.g., liberals in 1978). The SRM provides unstandardized variance values. To create standardized values of in-group consensus for each group that can be used in analyses, we calculated relative target variances by diving the amount of target variance by the amount of total variance (target + perceiver + error; Kenny, 1994). Once standardized values of the target variance were obtained for each year within each ideological group, we compiled those estimates into a data set for analysis. Data and analytic code for all studies can be accessed through the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/vhzkt/.

Results

Main Analyses

Do liberals or conservatives have more in-group consensus? We conducted an analysis using the MIXED procedure in SPSS (Version 21) to account for the fact that ideological groups are nested within year (Fitzmaurice, Laird, & Ware, 2012). We specified a compound symmetry covariance matrix. To examine differences between political ideology groups, we created two dummy-coded contrast variables with liberals specified as the reference group (Aiken & West, 1991). We specified the liberal–moderate contrast and the liberal–conservative contrast as fixed effects. Liberals were specified as the reference group because our hypotheses related to theoretical differences between liberals and conservatives. Target variance (i.e., the amount of in-group consensus) was included as the dependent variable.

Liberals possessed more in-group consensus in their political attitudes than did conservatives, $B = -.010$, $SE = .002$, 95% CI [−.013, −.006], $t(56) = -6.15$, $p < .001$, and moderates, $B = -.025$, $SE = .002$, 95% CI [−.028, −.022], $t(56) = -16.29$, $p < .001$. Additionally, conservatives possessed more in-group consensus in their political attitudes than did moderates, $B = .016$, $SE = .002$, 95% CI [.013, .019], $t(56) = 10.14$, $p < .001$. For visual purposes, we display in-group consensus across years in Figure 1.

Adjusting for Correlates of Ideology

Ideology typically correlates with demographic factors, including gender, race, and education (Pew Research Center, 2015). Thus, as in previous research (Graham et al., 2009), we conducted additional models where we statistically adjusted for these demographic variables. To do so, for each year and ideological group, we computed the following variables: percentage of females, percentage of Whites, and the percentage of individuals with at least a bachelor's (BS) degree. As shown in Table 1, results were the same when statistically adjusting for these demographic factors.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 strongly supported the notion that liberals possess a greater degree of in-group consensus in their political attitudes on a national level than do conservatives. Additionally, both liberals and conservatives possessed more in-group consensus on a national level than did moderates. Given that we entered Study 1 with competing predictions of whether liberals or conservatives would have more consensus, we sought to obtain further evidence that liberals possess more in-group consensus on a national level in Study 2.

Table 1. Ideological In-Group Consensus in the GSS With Demographic Adjustment Variables.

Source	*B*	SE_b	*df*	*t*	95% Lower	95% Upper
Reference group = liberal						
Liberal vs. moderate	−.012***	.002	64.4	−5.17	−.016	−.007
Liberal vs. conservative	−.006***	.002	80.5	−3.72	−.010	−.003
% With BS degree	.001***	<.001	45.7	7.99	.001	.001
% White	<.001*	<.001	52.7	2.00	.000	.001
% Female	<.001	<.001	60.6	1.49	.000	.001
Reference group = moderate						
Moderate vs. conservative	.006*	.002	68.3	2.27	.001	.010

Note. Estimates for the demographic variables in the *Reference Group = Moderate* model are redundant and thus omitted. GSS = General Social Survey.
*$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$.

Study 2

In Study 2, we aimed to replicate the findings of Study 1 by utilizing another nationally representative data set—the American National Election Studies (ANES). Based on the results of Study 1, we predicted that liberals would have more in-group consensus than conservatives.

Method

Participants

Participants were 29,042 individuals ($M_{age} = 45.62$, $SD = 17.33$) who participated in the ANES between the years of 1972 and 2012 (years during which measures of political orientation were assessed). The project was started in 1948, with national surveys being administered approximately every 2 years. The sample consisted of 15,176 (52.3%) women and 13,866 (47.7%) men. Of all, 22,658 (78.0%) individuals identified as White, 3,039 (10.5%) as Black, 3,188 (11.0%) as other and mixed races, and 157 (0.5%) did not indicate their race.

Measures

Political attitude items. We used the same approach as in Study 1 to categorize items as political. This resulted in a total of 55 items, which can be found in the Online Supplemental Materials. As in Study 1, we standardized variables within each year.

Political orientation. In the ANES, political orientation was similarly assessed using a single item that was described as a continuum ranging from 1 (*extremely liberal*) to 7 (*extremely conservative*), with a midpoint of 4 (*moderate, middle of the road*). Unlike the GSS, the ANES included an explicit option for those who were uncertain about their ideology (*don't know*). Individuals who indicated *don't know* (24.8% of the total sample) were removed from analyses. Given that an opt-out choice was provided for participants who did not feel that they could locate themselves on the ideology scale, it is highly likely that participants who selected the midpoint (*moderate*) were actually ideologically moderate. Other than the inclusion of the explicit "don't know" choice in the ANES, the phrasing and structure of the primary political orientation question in the GSS and ANES was nearly identical.

Analytic Strategy

Assessing consensus. As in Study 1, we estimated in-group consensus using Kenny's (1994) SRM. We again focused on target variance because it captures the degree of in-group consensus in political attitudes. For interested readers, the results for perceiver variance are reported in the Online Supplement.

Comparing consensus between ideologies. As in Study 1, we created ideological categories using a tertile split on the continuous ideology measure. Individuals responding 1–3 were categorized as "liberal," 4 as "moderate," and 5–7 as "conservative." This resulted in 7,491 (25.8%) liberals, 9,873 (34.0%) moderates, and 11,678 (40.2%) conservatives. We calculated standardized in-group consensus estimates for each ideological group using the same approach as in Study 1.

Results

Main Analyses

We conducted our main analysis with the same statistical model from Study 1. Replicating Study 1, liberals possessed more in-group consensus in their political attitudes than did conservatives, $B = -.044$, $SE = .006$, 95% CI [−.057, −.031], $t(29.4) = -6.89$, $p < .001$, and moderates, $B = -.073$, $SE = .006$, 95% CI [−.086, −.060], $t(29.4) = -11.53$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, conservatives showed more consensus in their political attitudes than did moderates, $B = .029$, $SE = .006$, 95% CI [.016, .042], $t(28.7) = 4.62$, $p < .001$. We display in-group consensus across years in Figure 2.

Adjusting for Correlates of Ideology

As in Study 1, we conducted additional models in which we adjusted for gender, race, and education. As shown in Table 2, results comparing liberals and conservatives were the same when statistically adjusting for these demographic factors.

Discussion

In Study 2, we replicated Study 1 and found that liberals possessed more in-group consensus in their political attitudes on a national level than did conservatives and that liberals and conservatives both possessed more in-group consensus than did moderates.

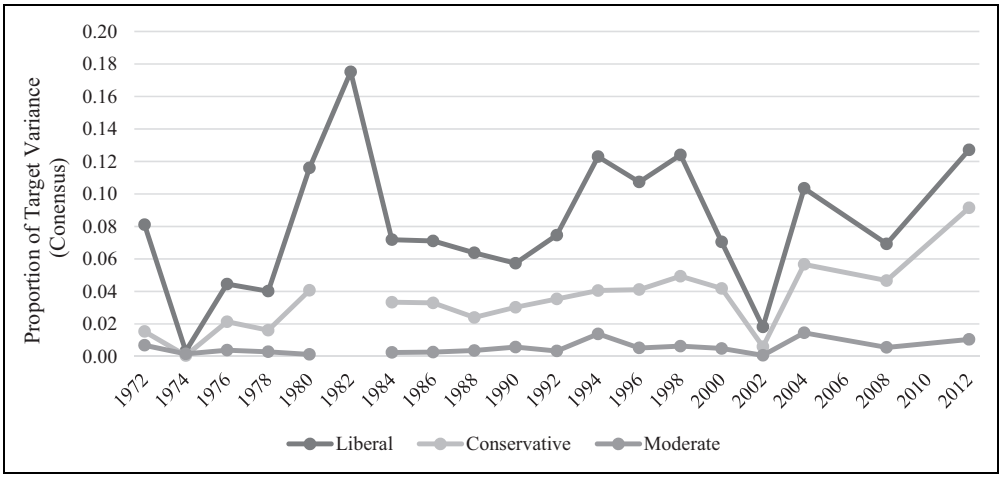

Figure 2. Proportion of target variance (in-group consensus) in the ANES data set by year and ideology. No estimates were generated in 1982 for conservatives and moderates due to a lack of model convergence. ANES = American National Election Studies.

Table 2. Ideological In-Group Consensus in the ANES With Demographic Adjustment Variables.

Source	*B*	SE_b	*df*	*t*	95% Lower	95% Upper
Reference group = liberal						
Liberal vs. moderate	−.044***	.012	47.8	−3.66	−.067	−.020
Liberal vs. conservative	−.038***	.010	49.0	−3.79	−.059	−.018
% With BS degree	.002**	.001	40.2	3.03	.001	.003
% White	.001	.001	35.0	1.14	.000	.002
% Female	<.001	.001	33.5	0.14	.000	.002
Reference group = moderate						
Moderate vs. conservative	.005	.013	44.2	0.40	−.021	.031

Note. Estimates for the demographic variables in the *Reference Group = Moderate* model are redundant and thus omitted. ANES = American National Election Studies.
**$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

General Discussion

Across two nationally representative data sets, we found that, on a national level, liberals possessed more in-group consensus on political issues than did conservatives. We found this to be the case even when adjusting for demographic factors such as education, gender, and ethnicity. These findings provide insight into research on consensus, political mobilization, and group effectiveness, each of which we discuss below.

Considerations of Consensus on a National Level

The present finding—that liberals show more in-group consensus on a national level—is perhaps surprising in light of past research showing that conservatives (relative to liberals) are more motivated to conform with close others and value in-group cohesion (Feldman, 2003; Graham et al., 2009; Jost et al., 2003). Past research has similarly indicated that conservatives possess greater homogeneity in their self-created social networks than do liberals (Barberá et al., 2015; Boutyline & Willer, 2017). In addition, relative to liberals, conservatives value and strive for consensus within immediate social networks and self-created, localized social groups (Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008), such as their local community (Putnam, 2000). The present research adds to this literature of liberal–conservative differences by showing that when assessing consensus on a broad, national level, liberals—rather than conservatives—exhibit more consensus and similarity on their stances to social–political issues. More specifically, we argue that when conservatives strive for similarity and consensus within their own immediate social network (Barberá et al., 2015; Boutyline & Willer, 2017; Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008), it should inevitably yield more differences and variability (i.e., less consensus) on a population level (Henrich & Boyd, 1998; Newson et al., 2007).

In the present research, mean-level differences in consensus between liberals and conservatives were relatively small (several percentage points). However, these findings are still practically and theoretically informative. First, relatively small differences observed in research can translate into meaningful influences in society (Prentice & Miller, 1992). The domain of politics is an area where this is especially true. Even a small difference in consensus could reflect a large advantage in collective action mobilization and the advancement of political agendas. Indeed, the political course of countries as a whole is often determined by only a few percentage points. National elections for roles in which people occupy substantial levels of power and influence (e.g., the U.S. Presidency) are frequently determined by narrow margins, and legislative bodies throughout the world often vote to make integral changes to a society with the winning side possessing only a slight

majority. One ideological group possessing slightly greater consensus than others has the potential to make a meaningful impact on society. Second, as previously discussed, past research has consistently documented that conservatives more strongly value their groups (Graham et al., 2009) and form more homogeneous networks than do liberals (Barberá et al., 2015; Boutyline & Willer, 2017). As such, the finding that liberals have greater in-group consensus (i.e., are more homogeneous) than conservatives to any degree is theoretically informative and suggests that future research should more strongly consider the scope of the group when discussing a group's level of homogeneity.

Relatedly, it is important to note that overall levels of in-group consensus were low for all ideological groups. We believe that this is a result of the same factors that lead conservatives to possess less consensus than liberals on a national level. As previous noted, to the extent that people possess homogeneous attitudes *within* their local communities, there will be differences *between* the attitudes of those groups and communities (e.g., Newson et al., 2007). In turn, consensus among a range of local communities (i.e., consensus at a national level) will be lower than consensus within each of those specific communities. We argue that because conservatives have greater homogeneity in their local self-selected groups, this leads them to possess lower levels of consensus than liberals on the national level. However, because both liberals and conservatives possess at least some degree of consensus in their local communities, all ideological groups will ultimately possess relatively lower levels of consensus when assessed nationally.

Implications for Political Mobilization and Group Effectiveness

Successful group cohesion and consensus formation are critical for mobilizing collective action. The present research offers a unique take on Bill Clinton's apocryphal quote that working with liberals is "like herding cats." Namely, if liberals have more in-group consensus on a national level, why might it be that some liberal movements (e.g., Occupy Wall Street) fail to establish a concrete agenda and course of action and subsequently flounder in achieving substantial social and political change?

One possibility is that consensus formation might function differently for liberals and conservatives when they engage with like-minded others in real-time group interactions. Specifically, liberals' greater degree of similarity in their political attitudes on a national level could give them an edge over conservatives in mobilizing liberal movements on a larger scale. However, liberals tend to value maintaining a sense of uniqueness and individuality than do conservatives (Stern et al., 2014). As such, making widely known to liberals that they agree more with one another than do conservatives could lead to reactance and activation of the motivation to individuate oneself within the group. Given that effective mobilization of a group to some degree necessitates following rank and conforming to the goals and attitudes that others espouse, liberals' motivations to heavily deliberate on judgments and construct a sense of uniqueness could undermine generating an effective social movement. Additionally, because motivations to individuate oneself become stronger as the size of a group increases (Pickett, Silver, & Brewer, 2002), effectively developing solidary in social movements could be especially challenging for liberals as the size of the group increases. This possibility could help account for the fact that members of the largest politically liberal organizations (e.g., the American Civil Liberties Union) tend to be relatively unconnected with one another (Putnam, 2000).

For conservatives, on the other hand, although they may have less consensus with other conservatives on a national scale, recognizing where dissimilarities exist in their attitudes in real-time social interactions could activate the motivation to conform and develop a sense of shared reality. In turn, conservatives could efficiently forge consensus and galvanize their ranks into social action, as has been observed over the past several decades in a variety of politically conservative movements that made large-scale social impacts (e.g., the Moral Majority, the Tea Party). Empirically examining these questions would be an interesting avenue for future research.

Lastly, while we focused solely on levels of national consensus in the United States, motivational differences between liberals and conservative tend to be relatively similar across cultures and contexts (Jost et al., 2017; Jost et al., in press). As such, we would expect the results observed in the present research to generalize across cultural contexts. Nevertheless, a cross-cultural analysis of broad, national-level consensus among liberals and conservatives would be a fruitful direction for future research.

Conclusion

Anecdotal evidence sometimes paints the political landscape as one of disorganized liberals and conformist conservatives, suggesting that liberals and conservatives differ in the extent to which they possess in-group consensus on political issues. In the present research, we examined whether liberals or conservatives have more in-group consensus using two nationally representative data sets spanning more than 40 years. We found that on a national level, liberals consistently possessed more in-group consensus on political issues than did conservatives. This finding provides interesting insights for future research examining attitude formation in liberal and conservative groups and the underlying factors that shape the effectiveness of social movements.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available in the online version of the article.

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