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Report

Political mindset: Effects of schema priming on liberal-conservative political positions

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ABSTRACT

Although stable factors play an important role in determining people's political positions, most Americans also hold a mix of values and beliefs some congruent with political conservatism and some congruent with political liberalism. To investigate this more dynamic component of political thinking, two studies manipulated the relative salience of schemas about personal merit vs. good fortune as explanations for success in life. In Study 1, students at a highly selective university were asked to explain their academic success focusing either on the role of hard work, self-discipline and wise decision-making (Personal Merit condition) or that of chance, opportunity, and help from others (Good Fortune condition). In Study 2, personal merit vs. good fortune was primed through prior exposure to relevant questionnaire items. In both studies, participants in the Good Fortune condition subsequently indicated more support for liberal policies than did those in the Personal Merit condition.

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A great deal of research has shown that liberal-conservative political positions are, to a considerable extent, rooted in deeply held ideologies, stable personality factors and powerful social forces (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Altemeyer, 1998; Cohen, 2003; Eysenck, 1954; Newcomb, 1943; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Wilson, 1973). In the present research, however, we suggest that such positions are sometimes more malleable than is commonly assumed. We proceed from the premise that many Americans hold a mix of values and beliefs, some more consistent with political conservatism and some more consistent with political liberalism. Accordingly, we argue, the judgments an individual makes about a given political issue at a given moment are apt to be a function, at least in part, of the particular schema that is brought to bear in that moment (cf. Tourangeau, Rasinski, Bradburn, & D'Andrade, 1989).

We suggest that a particularly important kind of schema that underlies differences between liberal and conservative ways of thinking involves beliefs about the relative importance of personal merit and good fortune in the attainment of worldly success. In conventional conservative ideology, success is seen as the product of hard work, wise decision-making and other aspects of personal merit, whereas failure and low status are attributed to their opposites (Personal Merit schema) (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; see also Bobo, 1991; Feldman, 1988; Feldman & Zaller, 1992; McClosky & Zaller, 1984). In conventional liberal ideology, by contrast, success

is seen as also being, to a significant degree, the result of good fortune, social advantage, the help one receives from others, and other factors independent of personal merit (Good Fortune schema) (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Our suggestion is not that some people hold one of these schemas and some hold the other, but rather that most Americans possess both of them and that, when activated, each has the power to influence one's political opinions.

Indeed, consistent with this suggestion, some past research on public opinion has shown that Americans often hold a mix of values and beliefs relevant to their policy opinions, with near majorities of them endorsing both the view that people should get ahead on their own without relying on others to help them *and* the view that society has an obligation to reduce inequality and meet the needs of all its members (Bobo, 1991; Feldman, 1988; Feldman & Zaller, 1992; McClosky & Zaller, 1984; Tourangeau et al., 1989).

In the present research, we have two main goals. Our first goal is to demonstrate that liberal-conservative political positions are more malleable than has traditionally been assumed. To this end, we test the hypothesis that participants' political positions will be influenced by a manipulation that primes either the Personal Merit or the Good Fortune schema. Second, while there is research showing that Personal Merit and Good Fortune schemas are correlated with opinions about social welfare and other redistributive policies (Kluegel & Smith, 1986), we aim to provide experimental evidence that those schemas underlie and can play a role in influencing people's views about a variety of liberal-conservative policy issues to which they are not directly or obviously related.

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Study 1

In Study 1, our experimental manipulation involved a uniquely personalized form of priming that called upon research participants to consider the antecedents of their current status as students at a highly selective university. That is, undergraduates at Stanford University were asked to write a paragraph about how they got into their university—focusing either on the role of “hard work, self-discipline and wise decisions” (Personal Merit condition), or on the role of “chance, opportunity, and help from others” (Good Fortune condition) in the achievement of their enviable current status.

When participants had completed this task, they were given a separate task, a questionnaire asking them to make judgments about various issues that were designed to reflect classically liberal vs. conservative positions and most of which were not directly or obviously related to the content of their essays. Our hypothesis was that activating the Personal Merit schema (wherein success was linked to hard work, self-discipline and good decision-making) would produce more conservative responses to our questionnaire items than would activating the Good Fortune schema (wherein success was linked to good fortune, opportunity, and the help of others).

Method

Participants

Participants were 81 students at Stanford University (50 female; mean age 19.3 years; 43.8% White; 8.8% Hispanic; 12.5% African–American; 22.5% Asian; 1.3% Native American; 1.3% multi-ethnic; 10% other) who participated in exchange for course credit or monetary compensation.

Materials and procedure

Upon arrival in the lab, participants were randomly assigned to a condition and seated in front of a computer. They were told they would be completing a questionnaire about their opinions regarding a number of issues but that, first, we needed to gather some information about them. To make the goals and hypotheses of our research less transparent, we presented this personal information-gathering task as one designed to help us get to know a little about our participants before the “main” task on political judgment to follow. Participants were then asked to read a set of instructions presented on their computer screen, and to spend 10–15 min typing their response to the question. The essay instructions constituted our manipulation and differed by condition as follows:

Personal Merit condition. *It obviously takes some combination of good fortune and hard-work to get to be a student at Stanford. Please tell us the story of how you got into Stanford. In particular, we would like to know about the role that **hard work, self-discipline and wise decisions** played in helping you get here [bold in original].*

Good Fortune condition. *It obviously takes some combination of hard work and good fortune to get to be a student at Stanford. Please tell us the chain of events that culminated in your getting into Stanford. In particular, we would like to know about the role that **chance, opportunity and help from others** played in helping you to get here [bold in original].*

After participants had finished typing their responses they were given a two-part questionnaire. The first set of four items asked them to indicate on a 7-point scale, with endpoints “strongly opposed” and “strongly in favor,” how they felt about the government spending money on, or otherwise taking steps in favor of,

four policies: building more prisons, toughening restrictions on unemployment benefits, universal guaranteed health care, and a flat income tax. For each issue, a brief argument was provided on each side of the debate (see Table 1).

In the second part of the questionnaire, participants read four one-paragraph vignettes, each describing a decision or dilemma and calling for a recommendation about the appropriate response. The issues raised by these vignettes included affirmative action, tougher restrictions on welfare benefits, capital punishment, and instituting gifted tracks in elementary schools (see Table 1). Participants again responded on a 7-point scale, this time ranging from a total endorsement of one side of the dilemma (e.g., strong recommendation in favor of sentencing a defendant to death) to a total endorsement of the other side (e.g., strong recommendation against sentencing a defendant to death). Pilot testing, using a separate sample from the same population, confirmed that participants agreed with our judgments about which was the liberal and which was the conservative position on each issue. For each issue, pilot participants rated a hypothetical target student who took the conservative position as significantly more conservative than one who took the liberal position, (t s ranging from 2.59 to 14.14, all p s < .05).

Finally, participants filled out an open-ended questionnaire item asking them to indicate what they thought the purpose of the study was (“Please tell us what you think the study was about”). This questionnaire was intended to gauge whether participants suspected that the manipulation task was designed to affect their responses to the political judgment questionnaire, and potentially to eliminate those who harbored such suspicions in our subsequent data analyses.

Results

To facilitate data analysis, all items were coded such that higher scores on a given item represented more conservative responses. Three composite measures were then developed—one reflecting participants’ mean response to all eight dependent variable issues ($\alpha = .71$), one reflecting their mean response to the four items dealing with general policy questions ($\alpha = .63$) and one reflecting their mean response to the four vignettes dealing with more specific decisions ($\alpha = .41$).

We predicted that asking participants to consider how personal merit led to their success would activate a more conservative schema and asking them to consider how good fortune led to their success would activate a more liberal schema on a subsequent task. That is, we hypothesized that this difference in mindsets would be apparent in their judgments of particular socio-political policies. Indeed, participants in the Personal Merit condition expressed more conservative opinions than those in the Good Fortune condition, not only for the composite reflecting participants’ mean responses to the entire set of items ($M = 3.46$ vs. $M = 2.92$), $t(80) = 2.37$, $p < .05$, $d = .55$, but also, as shown in Fig. 1, separately for the subset of four items dealing with general government policies ($M = 3.20$ vs. $M = 2.65$), $t(80) = 2.25$, $p < .05$, $d = .49$, and the subset of four vignettes calling for specific decisions ($M = 3.71$ vs. $M = 3.20$), $t(80) = 2.36$, $p < .05$, $d = .51$. These differences were moderate in size (d for the eight-item composite = .55) and very consistent in direction (see Table 1; also Fig. 1).

Responses to the open-ended probe for suspicion suggested that 7 of the 81 participants thought that the manipulation task might have been designed to influence their subsequent political judgments. We think it unlikely, however, that our effect was driven by such awareness, especially given that excluding data from these seven participants slightly *increased* rather than decreased the statistical significance of the between-condition differences noted earlier ($t(71) = 2.31$, $p < .05$, $d = .53$ and $t(71) = 2.37$, $p < .05$,

Table 1
Mean Conservatism of Response to Each Item as a Function of Condition.

Question	Condition (Study 1)		Condition (Study 2)	
	Personal Merit	Good Fortune	Personal Merit	Good Fortune
<i>General policy questions (abbreviated)</i>				
Building more prisons Proponents: would solve revolving-door problem in prisons and allow for effective punishment. Opponents: Better to focus on rehabilitation of non-violent criminals.	3.23	2.76	3.63	3.40
Toughening restrictions on unemployment benefits Proponents: loose restrictions provide a free ride to lazy people at the expense of those who are working. Opponents: finding a job can be very difficult and the unemployed deserve the support of those who are more fortunate.	3.75	3.15	3.58	3.14
Universal, guaranteed health care (R) Proponents: health care should be a right, not a privilege. Opponents: those with health insurance shouldn't have to pay for other people's health care.	3.10	2.46	2.61	2.31
Flat income tax Proponents: would be fairer because it wouldn't punish people for working hard and earning more money. Opponents: would be unfair because the wealthy spend a smaller proportion of their income on necessities of life.	2.73	2.22	3.26	2.51
<i>Vignette questions (abbreviated)</i>				
Should UCLA admit a very successful student from private high school or a slightly less successful student from a public high school in a poor, predominantly black neighborhood? (R)	4.00	3.32	N/A	N/A
Should a single mother have her Welfare benefits cut off after two years? Opponents argue that her level of education would preclude finding a job that would provide health insurance or allow her to afford child care. Proponents argue that extending her benefits would only encourage her to remain dependent. (R)	4.23	3.59	N/A	N/A
A man shot a police officer to death when he panicked during a robbery. The police officer had a wife and young son. Should the defendant be sentenced to death?	2.38	2.05	N/A	N/A
Should an elementary school implement a gifted track starting in the fourth grade? The system would mean diverting resources away from those who are doing poorly but would prepare the most promising students for a competitive academic career.	4.33	3.83	N/A	N/A

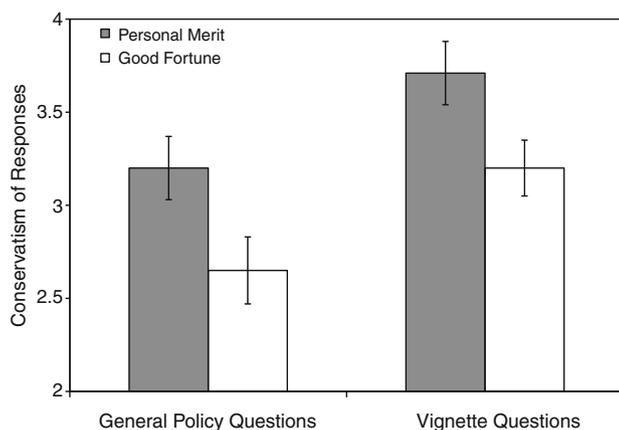


Fig. 1. Mean conservatism of scores on the index of general policy questions and on the index of vignette-style dilemma questions, each as a function of experimental condition in Study 1.

$d = .54$, respectively, for general policy and vignette-style dilemma questions).

Discussion

Participants in Study 1 who were asked to tell the story of their success in terms of their personal merits, hard work, and wise decisions subsequently offered more conservative political judgments than did participants who were asked to tell their story in terms of their good fortune and help received from others. Thus, as hypothesized, political positions may be influenced by the relative salience of liberal vs. conservative schemas at the time those judgments are made.

So far, we have talked about this effect as one of priming. According to Bargh's definition (Bargh, 1996) an implicit priming effect is

one in which participants are unaware that the manipulation has had an effect on them. As noted above, in Study 1, only 7 of the 81 participants indicated any suspicion that the essay might have been designed to influence them and those participants had a slight tendency to work against our hypothesis. While this seems to suggest that the effect is indeed implicit, Study 2 was designed to provide a conceptual replication of the effect while taking greater pains to conceal any relationship between the schema priming manipulation and the political judgment task. This offers a more appropriate test of the implicit nature of the effect and has the additional advantages of eliminating the possibility that demand characteristics contributed to our effect and of showing that the effect is not dependent on the particular method employed in Study 1.

Study 2

Study 2, as noted above, serves as a conceptual replication of Study 1 and a test of the implicit nature of the effect observed in that study. In Study 2, we also included a pre-measure of participants' self-identified political ideology (in the traditional sense of a person's self-placement on a liberal-conservative continuum). This, we expected, would help to explain some of the otherwise unexplained variance in participants' political judgments and allow the effect of our experimental manipulation to emerge more clearly.

Method

Participants

Participants were 83 students at Stanford University (55 female; mean age 19.1 years; 57.1% White; 13.0% Hispanic; 2.6% African-American; 16.9% Asian; 10.4% multiple) who participated in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. Prior to the study, participants had completed a demographic information questionnaire online that included a question about their political ideology,

to which they responded using a 7-point scale ranging from “very liberal” to “very conservative.” Ten participants were excluded from analyses because they did not provide complete data.

Materials and procedure

Both the manipulation task and the dependent variable questionnaire were embedded in a large questionnaire packet that was administered in a mass-testing session. Participants were told beforehand that the packet contained a series of unrelated questionnaires from different researchers that would be used as pre-measures for future studies. Each page, they were told, represented a completely different study.

The priming manipulation exposed participants to a questionnaire that simply asked how much they agreed with a series of easy-to-agree-with statements, the content of which was varied in a manner that served to create two experimental conditions (cf. Jost & Kay, 2005; Katz & Hass, 1988; Tourangeau et al., 1989). Thus, the statements in one condition pertained to personal merit (e.g., “It takes a great deal of hard work to get into a top university.”) whereas those in the other condition pertained to good fortune (e.g., “It takes more than just hard work to get into a top university; it also takes some good fortune and the support of those around us.”) (see Appendix for both full sets of items). Next, there followed a task in which participants estimated the number of points (200) in a scatterplot, thus underscoring the lack of relationship between the consecutive tasks being presented. Then, on the following page, participants were asked to respond to questionnaire items that provided our dependent variables. Four items posed the same general policy questions that had been used in Study 1.

Results and discussion

As in Study 1, responses to all items were coded such that higher scores reflected more conservative responses. A single composite index was then computed to reflect participants' mean judgment of the four general policy questions that comprised our dependent variable ($\alpha = .58$).

To test the effects of our experimental manipulation, controlling for self-identified political ideology, the composite political judgment index was regressed on (a) a dummy variable representing participants' assignment to condition, (b) participants' liberal-conservative ideology, and (c) a term representing the interaction between ideology and condition. This analysis revealed, first and not surprisingly, that liberal-conservative ideology was a significant predictor of political judgment, $\beta = .442$, $p < .005$. Next, it was revealed that our schema priming manipulation also had a significant effect on participants' political judgment, $\beta = .229$, $p < .05$ (see Fig. 2). The interaction between condition and ideology did not approach significance, $\beta = .098$, *ns*. Thus, Study 2 demonstrates that, even when participants were primed simply by answering a series of schema-relevant questions that they did not think were relevant to the subsequent political judgment task, the effect of the Personal Merit and Good Fortune schemas still emerged.

General discussion

The results of two studies demonstrate that manipulations that increase the salience of either personal merit or good fortune explanations for one's own success can have an effect on one's judgments about a variety of controversial and important questions of public policy. This demonstration offers support for the hypothesis that political judgments are not only the product of individual differences and stable social forces, they are also the product of situational activation of available schemas and knowl-

edge structures. It also offers support for the notion that schemas pertaining to good fortune vs. personal merit underlie and can play a role in influencing liberal-conservative political positions.

There is, of course, some precedent for the notion that certain “theories” about determinants of personal outcomes can have profound consequences. A great deal of work by Dweck and her colleagues (e.g., Dweck, 1999; Dweck & Leggett, 1988) has demonstrated that people's implicit theories about the malleability of personal characteristics such as intelligence and personality have important effects on how they deal with personal challenge and engage in their social worlds. We suggest that implicit theories about the relative role of personal merit and good fortune in determining worldly success might have a similar range of important consequences. While the present studies demonstrate their role in the evaluation of policy issues, future research should explore their effect on such important variables as people's sympathy for the needy, their willingness to donate to charities, and their tendency to view people suffering with addictions or obesity-related health problems as the authors of their own troubles.

Some readers might see a similarity between the present studies and past work in the tradition of self-perception theory (e.g., Bem, 1972; Salancik, 1974; Salancik & Conway, 1975). While we agree that there may be points of similarity, the present studies differ from that past work in one important way: past work in the self-perception tradition demonstrated that the actor infers his or her sentiments from observation of and reflection upon behavior that is *obviously and directly* relevant to those sentiments. Bem (1972), for example, showed that inducing participants to escape electric shocks had an effect on how painful they rated those shocks to be. Salancik and Conway (1975) showed that manipulating the extent to which participants report having engaged in religious behaviors affects how religious they report themselves to be. In contrast to that work, our studies involve the non-obvious connection between theories about how success is achieved and judgments about a variety of policy issues ranging from crime and punishment to tax policy. Indeed, in a separate study designed to address this question, participants did not infer anything about the political ideology of a hypothetical other person who they were told agreed with either our Personal Merit or our Good Fortune priming items.¹ Thus our work demonstrated a much more subtle causal relationship between our independent and dependent variables.

Ours is also not the only type of situational manipulation that can affect liberal-conservative political positions. A number of studies have shown that feelings of threat or fear can also lead to a conservative shift in such positions (Jost, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2004; Thorisdottir & Jost, 2008; Willer, 2004). In a related vein, work by terror management theorists demonstrated that mortality salience inductions led to increased support for President

¹ To further demonstrate that participants are unlikely to have directly inferred anything about their liberalism or conservatism from their responses to our manipulations, we conducted a “social perception” version of our Study 2. Thus we recruited a separate sample of participants from the same population and exposed them either to our Personal Merit or to our Good Fortune priming questionnaire. Specifically, we asked them to list up to three adjectives they would use to describe another Stanford student who agreed with each statement in one or the other version of our manipulation questionnaire. We then exposed them to each of our dependent variable items and asked them again to list up to three adjectives they would use to describe someone who took either the conservative or the liberal position on that issue (i.e., “If you knew that a Stanford student favored universal, guaranteed health care...”). While participants had a strong tendency to draw inferences about the target student's political ideology from positions on the dependent variable issues, there was no tendency to draw such inferences based on the target's agreement with the manipulation items (interaction: $F(1, 20) = 18.65$, $p < .0005$). This finding also held when participants were first exposed to the target's positions on the dependent variable issues and then exposed to their agreement with the manipulation items so that political inferences were already salient when participants were exposed to the manipulation items (interaction: $F(1, 20) = 14.88$, $p = .001$).

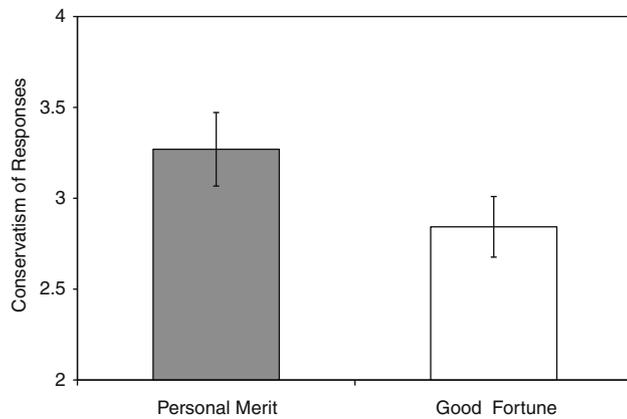


Fig. 2. Mean conservatism of political judgments by condition, controlling for self-identified political ideology in Study 2.

George W. Bush and decreased support for his Democratic rival John Kerry in the months leading up to the 2004 presidential election (Landau et al., 2004). It is also possible that other types of schemas, when made salient, can have consequences for political judgment. Lakoff (1996), for example, has suggested a central role for metaphors of the community or nation as a family and for schemas based on parenting models in guiding political ideology and judgment.

We close this article by noting that over the years psychologists have contributed a great deal to our understanding of the role of individual differences and stable social forces in guiding political opinion and judgment (e.g., Adorno et al., 1950; Altemeyer, 1998; Cohen, 2003; Eysenck, 1954; Newcomb, 1943; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Wilson, 1973). The present research suggests that while such differences are clearly important, many Americans seem quite capable of giving weight to alternative, even conflicting, points of view. Indeed, the impact exerted by our simple experimental manipulations suggests that these other ways of thinking may often be just beneath the surface.

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Appendix

Study 2 Manipulation Items (with participants' mean level of agreement on a 5-point scale ranging from "Do not agree" to "Agree very strongly.")

Personal Merit condition

1. It takes a great deal of hard work to get into a top university (4.15/5).
2. Many people who aren't successful don't realize how much you have to give up to really make it in this world (2.40/5).
3. Having the self-discipline to buckle down and work, even when you don't feel like it, is one of the most important factors in determining how well you do (3.55/5).

4. I had to pass up a lot of occasions for fun and relaxation to get into Stanford but, in retrospect, it was worth it (2.85/5).
5. If you want to succeed in life, you need to learn how to pass up short-term gratification in favor of greater rewards in the future (3.25/5).
6. I can think of at least one wise decision I made that played a large role in getting me where I am today (3.45/5).
7. It wasn't always easy but I'm glad I did what it took to get into a top university (4.08/5).

Good Fortune condition

1. It takes more than just hard work to get into a top university; it also takes some good fortune and the support of those around us (3.77/5).
2. It is more difficult for some people to achieve career success because they don't have the same advantages that other people do (3.93/5).
3. I can think of at least one fortunate thing that happened that helped me to get where I am today (4.23/5).
4. Some students don't experience the supportive learning environment early in life that others are fortunate to receive (4.28/5).
5. Unfortunate obstacles sometimes come up that prevent even some of the hardest-working and most self-disciplined students from succeeding (3.88/5).
6. Few of us would be where we are today without the support of one or some of the important figures in our lives (3.91/5).
7. I feel fortunate to be a student at a top university because many able, hard-working students don't get this opportunity (4.30/5).

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