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# Border Control: The Use of Language as it Relates to Compensatory Control Theory

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# Abstract

Politics in the United States are increasingly more polarized. To date, there are known differences between conservatives and liberals in relation to societal goals and personality traits. However, little research has explored specific differences in the language used by conservatives and liberals when describing policy preferences, and less has been conducted on the language preferences of self-identified moderates. Additionally, people rely on Compensatory Control Theory to reestablish order, whether through an endorsement of the government or religious organization, when they feel out of control. This study aimed to expand the existing literature on the types of language used when explicitly discussing the rationale for making certain policy ratings. We found that there were significant differences in the language used by different political groups across the when describing policy ratings.

**Border Control: The Use of Language as it Relates to Compensatory Control Theory**

In a world filled with so much uncertainty, it is known that people tend to seek structure

and order (Kruglanski, 1989; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Landau et al., 2004; Landau,

Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Martens, 2006). Recently, there has been a greater fixation

on social and political boundaries, e.g., Brexit, the US-Mexico border. People seek out

boundaries as a way to maintain control over some aspects of their lives when they lose control

over others. After all, maintaining control over the environment allows people to feel protected

from chaos and randomness, which can be stressful and anxiety-producing (Kay, Gaucher,

Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008; Frenkel-Brunswik, 1949; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Kay,

Whitson, Gaucher, & Galinsky, 2009; Peterson, 1999; Hirsh, Mar, & Peterson, 2012).

One area in which these differences are particularly salient can be seen with borders, both

tangible (e.g., the US-Mexico border) and intangible (e.g., gender and sexual orientation). Since

all borders, both physical and social, are relevant to policy-making, it is important to understand

individuals' beliefs on certain topics and how they express these beliefs. In doing so, legislators

and lobbyists can become better at creating a compelling dialogue on divisive topics and writing

effective bills.

**Compensatory Control Theory**

The Compensatory Control Theory (CCT) states that, when people perceive a lack of

personal control, they compensate for this by perceiving patterns and attempting to reestablish

control over other aspects of their surroundings (Kay et al., 2008; Kay et al., 2009; Whitson &

Galinksy, 2009). In practice, this can be seen in validation of sociopolitical systems such as the government, religious institutions, or even universities. In validating these systems, people are attempting to dismiss the thought that events may have occurred randomly (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Kay et al., 2009; Kay et al., 2007). Another method through which people can avoid feeling out of control and to establish order may be to strengthen borders. Since the purpose of a border is to provide concrete unity and identity, threats to personal control may be mitigated their reinforcement.

**Conservatism and Liberalism**

Although both seek to create a positive society, conservatives and liberals as parties differ in their approaches to achieving that goal, with even more nuance existing at the individual level. Thus, the literature reviewed in this section reflects the general trends in generalized political goals, not the actions of individuals, and will be discussed at the party level. At their core, the two groups are characterized by different values and ideals about the world. Thus, to posit conservatism and liberalism on two opposite ends of a single spectrum potentially addresses the wrong issue (Marietta, 2012). That is, conservative and liberal beliefs are based on inherently different values and psychological systems (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2007). This makes understanding those underlying systems, and the language used to express them, that much more pertinent.

Conservatives as a party can be understood as wanting to protect society, to have a world where there is minimal threat to their safety and security (Marietta, 2012). The conservative

system, then, is in some ways based on a higher tolerance of inequality and greater resistance to

societal change (Jost et. al., 2003; 2007). Researchers have argued that the acceptance of

inequality is based on a fear of instability that inevitably comes with challenges to the status quo

(Moskowitz, Gollwitzer, Wasel, & Schaal, 1999; Hirsh et al., 2010). When compared to liberals,

numerous studies have shown that conservatives prefer obedience and are more motivated to

pursue certainty, firm beliefs, and decisiveness (Frimer, Gaucher, & Shaefer, 2014; Piurko,

Schwartz, & Davidov, 2011; Schwartz, Caprara, & Vecchione, 2010; Stenner, 2005; Xu, Plaks,

& Peterson, 2016). One way that can be seen is through conservatives' tendency to score highly

in preference for order. They generally prefer to maintain structure, cleanliness, and

organization, and will often default to the status quo, as opposed to embracing ambiguity and

uncertainty (Hirsh et al., 2010; Jost et al., 2003; Jost et al., 2007).

Conversely, the goal of liberals as a party is to create a society that fights oppression

(Marietta, 2012). As a result, liberals tend to focus more heavily on compassion and justice, as

well as show stronger preferences for complex, novel stimuli and experiences than their

conservative counterparts (Jost et al., 2003; Hirsh et al., 2010). As early as in preschool, they

have been described as emotionally expressive, self-reliant, and energetic (Block & Block,

2006). When using the Big Five personality traits as a guide, liberals score higher than

conservatives on openness to experience, which further reinforces their generalized motivation to

understand novel information, both politically and beyond (Carney, Jost, Gosling, Potter, 2008;

Sibley, Duckitt, & Osborne, 2012). They are more likely to endorse societal changes or social

disruptions, if it means aids in creating a level playing field (Jost, 2006).

In understanding that the differences between liberals and conservatives are not

necessarily linear, we then need to address the group of individuals who claim to be neither

liberal nor conservative. To date, less research has focused on the personality traits and language

used by that facet of society.

**The Role of Language in Event Processing and Value Judgements**

Through language, individuals transfer their culturally constructed ideas and values

(Fivush & Nelson, 2004). They use social interactions as a way to process memories, create

identity, and seek ideological validation (Fivush, 2010). It is natural, then, to assume that

individuals would respond defensively when their motivations and core beliefs are threatened. If

a core aspects of identity, such as group membership, is challenged, individuals may increase

their belief in the importance of that trait or value (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; Mullen, Brown,

& Smith, 1992).

Additionally, people rely on personal narratives when other aspects of identity are

weakening as a way to increase a sense of self (Fivush, 2019). To that end, narrative

meaning-making has been shown to unlock a deeper, more contextualized layer of personality

than simply a person's traits and lasting goals, which are shaped by the different roles and

experiences from participants' life stories (Booker et al., 2018; Bluck & Habermas, 2001;

McAdams, 1995). Particularly, when an individual is able to create meaning from an event that

was difficult or jarring, it can serve as a way to solidify their sense of self (Pals, 2006; Habermas & Köber, 2015; Booker et al., 2018).

That narrative meaning-making occurs when an individual uses a past experience to shape identity, inform future behavior, and connect the self with others. In order to do so, a person must take time to reflect on their emotions and be able to coherently derive meanings from them. It goes beyond simply being able to list certain features of an event, and requires that the narrator have linked those features with their thoughts, feelings, and objectives from that time. Working through traumatic events can lead to stress-related growth and can lead to a stronger sense of self, a change in world-view, and a wide range of additional potential insights (Graci & Fivush, 2016). Although frequently seen in the literature on identity development and processing of traumatic events, it is logical that these same trends might extend to situations where individuals felt out of control, since trauma-inducing scenarios tend to also induce feelings of a lack of control.Therefore, it is important to include explicit, self-reported accounts of political preferences, if we want to understand what situations cause people to cling to particular beliefs.

Studying narratives allows researchers to make connections between the internal neural context of the subject and external sociocultural context surrounding the information being recalled. By extension, it is possible that by understanding the language used for the rationale behind specific political policy preferences, researchers could also better understand what will

compel individuals to endorse certain policies in the future. Life scripts become prescriptive and

inform the choices that should be most valued (Fivush, 2010; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals 2007).

**The Current Study**

Although significant research has been conducted on both CCT and on the language

preferences associated with different political parties, few have examined the trends in language

within a political party when individuals feel that their sense of control has been threatened, and

even fewer have mapped trends in language for those who claim to be politically moderate.

With the present study, then, we aimed to explore two questions. First, are there any

significant differences in the language used to describe personal policy preferences between

those who self-identify as more liberal, conservative, or moderate, and second, where within the

political spectrum do self-reported liberals, conservatives, and moderates tend to align when they

feel they are in control versus when they feel they are out of control? For the first question, we

used the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) summary variables and the following

dictionaries (Social Words, Cognitive Processes, Drives, Personal Concerns, Biological

Processes) to better understand the language individuals use when discussing political policies.

We predicted that there will be significant differences in the language used, but given the novel

nature of this specific analysis, we left the specifics of preferred language exploratory. We did

predict that politically moderate participants will use language more in-line with individuals who

are politically conservative. We also predicted there would be differences in language use

between people who have personal control versus those who experienced control loss, since CCT

states that when individuals feel out of control they tend to try and reestablish order in their

surroundings. This study therefore aimed to expand the existing literature on the types of

language used when explicitly discussing the rationale for making certain policy ratings.

## Method

### Participants and procedure

199 adults ($M_{Age}$ = 36.98, SD = 12.55; 100 males, 99 females) were recruited online from

across the United States using Prolific. Participants were selected based on their Prolific

performance (95% approval rating or higher).

Participants were directed to and completed all study materials online. After completing a

consent form, all participants completed measures of political orientation and personality.

Afterward, they were separated into two groups: Personal Control and Lack of Personal Control.

They were asked to recall events in their lives during which they had or lacked personal control.

Afterward, participants were asked to indicate their ratings for numerous border-strengthening

policies, and were asked to write their justifications for their ratings. Participants were debriefed

and compensated online.

### Materials

**Political orientation.** Political orientation was assessed by a one-item measure ranging

from Very conservative (1) to Very liberal (7).

**Control manipulation.** In the personal control condition, participants were asked the following: "Please try and think of something positive that happened to you in the past few months that happened due to your own doing (i.e., that you had control over). Please describe that event in approximately 150 words." In the Loss of Personal Control condition, participants were asked: **"**Please try and think of something positive that happened to you in the past few months that did not happen due to your own doing (i.e., that you had absolutely no control over). Please describe that event in approximately 150 words."

**Policy ratings.** Participants were presented with 24 policy statements (e.g., "Children of undocumented immigrants should be granted legal citizenship"), for which they indicated their agreement on a 7-point Likert scale. Finally, participants were presented with the following prompt to justify their prior policy ratings: "Please take a minute to reflect on your responses to the survey questions you just completed from the previous page. Using at least 50 words, please explain your reasoning for your ratings."

## Results

### Analytical Plan

The political orientation item was recoded into three groups based on the self-reported scores. Individuals reporting a score between 1-3 were considered conservative, 4 were considered moderate, and between 5-7 were considered liberal. Analyses consisted of a Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) text analysis using summary variables and the following dictionaries: Social Processes, Cognitive Processes, Drives, Personal Concerns, and

Biological Processes (Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, & Blackburn, 2015). Differences in language

usage between the three political groups were tested using a one-way ANOVA with Bonferroni

post hoc tests.

**Differences in language use by liberals, conservatives, and moderates**

We first assessed whether or not individuals with diverging political orientations used

differing language when discussing personal policy preferences, and, if so, which types of

vocabulary are they more likely to use. A one-way ANOVA was used to determine whether there

were any significant differences in language usage between conservatives (n = 40), liberals (n =

41), and moderates (n = 118). The results showed the following significant language differences:

the Summary Variables Clout ($F(2, 196) = 4.307$, $p = 0.015$) and Authentic ($F(2, 196) = 5.678$, p

$= 0.003$), as well as the Biological Processes variable Ingest ($F(2, 196) = 5.730$, $p = 0.078$),

Drives ($F(2, 196) = 4.133$, $p = 0.075$), and the Drives variable Affiliation ($F(2, 196) = 3.209$, $p =$

$0.38$).

Post hoc tests was then run to look more specifically at the significant between-group

differences. There were significant differences between conservatives and liberals for Clout

(Mean Difference = 18.283, Std. Error = 6.254, $p = 0.012$), Authentic (Mean Difference =

-23.609, Std. Error = 7.006, $p = 0.003$), Ingest (Mean Difference = 0.078, Std. Error = 0.028, $p =$

$0.018$), Drives (Mean Difference = 2.736, Std. Error = 1.049, $p = 0.029$), and Affiliation (Mean

Difference = 1.643, Std. Error = 0.652, $p = 0.038$). There were also significant differences

between conservatives and moderates in Ingest (Mean Difference = 0.075, Std. Error = 0.023, p

= 0.004) and Drives (Mean Difference = 2.209, Std. Error = 0.864, p = 0.034). There were no

significant differences between liberals and moderates. Mean number of words used for each

political group can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Mean Number of Words Used Across Political Affiliations*

| Political Affiliation | Mean Number of Words Used | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Clout | Authentic | Ingest | Drives | Affiliation |
| Conservative | 56.699 | 40.241 | 0.078 | 10.317 | 3.965 |
| Liberal | 38.415 | 63.85 | 0 | 7.581 | 2.322 |
| Moderate | 48.491 | 51.994 | 0.003 | 8.108 | 3.02 |

Overall, then, we found significant differences in language usage primarily between

liberals and conservatives, as well as conservatives and moderates. However, liberals and

moderates did not seem to differ in language usage in this study.

**Does language change depend on the presence or absence of personal control?**

Next, we examined if and how language usage changed when individuals either felt that

they were in control or out of control. Again, we used a one-way ANOVA to test whether or not

there were any significant differences between the two conditions. Our results suggest that there

were no significant differences in language use between the personal control condition and lack

of personal control condition.

<div align="center">**Discussion**</div>

**Assessment of Hypotheses**

Our primary hypothesis was that there would be significant differences in the language used by conservatives, liberals, and moderates, while leaving the specifics of that preferred language exploratory. What we found was that there were significant differences in language use between conservatives and liberals, and between conservatives and moderates, but not between liberals and moderates. These differences were seen between conservatives and liberals in the language categories Clout, Authentic, Ingest, Drives, and Affiliation. They were also seen between conservatives and moderates in Ingest and Drives.

Conservatives scored significantly higher on Clout, which is designed to show the social status, leadership, or confidence that individuals convey in their writing (Kacewicz, Pennebaker, Davis, Jeon, & Graesser, 2013). Also worth noting is the significant mean in the number of words used by all three groups, with conservatives using a mean of 56.699 Clout words. This vocabulary, then, could be important for appealing to conservatives when engaging in political discussions. This finding could also be related to conservatives' preference for certainty, firm beliefs, and decisiveness, and is in line with the significant difference in words related to Drives (Frimer, Gaucher, & Shaefer, 2014; Piurko, Schwartz, & Davidov, 2011; Schwartz, Caprara, Vecchione, 2010; Stenner, 2005; Xu, Plaks, & Peterson, 2016). Drives words include the subcategories Power and Risk, which are things that conservatives seek to maintain or avoid respectively.

Additionally, conservatives used significantly more Affiliation language, which falls under the Drives dictionary, and which includes words such as "friend" and "ally," than their

liberal and moderate counterparts. Conservatives tend to emphasize in-group relationships and loyalty more so than liberals, which would therefore mean they are more likely to talk about their allies and friends than liberals are (Haidt & Graham, 2007).

Conversely, when revisiting summary variables, Authentic, for which liberals scored more highly, appears in individuals who are more humble, honest, and personable (Newman, Pennebaker, Berry, & Richards, 2003). Like with Clout, there is a high mean number of these words used by liberals (63.850) than any of the other significant language categories, which could reinforce the importance of liberals' emphasis on compassion and justice, both of which involve consideration for others (Jost et al., 2003; Hirsh et al., 2010). It makes sense, then, that the language that is used most heavily by them is language that would support positive relationships.

Finally, Ingest words show a significant difference in use between conservatives and liberals but not between liberals and moderates. Based on a lack of prior research, it is unclear why Ingest words, which include "eat" and "pizza," should be relevant to politics; however, the mean number of Ingest words used falls below 1, so these results should be treated with some reservation. The finding that moderates use language that differs significantly from conservatives was contrary to our expectations. This result is surprising, and invites more in-depth attention. Contrary to our secondary hypothesis, there were no significant differences within groups between the control and out of control conditions. This finding is inconsistent with findings from the CCT literature, which suggests that people would be more likely to compensate for loss of

personal control by reaffirming other domains or institutions. However, the present null finding

may present a limitation in the present study method, as outlined below.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Although there were no significant findings related to the control and out of control

conditions, it is possible that there would be moderation effects. For instance, it may be that only

certain types of individuals (e.g., orderly people) who are more likely to compensate for loss of

control. Furthermore, it may be the case that our loss of control manipulation may not be strong

enough to elicit the compensatory control effects. Since the loss of control manipulation did not

specify that the participant should report a recent lack of control narrative, it is possible that they

had already made peace with the story they were telling, thus lowering the degree to which they

felt out of control at the time of completing the study. Future researchers could examine such

possibilities.

The data also present several new categories of language that can be used to better

understand the motivations surrounding political affiliation. Although the analyses make it clear

that there are differences in word choice, research could be done to understand why the

differences appeared within the dictionaries they did. Additionally, the data suggests that there

are significant differences in the language moderates use when discussing political ideology.

Further research on their use of language and personality traits, as well as research on their

implicit versus explicit political affiliations would create a meaningful contribution to the

political psychology literature.

**Conclusion**

Currently, Americans are divided in a cultural war (Firmer, Gaucher, & Shaefer, 2014).

Now more than ever, it is important that we understand what motivates individuals to hold

certain political beliefs, and how best to discuss those preferences with them, since language has

the power to shape identity and motivate behavior. Beyond that, it is important that researchers

not neglect individuals who do not identify strongly with either liberal or conservative

ideologies.

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