

**Unpacking Liberalism and Conservatism:
Exploring Optimality Effects of Implicit Political Values on
Mitigating Partisan Polarization**

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Abstract

Extreme forms of political polarization can impair societies' capacities to respond to other major problems that arise. Psychology could play a central role in mitigating toxic polarization. Unfortunately, the way conservatism and liberalism are often conceptualized and measured in research tends to dichotomize the underlying values inherent to both ideologies, and so neglects configurations that may be more optimal and less susceptible to division. The current study uses survey data to unpack these value structures and examine the effects of more optimal combinations of them on mitigating polarization. Findings suggest that a more nuanced approach to understanding these ideologies can lead to a reduction in polarization and suggests that more balanced value orientations are associated with lower levels of political tribalism. The implications of this research for civic education and the framing of policies in the media are discussed.

Keywords

Ideological consistency, political polarization, implicit political values

Declarations

Not Applicable

Political polarization is increasingly straining American life. One particularly concerning trend is the rise in *ideological consistency*, or the convergence of voters' attitudes within parties across ten distinct policy issues (Pew 2014). Since 1994, Democrats' and Republicans' views on key issues have increasingly converged within parties and diverged between parties, suggesting partisan tribalism and conformity are trumping the need for understanding major policy issues (Pew, 2014). Ideological consistency has also been found to be positively associated with higher levels of political activity, political knowledge, and ideological identification (Abramowitz & Saunders 2005; Barber & Pope 2018), contributing to a vicious cycle where the more divergent the views of political groups, the readier they are for partisan battle (Wetherell 2013). Lelkes (2016) found that growth in ideological consistency has occurred mostly among partisans. As partisanship becomes a greater source of collective identity, it leads to higher levels of *affective polarization* and contempt for the other party (Iyengar, 2019; Lelkes, 2016), which is associated with more out-group hostility, coercion, aggressiveness, and destructive conflict (e.g., de Zavala, Cislak, & Wesolowska 2010; Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes 2012).

So, what can be done to slow or reverse this runaway train?

Although the sources of our political divide are highly complex and structural (Coleman 2021), some researchers have placed fault squarely with the dogmatism on one side of the aisle – with conservatives (Jost et al. 2003). These authors situate the problem in conservatism's core values, characterizing them as centering on *resistance to change* and *justification of inequality* and, in contrast, imply the foundation of liberalism to be one of *openness to change* and *justification of equality*. Conservatives' resistance to change is believed to come from a preference for orderliness and stability, with conservatives scoring higher on politeness (linked to tradition; Hirsch et al. 2010). However, other studies have found that *both* liberals and conservatives – when more extreme – can show intolerance towards those who disagree with them (Brandt et al. 2014), particularly when important values are threatened (Wetherell et al. 2013).

However, it can be argued that all four aspects of these ideologies – *resistance and openness to change, and justification of inequality and equality* – have their conditional logic and, when taken to extremes, have associated pathologies (Deutsch 1985). Another way to look at these differences is that both sets of value systems in fact reflect reasonable but divergent responses to two basic human dilemmas articulated by two forefathers of Western society, Plato (375 BC; 1973) and Aristotle (350 BC; 1997): (1) our needs for stability *and* adaptation to change and (2) the needs for political control *and* inclusion (Coleman 2003).

The current study seeks to unpack the underlying value structures of liberalism and conservatism into four orthogonal values and to investigate the effects of optimal combinations of both pro-stability *and* pro-change values, and pro-control *and* pro-inclusion values on differences in levels of ideological consistency of American voters. In other words, rather than viewing political orientations in terms of the opposing values of stability-vs-change and of control-vs-inclusion, we approach them as independent values that reasonable people may hold simultaneously or in combination. Prior research has found that prevention motives *and* promotion motives (Higgins 1997), two mostly orthogonal motives found to be associated with preferences for stability and change respectively (Lieberman et al. 1999), when combined optimally are associated with higher levels of satisfaction and goal attainment in conflict situations (Coleman et al. 2018). The current study hypothesizes similar optimality effects of more moderate levels of pro-stability *and* pro-change values and pro-control *and* pro-inclusion values on mitigating the effects of the other considerable forces currently driving ideological consistency.

Method

Participants

Data collection occurred between January and June 2019. A total of 401 adult American participants were recruited via Prolific, an online recruitment platform, and surveys were administered via Qualtrics. Equal numbers of Democratic, Republican, and Independent/Other parties were recruited to participate. Green (1991) suggests a sample size greater than 50+ (8* the number of IVs) for multiple regression; in this case, we had four predictors (Stability, Change, Control, and Inclusivity), leading to a recommended sample size of 82. To achieve an adequate sample size for response surface analysis (a method for assessing optimal combinations of independent variables), Humberg, Nestler, & Back (2019) recommend a sample size of two to three times the number of participants required for linear effects; thus, 246 participants are required, which our sample of 401 meets. Participants were reimbursed \$3 via the Prolific platform for their time.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Data collection was conducted in compliance with the Institutional Review Board of Teachers College. All participants read and agreed to an informed consent form before taking the survey. The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Measures

Demographics. Data was collected on participants' demographic information, including gender, age, race, religion, and political party affiliation. Participants had a mean age of 31.76 ($SD=11.82$). For an in-detail demographic breakdown of the sample, see Table 1.

Ideological Consistency Scale (ICS). The ICS was developed in 1994 by the Pew Research Center to measure polarization. The scale instructs participants to select which side of a social issue they agree with (e.g., conservative: Most corporations make a fair and reasonable amount of profit vs liberal: Business corporations make too much profit). A score of -10 means that the participant always chose the liberal response, while a score of 10 means that the participant always chose the conservative one. This measure was arithmetically modified such that 0 = 5 liberal/5 conservative (i.e., no consistency), 5 = entirely consistent by taking half of the absolute value of the difference between the number of times the participant chose the liberal option from the number of times they chose the conservative option. Figure 1 shows the spread for this adjusted variable, as well as this spread separated by party.

Implicit Political Values Scale (IPVS). The IPVS, developed for this study and derived from Offerman et al.'s (1994) Implicit Leadership Scale, is a 16-item Likert-type scale developed to assess differences in peoples' *implicit values* for "good leadership". Specifically, the IPVS measures differences in respondents' tacit associations of good leadership with four theoretically orthogonal values previously used to distinguish conservatives from liberals: *providing stability* vs. *promoting change* and *maintaining decision-making control* vs. *encouraging decision-making inclusion*. Two independent samples were used for the scale development ($N_1 = 67$ and $N_2 = 112$). A 4-factor structure (Stability, Change, Control, Inclusion) was found to most accurately represent implicit political values. For the present study, we ran factor analyses to confirm that items loaded onto subscales as expected. The four subscales that resulted are: *Stability* (e.g. "Good leaders preserve order"; 4 items, $\alpha=.85$, $M=5.64$, $SD = .88$), *Change* (e.g. "Good leaders promote change"; 3 items, $\alpha=.77$, $M=4.5$, $SD=.94$), *Control* in decision making (e.g. "Good leaders control decisions"; 2 items, $\alpha=.59$, $M=4.4$, $SD=1.13$) and *Inclusion* (e.g. "Good leaders involve others when making decisions"; 3 items, $\alpha = .83$, $M=5.4$, $SD = .91$). See Table 2 for descriptive statistics and Table 3 for a list of the items in the IPVS.

Analyses

Response surface analyses (RSA) can determine optimality effects, or whether there is a level of similarity in two 2 predictors that together predict an optimal outcome (Humberg et al., 2019). In our study, we looked at

whether certain combinations of implicit leadership values (*Stability and Change* or *Control and Inclusion*) predicted different levels of ideological consistency. Before running an RSA, polynomial regression analyses were necessary to determine if there are nonlinear relationships, particularly by incorporating quadratic and interaction terms. All predictors were centered at the grand mean, such that a 0 on either predictor means an average score. Furthermore, to determine that multicollinearity between predictors was sufficiently low, the variance inflation factors (VIF) for all predictors were examined to ensure that they were all lower than 5.

Once a nonlinear relationship was established, the congruence hypothesis was evaluated using the RSA package developed by Schönbrodt (2016). The congruence hypothesis was tested by four parameters measuring whether the ridge of the surface is located along the line of congruence, and whether this surface has an inverted U-shape over the line of incongruence (where one has a complete mismatch on the two variables, and thus the inverted U-shape implies the outcome is maximized along the line of congruence) (Humberg, Nestler, & Back 2019). The congruence hypothesis, where higher similarity in *x* and *y* predicts an outcome variable *z*, was untenable in both models. The models predicting ideological consistency did not meet all the criteria for congruence and thus we rejected the hypothesis that the congruence between stability and change or control and inclusion values predicts ideological consistency.

Next, we took an exploratory route, using the Akaike Information Criterion tables in the RSA package to select alternative models to explain the significant nonlinear relationships found in polynomial models. AIC Weights are the probability that a model is the “best” among those tested. Additionally, Delta AIC is reported, and a delta greater than 2 indicates weak support for that model (Burnham & Anderson 2002, p.70). Because AIC is only a comparative measure, Adjusted R^2 was used to assess whether there was a significant amount of variance explained. A cutoff comparative fit index (CFI) of $>.95$ was also used to determine good model fit. Table 4 presents the parameters used to determine best models for interpretation and results of models.

Once a final model was selected, we examined the coefficients and plots to determine how relationships between the predictors influenced the shape of the surface—and thus, predicted values of ideological consistency. To interpret significant parameters, an inspection of the surface and contour plots is helpful. Figures 2a and c are plots with predicted values for ideological consistency, while Figure 2b and d are contour plots that “flatten” the 3D model. Red indicates lower ideological consistency, whereas green indicates the highest consistency—thus, red indicates a higher flexibility of thought regarding political issues. The dotted line circle indicates all of the data

points, excluding outliers, and the inner solid circle indicates half of the data points. When interpreting these plots, one should not extrapolate beyond the actual observations, and thus look only within the dotted line border (Schönbrodt 2016).

Results

The four implicit leadership values were found to be orthogonal, having either insignificant or weak correlations with one another. Stability ($M = 5.65$, $SD = .89$) was not significantly correlated with change ($M = 4.54$, $SD = .93$, $r = .05$), while control in decision making ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.03$) was only weakly correlated with inclusivity ($M = 5.41$, $SD = .91$, $r = -.21$, $p < .001$). This suggests that most participants tended not to see these values as opposing, but rather as mostly independent. These findings were consistent with the factor analysis, which suggests that rather than representing two bi-polar dimensions, these four implicit leadership values represent four distinct values. Ideological consistency was also found to have significant but weak correlations with stability ($r = -.14$, $p = .004$), change ($r = .14$, $p = .006$), control ($r = -.13$, $p = .008$), and inclusivity ($r = .19$, $p < .001$). In other words, ideological consistency was found to have slight positive associations with the traditionally liberal values and had slight negative associations with more conservative values.

In fact, in this study, Democrats were found to be significantly more ideologically consistent than Republicans— which may reflect four years of powerless feelings among the Democrats in Washington. Nevertheless, this finding directly contradicts the more commonly accepted associations between conservative values and more narrow-minded conformity put forth in the 2003 article on conservatism.

Providing Stability and Promoting Change

In the case of Stability and Change, adding cubic terms had a marginally significant improvement upon the fit of the quadratic model ($F=2.33$, $p=.056$), and a significant improvement on the fit of the linear model ($F=2.04$, $p=.049$). Based on tests of the polynomial models as well as an inspection of the AIC table, we determined that a cubic model was the most parsimonious for exploring optimality dynamics for Stability and Change, as the cubic model had a higher adjusted R^2 , a CFI $> .95$, a higher AIC Weight, and a lower Delta AICc (see Table 2). The full cubic model of Stability and Change explaining ideological consistency was significant ($R^2 = 0.088$, $p < .001$), *indicating that more similar, moderate levels of both values were found to be associated with less ideological-consistent thinking*. Further, the cubic model indicated that consistency was not simply a linear function of Stability and Change, but there were also interactions and curvilinear effects at play, best represented by a curved surface. In

other words, the shape that best represented the effect of the relationship between Stability and Change was not a flat plane (linear model) or a U-shape (quadratic model), but rather something more curvy (see Figure 1a)—indicating two “humps” in the prediction of ideological consistency, where there is a region on the plot such that ideological consistency is highest and one where it is lowest.

A few coefficients were found to be significant in this model. First, there was a significant linear effect of stability such that higher scores were associated with *less* ideological consistency ($b_1 = -.889, p < .001$). Additionally, we found a significantly negative interaction effect between stability and change, such that higher scores on one variable negatively impacted the effect that the other variable had on consistency ($b_4 = -.384, p < .001$). In other words, as values for stability increased, the influence that change had on ideological consistency decreased (and vice versa). A second interaction was significant between the change orientation and stability, such that higher scores in change increased the quadratic effect of stability ($b_7 = .205, p = .002$), showing more ways that an interplay between these opposing orientations can influence ideological consistency. Lastly, there was a significant cubic effect of stability ($b_6 = .216, p = .001$). Because the cubic effect of stability was found to be significant, a look at the stability axis of the plots showed a curve such that ideological consistency increases as stability increases, plateauing around the mean before decreasing again. Along the line of congruence (where both predictors were equal), there was an interesting effect, such that when both stability and change values were low, ideological consistency was low, and it generally rose along the LOC but dipped down in the middle. Because we are interested in value orientations that either minimize or maximize ideological consistency, we examined the darkest red areas of the bagplot and found that ideological consistency was maximized where stability was slightly below the mean and change was slightly above the mean, and consistency was minimized at low levels of change values with both low and high levels of stability. This pointed to the surprising effect that higher levels of the liberal orientation (pro-change) and moderate levels of the conservative orientation (pro-stability) were associated with *more* ideological consistency.

Maintaining Control and Encouraging Inclusion in Decision Making

To model the effects of control and inclusion values on ideological consistency, adding quadratic terms significantly improved fit upon the linear model ($F = 4.17, p = .006$). However, because the congruence hypothesis was not supported by parameters measuring whether the ridge of the U-shape rested on the line of congruence, we explored AIC tables to find the best fitting alternative model and determined that the “Shifted Squared Difference” (SSQD) model was the best fit, based on a lower Delta AICc, a higher AIC weight, and higher adjusted R^2 than the

quadratic model. The shifted squared differences (SSQD) model of Control and Inclusion explaining ideological consistency was significant ($R^2 = 0.069, p < .001$). The SSQD model is a simpler quadratic model that is nested under the full polynomial model (Schönbrodt 2016), and it tests the effects of dissimilarity between the two scores, in this case control and inclusion, to predict ideological consistency. SSQD is a “flat ridge model” (one can see the flatness of the ridge in Figure 2c), specifically a “Shifted Squared Difference” model, such that the response surface is shifted from the line of congruence by a constant. Thus, unlike other models, the match between scores that optimizes consistency might not be when control and inclusion are the same, but rather when one is greater than the other.

After determining that the SSQD model had the best fit and was the most parsimonious for predicting ideological consistency, surface coefficients were used to test for congruence or incongruence effects between control and inclusion (Shanock et al. 2010). In this model, the surface coefficients a_3 and a_4 were significant. The a_3 coefficient was the difference between b_1 and b_2 (i.e., the linear effects of control and inclusion). A significantly positive a_3 (.74) coefficient indicated that participants whose inclusion scores were higher than their control scores had higher ideological consistency than those with the opposite scores. Again, this challenged much of the social-psychological critique of conservative values and spoke to the need to understand these values *in relation to one another*. The a_4 coefficient indicated a curvilinear effect along the line of incongruence (when the scores were not equal), and it was the sum of the squared terms minus their interaction. A significantly negative a_4 (-.27) coefficient indicated that the larger the discrepancy between inclusion and control over decision making processes, the less they predicted ideological consistency. Thus, having too big of a difference between inclusion and control (i.e., a strong preference for one over the other) had a negative impact on consistency. The significant a_4 coefficient furthermore supported the fit effect (Schönbrodt 2016). The green band along the bagplot showed the shifted congruence effect: that a preference of inclusivity over control was associated with higher ideological consistency, though as seen in the red region of the bagplot, high control was associated with the least consistency. Thus, those who value more inclusion were likely to be more ideologically consistent, while surprisingly, those who value more control of decision-making processes were the least ideologically consistent.

Discussion

The findings from this study have a few potential implications. First, the finding that ideological consistency is *increased* by preferences for inclusion over control in decision making, and is *decreased* by higher

preferences for stability, implies that those with stronger liberal values are (at least currently) more cognitively constrained by partisan ideology than those with higher levels of conservative values. This is also supported by an examination of the distribution of the ideological consistency variable: for Democrats, this variable is highly negatively skewed (showing a tendency for high consistency) while Republicans skewed positively (a tendency for low consistency; see Fig. 1). This finding directly contradicts the more commonly accepted associations between conservative values and more narrow-minded conformity (see Jost, et al. 2002). The sustainability of these effects under different political climates remains a question for future study.

Second, the orthogonal approach taken in this study to the four values underlying political ideology – in contrast to viewing them as bipolar – proved promising. We found the four implicit political values to be largely orthogonal, having either insignificant or weak correlations with one another. This suggests that most of us tend not to experience these (implicit) values as opposing, but rather as independent or potentially complementary. Perhaps viewing change and stability, and inclusion and control, not as static value differences between partisans but as potentially adaptive responses to basic human dilemmas, is the key. Recognizing the value and limitations inherent in both sides, which are often presented by politicians and the media as partisan litmus tests, may just be one way to help us begin to find our way out of these most divisive times.

Third, we found that particular combinations of these previously-perceived-to-be opposing values – valuing orientations to change *and* stability in leaders and valuing their capacities for inclusion *and* control in decision making, to be the best predictors of *lower* levels of ideological consistency. In fact, having lower values on *both* change and stability was associated with the least consistency. In other words, voters – *across party affiliations* – who held lower-to-moderate combined value preferences for both change *and* stability, and for inclusion *and* control, were found to hold less tribal partisan views of the issues – or better put - they were more discerning about important differences in the ten major policy issues.

This study comes with limitations that restrict the generalizability of the current findings. First, the ICS was created in 1994 and the ten issues have remained the same since then, in order to have a stable measure of liberal and conservative stances on issues across the years. It may be the case that the general view of these issues may have shifted since they were first published. For example, acceptance of homosexuality may have grown after gay marriage was legalized in 2015 and LGBTQIA+ individuals have become better represented in media since the last Pew report in 2014. However, according to Pew's assessment of these issues, the partisan gap on these issues has

increased greatly in twenty years, so the items themselves may not be the cause. Alternatively, the way we reconfigured these questions into a singular measure of consistency (the absolute value of the difference between the number of times the participant chose the liberal option from the number of times they chose the conservative option) may not be the only or the best way to do so. Other configurations of this variable can be further explored in future research. In our sample, this resulted in an even spread of ideological consistency for all samples except for Democrats, who skewed towards higher consistency.

The Implicit Political Values scale also comes with limitations. Though it was based on the Implicit Leadership scale and had been validated in previous studies, a factor analysis of the current data resulted in the control subscale having only two items with a relatively low Cronbach's alpha, which may limit the interpretability of the results of the SSQD model.

Finally, the models themselves may come with methodological limitations, as Humberg, Schönbrodt, & Nestler (2019) recommend against using a full cubic model in a confirmatory manner. Thus, this study is exploratory, though these findings are interesting and can point towards changes that could be made to how ideological consistency and political polarization are studied. However, this study adds to the conversation on political polarization by unpacking the liberal and conservative value structures and examines the effects of optimal combinations on polarization.

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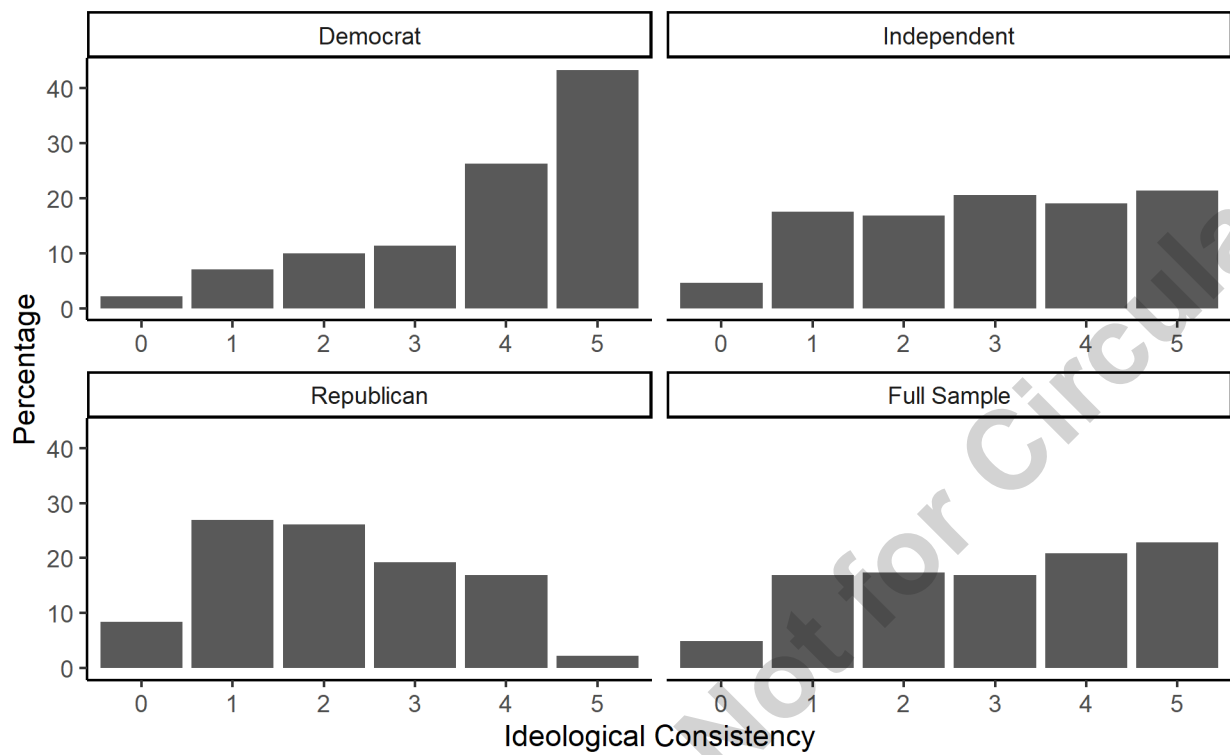
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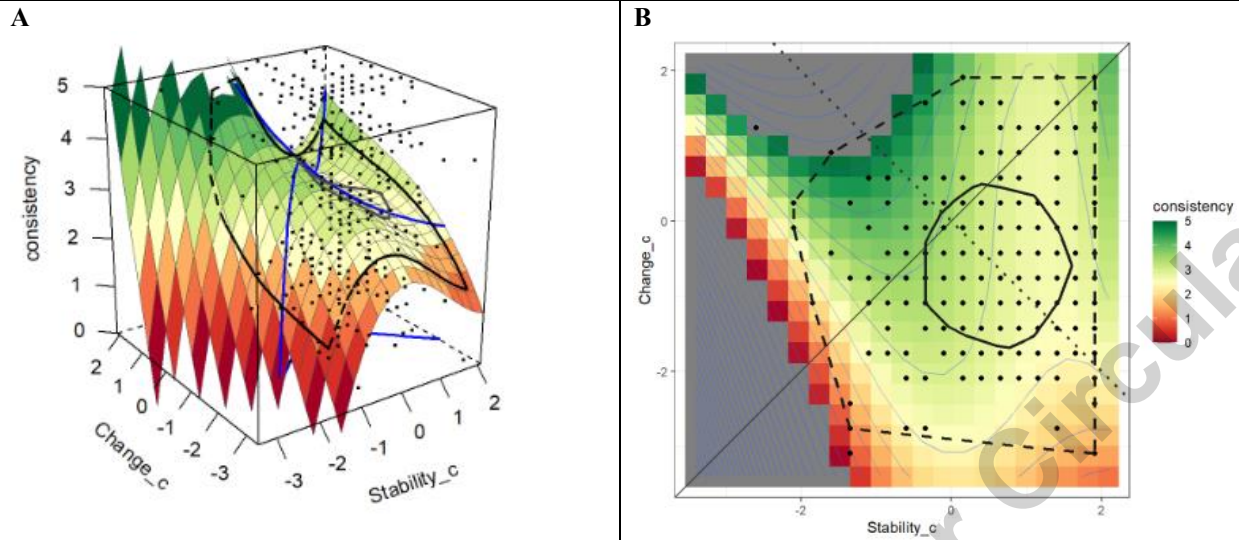
Pre-Publication Draft: Not for Circulation

Figure 1. Distribution of the ideological consistency scale separated by political party and full sample.

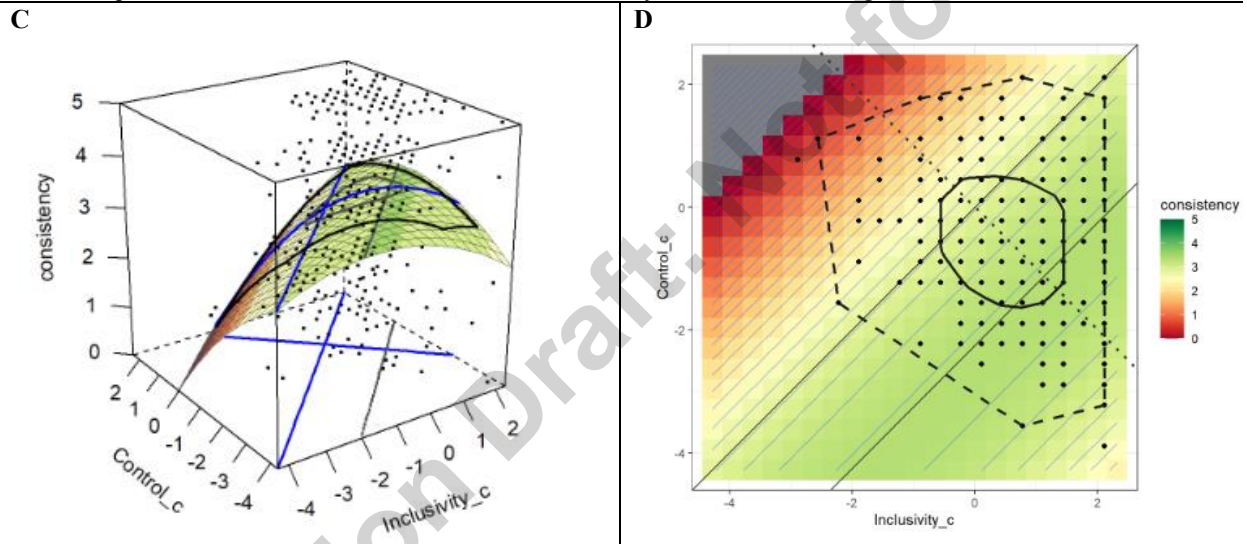
Note: Graphs representing each political party group as well as the full sample are shown. For the ideological consistency variable, 0 = completely inconsistent, 5 = completely consistent.

Figure 2. Estimated surface and contour plots of the impact of models on ideological consistency.

Cubic model of Stability and Change



Shifted Squared Difference model of Control and Inclusivity in Decision Making



Note: Red indicates lower ideological consistency, whereas green indicates the highest consistency.

Table 1. Demographic features of the sample.

Group	N (%)
Gender	
Male	214 (52.54%)
Female	188 (46.08%)
Other	5 (1.23%)
Race or Ethnicity	
White	338 (74.95%)
Asian	40 (8.87%)
Latinx	28 (6.21%)
Black or African American	24 (5.32%)
Other	10 (2.22%)
American Indian or Alaskan Native	9 (2.00%)
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	2 (.44%)
Political Affiliation	
Democrat	141 (35.08%)
Republican	130 (32.34%)
Independent/Other	131 (32.59%)
Highest Level of Education	
Bachelor's degree	131 (32.11%)
High school or GED	131 (32.11%)
Associate degree	63 (15.44%)
Master's degree	39 (9.56%)
Trade school	18 (4.41%)
Some high school	14 (3.43%)
Other	5 (1.23%)
Professional degree (JD or MD)	4 (.98%)
Doctorates	3 (.74%)
Socioeconomic Status	
Middle class	162 (39.71%)
Lower-middle class	124 (30.39%)
Lower class	55 (13.48%)
Upper-middle class	53 (12.99%)
Upper class	10 (2.45%)
Religion	
Protestant Christian	87 (20.19%)
Atheists	72 (16.71%)
Agnostic	71 (16.47%)
None	66 (15.31%)
Buddhist	51 (11.83%)
Other	38 (8.82%)
Jewish	7 (1.62%)
Catholic	4 (.93%)
Muslim	4 (.93%)
Hindu	3 (.70%)

Note: Percentages for religion may not add up to 100%, as participants could select more than one.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for main study variables.

	Mean	SD	Range	Correlations			
				Consistency	Stability	Change	Control
Consistency	3	1.56	0-5				
Stability	5.65	.89	1-7	-.14**			
Change	4.54	.93	1-7	.14**	.08		
Control	4.38	1.03	1-7	-.13**	.31***	.16**	
Inclusion	5.41	.91	1-7	.19***	.15**	.29***	-.21***

Note: **p<.01 ***p<.001

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Table 3. Implicit Political Values Scale

Inclusion Orientation

Good leaders involve subordinates in decision making

Good leaders ask for contributions from subordinates in decision making

Good leaders involve others when making decisions

Control Orientation

Good leaders are independent decision makers

Good leaders control decisions

Stability Orientation

Good leaders preserve order

Good leaders provide a sense of stability

Good leaders are a stabilizing force

Good leaders provide a sense of order

Change Orientation

Good leaders believe change is for the better

Good leaders promote change

Good leaders always look for opportunities to change things up

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Table 4. Goodness of fit indicators and coefficients for models predicting ideological consistency.

Stability vs Change						
Model	Delta AICc	CFI	AIC Weight	R2	Adj. R2	
Full Quadratic	5.483	.649	.023	.056***	.044	
Full Cubic	.000	1.000	.354	.088***	.067	
Model Parameters			Estimate (SE)	p-value		
\widehat{b}_0 : Intercept			3.458 (.137)	<.001***		
\widehat{b}_1 : Stability			-.889(.187)	<.001***		
\widehat{b}_2 : Change			.195(.148)	.189		
\widehat{b}_3 : Stability ²			-.055(.07)	.431		
\widehat{b}_4 : Stability* Change			-.384(.113)	<.001***		
\widehat{b}_5 : Change ²			.026(.095)	.783		
\widehat{b}_6 : Stability ³			.216(.067)	.001**		
\widehat{b}_7 : Stability ² * Change			.205(.068)	.002**		
\widehat{b}_8 : Stability* Change ²			-.026(.06)	.657		
\widehat{b}_9 : Change ³			.024(.048)	.61		
Control vs. Inclusivity						
Model	Delta AICc	CFI	AIC Weight	R2	Adj. R2	
Full Quadratic	4.023	1.000	.046	.073***	.062	
SSQD	.000	1.000	.344	.069***	.064	
Model Parameters			Estimate (SE)	p-value		
\widehat{b}_0 : Intercept			2.850(.090)	<.001***		
\widehat{b}_1 : Inclusive			.37(.054)	<.001***		
\widehat{b}_2 : Control			-.37(.054)	<.001***		
\widehat{b}_3 : Inclusive ²			-.067(.019)	<.001***		
\widehat{b}_4 : Inclusive * Control			.135(.038)	<.001***		
\widehat{b}_5 : Control ²			-.067(.019)	<.001***		
\widehat{a}_3 : shifted ridge?			.74(.108)	<.001***		
\widehat{a}_4 : congruence effect?			-.27(.076)	<.001***		

Note: **p<.01 , ***p<.001.