

Liberal–conservative self-identification in Korea: a cross-cultural explanation

Kisok Richard Kim · Je-Sang Kang

Received: 26 July 2013/Revised: 8 November 2013/Accepted: 16 November 2013
© Korean Social Science Research Council 2013

Abstract Two sets of explanations for the liberal–conservative political orientation developed and tested in the U.S. were compared and tested with Korean data. The two sets of explanations are (1) Moral Foundations Theory that states that liberals and conservatives have different moral intuitions (Haidt and Graham, *Soc Justice Res* 20:98–116, 2007) and (2) a theory that cognitive needs to manage uncertainty and threat are the main factors behind the political orientation (Jost et al., *Psychol Bull* 129:339–375, 2003). These two sets of explanation for political orientation were tested and supported empirically in the U.S. The Korean data showed clear support for the Moral Foundations Theory. Compared to conservatives, liberals in South Korea agreed more with individual oriented moral statements and less with community oriented moral statements. The data showed weak support for the uncertainty and threat explanation in that conservatives showed higher level of intolerance to ambiguity and higher level of death anxiety, but the correlations are weak. Implications of these findings were discussed.

Keywords Political ideology · Cross-cultural comparison · Moral foundations · Left–right political orientation · Liberal–conservative

Introduction

Many have tried to answer the question, why some people are liberal and why some conservative. There have been various explanations (see Jost et al. 2003 for review) and we plan to examine two leading psychological theories developed in the United States to see if they explain political attitudes of Koreans as they did political orientation of Americans.

K. R. Kim (✉)

Department of Psychology, Iona College, 715 North Ave, New Rochelle, NY 10801, USA
e-mail: kkim@iona.edu; krichardkim@gmail.com

K. R. Kim · J.-S. Kang (✉)

Department of Public Administration, Kyung Hee University, 26 Kyunghedae-ro, Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul 130-701, South Korea
e-mail: jskang@khu.ac.kr

The two proposals are (1) that differences in moral intuitions determine liberal or conservative attitudes (Haidt and Graham 2007; Graham et al. 2009; Haidt and Joseph 2004) and (2) that cognitive needs to manage uncertainty and threat determine political orientation (Jost et al. 2003, 2007).

Jost et al. (2003) proposed that conservatism is caused by personality traits such as authoritarianism and intolerance of ambiguity; and cognitive and emotional needs such as rationalization of the current status and fear of instability and death. After conducting meta-analysis of various studies on the topic, they summarized the results as follows: that death anxiety, fear of threat, and intolerance of ambiguity correlates with political conservatism; that openness to experience correlates with liberal tendency. They concluded that needs to manage uncertainty and threat determine political conservatism (Jost et al. 2007).

Haidt and Graham (2007) claimed that political ideology is linked with moral intuitions. They proposed that people have the following five innate moral “foundations”: (1) Harm/Care (do not harm others and relieve pain in others), (2) Fairness/Reciprocity (be fair and return the favor), (3) Ingroup/Loyalty (be loyal to the ingroup members), (4) Authority/Respect (respect authority), and (5) Purity/Sanctity (innate preference to purity and sacredness). According to this proposal, even though these moral sensitivity are innate, each of these moral sensitivity can be turned up or down by experience and education. Liberal people tend to emphasize morality related to (1) Harm/Care and (2) Fairness/Reciprocity and tend not to value (3) Ingroup/Loyalty, (4) Authority/Respect, and (5) Purity/Sanctity as moral principles as much, while conservatives value morality related to (3) (4) & (5) as much as (1) and (2), if not more. Haidt and Graham (2007) called (1) and (2) individualizing foundations and (3) (4) and (5) binding foundations. Individualizing foundations are moral intuitions related to protecting individuals and respecting rights of other individuals; and binding foundations are moral intuitions related to binding individuals within groups and to strengthening groups and institutions (see also Kim et al. 2012).

Most of the studies that tested these two theories were conducted in the U.S. and Europe. Kim et al. (2012) study is probably the only study that tested the moral foundations theory with Korean participants in Korean language so far. The study showed that despite the cultural and historical differences, Koreans showed the similar pattern of data that supported the moral foundations theory. In this study we tested the uncertainty and threat explanation by Jost et al. (2003) and compared it with the moral foundations theory using the within-subject comparison design with Korean data.

The main goal of this study is to test the generality of two sets of psychological explanations developed and successfully tested in the U.S. This study also addresses another important question: the cross-cultural validity of self-rated political orientation. The validity of self-rated political orientation has been debated. Some social scientists argued that ordinary people do not fully understand political ideology and use the related terms such as left/right and liberal/conservative inconsistently. This view led many social scientists shun the use of self-ratings of political ideology as research tool. Recently research activity concerning self-rated political ideology has resurged partially due to psychological approach (Jost 2006). If the results of this study showed that self-ratings of political ideology of both Korean and American participants have common psychological characteristics, it would be a powerful demonstration of cross-cultural validity of self-rated political ideology.

Method

Materials and procedure

Participants who were given pencil and paper questionnaire completed 53 questions. The 53-item questionnaire consists of (1) 8 questions on demographic information such as gender, age, education level, birthplace, household income, the political party the respondent supports, type of religion, and strength of religiosity; (2) a 7-point scale self-rating of political view (1 = very liberal to 7 = very conservative); (3) 20 moral judgment questions used in the study 2 of Graham et al. (2009) that measures 5 moral foundations; (4) 8 questions selected from Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (Budner 1962); (5) 5 questions selected from the Dangerous and threatening social world view Scale (Altemeyer 1988); (6) 5 questions from Need for Closure Scale (Webster and Kruglanski 1994); (7) 3 questions from Death Anxiety Scale (Wong et al. 1994); (8) 2 questions concerning the attitude toward North Korea; and (9) 1 question about why the respondent thinks that he or she is liberal or conservative. Participants answer the questions in the order as described above. The responses to questions in (3), (4), (5), (6), (7), and (8) were made on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

The 20 moral judgment questions (numbered 3 above) consist of 5 subscales with 4 questions each: Harm (e.g., “It can never be right to kill a human being”), Fairness (e.g., “If a friend wanted to cut in with me on a long line, I would feel uncomfortable because it wouldn’t be fair to those behind me”), Ingroup (“Loyalty to one’s group is more important than one’s individual concerns”), Authority (“If I were a soldier and disagreed with my commanding officer’s orders, I would obey anyway because that is my duty”), and Purity (“People should not do things that are revolting to others, even if no one is harmed”). Participants were instructed to respond to each statement with a strength of agreement (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

The four scales to measure uncertainty and threat (numbered with 4, 5, 6, 7 above) include questions such as “People who insist upon a yes or no answer just don’t know how complicated things really are” (Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale), “There are many dangerous people in our society who will attack someone out of pure meanness, for no reason at all” (Dangerous and threatening social world view Scale), “I usually make important decisions quickly and confidently” (Need for Closure Scale), and “I avoid death thoughts at all costs” (Death Anxiety Scale). The questions from these scales used are translated to Korean by one of the authors and back-translated independently to English by another person to check the translation.

The 48th and 49th questions, (8) above, were: “The biggest threat to South Korea’s security is North Korea” and “I support the Sunshine policy (conciliatory approach to North Korea).” The last question, (9), was “Why do you think you are a liberal or a conservative (the most important dimension)?” This was a multiple choice question where the choices were: (1) Because economic growth is important/because distribution of wealth is important. (2) Because community is more important than individual/because individual is more important than community. (3) Because of North Korean policy (for or against conciliatory policy). (4) Other (specify).

Participants

Participants were 628 students (57 % female, 43 % male; mean age 22.2; SD 3.3) from 4 Korean Universities (Kyung Hee University, Seoul; Cho Sun University, Gwangju; and

Kyung Sang University, Jinju, Daegu Catholic University, Daegu) who answered the survey either voluntarily or for partial course credit. In terms of religion, 53 % had no religion, 17 % were Buddhists, 18 % Protestants, 10 % Catholic, and 2 % other. In terms of birthplace which has been a factor in Korean politics. 13.5 % were born in Seoul, 8 % Incheon/Kyung-Ki area, 21 % Daegu/Kyung-Book area, 27.5 % Pusan/Kyung-Nam area, 21 % Kwangju/Jeon-Nam area, and 2 % other.

Results

Moral foundations theory

Figure 1 shows the 5 moral foundations scores by political ratings. It shows the same pattern of results as other studies that examined the relationship between the five moral foundations and political identification. (Graham et al. 2009; McAdams et al. 2008; Van Leeuwen and Park 2009; Haidt and Graham 2007; Kim, Kang and Yun 2012). Harm and Fairness scores decrease as political rating increase (more conservative), while Ingroup, Authority, and Purity scores increase. The mean political self-rating was 3.76 with standard deviation of 1.14. The political self-rating was made on a 7-point scale, but out of 628 participants only 4 (0.6 %) identify themselves as very conservative (7 on the scale) and 10 (1.6 %) identified themselves as very liberal (1 on the scale). We, therefore, collapsed 1

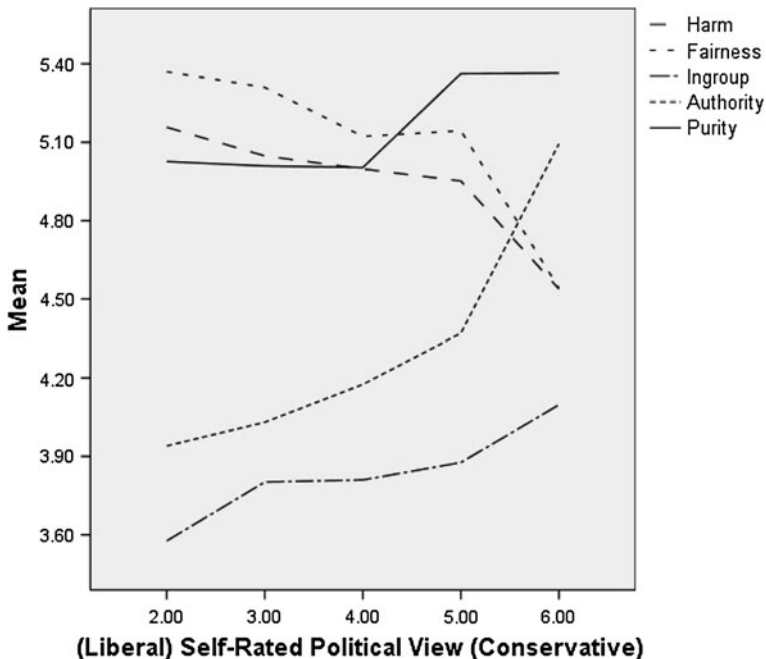


Fig. 1 Agreement with moral statements as a function of the political view. The *horizontal line* at y-axis value 4 indicates neutral position. Higher values on the y-axis indicate agreement and lower values, disagreement. x-Axis indicates self-rated political orientation. 4 on the x-axis indicates neutral position. 1 on the x-axis (very liberal) is merged with 2 (liberal), and 7 (very conservative) is merged with 6 (conservative) due to the very small number of participants in the two extreme categories

Table 1 Correlation and regression coefficients between the self-rating of political views (1 = very liberal to 7 = very conservative) and 5 moral foundations scores

| | Political orientation | Harm | Fairness | Ingroup | Authority | Purity | <i>b</i> | β | sr |
|-----------|-----------------------|---------|----------|---------|-----------|--------|----------|----------|--------|
| Harm | -0.104** | - | - | - | - | - | -0.083 | -0.069 | -0.064 |
| Fairness | -0.167** | 0.350** | - | - | - | - | -0.206 | -0.149** | -0.138 |
| Ingroup | 0.103* | -0.033 | -0.107** | - | - | - | 0.038 | 0.029 | 0.028 |
| Authority | 0.215** | -0.006 | -0.041 | 0.239** | - | - | 0.193 | 0.165** | 0.149 |
| Purity | 0.124** | 0.195** | 0.167** | 0.168** | 0.366** | - | 0.114 | 0.098* | 0.087 |
| Mean | 3.77 | 5.00 | 5.20 | 3.81 | 4.19 | 5.12 | | | |
| SD | 1.09 | 0.944 | 0.824 | 0.866 | 0.967 | 0.972 | | | |

Also shown are the descriptive statistics for the moral foundations scores and the correlations among the scores $R^2 = 0.082$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.075$, $R = 0.287^{**}$, intercept = 3.72

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

and 2; and also 6 and 7 making it a 5 point liberal–conservative self-rating to see its relationship with 5 moral foundations. The collapsing of the rating was done for this graph because the end points represented by a very small number of respondents can be misleading. All the subsequent analyses were based on the original seven point ratings.

Table 1 shows the results of a standard regression analysis with the five moral foundation scores as predictors and the political orientation as the dependent variable. For the overall multiple regression, $R = 0.29$, $R^2 = 0.082$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.075$. The overall regression is statistically significant, $F(5, 617) = 11.10$, $p < 0.001$. Among the five predictor variables, authority factor showed highest beta weight. Studies testing the moral foundations theory in the U.S. have shown that purity foundation is the strongest factor in predicting the political orientation. This difference was also found in Kim et al. (2012). Table 1 also shows the zero-order correlation coefficients between the political ratings and 5 foundation scores which are all significant and in the expected directions.

Uncertainty and threat

The results of standard regression analysis to predict the political orientation from four sets of questions related to the perception of threat and uncertainty are shown in Table 2. For the overall multiple regression, $R = 0.16$, $R^2 = 0.025$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.019$. The overall regression is statistically significant, $F(4, 614) = 3.99$, $p < 0.005$. Intolerance to ambiguity was the predictor with the highest beta weight and also the only significant predictor.

As shown in the same Table, correlation analyses showed that responses to questions measuring the Dangerous and threatening social world view Scale (Altemeyer 1988) and those measuring Closure did not show significant correlation with political orientation. Responses to questions measuring Death Anxiety (Wong et al. 1994) do show weak, but significant correlation with political orientation. In other words, conservative people were slightly more fearful of death. Responses to questions measuring Tolerance of Ambiguity (Budner 1962) also showed significant correlation implying that conservative people are more intolerant to ambiguity.

Table 2 Correlation and regression coefficients between the self-rating of political views (1 = very liberal to 7 = very conservative) and 4 measures of uncertainty and threat

| | Political orientation | Ambiguity | Danger | Closure | Death | <i>b</i> | β | sr |
|-----------|-----------------------|-----------|---------|---------|-------|----------|---------|-------|
| Ambiguity | 0.162** | | | | | 0.234 | 0.139** | 0.129 |
| Danger | 0.044 | 0.068 | | | | 0.028 | 0.022 | 0.021 |
| Closure | 0.035 | 0.273** | -0.061 | | | -0.039 | -0.022 | 0.021 |
| Death | 0.094* | 0.271** | 0.103** | 0.081* | | 0.040 | 0.050 | 0.047 |
| Mean | 3.77 | 3.65 | 4.34 | 3.67 | 3.29 | | | |
| SD | 1.90 | 0.677 | 0.884 | 0.650 | 1.42 | | | |

Also shown are the descriptive statistics

$R^2 = 0.025$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.019$, $R = 0.159^{**}$, intercept = 2.80

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Other miscellaneous factors

There was no significant effect of gender, place of birth, location of the university, household income, or religiosity on the political identification ratings. However, the attitudes toward North Korea, as expected, showed significant correlation with the political identification. Those who think that North Korea is the biggest threat to the safety of South Korea are more conservative, $R = 0.17$, $R^2 = 0.029$, $p < 0.001$. Those who support the “sunshine policy” (emphasizing peaceful cooperation and reconciliation with North Korea) are more liberal, $R = -0.24$, $R^2 = 0.058$, $p < 0.001$.

For the question “what is the most important issue (dimension) that determine your political orientation?” participants can answer by choosing one of three key issue dimensions in Korean politics. Those who selected “growth or distribution of wealth” as the most important reason for their political orientation tend to be liberal (mean political orientation = 3.63) and those who selected North Korean policy (confrontational or conciliatory) tend to be conservative (4.24). Those who selected “community or individual” were in the middle (3.88). Those who selected other had mean of 3.67. ANOVA showed that the difference among the four mean political orientation scores were statistically significant, $F(3, 492) = 4.24$, $p < 0.01$.

Discussion

The main goal of this study is to test cross-cultural generality of two leading explanations of political orientation developed in the U.S. with Korean data using within-subject design. The moral foundations theory, as it is applied to explain people’s political orientation, predicts that liberals value moral principles regarding harm/care and fairness/reciprocity more than those regarding loyalty/ingroup, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity, while conservatives value the last three as much, if not more, as the first two. Korean participants showed the predicted pattern. Correlations between five factors within the theory and political orientation were all significant and in the expected directions. The percentage of variance explained by the moral foundations theory (R^2 value of the overall regression) was 8 %. The uncertainty and threat hypothesis were also consistent with Korean data in that conservatives in Korea disliked ambiguity and also are slightly more afraid of death

than liberals, but correlations between factors and political orientation were weak and as a whole explained only 2.5 % (R^2) of variance in political orientation data in Korea.

This study showed that there could be a culturally universal explanation about the self-identification of political orientation, and that the moral foundations theory is a very good starting point for further explorations. The finding that the same set of theoretical constructs explains self-identification of left–right political orientation in both South Korea and the U.S. despite the different cultural, historical, and language background is quite remarkable. The R^2 value was not that high (8 %), but that could be partially due to the fact that we used a Korean-translated version of a questionnaire that was developed with American participants in mind. Developing a scale that measures the moral foundations that is less culture dependent could be a possible future research project.

The uncertainty and threat explanation states that conservatives are more sensitive to threat and dislike uncertainty. It would be an interesting to further explore a possibility that Korean conservatives are less driven by fear and dislike of uncertainty. As discussed in Kim et al. (2012), Korean political scientists have been argued that attitude toward North Korea was the biggest (perhaps the only) factor empirically shown to explain liberal–conservative divide in Korea. Conservatives in Korea might be more sensitive to threats posed by North Korea than liberals and this might be a supportive evidence for the threat and uncertainty explanation. However, this attitude toward North Korea can be also explained by the moral foundations theory that conservatives have a stronger sense of Ingroup/Loyalty.

The limitations of this study include sampling method. We collected responses only from college students who were not selected through probability sampling methods. We also could not include more questions measuring fear and intolerance of uncertainty because we needed to limit the length of the survey. Another potential problem of this study is translation of questions from English to Korean. Even though we followed the standard procedure of translation and back-translation by different bilingual persons, using a set of questionnaire developed in a different language can always introduce a problem in measuring what is originally intended by the questionnaire.

One of the interesting findings reported in this study is that attitude on Authority is the biggest factor in separating liberals and conservatives in Korea. The same finding was reported in Kim et al. (2012). As discussed in that study, while liberals and conservatives in the U.S. showed the biggest difference in the Purity subscale among the five moral foundations, the Authority is the key factor in Korea.

There could be of course many other factors that determine the self-identification of political orientation on a single left–right dimension. Issues that divide liberals and conservatives in the U.S. are very different from those in Korea and other countries. If there are common factors that explain left–right confrontation across different countries, it might suggest that the left–right political ideology is related to a fundamental nature of human mind.

References

- Altemeyer, B. (1988). *Enemies of freedom: Understanding right-wing authoritarianism* (pp. 74–78). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Budner, S. (1962). Intolerance of ambiguity as a personality variable. *Journal of Personality*, 30, 29–50.
- Graham, J., Haidt, J., & Nosek, B. A. (2009). Liberals and conservatives rely on different sets of moral foundations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96(5), 1029.

- Haidt, J., & Graham, J. (2007). When morality opposes justice: Conservatives have moral intuitions that liberals may not recognize. *Social Justice Research, 20*, 98–116.
- Haidt, J., Joseph, C., & Joseph, C. (2004). Intuitive ethics: How innately prepared intuitions generate culturally variable virtues. *Daedalus, 133*, 55–66.
- Jost, J. T. (2006). The end of the end of ideology. *American Psychologist, 61*, 651–670.
- Jost, J. T., Glaser, J., Kruglanski, A. W., & Sulloway, F. (2003). Political conservatism as motivated social cognition. *Psychological Bulletin, 129*, 339–375.
- Jost, J. T., Napier, J. L., Thorisdottir, H., Gosling, S. D., Palfai, T. P., & Ostafin, B. (2007). Are needs to manage uncertainty and threat associated with political conservatism or ideological extremity? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 33*, 989–1007.
- Kim, K. R., Kang, J., & Yun, S. (2012). Moral intuitions and political orientation: Similarities and differences between Korea and the United States. *Psychological Reports, 111*(1), 173–185.
- McAdams, D. P., Albaugh, M., Farber, E., Daniels, J., Logan, R. L., & Olson, B. (2008). Family metaphors and moral intuitions: How conservatives and liberals narrate their lives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 95*, 978–990.
- Van Leeuwen, F., & Park, J. H. (2009). Perceptions of social dangers, moral foundations, and political orientation. *Personality and Individual Differences, 47*, 169–173.
- Webster, D. M., & Kruglanski, A. W. (1994). Individual differences in need for cognitive closure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 67*, 1049–1062.
- Wong, P. T. P., Reker, G. T., & Gesser, G. (1994). *Death attitude profile—revised: A multidimensional measure of attitudes toward death*. Philadelphia: Taylor & Francis.