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“You are either with us, or against us”: The association between dichotomous thinking and political extremism among Israeli voters

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Abstract. Purpose of the study: people prone to political extremism often exhibit a rather simplistic black-and-white view of social reality. This is a consequence of the psychological tendency to perceive and interpret the world in a certain way. The hypothesis underlying this study is that this tendency manifests in a style of thinking defined as “dichotomous thinking”. That is, a tendency to perceive and interpret the world in terms of binary options (i.e., “black or white”, “good or bad”, or “all or nothing”). The study was conducted in Israel during the 2019 election campaign, which initiated a prolonged political crisis leading to deep polarisation between the two main political camps in Israel. Participants (N = 312) completed an online survey, which included a demographic questionnaire and measures of political identification and dichotomous thinking style. The study found both linear and quadratic associations between dichotomous thinking and political identification. Thus, dichotomous thinking was associated with both right-wing political orientation and an overall propensity for political extremism, both right-wing and left-wing. These results provide empirical support for theoretical models suggesting that there is a U-shaped relationship between cognitive rigidity and political identification, but this relationship is stronger at the right end of the political spectrum

Keywords: political extremism; political polarisation; conservatism; cognitive rigidity; dichotomous thinking

INTRODUCTION

In the post-World War II period, the political focus shifted towards the centre, especially in the Western world. While ideological disputes still existed, they appeared to be constrained, perhaps influenced by the trauma of the war. In most Western liberal democracies, political candidates leaned towards the centre and avoided being labelled as extremists; as such, portrayals became the most effective weapon of their political rivals (Krouwel, 2012).

However, in recent years, this trend has reversed. Rather than gravitating towards the centre, politicians in Western liberal democracies have increasingly

adopted extreme positions, accentuating the differences between their camp and the opposition (Iyengar *et al.*, 2012; Krouwel, 2012; Vaan-Baar & Feldman-Hall, 2022). The purpose of this study is to analyse this phenomenon from a psychological perspective and identify the psychological characteristics associated with political extremism.

Objective: Political psychologists (Iyengar *et al.*, 2012) have long claimed that a person's unique psychological needs are the ones that contribute to the adoption of certain political opinions. As L. Zmigrod *et al.* (2020) indicated, “There may be a certain “type of

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mind” that is particularly drawn to adopting an ideology or doctrine, almost regardless of its content or ambition”. Following this argument, the premise of the current study is that political extremism arises from a psychological inclination to perceive and interpret the world in a specific manner. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to provide evidence that this inclination manifests in a cognitive style known as “dichotomous thinking” (Oshio, 2009), which is characteristic of individuals who tend towards extreme political ideologies, whether on the right or left side of the political spectrum.

The study was conducted in Israel, where political extremism is prominently reflected in the ongoing political crisis experienced since 2019, which led to five consecutive general elections in fewer than three and a half years. The crisis stems from deep polarisation between two political blocs in Israel: the right-wing bloc, led by Benjamin Netanyahu, and the left (referred to as the “left-centre” bloc) seeking to replace him in power.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political extremism and cognitive rigidity. Political extremism is defined as the degree to which individuals hold and strongly identify with generic leftist or rightist worldviews in a polarised manner (van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019). Those inclined towards political extremism tend to view their social reality in a rather simplistic black-and-white manner (van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019). The psychological motivation underlying the adoption of extreme ideologies lies in their ability to provide meaning to a complex social environment by offering a system of clear assumptions that render the world more understandable and predictable (Kruglanski *et al.*, 2017). From a social-cognitive perspective, these perceptual tendencies are defined as cognitive inflexibility or cognitive rigidity (van Bavel & Pereira, 2018; Zmigrod *et al.*, 2020).

However, recent evidence suggests that a lack of cognitive flexibility characterises individuals inclined towards extremism at both ends of the political spectrum, including the left and the right (Ditto *et al.*, 2019; Zmigrod *et al.*, 2020). This perspective, known as “rigidity of the extreme”, posits that political extremism reflects a general cognitive style that influences decision-making and information processing beyond the confines of a specific political stance. According to this view, individuals with cognitive inflexibility are more likely to gravitate towards the extreme ends of the political spectrum, with the direction of their leaning (right or left) largely dependent on the dominant ideology in their social and cultural environment (Greenberg & Jonas, 2003).

The “rigidity of the extreme” approach has received empirical support from several recent studies. For instance, a study examining attitudes towards the 2016 migrant crisis in the European Union found that while the political left and right supported different solutions to the crisis, politicians at both extremes believed the solution was straightforward (“We should accept all the refugees”

or “We should reject all the refugees”). Similarly, L. Zmigrod *et al.* (2020) investigated the level of identity fusion between personal identity and party identity among over 700 US citizens. They discovered that individuals with a high level of fusion between identities (indicating partisan solid support for their political party), both Democrats (liberals) and Republicans (conservatives), exhibited low cognitive flexibility.

M. Rollwage *et al.* (2018) identified a quadratic association between political orientation and dogmatic intolerance. Their findings revealed that political extremism was linked to reduced metacognitive sensitivity among extreme right and extreme left ideologists. Through a perceptual decision-making task, they demonstrated that individuals inclined towards political extremism were less aware of the correctness of their answers and less likely to revise their confidence in their answers, even when presented with conflicting evidence post-decision. A meta-analysis by P.H. Ditto *et al.* (2019) found that both liberals and conservatives shared a tendency to interpret information more positively if it confirmed their political leanings.

Dichotomous thinking. One manifestation of cognitive rigidity, explored in the current study, is a dichotomous thinking style. Dichotomous thinking is characterised by a propensity to view things in binary oppositions such as “black or white”, “good or bad”, and “all or nothing”. In essence, dichotomous thinking represents an “either-or” mode of thinking rather than an inclusive “and” mode of thinking (Oshio, 2009, 2012).

As a result, dichotomous thinking often oversimplifies complex social realities by activating simplistic categorical cognitive schemas that offer only two opposite and extreme options. This type of schema allows individuals to avoid acknowledging the often multidimensional, sometimes ambivalent, and even paradoxical nature of reality (Bonfá-Araujo & Hauck Filho, 2021).

A dichotomous thinking style reduces the perceived vast area of uncertainty in social reality. Indeed, dichotomous thinking has been closely linked to concepts such as avoidance of ambiguity and intolerance of uncertainty (Oshio, 2009). Research in the political field has often linked these characteristics with political conservatism. Nevertheless, it can equally be argued (Zmigrod, 2020) that people on the left end of the political spectrum may also have a similar epistemic need to construct reality into distinct categories, which can lead them to adopt a dichotomous thinking style as well.

Individuals with a dichotomous thinking style, perceiving reality one-dimensionally through binary lenses, may be so self-centred that they fail to recognise others’ needs or exhibit empathy (Jonason *et al.*, 2018). This is supported by associations found between dichotomous thinking, narcissism, borderline personality disorder (Oshio, 2009), and the Dark Triad of personality traits (Bonfá-Araujo & Hauck Filho, 2021). Furthermore, dichotomous thinking has been linked to negative psychological outcomes in specific contexts such as eating disorders

(Byrne *et al.*, 2008), prioritisation of immediate needs over long-term benefits (Jonason *et al.*, 2018), and extreme response styles (Bonfá-Araujo & Hauck Filho, 2021).

The current study. J. Greenberg & E. Jonas (2003) noted that almost all studies examining political extremism have been conducted within specific socio-political contexts, primarily in the USA and a few in Europe. However, recent findings (Zmigrod *et al.*, 2020) suggest that different political issues (economic right-left versus social right-left) may influence how individuals associate themselves with political categories.

In contrast to the US and Europe, where the political divide between right and left primarily stems from socio-economic issues, in Israel, this division predominantly revolves around matters of security and foreign relations. In fact, from a socio-economic standpoint, the situation appears absurd: support for leftist parties, advocating for generous welfare policies and equitable resource distribution, largely originates from the upper classes, while backing for right-wing parties, advocating for neoliberal economic policies by reducing government intervention and fostering a free market, predominantly emanates from the lower socio-economic strata (Peretz & Doron, 2018).

Since the general election for the 21st Knesset (the Israeli parliament) held in April 2019, Israel has been engulfed in a profound political crisis. This crisis erupted after Binyamin Netanyahu, who served as prime minister in the decade preceding the crisis, lost the traditional support of several right-wing parties, rendering him unable to secure a majority to form a new government. Simultaneously, parties from the left-centre camp also failed to form a coalition government due to internal disagreements. Since then, the parliament has been divided between two starkly contrasting views regarding Binyamin Netanyahu's political future. Approximately half of the Knesset members have expressed unwavering support for him, and the other half have vehemently opposed another term for him as prime minister at any cost. The persistence of this crisis has exacerbated polarisation and extremism within two traditional political camps of Israel.

The fact that the current study was conducted within such a distinctive political culture and climate provides an opportunity to examine the theoretical assertion that the motivation for adopting a political position may be independent of its ideological content. Therefore, the current study explores the notion that cognitive rigidity, specifically a dichotomous thinking style, may characterise individuals who align strongly with either the right or the left of the political spectrum.

Although it is predicted that the dichotomous thinking style will be positively associated with a tendency towards right-wing political views (H1), based on previous studies (Iost *et al.*, 2003) that found an association between conservatism and cognitive rigidity, it is also anticipated that a quadratic relationship will be identified between dichotomous thinking and political identification, which will remain unaffected by this association (H2).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants and procedure. The sample consisted of 312 participants (57% males, $M_{age} = 34.53$, $SD = 12.57$, Range: 18-85). An a-priori power analysis was conducted for sample size estimation using G*Power 3.1.9 (Faul *et al.*, 2009). Based on J. Cohen's (2013) criteria for large effect size ($ES = .40$), with an alpha of .05 and power of .95, the estimated sample size required for the current tested model was $N = 107$. Data collection occurred during the general election campaign for the 21st Knesset in April 2019. Participants were recruited via advertisements on social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram). Upon providing their consent to participate, they completed an online survey comprising a demographic questionnaire and measures of political identification and dichotomous thinking style. Data and study materials are publicly available at <https://osf.io/v5hsp/>.

Materials and descriptive statistics. Political identification was gauged using the following prompt: "When talking about political issues people usually refer to "right" and "left", how would you place your views on the following scale, ranging from 1 (right) to 7 (left)?" Assessing political identification with a single item is widely accepted (Chirumbolo, 2002; Kimmelmeier, 2007; van Prooijen *et al.*, 2015). On average, participants scored near the midpoint of the scale ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.77$), indicating a balanced representation of both ends of the political spectrum.

Dichotomous thinking style was assessed using the Dichotomous Thinking Inventory (DTI; Oshio, 2009), comprising three subscales: Preference for Dichotomy, Dichotomous Belief, and Profit-and-Loss Thinking. For the current study, the Dichotomous Belief subscale was utilised. This subscale encompasses five items that assess a thinking style grounded in the belief that any class of physical objects or abstract ideas in the world can be segregated into two distinct and usually mutually exclusive groups. Participants indicated their agreement with statements such as "People can clearly be distinguished as being "good" or "bad" and "I think of everyone as being either my friend or my enemy", on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The internal consistency, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, was .78 ($Mean = 1.84$, $SD = .73$).

RESULTS

Preliminary analysis. Religiosity was positively correlated with political identification with the right, while age and educational level were positively correlated with political identification with the left. Males ($M = 3.61$; $SD = 1.74$) leaned towards the right more than females ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.74$; $t(307) = -1.84$, $p = .033$). Dichotomous thinking was negatively correlated with political identification with the right ($r = -.26$, $p < .001$, 95% CI[-.36, -.15]).

Hypotheses testing. A series of multiple regression analyses were performed to assess the hypotheses of

the study using the PROCESS Ver. 4.1 add-on to SPSS Ver. 28.0 (Hayes, 2009). To test the first hypothesis, political identification was entered as the dependent variable, dichotomous thinking as the independent variable, and age, gender, religion, education, and income were entered as covariates. Results supported the first hypothesis (H1), revealing that dichotomous thinking predicted political identification with the right, even after controlling for demographic variables ($\beta = -.19$, $p < .001$, 95% CI[-.27, -.12]).

Subsequently, to test the proposed association between dichotomous thinking and political extremism (H2), a political extremism index was created by computing a variable in which the midpoint of the political identification scale (4) was coded as zero; values 3 and 5 were coded as 1; 2 and 6 were coded as 2; and 1 and 7 were coded as 3. Accordingly, the closer the participants rated themselves to one of the extremes (right or left) of the political spectrum, the higher their score of political extremism ($M = 1.51$, $SD = .94$). Then, a multiple regression analysis was conducted in which political extremism was entered as the dependent variable, dichotomous thinking was entered as the independent variable, and age, gender, religion, education, and income were entered as covariates. Results confirmed that dichotomous thinking predicted political extremism, independent of demographic variables ($\beta = .13$, $p = .026$, 95% CI[.02, .32]). Notably, the impact of dichotomous thinking on political extremism remained significant even after accounting for political identification in the model ($\beta = .12$, $p = .045$, 95% CI[.01, .31]), indicating that the relationship between dichotomous thinking and political extremism is distinct from political identification with either the right or the left.

Finally, a quadratic association between dichotomous thinking and political identification was tested (Cohen *et al.*, 2003). A multiple regression analysis was conducted with political identification as the dependent variable; dichotomous thinking squared (the quadratic term) as the independent variable and age, gender, religion, education, and income as covariates. As illustrated in Figure 1, a quadratic effect was evident, with dichotomous thinking squared predicting political identification independent of demographic variables ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .001$, 95% CI[-.16, -.06]).

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the relationship between a cognitive tendency towards dichotomous thinking and political identification. The results supported the hypotheses suggesting that dichotomous thinking is associated with both a tendency towards right-wing political views and a general tendency towards political extremism, regardless of political orientation.

The finding that individuals identifying with the right exhibit higher levels of cognitive rigidity is consistent with prior research linking conservatism to

cognitive rigidity (Jost *et al.*, 2003). This result also aligns with recent neuropsychological studies (Jost & Amodio, 2012) indicating that right-wing political identification is linked to increased neural sensitivity to threats, larger amygdala volume, and smaller cingulate volume (an area of the brain associated with cognitive response regulation), among other findings.

Scientific and practical value. However, the unique contribution of the current study lies in the fact that it provides empirical support for the theoretical notion that cognitive rigidity characterises not only people who hold extreme right-wing political views but also those who hold extreme left-wing views.

The idea of a tendency towards authoritarianism, characterised by cognitive rigidity, even within left-wing political views, is a contentious issue in psychological research (Greenberg & Jonas, 2003; Malka *et al.*, 2017). Nevertheless, this perspective, known as the “rigidity of the extreme”, as opposed to the “rigidity of the right”, is increasingly being supported by empirical evidence. For instance, J.E. Settle *et al.* (2009) compared the strength of political identification among identical and non-identical twins and found a significant hereditary component in the strength of political identification, explaining almost half of the variance. However, there was no genetic effect on the direction of political identification (right or left), which appears to be primarily influenced by environmental factors during upbringing.

J. Greenberg & E. Jonas (2003) proposed a model that integrates the “rigidity of the extreme” and the “rigidity of the right” approaches. According to their model, political identification has two vertical dimensions: one related to the ideological content of identification, ranging from right to left, and the other describing the intensity of identification, ranging from low to high. Based on this model, it could be argued that cognitive rigidity increases as individuals move closer to the right end of the ideological dimension or the high end of the intensity dimension.

The following study also supports the theoretical model proposed by J.T. Jost *et al.* (2003), who suggested that a U-shaped pattern of association exists between cognitive rigidity and political identification but that the association is stronger at the right end of the political map compared to the left end (Jost *et al.*, 2003). These researchers suggest that individuals seeking an ideology that provides a simple, coherent, and uncomplicated interpretation of reality may be less inclined towards left-wing ideologies. Another explanation for this pattern comes from J.W. van Prooijen & A.P. Krouwel (2017), who note that extreme left-wing ideologies (e.g., socialism, communism) are relatively rare in the Western world, leading to the extreme right appearing more radical than the extreme left.

Limitations and future directions. The findings of this study offer a better understanding of the psychological mechanisms that underlie the motivations to

adopt a certain political ideology. These findings are, however, limited by the fact that the current study is based on a cross-sectional study design that cannot offer a definitive causal explanation. Future research could explore whether inducing a state of cognitive rigidity indeed increases the adoption of extreme political ideologies.

Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge that the study was conducted within a specific social and political context. Israel underwent a period of significant political instability during the study period, characterised by four consecutive election campaigns and heightened political polarisation. Therefore, further validation of the findings is warranted in diverse samples and different cultural and political contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

This study established that individuals closer to the political centre tend to exhibit greater cognitive flexibility, enabling them to perceive and tolerate the complexity

of the social world more effectively. As J. Greenberg & E. Jonas (2003) outline, ideologically flexible individuals are more inclined to tolerate differing viewpoints. They can question and critically evaluate their own political stances and affiliations and accept the logical validity of opposing viewpoints. Therefore, they recognise and can accept the fact that the complex social and political reality does not always have a single clear solution and cannot be represented by a single truth. Psychologically, such an understanding implies that ideologically flexible individuals can cope effectively with situations characterised by a high degree of uncertainty, ambiguity, ambivalence, and even paradoxes, which often represent the human experience.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author of this study declares no conflict of interest.

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«Ти з нами або проти нас»: зв'язок між дихотомічним стилем мислення та політичним екстремізмом серед ізраїльських виборців

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Анотація. Мета дослідження: для людей, схильних до політичного екстремізму, часто характерне досить спрощене чорно-біле бачення соціальної реальності. Це є наслідком психологічної схильності сприймати та інтерпретувати світ у певний спосіб. Гіпотеза, що лежить в основі цього дослідження, полягає в тому, що ця тенденція проявляється в стилі мислення, який визначається як «дихотомічне мислення». Тобто схильність сприймати та інтерпретувати світ у термінах бінарних опцій (тобто «чорне або біле», «добре або погано», або «все або нічого»). Дослідження проводилося в Ізраїлі під час виборчої кампанії 2019 року, яка розпочала тривалу політичну кризу, що призвела до глибокої поляризації між двома основними політичними таборами в Ізраїлі. Учасники (N = 312) пройшли онлайн-опитування, яке включало демографічну анкету, а також вимірювання політичної ідентифікації та дихотомічного стилю мислення. Результати дослідження показали як лінійні, так і квадратичні асоціації між дихотомічним мисленням і політичною ідентифікацією. Тобто, дихотомічний стиль мислення був пов'язаний як з правою політичною орієнтацією, так і в цілому зі схильністю до політичного екстремізму, як правого, так і лівого спрямування. Ці результати надають емпіричну підтримку теоретичним моделям, які припускали, що між когнітивною ригідністю та політичною ідентифікацією існує U-подібний зв'язок, але цей зв'язок сильніший на правому кінці політичного спектру

Ключові слова: політичний екстремізм; політична поляризація; консерватизм; когнітивна ригідність; дихотомічне мислення