

Libertarianism, Culture, and Personal Predispositions

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Abstract

The United States has exhibited two potentially connected trends – increasing individualism and increasing interest in libertarian ideology. Previous research on libertarian ideology found higher levels of individualism among libertarians, and cross-cultural research has tied greater individualism to making dispositional attributions and lower altruistic tendencies. Given this, we expected to observe positive correlations between the following variables in the present research: individualism and endorsement of libertarianism, individualism and dispositional attributions, and endorsement of libertarianism and dispositional attributions. We also expected to observe negative correlations between libertarianism and altruism, dispositional attributions and altruism, and individualism and altruism. Survey results from 252 participants confirmed a positive correlation between individualism and libertarianism, a marginally significant positive correlation between libertarianism and dispositional attributions, and a negative correlation between individualism and altruism. These results confirm the connection between libertarianism and individualism observed in previous research and present several intriguing questions for future research on libertarian ideology.

Key Words:

Libertarianism, individualism, altruism, attributions

The United States has witnessed two important trends over the last several decades. Firstly, there has been a growing interest in the Libertarian Party, as evident by the increased proportion of votes going to the Libertarian Party in each consecutive general election (Lightner, 2016; Dwilson, 2016).[1]¹ Secondly, the nation is becoming more

individualistic, made apparent through the increased use of words and phrases focusing on oneself rather than communal words or phrases (Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2012). These two trends may be connected, given the distinctly individualistic nature of the libertarian ideology. For example, libertarians tend to believe that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is not guaranteed by the

hugely unpopular, resulting in support for alternative third party candidates (Yglesias, 2017).

¹ The surge in Libertarian votes during the 2016 election was partly due to the fact that both major-party candidates were

government and therefore prefer that more power is given to each individual (Iyer, Graham, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012). Additionally, the libertarian ideology places a premium on individual freedom and choices (Libertarian Party, 2017). Extensive psychological research has been performed on other prominent political ideologies, such as conservatism (e.g., Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003), but far less attention has been devoted to the exploration of libertarian ideology. One exception is recent work by Iyer and colleagues (2012), which examined libertarian morality. The present research extends this initial work by exploring cultural and dispositional factors related to libertarian ideology.

Cultures and individuals can differ greatly in the extent to which they are individualistic or collectivistic. As mentioned previously, libertarians tend to prefer more power to the individual and highly value self-reliance and independence, which are hallmarks of the individualistic mindset. It is not surprising, then, that Iyer and colleagues (2012) found that among self-proclaimed libertarians, conservatives, and liberals, libertarians tend to score the lowest on collectivism and higher or evenly with conservatives on individualism. This suggests that libertarians tend to be more individualistic and less collectivist than both liberals and conservatives. This could be because libertarians reject the notion of group effort or participating in groups that are not voluntarily chosen, which is in line with their self-reliant ideologies (Rand, 1964). Given the previously documented connection between libertarians and individualism, we hypothesized that people who endorse libertarian ideology will also score high on individualism, as evident by a positive correlation between libertarianism and individualism (Hypothesis 1).

Research conducted in collectivistic and individualistic cultures has found consistent cultural differences in the attributions (i.e., explanations) people make regarding other people's behavior. Specifically, there is a sharp split between Western and Eastern cultures (Morris & Peng, 1994; Lee, Hallahan, & Herzog, 1996; Morris, Menon, &

Ames, 2001). People from Eastern (i.e., collectivistic) cultures tend to be less likely to commit the fundamental attribution error (explaining a behavior in terms of personal dispositions and neglecting to consider situational influences) than are those from Western (i.e., individualistic) cultures. This could be because people from Eastern cultures tend to be more inclined than Westerners to think in broader terms regarding the influence of social institutions, roles, and external dispositions (Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999). Overall, this research suggests that individualists are more likely to make dispositional rather than situational attributions. The individualistic tendencies found among libertarians in Iyer and colleagues' (2012) research led to the prediction that endorsement of libertarian ideology would be associated with making dispositional attributions (Hypothesis 2).

According to their party's platform, libertarians are generally opposed to government interference. The argument is that people should not be compelled to help others; rather, they should help because it is their own choice, such as in the case of charitable giving (Libertarian Party, 2017). This raises an interesting question: is it reasonable to expect people, especially those who are strongly individualistic, to render aid where it is needed? Research on attributions and altruism cast some doubt on this particular question. Weiner's (1980) attribution model outlines whether people are more or less likely to offer help to those in need. Specifically, the model predicts that when people attribute a person's state of need to controllable factors (e.g., their disposition), they feel less sympathy and more negative emotions towards the person in need, which in turn is associated with less willingness to help. However, if the person's state of need is attributed to factors outside their control (e.g., their situation), people tend to be more willing to offer aid (Weiner, 1980). Given that individualistic people tend to make more dispositional attributions than situational attributions, it is possible that individualistic people would also be less likely to offer aid and assistance

to those in need. By extension, this also suggests that endorsing libertarian ideology - which scores higher on individualism - is associated with lower altruistic tendencies (Hypothesis 3). Additionally, we expected this relationship to be mediated by attributions (dispositional versus situational) (Hypothesis 4).

Findings from previous research suggest that libertarians tend to be more individualistic and may therefore make more dispositional attributions than people who endorse conservatism or liberalism. Additionally, as libertarians tend to score higher on individualism, it is suggested that endorsement of libertarianism may also be associated with lower altruistic tendencies and helping behaviors. The current research will study any possible correlations between libertarian ideology, individualism, dispositional attributions, and altruism. This study will also search for evidence that the connection between individualism and altruism is mediated through attributions, as proposed in Weiner's (1980) model.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and fifty-two undergraduate students from a large southeastern university participated in the study in exchange for partial course credit. Participant data was excluded if the participants were under the age of 18 ($N = 3$), failed the attention check ($N = 4$), completed the survey in under 5 minutes ($N = 7$), completed the survey more than once ($N = 6$, where the first completion was retained), or were missing more than 30-40% of the data ($N = 6$). The removal of the participant data resulted in a final sample of 226 participants (70% female). The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 63 ($M = 20.7$ years) with a racial composition of 58.5% White/European American, 24.5% Black/African American, and 16.8% mixed or other.

Materials & Measures

Libertarianism

The 20-item Libertarianism-Totalitarianism scale (Mehrabian, 1996) was used to measure participants' preference for individual freedom or a more autocratic government. The items assess the extent to which an individual prefers a government that is involved with economic and social issues, versus a government that is less involved with these issues. Sample items from the scale are "we need a stronger government to create a better society" (reverse-coded), and "the more powerful a government becomes, the greater the risk that it will become corrupt and unresponsive to the will of its people." Participants responded to the scale using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The scores were averaged before analysis, with higher scores indicating greater endorsement of libertarian ideology. The scale demonstrated good internal reliability in the current sample ($\alpha = .853$).

Individualism

The Auckland Individualism and Collectivism Scale (Shulruf, Hattie, & Dixon, 2007), was used to measure how individualistic or collectivistic an individual is, with individualism measured in three subscales and collectivism measured in three subscales. In this scale, individualism is defined in terms of how much responsibility one takes over one's action, how unique the individual perceives themselves, and the competitiveness of the individual. Two sample items from the individualism subscales are "when faced with a difficult personal problem, it is better to decide for myself than follow the advice of others." and "I take responsibility for my own actions." Collectivism is defined in terms of how much advice the individual is willing to ask for before taking action, and how much the individual is willing to avoid conflict in order to maintain harmony. Two sample items from the collectivism subscales is "I hate to disagree with others in my group." and "I sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of my group." The participants responded to the 30-items using a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*never or almost never*) to 6 (*always*). Scores were averaged separately for collectivism and

individualism subscales. Higher scores on the three collectivistic subscales indicate greater collectivistic inclinations ($\alpha = .763$) and higher scores on the three individualistic subscales indicate greater individualistic inclinations ($\alpha = .742$).

Attributional Style

To measure attributional style, participants were presented with 10 hypothetical scenarios in which a person's actions could be attributed to their character (dispositional attribution) or the circumstances (situational attribution). Scenarios were previously created to be purposely ambiguous to elicit variability in responses (Moran, Jendrusina, & Moser, 2013). An example scenario is,

Daniel is walking on a busy street when he notices that the man in front of him drops a \$20 bill. The man who dropped it doesn't notice and keeps walking, but other people on the street see the event unfold. Daniel rushes up to the man to return the bill.

Participants were presented with two possible explanations for the behavior, such as "Daniel returns the money because he is honest," (dispositional option), or "other people were watching him," (situational option). Dispositional attributional style was quantified as the number of dispositional attributions (out of 10) selected by each participant.

Altruism

The Social Value Orientation measurement (Van Lange, De Bruin, Otten, & Joireman, 1997) was used to assess altruistic tendencies. In this task, the participants were asked to imagine that they are randomly paired with an unknown person. They are then presented with a series of nine "scenarios" in which they must decide how to divide up hypothetical points between themselves and the unknown person. An example scenario is "A) You get 480, Other gets 80, B) You get 540, Other gets

280, C) You get 480, Other gets 480," with C representing the altruistic choice in this example.

Altruistic tendency was quantified by calculating the percentage of altruistic choices made by each participant. Due to an error in the online survey software, the participants were able to select more than one option on each scenario. This created a dilemma for scoring, which was resolved in the following way: if all three choices were selected, the scenario was excluded from scoring (i.e., it was counted as a missing response); if two choices were selected, neither of which were the altruistic one, the response was counted as a non-altruistic choice; if two choices were selected, one of which was the altruistic option, the response was counted as "half" altruistic. For example, a participant may have selected all three options on two scenarios, the altruistic option on six scenarios, and both an altruistic and non-altruistic option on the remaining scenario. Under the coding scheme, the scenarios where all three options were selected would be counted as "missing responses," leaving only seven viable scenarios. The six scenarios with the altruistic choice would each count as one point, and the scenario where the participant selected both an altruistic and non-altruistic option would count as half a point. Thus, the participant's score would be calculated by dividing 6.5 by 7 and multiplying it by 100 to obtain a percentage (92.9%).

Political Identification

Political identification was measured by asking participants to indicate their political identification separately for social issues and economic issues. Responses were made on a scale ranging from 1 (*very conservative*) to 7 (*very liberal*) for both questions. The participants were also asked to select the label that best described them from a list of political identifications, including republican, democrat, libertarian, progressive, independent, and non-affiliated. Finally, the participants were asked to indicate how strongly they identify with this political label/identification on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*).

Procedure

Participants completed the study online using the Qualtrics survey platform. All participants completed the Libertarian-Totalitarian scale (Mehrabian, 1996), the Auckland Individualism and Collectivism scale (Shulruf et al., 2007), the attribution scenarios (Moran, et al., 2013), and the Social Value Orientation measure (Van Lange et al., 1997). The order in which these measures were presented was randomized for each participant. After the completion of these measures, the participants completed a basic demographic survey, which included questions regarding political identification. Finally, the participants were asked what they thought the purpose of the study was (suspicion check) and were redirected to a page with debriefing information.

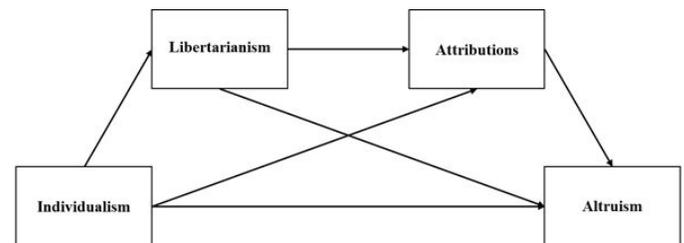
Results

For the correlation analyses, data was checked for normality by dividing the skew and kurtosis by the standard error to see if the value falls inside +/- 1.5 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). The data showed violations of normality (either skew or kurtosis) for all four variables: libertarianism, individualism, attributions, and altruism. Attempts to normalize the distributions using a log transformation were unsuccessful. Spearman's correlation coefficients were therefore calculated in place of Pearson's for all correlation analyses.

All correlations were in their hypothesized direction, but only the correlation between individualism and libertarianism reached statistical significance, $r(226) = .233, p < .001$. The results also showed a non-significant positive correlation between libertarianism and attributions, $r(226) = .106, p = .111$, and a non-significant negative correlation between libertarianism and altruism, $r(226) = -.032, p = .627$. Support was therefore found for Hypothesis 1, but not Hypotheses 2 and 3.

Hypothesis 4 stated that the relationship between individualism and altruism should be mediated by endorsement of libertarian ideology and

attributional style (see Figure 1). The PROCESS SPSS macro (Hayes, 2013) with 5000 bootstrap samples was used to conduct the mediation analysis. The analysis found a marginally significant direct effect of individualism on altruism, ($t = -1.73, SE = 4.64, 95\% CI [-17.14, 1.14], p = .086$). However, the indirect effect of individualism to altruism, mediated through libertarianism and attributions, failed to reach significance, (Effect = $-.1004, SE = .1661, 95\% CI [-.691, .085]$). Hypothesis 4 was therefore not supported.



Exploratory Analyses

Study participants also reported their political identification in the current study. Their identifications were as follows: 62 Republicans, 71 Democrats, 16 Libertarians, 3 Progressives, 15 Independents, and 58 Not Affiliated/Not political. To ensure that our measure of libertarianism was performing as expected, we conducted an exploratory one-way ANOVA analysis with political identification as the independent variable and score on the Libertarianism-Totalitarianism scale as the dependent variable. Only republicans, democrats, and libertarians were included in the analysis. Progressives were excluded due to the small frequency compared to the other dominant groups. Independents and Not Affiliated were excluded because these groups are more likely to include individuals from all orientations, which would make it difficult to see clear patterns within and between those groups.

The one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference in endorsement of libertarian ideology among the various political groups $F(2, 146) = 20.87, p < .001$. Planned comparisons were performed to further probe these results, and results are reported with the assumption of unequal variances.

There was no difference in libertarian ideology endorsement between self-identified republicans ($M = 4.99$, $SD = .78$) and libertarians ($M = 5.08$, $SD = 1.11$), $t(18.98) = -.33$, $p = .746$. On the other hand, self-identified libertarians' endorsement of libertarian ideology was significantly higher than endorsement among self-identified Democrats ($M = 4.22$, $SD = .60$), $t(17.07) = -3.02$, $p = .008$.

Discussion

The hypotheses in this study were partially supported. We predicted a positive correlation between libertarianism and individualism, which suggests that those who endorse libertarian ideology would score higher on individualism (Hypothesis 1). We also predicted that those who endorse libertarian ideology were more likely to make more dispositional attributions (Hypothesis 2) and that those who make more dispositional attributions are more likely to show lower altruistic tendencies (Hypothesis 3). Finally, we expected the negative correlation between individualism and altruism to be mediated through endorsement of libertarian ideology and dispositional attributions (Hypothesis 4). All correlations were in their hypothesized direction, but only the first hypothesis, which predicted a correlation between libertarian ideology and individualism, reached statistical significance. There was also no evidence of significant mediation.

The significant correlation between libertarianism and individualism aligns with research from Iyer and colleagues (2012), which found that libertarians are significantly more individualistic compared to self-identified democrats and republicans. The results of the current study therefore confirm a connection between libertarianism and individualism. This indicates that people who endorse libertarianism tend to be more independent, self-reliant and nonconformist than their peers.

Research has also demonstrated that Western (i.e. individualistic) cultures tend to make more dispositional attributions (Choi et al., 1999), which might cause a person to be less sympathetic to

people in need and decrease altruistic tendencies (Weiner, 1980). We therefore expected those who endorse libertarian ideology to make more dispositional attributions and exhibit lower altruism rates. These predictions were not supported by the results. While it is possible that there are simply no genuine relationships among these variables, we find this unlikely given previous research. We are fairly confident in the validity of the attributional scenarios we used in the present study, but we do have reservations and concerns regarding the measures used for libertarianism and altruism.

Although the Libertarianism-Totalitarianism Scale (Mehrabian, 1996) showed good internal reliability ($p = .853$), the extent to which this scale adequately captured the facet of libertarianism most relevant to our predictions is questionable. Libertarian ideology covers multiple topics, including individual liberty, government intervention, and economic (de)regulation (Libertarian Party, 2017). The Libertarianism-Totalitarianism Scale (Mehrabian, 1996) is the only validated survey measure of libertarian ideology, which is why it was selected for the current research. However, it could be argued that this scale only adequately captures the government intervention facet of libertarian ideology and neglects to thoroughly assess the extent to which an individual places a premium on individual liberties. Minimizing government intervention and involvement is a shared goal between libertarians and conservatives, which would explain why participants who self-identified as libertarian and conservatives scored similarly on our Libertarianism scale. Moreover, the individual liberty facet of libertarian ideology is most relevant for our topic and predictions since it places the focus squarely on the individual. For example, people are less likely to consider context and situations when they focus primarily on the individual, thus making them more likely to make dispositional attributions (Lassiter & Irvine, 1986). If this aspect of libertarian ideology was not adequately captured in the current study, this is one potential explanation why we did not observe some of the predicted correlations with libertarianism.

One possibility for future research on libertarianism, then, is to develop a survey scale that captures all facets of libertarian ideology.

We have additional concerns regarding the Social Value Orientation Measurement (Van Lange et al., 1997). Specifically, the vast majority of participants scored either very high or very low on this measure. In other words, most participants either selected the altruistic option nearly every time or practically never. This measurement also considers a participant giving a 50-50 split as the most altruistic and does not give the option of the participant choosing to give all of the points away, making an arguably incomplete scale. This produced data that showed low variability in addition to violations of normality. While we calculated Spearman's correlation coefficients to account for non-normally distributed data, this approach cannot overcome problems with restricted range. This, in turn, may have resulted in unexpectedly low correlations between altruism and the other variables. As with the measure of libertarian ideology, it will be important for future research to use a different measure of altruism that avoids this potential pitfall. Murphy, Ackermann, and Handgraaf (2011) utilized an altruism measure that included items to capture altruistic tendencies and allowed participants to give away more than they could keep. Future utilization of this or similar measures might better capture the full scale of altruism.

The lack of significance could also potentially stem from a small, unrepresentative sample. The sample in this study was mainly young female university students (M_{age} 20.7 years, $F = 70\%$). While libertarians do tend to be younger, they also tend to be predominantly male. Libertarians may therefore have been underrepresented in the current sample. It is also possible that the relationships detected would reach significance in a larger sample (due to increased power). These issues cannot be resolved for the current study, but future studies should focus on using a larger, more representative sample, preferably from a bigger community with greater diversity.

In conclusion, the results from the present research confirms previous findings that connect elevated levels of individualism to libertarianism (Iyer et al., 2012). Specifically, those who endorsed libertarian ideology at higher rates also endorsed individualistic beliefs and practices at higher rates. The predicted connections between libertarianism, dispositional attributions, and lower altruism, however, were not observed. These correlations were in the hypothesized directions but failed to reach significance. It is possible that these results are due to poor measurement and/or sample characteristics rather than a true lack of correlation. Future research should consider adopting measures that are better tailored to the topic and which will capture adequate variability.

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