We the People: Intergroup Interdependence Breeds Liberalism

Jojanneke van der Toorn\(^1\), Jaime L. Napier\(^2\), and John F. Dovidio\(^2\)

Abstract
Whereas much social psychological research has focused on the conditions that lead to political conservatism, the current research suggests that instilling a sense of intergroup interdependence can increase political liberalism and, in turn, foster concern for universal welfare. Using both correlational (Study 1) and experimental (Study 2) methodologies, we find convergent support for the novel hypothesis that perceived interdependence between groups in society increases people's support for human rights because it increases liberalism. In addition to establishing the hypothesized effect, we empirically distinguished the effect of intergroup interdependence from that of intragroup (or "interpersonal") interdependence, which was related to conservatism. This research presents a novel demonstration of the effect of intergroup interdependence on political attitudes and fills a gap in the literature on the conditions that lead to liberalization.

Keywords
intergroup interdependence, liberalism, human rights, ideological shift, policy support

The basic thought that guides these specific means of national recovery is not narrowly nationalistic. It is the insistence, as a first consideration, upon the interdependence of the various elements in all parts of the United States. (U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address, 1933)

There is no issue of States' rights or National rights. There is only the struggle for human rights. (U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson, Voting Rights Act Address, 1965)

The policies adopted during the emergence of modern liberalism in the United States—starting with Roosevelt's "New Deal" and peaking under the Johnson administration's "Great Society"—now form the foundations of American civil liberties (Alterman, 2008; Milks & Mileur, 2005; Shaw, 1988). As illustrated in the above quotations, both of these leaders appealed to Americans' sense of societal interdependence to promote domestic agendas that protected the rights of all citizens. In the current work, we empirically examine the relationships between societal (or "intergroup") interdependence and political policy support. We propose a causal model that might account, at least in part, for why these unprecedented (and since unrivaled) human rights policies were successfully implemented during times when diverse groups of Americans might have felt especially interconnected—on the heels of the Great Depression or after the loss of a President. Specifically, we hypothesize that an increased salience of the dependency between various groups in society will lead people to embrace liberal viewpoints that, in turn, increase support for human rights.

The notion that people’s support for political policies reflects underlying psychological needs has garnered considerable empirical support (see Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009). The majority of this work has been inspired by a motivated social-cognition account of political ideology and has focused on how adverse environmental factors, such as threat or uncertainty, lead individuals to adopt more politically conservative beliefs (e.g., Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Landau et al., 2004; Nail, McGregor, Drinkwater, Steele, & Thompson, 2009; Thorisdottir & Jost, 2011), presumably because these beliefs provide a sense of security, order, and certainty. Less is known, however, about what conditions might foster more liberal attitudes.

Recent theoretical perspectives on the moral values of liberals and conservatives have extended this model of ideological differences in ways that could offer intriguing insights into the motivational underpinnings of liberalism. Specifically, Janoff-Bulman and colleagues (Janoff-Bulman, 2009; Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013; Janoff-Bulman, Sheik, & Baldacci, 2008) have proposed an approach/avoidance model to illuminate ideological divisions in moral concern: Conservative values tend to be based in...
avoidance-type motivations, and thus focus on protection, whereas liberal values are based in approach-type motivations and focus on providing. On the collective (or societal) level, conservatives’ concerns center on protection from threat. Toward that end, they value “social order” and promote notions of in-group loyalty and cohesion (see also Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). Liberals, by contrast, are concerned about providing for the collective; in turn, they value “social justice” and promote notions of intergroup interdependence and shared responsibility (Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013).

This model highlights one important (yet understudied) difference between liberals and conservatives—their divergent conceptions of group interdependence. Conservatives tend to focus on interdependence within their own groups as well as the boundaries between groups, whereas liberals focus on collectivism and interdependence within (constellations of) groups (Janoff-Bulman, 2009; Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Baldacci, 2008). In line with this, research has demonstrated that there are ideological differences in the perceived scope of category memberships, such that liberals have a more inclusive conception of group (e.g., society) as compared to conservatives (e.g., my ethnic group; Rock & Janoff-Bulman, 2010).

The notion that intergroup interdependence is an important ideological construct is in line with work in political science, which highlights the fact that left-wing (vs. right wing) ideologies tend to espouse a general view that human beings should live together cooperatively without social distinctions (Magstadt, 2010) and emphasize interdependence between groups and nations (Monaghan, 1984). Consistent with this position, Stel and Harinck (2011) found that a manipulation of interdependence (vs. independence) led to leftist voting behavior. Conservative ideologies, by contrast, tend to emphasize either individualism or a different type of interdependence—interdependence on others within one’s group. Moral foundations theory (Graham et al., 2009) proposes that conservatives, to a greater extent than liberals, possess the “binding” moral value of community, referring to one’s perception of connectedness to other in-group members.

In the present research, we examined how the nature of interdependence affects political orientations and ultimately support for human rights. In social psychological research, much of the research on interdependence has been in the context of work on the relational self, with a focus on how people define themselves in terms of their social relationships, group memberships, and social roles (Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991; see Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002 for an overview). However, research in the area of intergroup relations demonstrates the importance of whether such feelings of connectedness occur within or across group boundaries: Whereas perceptions of intergroup interdependence reduce bias (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010; Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961), perceptions of greater interdependence on others within one’s group promote intergroup bias (Gaertner, Iuzzini, Witt, & Oriaña, 2006). In addition, in the cultural psychology literature, greater horizontal collectivism, which emphasizes greater cooperation with others generally, predicts greater liberalism, whereas greater vertical collectivism, which emphasizes hierarchy and distinctive roles, predicts greater conservatism (Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013). Vertical collectivism is also positively related to authoritarianism (Kemmelmeier et al., 2003).

We posit that intergroup interdependence will be related to political liberalism insofar as liberal policies promote well-being for all groups in society (see Janoff-Bulman, 2009; Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013), but that conservatives will be more inclined toward interpersonal (or intragroup) interdependence (see Graham et al., 2009). In two studies, we tested the possibility that liberalism and, in turn, support for policies promoting human rights, would be enhanced when people perceive intergroup (but not interpersonal) interdependence. To our knowledge, no research has directly examined how interdependence potentially affects political ideology nor studied the implications of this relationship for policy support. In Study 1, we conducted a survey to test the mediation hypothesis that perceived intergroup interdependence (but not interpersonal interdependence) is positively related to participants’ liberalism scores and, consequently, with support for universal welfare. In Study 2, we used an experimental paradigm to establish causality.

**Study 1**

**Method**

**Participants.** Eighty-seven White American Mechanical Turk participants (age, mean $[M] = 30.17$, standard deviation $[SD] = 11.17$; 67.8% male) completed an online survey in exchange for monetary compensation.

**Procedure.** Participants first rated their political orientation on a scale ranging from 1 (extremely liberal) to 7 (extremely conservative), which was reverse coded so that higher scores indicate greater liberalism (Jost et al., 2009). Participants’ perceived intergroup interdependence was then assessed with the following statement: “Different groups are needed for society to work” (1 = extremely disagree; 7 = extremely agree). To measure participants’ sense of interpersonal interdependence, we used Lu and Gilmour’s (2007) 21-item interdependence scale (1 = extremely disagree; 7 = extremely agree; $\alpha = .86$). This scale was designed to measure “constructs at the individual level to correspond to individualism-collectivism (IC) at the cultural level” (p. 249) and includes items that reflect various aspects of this distinction, including conformity (e.g., “I believe that people should behave appropriately according to their different social status and roles”), cohesion (e.g., “I have a strong identification with people close to me”), and identification with various in-groups (e.g., “I believe that family is the source of our self”). Finally, to assess support for universal welfare, we adapted the fixed resource distribution task employed by Son Hing, Li, and Zanna (2002; see also Haddock, Zanna, & Esses, 1993), which is designed to reduce the influence of social desirability responding by requiring participants to allocate limited funds between
Table 1. Descriptives and Intercorrelations (Study 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M (SD)</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Intergroup interdependence</td>
<td>5.41 (1.31)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>2. Interpersonal interdependence</td>
<td>4.43 (0.74)</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Liberalism</td>
<td>5.07 (1.60)</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>-.25*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Support for human rights</td>
<td>45.25 (19.34)</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.48***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Gender</td>
<td>.36 (0.94)</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Age</td>
<td>30.17 (11.17)</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.25*</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.26*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Gender was effect-coded (women = −1; men = 1).
*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 lists the variable Ms, SDs, and intercorrelations. Intergroup interdependence was not significantly related to interpersonal interdependence, r(85) = .03, p = .782, suggesting that the two types of interdependence are independent constructs.

To test our central hypothesis that concern for universal welfare would be predicted by intergroup interdependence and liberalism, we conducted two linear multiple regression analyses with intergroup interdependence and interpersonal interdependence predicting (1) liberalism and (2) support for human rights. As hypothesized, perceived intergroup interdependence significantly predicted political orientation, b = .29, standard error (SE) = 0.13, p = .022. The more participants believed different groups are needed for society to work, the more they identified as liberal. Perceived interpersonal interdependence also significantly predicted political orientation, but in the opposite direction, b = -.56, SE = 0.22, p = .014: As predicted, the more participants reported valuing conformity, cohesion, and identification with their in-group, the more conservative they were. A separate analysis predicting support for human rights from intergroup and interpersonal interdependence yielded a significant positive association between perceived intergroup interdependence and support for human rights, b = 3.43, SE = 1.56, p = .030, such that the more intergroup interdependence participants perceived, the more funds they allocated to human rights advocacy groups. Although the zero-order correlation between perceived interpersonal interdependence and support for human rights was not significant (see Table 1), the regression analysis that adjusted for intergroup interdependence yielded a marginally significant association between perceived interpersonal interdependence and support for human rights, b = 2.67, SE = 2.77, p = .073.

To examine whether the effect of intergroup interdependence on support for human rights was mediated by liberalism, we conducted bootstrapping analyses based on 1,000 bootstrap resamples, adjusting for interpersonal interdependence (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). As predicted, liberalism significantly predicted support for human rights, b = 6.18, SE = 1.19, p < .001. In addition, with liberalism in the model, the direct effect of intergroup interdependence on support for human rights was no longer significant, b = 1.63, SE = 1.41, p = .250, suggesting mediation (see Figure 1). The bias-corrected confidence interval did not include zero [0.57; 4.26], confirming that the indirect path was significant.

Because these data were correlational, we were also able to test the competing hypothesis that perceived intergroup interdependence would mediate the relationship between liberalism and support for universal welfare. This indirect effect was not significant [lower bound = −0.16, upper bound = 1.40]. In summary, these findings are consistent with our hypothesis that intergroup interdependence uniquely predicts greater support for human rights through liberalism. Although no support was obtained for the opposite mediation pattern, experimental evidence is required to definitively establish a causal relationship. This was done in Study 2.

Study 2

In this study, we used a word search task to prime either the individual or the collective and then measured people’s political ideology and support for universal welfare. Based on our findings from Study 1, we predicted that a collective (vs. self-) focused mind-set would lead to an increase in liberalism and that this effect would be mediated by increased intergroup interdependence. Because it is conceivable that the collective (vs. self) focused prime might also increase interpersonal interdependence (cf. Gardner et al., 1999), in which case we would expect to observe an increase in conservatism (as opposed to liberalism), we also included a measure of interpersonal interdependence.

Method

Participants. We recruited 223 White Americans from an online subject pool in exchange for entry into a cash prize lottery. Thirteen participants did not complete the manipulation and
As in Study 1, we conducted follow-up bootstrapping analyses to test for mediation. As hypothesized, liberalism significantly predicted support for human rights, $b = 3.42, SE = 0.88, p < .001$. In addition, with liberalism in the model, the direct effect of the prime on support for human rights was no longer significant, $b = 3.91, SE = 2.69, p = .146$, suggesting mediation (Figure 2). Bootstrapping results yielded a significant indirect effect [lower bound = 0.38, upper bound = 4.11], indicating that the interdependence prime indeed causes greater support for universal welfare through increased liberalism.

Separate additional bootstrapping analyses demonstrated that perceived intergroup interdependence (the manipulation check) mediated the relationship between the prime and liberalism [lower bound = 0.03, upper bound = 0.26], and between the prime and support for human rights [lower bound = 0.13, upper bound = 3.99]. Finally, liberalism mediated the relationship between perceived intergroup interdependence and support for universal welfare [lower bound = 0.28, upper bound = 1.82]. These findings provide further support for our contention that it is the perception that different groups are needed for society to work that increases policy support through liberalism.

**General Discussion**

We now realize, as we have never realized before, our interdependence on each other. (Franklin D. Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address, March 1933)

As Roosevelt began his first term as President of the United States during the depth of the Great Depression, lines between groups in society were blurred. This heightened sense of interdependence among Americans might have been the ideal climate to promote Roosevelt’s liberal policies that established rights for diverse groups in society. Whereas previous researchers have speculated that people who are more liberal generally see groups in society as more positively interdependent (Janoff-Bulman, 2009; Monaghan, 1984), the present research investigated the surprisingly understudied possibility that perceptions of interdependence between groups produce stronger liberal orientations. Indeed, the current research suggests that instilling a sense of intergroup interdependence (even through as simple a prime as copying pronouns) can increase political liberalism and, in turn, foster concern for universal welfare. Using both correlational (Study 1) and experimental (Study 2) methodologies, we find convergent support for the novel hypothesis that perceived intergroup interdependence increases people’s support for human rights because it increases liberalism. Of course, our findings do not preclude the possibility of bidirectionality in which we acknowledge that increases in liberalism may also produce stronger feelings of intergroup interdependence.

In addition to establishing the hypothesized effect, we build on moral foundations theory (Graham et al., 2009) and the approach/avoidance model of morality (Janoff-Bulman,
Table 2. Descriptives and Intercorrelations (Study 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M (SD)</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Interdependence manipulation</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Intergroup interdependence</td>
<td>5.23 (1.42)</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Liberalism</td>
<td>4.38 (1.53)</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>.24***</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Support for human rights</td>
<td>45.96 (19.92)</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>.23***</td>
<td>.28***</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Gender</td>
<td>-0.43 (0.91)</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.15*</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Age</td>
<td>37.59 (14.02)</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.17*</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Interdependence manipulation was coded 0 for independence and 1 for interdependence. Gender was effect-coded (women = -1; men = 1). *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

![Diagram](attachment:diagram.png)

Figure 2. Mediation model for Study 2 testing the indirect effect of intergroup interdependence on support for human rights through liberalism.

2009) by empirically distinguishing the effect of intergroup interdependence from that of interpersonal interdependence, which instead was related to conservatism (Study 1). In Study 2, we used a simple “we” versus “I” prime to induce intergroup interdependence versus independence. We confirmed that the prime uniquely affected intergroup interdependence and did not affect interpersonal interdependence, in our study.

It should be noted, however, that this might not always be the case. Research by Brewer and Gardner (1996) showed that priming of “we” versus priming of “they” or “it” led participants to have more inclusive self-concepts and to generate more interpersonal and collective self-descriptions. No comparison was made to an “I” condition. However, although the authors did not test it for significance, participants in the “we” condition generated more collective (18%) than interpersonal (7%) self-descriptions (Brewer & Gardner, 1996, Study 3). Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee (1999) found that priming “we” (vs. “I”) led to greater interdependent self-construals and social values, but they did not distinguish between interpersonal versus collective self-construals.

One limitation of Study 2 is that we did not have a neutral control condition and thus cannot conclusively say whether participants are in fact becoming more liberal in the interdependent condition, or whether they are becoming more conservative in the independent condition. However, the fact that participants’ independent self-concept scores were unrelated to their political orientation, as found in Study 1 (see Note 1), is in line with the assumption that it is the interdependent condition that moved people in a liberal direction. Regardless of the direction of the effect, the mediation analysis does confirm that greater perceived intergroup interdependence leads to liberalism (vs. conservatism), which is an important and novel contribution to our understanding of the underpinnings of political ideology.

It is conceivable that priming the collective “we” could have differential effects depending on the context—for instance, it might be the case that if ideology (or some other group) is first made salient, conservatives will think more about their interdependence on an interpersonal level, whereas liberals will think more about their collective, intergroup interdependence. Although more work is needed to fully understand how intergroup interdependence can be consistently evoked, our studies show that to the extent that people do hold an appreciation for a diverse, multigroup society, the more they will lean toward political liberalism and concern for human rights.

Although a sense of interdependence may be elicited under various conditions, our work demonstrates the importance of more specifically examining people’s responses in times of societal upheaval. While the conservative shift observed following 9/11 was likely due to the immense sense of threat that was associated with it, our findings suggest that we may well have seen increased liberalism should intergroup interdependence have been activated instead. It remains an open question whether priming of intergroup interdependence makes one generally open-minded or whether its effects are restricted to facilitating liberal attitudes in areas related to human welfare. Future research might examine its effects on other attitudes and in situations where concern for human welfare is at odds with other liberal stances (e.g., when protecting the environment is at odds with more immediate human welfare concerns).

In conclusion, the current research is scientifically innovative in that it fills a gap in the literature on political attitude formation. Whereas previous research has mainly focused on the circumstances that lead individuals to adopt more politically conservative beliefs, the current work offers a novel perspective by demonstrating the effect of intergroup interdependence on liberal attitudes. Beyond its theoretical contribution, the current research is of practical significance as well. One intriguing implication of these findings is that leveraging people’s sense of intergroup interdependence could impact social and political attitudes. Framing a message that highlights the shared
responsibility of the many diverse groups in society should enhance support for human rights and related liberal policies.

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Notes
1. We also included an item asking endorsement of the statement, “I feel dependent on other groups in society.” This measure, which focuses on an individual’s personal connection to other groups was moderately correlated with the measure of perceived interdependence between groups in society, $r(85) = .43, p < .001$, and not correlated with participants’ political orientation, $r(85) = .12, p = .282$, nor with their support for human rights, $r(85) = .11, p = .327$. Because this measure focused more on perceptions of personal dependence on other groups rather than on the interdependence between groups, we did not combine it with our item assessing intergroup interdependence. Using the mean of this item and our intergroup interdependence item slightly weakens the results; for example, its bivariate relationships with liberalism and support for human rights are marginally significant, $r(85) = .20, p = .070$ and $r(85) = .20, p = .078$, respectively. We also collected participants’ personal independence ratings using Lu and Gilmour’s (2007) 21-item scale ($\alpha = .82$), but had no specific predictions for them. Personal independence did not significantly correlate with any of the other variables, all $r’s < .15$. These analyses suggest that intergroup interdependence, our variable of primary interest, is conceptually distinct from forms of personal (in)dependence.

2. As previous research indicated gender and age differences in interdependent self-construal (e.g., Gabriel & Gardner, 1999; Watkins, Mortazavi, & Trofimova, 2000), we also ran our analyses adjusting for participant gender and age. The pattern of results for intergroup and interpersonal interdependence is nearly identical when adjusting for these demographics, and the focal effects remain significant; gender only marginally significantly predicted support for human rights, $b = –4.17, SE = 2.29, p = .073$, suggesting that women were somewhat more in favor of human rights advocacy than men were. All other $r’s < 1$. We also tested whether gender interacted with intergroup and interpersonal interdependence in predicting liberalism and support for human rights, but it did not, all $r’s < 1$.

3. Both tests had significant Levene’s tests for variance equality, so degrees of freedom were downward adjusted.

References

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