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Rigidity of the Far-Right? Motivated Social Cognition in a Nationally Representative Sample of Hungarians on the Eve of the Far-Right Breakthrough in the 2010 Elections

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Word count: 2999

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Abstract

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We investigated the “rigidity of the right” hypothesis in the context of the far-right breakthrough in the 2010 Hungarian parliamentary elections. This hypothesis suggests that psychological characteristics having to do with need for security and certainty attract people to a broad-based right-wing ideology. A nationally representative sample (*N* = 1000) in terms of age, gender, and place of residence was collected by means of the random walking method and face-to-face interviews. Voters of JOBBIK (*n* = 124), the radically nationalist conservative far-right party, scored lower on System Justifying Belief, Belief in a Just World (Global), and higher on Need for Cognition than other voters. Our results contradict the “rigidity of the right” hypothesis: JOBBIK voters scored, on many measures, opposite to what the hypothesis would predict.

Keywords: Political Psychology; System-Justification; Just World Belief; Need for Cognition; Radical Right Party

Rigidity of the Far-Right? Motivated Social Cognition in a Nationally Representative Sample of Hungarians on the Eve of the Far-Right Breakthrough in the 2010 Parliamentary Elections

Hungary witnessed political upheaval in the 2010 parliamentary elections. The ruling socialist party MSZP plummeted from having won 48.2% of the vote in the 2006 parliamentary elections to a meager 15.2%. The rightwing-conservative party FIDESZ won a landslide victory, with 53.7% of the vote (up from 42.0%). However, even more noteworthy was the breakthrough of the far-right. Although the far-right had been active in Hungary since the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1989, JOBBIK, the most successful party on the far right, had captured a mere 2.2 % of the votes in the previous 2006 parliamentary elections. By contrast, in 2010 they now garnered the biggest far-right gains within the EU, winning a staggering 16.7 percent of the vote, making them the third largest party in the Hungarian National Assembly.

Although the country was undergoing an economic crisis, the deeper causes of the right-wing electoral success are likely to have been more cultural than economic (Mudde, 2014). The platforms of social conservatism and nationalism that both FIDESZ and JOBBIK ran on would have been expected to attract voters with a dispositional high need for security and certainty (Malka, Lelkes, & Soto, 2017). FIDESZ, in its election program ("Politics of National Affairs", authored by party leader Viktor Orbán and other members of the party leadership), pledged to, for instance, increase police presence, raise prison sentences, assist families to have more children, protect marriage as the union between a man and a woman, protect life from the moment of conception, and honor the elderly. The emphasis on law and order, the family, and traditional morality, are very typical conservative themes. On the other hand, the leader of the ultranationalist JOBBIK party, Gábor Vona described his party as "a principled, conservative and radically patriotic Christian party", whose "fundamental purpose" is the protection of "Hungarian values and interests" (Vona, 2008). More generally, JOBBIK went into the elections focusing on Hungarian culture as the dominant marker that separates off ‘us’ from ‘them’ (Kyriazi, 2016). The nationalism, xenophobia, and sociocultural conservatism of JOBBIK makes it a typical radical right party (we do not distinguish between “extreme right”, “far-right”, “extreme rightwing” or “radical right”).

The purpose of the present research was to investigate the “rigidity of the right” hypothesis in a context in which the right, and especially the far-right, did not promise to defend the status quo, as is often the case, but instead championed change in the name of radical cultural conservatism. The rigidity of the right hypothesis suggests that psychological characteristics having to do with need for security and certainty—such as social conformity, intolerance of ambiguity, threat sensitivity, and needs for order, structure, and security—attract people to a broad-based right-wing ideology (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). More recent research, stemming from the framework provided by dual-process models of ideology that treat economic and social conservatism as independent dimensions (Malka et al., 2017) has suggested a qualification to this hypothesis. That is, the need for security and certainty may naturally attract people only to sociocultural right-wing ideologies and attitudes, not necessarily to the economic right. In fact, in post-Communist countries like Hungary, the opposite may even be true, with studies conducted in these countries finding concepts such as conventionalism, traditionalism, need for security, and closed-mindedness to be sometimes positively related, sometimes negatively related, and sometimes unrelated to economic conservatism (Kossowska & Van Hiel 2003; Malka et al., 2017; Thorsdittir et al., 2007). However, in the current context – in which both FIDESZ and JOBBIK strongly emphasized sociocultural, not economic, conservatism – psychological characteristics having to do with need for security and certainty would be expected to attract voters to these parties. Consistent with this reasoning, in one of the few studies on the psychological underpinnings of voters’ preferences for far-right right parties, supporters of the Austrian radical right party Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs) felt more threatened by immigration and were more close-minded in terms of personality (Aichholzer & Zandonella, 2016).

The literature thus suggests that the cognitively rigid could be expected to vote for FIDESZ or JOBBIK. However, in case of the latter, predictions may not be that straightforward. Although conservative in content, the radical changes that JOBBIK proposed could have been expected to disrupt the status quo, with the risk off putting of voters who believed in the system and with high need for security and certainty. The purpose of the present research was to examine the “rigidity of the right” hypothesis in the context of the Hungarian 2010 parliamentary elections. Previous research has not typically examined this hypothesis in contexts in which it is the socioculturally conservative parties that promise major upheavals. There is also no prior research on the rigidity of the far-right.

**Methods**

**Participants and Procedure**

The Hungarian parliamentary elections were held in April 2010. The present research was conducted in the two months leading up the elections. Hungary witnesses a major political upheaval in these elections, with the conservative opposition party FIDESZ winning a landslide victory and the far-right JOBBIK emerging as a player in national politics.

The present study was conducted with a nationally representative sample of 1,000 Hungarian adults. We designed a stratified sample, applying the random walking method and using a quota system based on the current data of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office. The strata were based on age, sex, and place of residence. Overall 3,980 Hungarian adults were approached by trained surveyors. One thousand face-to-face interviews were successfully conducted (25%), 1,229 people refused to participate (31%) and 1,751 people (44%) did not conform to the used quotas. The participants, who did not receive any material compensation, were informed that the data collection was voluntary and anonymous. The final sample thus consisted of 1,000 Hungarian adults (527 females) with a mean age of 45.4 years (*SD* = 16.5; see Kelemen et al. 2014). Regarding highest attained education, 47 had not finished elementary school, 436 had finished elementary school, 380 had finished high school, and 137 had finished higher education (BA or MA).

**Measures**

Characteristics reflecting cognitive rigidity were measured with the Need for Cognition, System Justifying Belief, Just World Belief (both Global and Personal), and Authoritarianism scales. We employed abridged Hungarian language adaptations of all scales (see Kelemen et al., 2014). All items were responded to on a scale ranging from 1 (*absolutely disagree*) to 4 (*absolutely agree*).

The Need for Cognition scale (NFC; Cacioppo & Petty, 1982) represents chronic preferences of people to engage in effortful, elaborative thought. It is positively correlated with Openness to Ideas and with high fluid intelligence, and negatively correlated with need for structure (Fleischhauer et al., 2010). We employed a five-item (alpha = .75) version of Cacioppo and Petty’s (1982) scale: (1) I try to anticipate and avoid situations where there is a chance I will have to think in depth about something (R), (2) I really enjoy a task that involves comping up with new solutions to problems, (3) The notion of thinking abstractly is appealing to me, (4) It's enough for me that something gets the job done, I don't care how or why it works (R), and (5) I usually end up deliberating about issues even when they do not affect me personally. In contrast to all of the below scales, high scores on NFC indicate low cognitive rigidity.

System Justification Theory proposes that people endorse system-justifying beliefs (SJBs), such as meritocratic beliefs, because of a fundamental motive to preserve the belief that existing social arrangements are fair, legitimate, and justifiable (Jost et al., 2003). Believing in a fair system is thought to impart a sense of security, certainty, and control. We employed a five-item version (alpha = .67) of Kay and Jost’s (2003) scale: (1) In general, I find society to be fair, (2) Hungarian society needs to be radically restructured (R) (3) Most policies serve the greater good, (4) Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness, and (5) Our society is getting worse every year (R).

Believing in a just world where people generally get what they deserve serves an important adaptive functions as it enables people to confront their physical and social environment as though it were stable and orderly (Lerner and Miller, 1978). General Belief in a Just World (GBJW; alpha = .67) and Personal Belief in a Just World (PBJW; alpha = .80) were measured, respectively, by three items: (1) I think basically the world is a just place, (2) I believe that, by and large, people get what they deserve, and (3) I am confident that justice always prevails over injustice and four items: (1) I think that important decisions that are made concerning me are usually just, (2) I believe that I usually get what I deserve, (3) In my life injustice is the exception rather than the rule, and (4) I believe that most of the things that happen in my life are fair.

Authoritarianism emphasizes submission to authority, social conformity, and hostility towards outgroups (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). Two items from the original F-scale by Adorno and colleagues (1950) and two items added by Kelemen and colleagues (2014) were used (alpha = .57). The items were (1) People can be divided into two distinct classes: the weak and the strong, (2) Human nature being what it is, there will always be war and conflict, (3), Everybody has to know his or her place in life in terms of both superiority and inferiority, and (4) It is both important to know how to obey and how to command. These items were selected (items 1 and 2) or developed (items 3 and 4) in an attempt to cover the entire breadth of the construct with only a few items. Authoritarianism being such a broad construct (Adorno et al., 1950), the decision to maximize construct validity necessarily hampered internal consistency reliability.

Regarding party affiliation, participants were asked which party they intended to vote for in the upcoming elections. We formed five groups, presented in Table 1, according to voting intentions. The sixth largest group would have consisted of 26 Green Party voters. The rapid drop in group size, from 95 MSZP voters to 26 Green Party voters, offered a natural cut-off point – those 60 participants whose votes were spread out across the small parties were excluded.

**Results**

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for voters of each party. Also shown are ANOVA results that reveal several significant differences between groups. Pairwise comparisons show that voters of JOBBIK differed from all other groups by scoring lower in SJB, higher in NFC, and lower in GJWB (all *p* < .05). Although generally scoring higher in Authoritarianism, only some of the comparisons to other groups reached statistical significance.

A multinomial regression analysis predicting voting intention was run in order to assess the independent predictive power of our variables (Table 2). Age, sex, level of education, SJB, NFC, Authoritarianism, GJWB, and PJWB were entered as predictor variables (Cox & Snell R2 = .13, Nagelkerke R2 = .13, Chi-square (df) = 125.12 (32), *p* < .001). Voters of JOBBIK differed from other voters by scoring higher on NFC and lower on SJB and GJWB (although with regards to GJWB, the difference between JOBBIK and MSZP voters was not statistically significant). Importantly, these results were similar to the ones presented in the ANOVA (Table 1). NFC, SJB and GJWB thus differentiated JOBBIK voters both in the presence of other variables and when considered alone. The interpretation of the results is more complex for PJWB. The significant differences between JOBBIK voters and other groups emerged only in the regression analysis; that is, when PJWB was considered together with other variables. This implies that differences in PJWB best be interpreted as a statistical artifact (e.g. suppressor effect). No other associations were sensitive to the inclusion of other variables.

**Discussion**

Our primary results, according to which JOBBIK voters were the least satisfied with the system, were the least inclined to believe in a globally just world, and scored highest on need for cognition, could at first glance be considered surprising. The rigidity of the right hypothesis would suggest that the type of sociocultural conservatism propagated by JOBBIK, which characterized itself as a “radically patriotic Christian party” (Vona, 2008), would appeal to those who believe in the system, believe in a just world, and are not open to new, potentially threatening ideas. Also somewhat surprisingly, Authoritarianism did not distinguish JOBBIK voters very well. Although JOBBIK voters did score higher on Authoritarianism as compared to several other groups of voters, such as FIDESZ voters, it had no independent predictive power when considered together with other variables. This lack of results could in part be due to the poor reliability of our measure of Authoritarianism.

Despite contradicting the rigidity of the right hypothesis, the results cannot, in retrospect, be considered very surprising. JOBBIK successfully created a sense of belonging, a simplified ideology, and a common purpose to act by pitting the ethnic ‘true Hungarians’ against all other social and political forces, such as the immigrants who take away work, the corrupt political elite that defends the status quo, and the European Union that threatens the nation state (Halasz, 2009). This global conspiracy narrative, in which everyone else is seen as acting against “our kind of people” was successfully employed by JOBBIK to mobilize people discontented with the seemingly unjust system (Kovács, 2012).

Our results, suggesting that JOBBIK voters believed neither the system nor the world to be just dovetail perfectly with the conspiracy narrative propagated by JOBBIK. The conspiracy theories that JOBBIK advanced may also in part explain JOBBIK voters’ high scores on NFC. Belief in modern conspiracy theories helps individuals attain or maintain a sense of meaning. Those who believe in such theories do not consider the world to be random, instead believing that there is reason or cause behind events (Moulding et al., 2016). The feeling that everything is connected, that there is more than meets the eye, that there is an underlying explanation, may appeal to those prone to deep thinking; that is, those scoring high on NFC. These people may have been attracted by the powerful heuristic value of the conspiracy narrative offered by JOBBIK. However, we acknowledge that more empirical evidence is required to substantiate these conclusions. To what extent voters of JOBBIK or other far-right parties with similar rhetoric actually endorse conspiracy theories is an important topic for future research.

The evidence that even basic cognitive and motivational processes vary across populations has become increasingly difficult to ignore. Phenomena such as the “rigidity of the right” cannot be convincingly investigated in populations of psychology students, in which there are likely to be extremely few voters of the right (Duarte et al., 2015). Internet samples are also known to be highly biased in terms of political attitudes and interests (Chang & Krosnick, 2009). Ironically, the very strength of the present research – a nationally representative sample from a post-communist state collected at the historical moment that the state is poised at the brink of a far-right breakthrough – is also a limitation to the generalizability of its results. Future research should in other contexts, such as Greece, France, Sweden, or Poland, investigate what psychological needs drive voters' preferences towards far-right parties. The results from Austria, according to which voters of the radical right scored lower on openness (Aichholzer & Zandonella, 2016), a trait usually correlated with low NFC (Fleischhauer et al., 2010), suggest that the present results may not necessarily generalize to Western contexts. On the other hand, providing some faith in the possible generalizability of some of our results, empirical analysis of party ideologies and mass attitudes (e.g., Mudde, 2014) suggest that the radical right parties and their supporters have, across Europe, very much in common.

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Table 1. Means, standard deviations and ANOVA results for all variables according to voting intention.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | FIDESZ  (*N* = 334) | JOBBIK  (*N* = 124) | MSZP  (*N* = 95) | No response  (*N* = 177) | Undecided  (*N* = 177) | F (4, 931) |
| SJB | 1.83 (0.47) a | 1.66 (0.47) b | 1.97 (0.56) c | 1.91 (0.48) a c | 1.85 (0.50) a c | 6.75 \*\*\* |
| NFC | 2.66 (0.62) a | 2.86 (0.63) b | 2.52 (0.62) a | 2.67 (0.60) a | 2.63 (0.63) a | 4.61 \*\*\* |
| Authoritarianism | 3.08 (0.48) a | 3.19 (0.51) b | 3.11 (0.52) a b | 3.06 (0.51) a | 3.11 (0.49) a b | 1.42 |
| GJWB | 2.33 (0.61) a | 2.13 (0.68) b | 2.35 (0.69) a | 2.34 (0.64) a | 2.30 (0.70) a | 2.75 \* |
| PJWB | 2.57 (0.60) a | 2.56 (0.63) a | 2.53 (0.57) a | 2.50 (0.56) a | 2.54 (0.59) a | 0.42 |

*Note*. SJB = System Justifying Belief, NFC = Need For Cognition, GJWB = Global Just World Belief, PJWB = Personal Just World Belief.

\*\*\* p ≤ .001, \*\* p ≤ .01, \* p ≤ .05, † p ≤ .10. Means with different subscripts differ at *p* < .05.

Table 2. Estimates from Multinomial Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting Voting Intention

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | JOBBIK vs. FIDESZ | | JOBBIK vs. MSZP | | JOBBIK vs. No response | | Jobbik vs. Undecided | |
|  | B (SE) | Wald | B (SE) | Wald | B (SE) | Wald | B (SE) | Wald |
| Intercept | 1.76 (1.15) | 2.32 | -2.14 (1.57) | 1.86 | 0.43 (1.26) | 0.12 | 0.26 (1.29) | 0.04 |
| Age | 0.00 (0.01) | 0.20 | 0.05 (0.01) | 29.62\*\*\* | 0.02 (0.01) | 3.61† | 0.01 (0.01) | 2.67† |
| Gender | -0.37 (0.22) | 2.81 | -0.72 (0.29) | 5.92\* | -0.58 (0.24) | 5.80\* | -0.74 (0.25) | 9.05\*\* |
| Education | -0.10 (0.14) | 0.49 | -0.17 (0.19) | 0.78 | 0.09 (0.15) | 0.32 | 0.00 (0.16) | 0.00 |
| SJB | 0.61 (0.26) | 5.38\* | 1.27 (0.34) | 14. 38\*\*\* | 1.01 (0.28) | 12.84\*\*\* | 0.73 (0.29) | 6.40\* |
| NFC | -0.39 (0.19) | 4.21\* | -0.41 (0.25) | 2.63† | -0.35 (0.21) | 2.82† | -0.41 (0.21) | 3.75\* |
| GJWB | 0.49 (0.24) | 3.99\* | 0.34 (0.34) | 1.03 | 0.54 (0.27) | 3.99\* | 0.50 (0.28) | 3.35† |
| PJWB | -0.38 (0.22) | 3.00† | -0.55 (0.31) | 3.18† | -0.76 (0.25) | 9.46\*\* | -0.50 (0.25) | 3.92\* |
| Authoritarianism | -0.19 (0.24) | 0.64 | -0.18 (0.32) | 0.29 | -0.22 (0.26) | 0.73 | -0.05 (0.27) | 0.03 |

*Note*. SJB = System Justifying Belief, NFC = Need For Cognition, GJWB = Global Just World Belief, PJWB = Personal Just World Belief.

\*\*\* p ≤ .001, \*\* p ≤ .01, \* p ≤ .05, † p ≤ .10.