

Political Orientation and Decision-Making

Research Report: SPAS-006 | August 21, 2020

Background

In this report, we asked, “Do people with different political orientations have different bases—evidence or emotion—for their political opinions?” To investigate this, we assessed political decision-making among 600 self-identified liberals, moderates, and conservatives.

Methodology

Data Source

- Social and Political Attitudes Study (SPAS)
 - A nationally representative sample reflecting the U.S. adult population in terms of educational attainment, ethnicity, gender, and household income.

Participants

- 600 adults that identify as fiscally and socially:
 1. Liberal: n = 159, 51% female, average age = 42.33 years
 2. Moderate: n = 241, 63% female, average age = 43.46 years
 3. Conservative: n = 200, 39% female, average age = 52.16 years

Measures

1. To measure political orientation, participants were asked, “When thinking about the following issues, where would you place yourself on the political continuum?” Participants were asked about (1) financial and economic issues, and (2) social and cultural issues.
 - If participants answered “liberal” for both, they were labeled “liberals.” If they answered “moderate” or “conservative” for both, they were labeled “moderates,” and “conservatives” respectively.
2. To measure what individuals reportedly use to come to their political opinions, participants were asked for the degree to which they agree or disagree with following two statements. Answers ranged from “-3” (i.e., disagree) to “+3” (i.e., agree).
 - “My political opinions are based on my emotions and/or the emotions of others.”
 - “My political opinions are based on scientific evidence and reason.”
3. Given the age and gender differences between the three groups, the analyses presented here controlled for participants’ age and gender.

Summary of Findings

1. Liberals, moderates, and conservatives all reported basing their political opinions on scientific evidence and reason, though no group agreed with the statement very strongly.
 - Liberals however, reported greater agreement with the statement compared to the other two groups.
2. Conservatives reported disagreement that they base their political opinions on their emotions, or the emotions of others.
 - Though conservatives disagreed more than the other two groups, their level of disagreement was not very strong.
 - Moderates and Liberals were not statistically different from one another in their answers to this question, and on average, did not clearly agree or disagree that their politics are based on emotion.

What do we make of this?

- Do liberals have a greater trust in science and evidence? Are conservatives trying to reinforce a self-conception that, unlike their liberal counterparts, they are not as “bleeding heart,” in their orientation to politics? (see Farwell and Weiner, 2000).
- Share your thoughts on these findings with us by emailing research@skeptic.com

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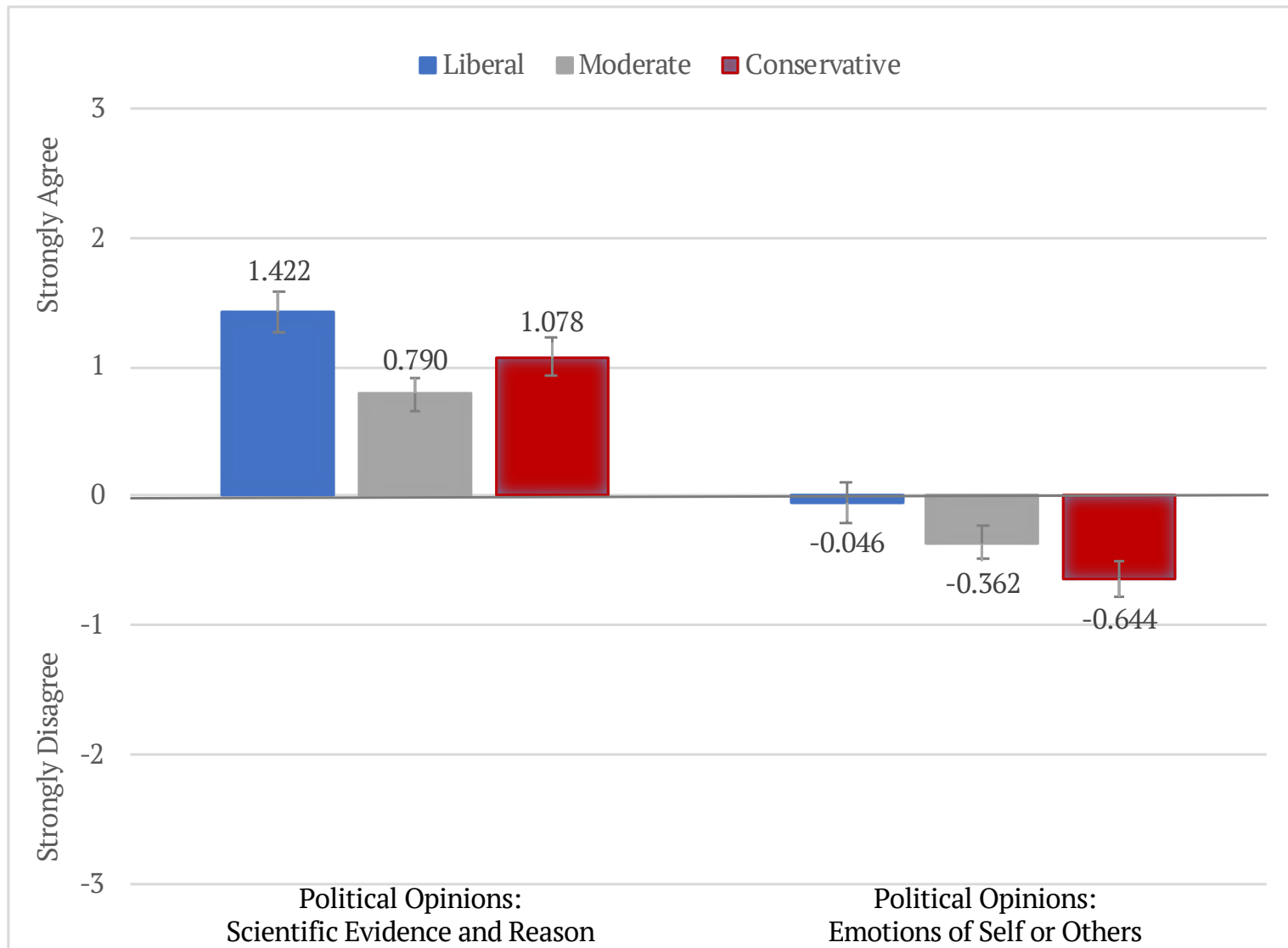
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Figure 1. Political Orientation and Political Decision-Making



Note: For additional information (e.g., statistical output, full citations) not included in this document, view the supplemental page for this report.