

What is “Conservatism”: Social Science Findings about Conservatism

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Theme: [History](#)

Global Research, June 01, 2015

*The great empirical social psychologist who specialized in studying bigotry, Bob Altemeyer, in his 1996 *The Authoritarian Specter*, and his other writings, reported his exhaustive empirical studies, of more than 50,000 individuals in many countries, demonstrating that bigotries against each and every minority group were the highest amongst the individuals who scored as being the most religious in any religion. In each religion, the more fundamentalist (believing in the inerrancy of some Scripture) one was, the more bigoted one tended to be, not just against non-believers, but against homosexuals, Blacks, and so forth. Religious belief, in other words, causes bigotry. His studies also found that his scale for “Right-Wing Authoritarianism” (RWA) or what’s commonly called conservatism, was exhibited the most strongly by fundamentalists (and, in the Soviet Union, those fundamentalists took as their inerrant Scripture not the Bible, but instead Marx’s *Das Capital*).*

Moreover, as one would expect from persons of faith (even of an atheistic one; i.e., belief in an atheistic ‘inerrant Scripture’), people of high RWA tended to make incorrect inferences from evidence, accept internal contradictions within their own beliefs, oppose constitutional guarantees of individual liberty, believe more strongly in sticks than in carrots to correct a person’s behavior, and were closed-minded to criticism of themselves. In 1992, Altemeyer had co-authored in the *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, “Authoritarianism, Religious Fundamentalism, Quest, and Prejudice,” which examined “the relationships among right-wing authoritarianism, various indices of religious orientation, and prejudice. Measures of religious fundamentalism ... were good discriminators between prejudiced and unprejudiced persons.”

Three authors — Westman, Willink and McHoskey — published, in the April 2000 *Psychological Reports*, their study “On Perceived Conflicts Between Religion and Science: The Role of Fundamentalism and Right-Wing Authoritarianism,” and reported that Fundamentalism and Right-Wing Authoritarianism varied together (or tended to be the same group), and that both groups were hostile toward science, and even toward technology.

Furthermore, a summary, and meta-analysis, of not just Altemeyer’s, but numerous other empirical psychological studies of conservatism, was published in the May 2003 *Psychological Bulletin* under the title “Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition.” This dealt with confirmation bias, which is the prejudice that people have to pay attention to what confirms their prior beliefs and to ignore what disconfirms or conflicts with their prejudices. Conservatives were found to have this bias even more than liberals do. (An excellent summary of this article was “Conservatives Deconstructed,” by Joel Bleifuss, in the 19 September 2003 *In These Times*. Another was U. Cal. Berkeley’s press release on this study, “Researchers Help Define What Makes a Political Conservative.”)

Not only did this research find strong correlations between conservatism and dogmatism, but one of the strongest correlations it discovered was between conservatism and fear of death. Because the meta-analysis was partly funded by the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health — which are federally funded — it excluded any exploration of the correlation between conservatism and bigotry, and also excised religion as a factor. Despite this, Britain's *Guardian* reported, on 13 August 2003, "Republicans are demanding to know why" this study "received \$1.2m in public funds."

Even though investigation of the links between conservatism, religion, and bigotry was excluded from being researched, the findings still managed to offend conservatives to such an extent that it was unlikely any scientific study of conservatism would be able to be funded in the U.S. in the future, until Republicans decisively lost power in Washington. "Death anxiety" was found to be the factor which was the most strongly correlated with "political conservatism." Next was "system instability" (meaning anything that endangers the existing cultural order). Nothing else was even close to those two factors in predicting an individual's conservatism. In other words, it found: Conservatism is driven by fear.

A study by Bouchard and four other authors, published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*, in 2003, and titled "Evidence for the Construct Validity and Heritability of the Wilson-Patterson Conservatism Scale: A Reared-Apart Twins Study of Social Attitudes," reported that political conservatism correlated at a stunningly high rate with Altemeyer's Right-Wing Authoritarianism, and that it also "demonstrated significant and sizable genetic influence," so that the inclination to be conservative or religious is influenced not only by one's environment but by one's genes. In other words, such conservative traits as lack of compassion, preference to use sticks instead of carrots, etc., are partly a reflection of one's genetic make-up or temperament, and not entirely a result of one's training. Furthermore, a 17 November 2014 study in *Current Biology*, "Nonpolitical Images Evoke Neural Predictors of Political Ideology," showed a huge difference between liberals and conservatives that can be measured by their MRI brainwave activity that results from pictures that are presented to them of mutilated bodies: conservatives consistently are more disturbed by those pictures. That too indicates a physical basis for conservatism, in fear of death.

The "Wilson-Patterson C Scale" was introduced by G.D. Wilson and J.R. Patterson in their 1968 "A New Measure of Conservatism," in the *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*. It is similar to Altemeyer's scale — an alternative to it. The Wilson-Patterson scale was used to measure "conservatism" in that *Current Biology* article.

The observation is commonly made that conservatives are driven by fears, such as of "the other," and are therefore obsessed with military solutions, and police solutions, and with having guns themselves — all solutions which enable them to force their own way, against the will of "the other," regardless of whether "the other" is "the Jew" or "the Black" or "the socialist" or "the homosexual," or whatever. Religion is, for its buyer, a way to deal specifically with his fear of death. But for the seller of religion, it's a way of enslaving buyers to the seller's personal ends (which can likewise be a craving for salvation — ergo: proselytizing so as to win eternal life).

The rather blatant ugliness of the personality traits and beliefs correlating with political conservatism (e.g., opposition to equality of opportunity, eagerness to punish people, especially high fear of death, widespread bigotry, etc.) has led some conservatives to attack this entire body of research. For example, the proud conservative John J. Ray, in *The Journal*

of *Social Psychology*, in 1985, headlined “Defective Validity in the Altemeyer Authoritarianism Scale,” and in a “Post-Publication Update” on the web he said that, “Altemeyer (1988, p. 239) reports that Right-Wing Authoritarians as detected by his scale, ‘show little preference in general for any political party’! In other words, according to the RWA scale, half of Right-Wing authoritarians vote for Leftist political parties! So how can they be rightist if they vote for Leftist parties?” However, Altemeyer wrote what Ray quoted here only as a scholar (in order to appear not to be “biased” against conservatives, in order to mollify them), not at all as a scientist (social or otherwise).

Though most of Altemeyer’s assertions were supported by empirical data that he cited, this particular assertion from him was not, and was purely a go-along-to-get-along statement, which here backfired against him. Altemeyer provided no data whatsoever to support that allegation which Ray quoted; and, in fact, Altemeyer promptly proceeded, right after that statement, to assert that his actual studies showed the exact opposite. For example: “In every sample of Canadian students and parents I have studied over the last 15 years” (and he was Canadian himself, so this referred to most of his data), the more conservative party’s “supporters have scored significantly higher (as a group) on the RWA scale than” the liberal party’s “backers.” And, “In the United States, ... Republican supporters scored significantly higher on the RWA scale than Democrats at each of six state universities I visited.” So, there was no exception to the correlation between RWA and exhibited political conservatism. Conservatives simply don’t want to know how ugly-charactered they are, but it’s demonstrated consistently by the actual and now massive data, regardless whether conservatives want to see themselves as they actually are, which empirical studies also show that they refuse to do.

Regarding Ray’s charge of “defective validity” of RWA, numerous independent studies have shown otherwise. For example, “Evidence for the Construct Validity and Heritability of the Wilson-Patterson Conservatism Scale” said that, “the Conservatism Scale” exhibited high “validity. It correlates .72 with RWA, a scale which has been extensively validated ... and which is considered by some to be ‘the best current measure of’ authoritarianism. A 1991 study was cited as the source of that evaluation.

LEADERS’ CONSERVATISM v. FOLLOWERS’ CONSERVATISM

Subsequently, the first major competing scale for conservatism, the Social Dominance Orientation or SDO Scale, was developed by Felicia Pratto and Jim Sedanius, and introduced in the 1994 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, as “Social Dominance Orientation: A Personality Variable Predicting Social and Political Attitudes.” There are about 15 questions on the scale, and they all relate to “groups” and to whether (for example) “It would be good if groups could be equal,” and, “In getting what you want, it is sometimes necessary to use force against other groups.” It was the first authoritarianism-measure that failed to correlate with either of the Altemeyer-Wilson ones (“RWA” or “C” Scales). Whereas both types of conservatism (the Altemeyer-Wilson, and the SDO) correlate with sexist, racist, homophobic, and anti-dissident attitudes, SDO correlates more with prejudice against subordinates and victims, regardless of category. Young males, perhaps due to high testosterone, were found to score especially high on the SDO scale. Also, high SDO people tended to be more economic, and high RWA people tended to be more cultural, conservatives.

Altemeyer’s 2006 *The Authoritarians* theorized that high-SDO people tend to be conservative politicians, whereas high-RWA people tend to be conservative voters.

Altemeyer also hypothesized that George W. Bush was probably high on both forms of conservatism. Furthermore, Chris Sibley and Marc Wilson issued in the April 2013 *Political Psychology*, "Social Dominance Orientation and Right-Wing Authoritarianism: Additive and Interactive Effects on Political Conservatism," which showed that when individuals were studied over a period of time, an increase in one score turned out to correlate with an increase in the other score, even though a high-scorer on one scale had no tendency to be a high-scorer in the other. Furthermore, "Both constructs are associated with increasing political conservatism, and the lowest levels of conservatism (or highest levels of political liberalism) are found in those lowest in both SDO and RWA." So: those are two different types of supporters of conservative political parties. However, Altemeyer's hypothesis that one conservative type are the leaders, and the other are the followers, has not yet been tested, even though it makes sense and would be extremely important in explaining history if it's true.

Conservatives, such as Ray, have similarly condemned the SDO Scale as indicating anything about conservatism. They don't say they're personally insulted by the scientific findings on conservatism; they say it's no science at all. Basically, they reject the sampling methods, or even, sometimes, the basic mathematical methods: factor analysis, and cluster analysis, of data.

CONSERVATISM & PSYCHOPATHY

Clearly, SDO focuses more on raw power, and RWA focuses more on majority-minority in terms of religion, gender, ethnicity, and all the rest. Recent studies of psychopaths have shown psychos to be power-focused. Sibley and Wilson have done a study, "Does endorsement of hierarchy make you evil? SDO and psychopathy," which found that though there was only a moderate degree of correlation between the two, "higher SDO at time 1 is associated with an increase in psychopathy at time 2, and vice-versa." In other words: those two traits reinforce each other. (However, that paper has not been peer-reviewed.) And a 2014 study by Dhont and Hodson, in *Personality and Individual Differences*, titled "Why do right-wing adherents engage in more animal exploitation and meat consumption?" found that: "Right-wing adherents do not simply consume more animals because they enjoy the taste of meat, but because doing so supports dominance ideologies and resistance to cultural change." In other words: High SDO produces increased meat-consumption.

Research into SDO is in its infancy, as is research into psychopathy. However, research into "authoritarianism" or "conservatism" is in its adulthood, with an enormous scientific literature, having started in 1950 with Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality*, which was inspired by the then-recent case of Adolf Hitler.

RELIGIOUS CONSERVATISM & ECONOMIC CONSERVATISM

In addition, Guiso, Sapienza, and Zingales headlined in the 2003 *Journal of Monetary Economics* (pp. 225-82), "People's Opium? Religion and Economic Attitudes," where they analyzed the results of the huge World Values Survey, to find not just the "economic attitudes," but all attitudes, that were correlated with respondents' religious background, current affiliation, beliefs, and frequency of church attendance. Among the findings were: "Religiosity is associated with ... a stronger belief that the market outcome is fair. Interestingly, religious people are more likely to believe that people are in need because they are lazy and lack will power rather than because society treats them unfairly. Overall, religious people tend to be more supportive of markets." "The characteristics that make

somebody attend religious services on a regular basis also make her more intolerant toward immigrants and people of other races.” “

The relation between religion and intolerance seems to be present in all religious denominations, ... Only Buddhists are more tolerant [however, more recently the majority Buddhists are trying to exterminate minority Muslims in Thailand].” “Intolerance is mostly an outcome of being raised religiously” and is less correlated with a person’s current frequency of church attendance. “All religious denominations are associated with a more conservative attitude toward women. However, that effect is twice as strong among Muslims than for any other religion.” “Religious people of all denominations (except Buddhists) are more inclined to believe that people in need are lazy.” “Not surprisingly, religions tend to increase intolerance only when they are dominant.” In other words, regarding that last one, the majority exclude from membership in “God’s People” the members of minority faiths, who are therefore strongly motivated to be more tolerant than are those people in the majority faith. Buddhism tended to be the least religious of the religions, because Buddhism is actually a cross between a philosophy and a religion.

Furthermore, in June 2008, the Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life issued their “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” based on “interviews with more than 36,000 Americans.” On subject after subject, it was found that the more religious a person was, the more conservative he tended to be. “Almost twice as many people who say religion is very important in their lives are conservative (46%) compared with those for whom religion is less important (25%).” Strikingly, in America, the highest percentages of liberals (respondents who “Lean Democrat”) were found in minority religions. 77% of “Hist. black churches” were of this category. 66% of “Buddhist” were. 66% of “Jewish” were. 63% of “Muslim” were. 63% of “Hindu” were. By contrast, 48% of “Catholic” were. 43% of “Mainline churches [Protestant]” were. 34% of “Evangelical churches” were. The most-extreme rightwing Americans were “Mormon,” only 22% of whom leaned Democratic. (An article on the Web, “Sampling of Latter-Day Saint/Utah Demographics,” notes that on strikingly many demographic variables, Mormons are in the extreme #1 or else in the very last position, as compared to all states or religious groups.) Mormons tended to be concentrated in Utah, where they constituted the overwhelming majority.

As a general rule, being conservative went along with being a member of fundamentalistic majoritarian faiths, basically white Christians in the United States. Regarding “Government Assistance for the Poor,” the least supportive Americans were Mormons, and then Hindus (their caste system enshrines inequality), followed by white Protestants (equally Evangelical and Mainline). The Americans most supportive of tax-funded assistance to the poor were black Protestants, followed by Muslims and Buddhists, then Jews. One might infer from this study that the more that a given religious believer lives amongst others of her own faith, the more conservative she’s likely to be. Perhaps being a minority tends to drive a person to consider other cultures’ viewpoints, and not to take Scripture as being quite so infallible.

One key question asked of respondents was “When it comes to questions of right and wrong, which of the following do you look to most for guidance?” The group highest citing “Religious teachings and beliefs” were “Jehovah’s Witness,” followed by “Mormon” and then by “Evangelical.” The lowest were “Buddhist,” then “Hindu,” then “Jewish.” This is consistent with people tending to be more skeptical of their Scripture to the extent that they lived and functioned amongst non-believers in that particular Scripture. This is more particularly consistent with Altemeyer’s having found that communists in the Soviet Union tended to be highly authoritarian, whereas communists in the U.S. were not. The Scripture

in the Soviet Union was Karl Marx, *Das Capital*. Communism was just an atheistic religion.

“Stagarite” posted at www.dailykos.com/storyonly/2006/7/12/175319/372, “Literature Review: Authoritarianism,” providing a good summary of scientific research (as of 2002) regarding the conservative personality. Bruce A. Robinson posted at www.religioustolerance.org/chr_prej.htm “The Relationship Between Church Membership and Prejudice,” in which a dozen early studies, from the 1940’s through the 1960’s, examining the relationship between religion and bigotry were referenced. Their general drift, even in those early times, was that people who are more religious were generally also more bigoted.

In September 2006, the Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion issued a study, “American Piety in the 21st Century,” which contained “Selected Findings from The Baylor Religion Survey.” This study claimed to be “the most extensive and sensitive study of religion ever conducted.” Under its heading “Religion and Politics” was reported that, among the five listed “Religious Indicators” examined for Christians (“Biblical Literalism,” “Religious Attendance,” “Evangelical Protestant,” “Mainline Protestant,” and “Catholic”), overwhelmingly the strongest correlation with conservative political attitudes was fundamentalism (“Biblical Literalism”). Specifically, fundamentalists were far more supportive than anyone else of “Spend more on the military,” “[Politically] Advocate Christian values,” “Punish criminals more harshly,” “Fund faith-based organizations,” and “Allow prayer in [public] schools.”

They were far less supportive than anyone else of “Abolish the death penalty,” “Regulate business more closely,” and “Protect the environment more.” All five categories of Christians opposed “Distribute wealth more evenly”; and three categories of Christians were especially opposed to the proposal to distribute wealth more evenly: (1) Religious Attendance (or frequency of church-attendance), (2) Evangelical Protestant, and (3) Biblical Literalism. This study provided 100% confirmation of the political strategy of prominent American conservative aristocratic families, and of Bush advisor Karl Rove, to seek Republican votes from the most literal, Bible-believing, Christians. Another interesting finding was that, whereas 50% of Christians whose income was under \$35,000 described themselves as “Bible Believing,” only 38% of Christians whose income was more than \$100,000 did. This suggests that, whereas America’s rich were overwhelmingly the financiers of the Republican Party, America’s poorest (who were strongly Democratic as an entire lot) were still ripe to vote Republican if they belonged to that half of America’s poor who view themselves as “Bible Believing.”

CONSERVATISM, POLITICS, & WEALTH

During 13-15 March 2015, CNN polled on whether respondents preferred that [“The candidate has never been wealthy,”](#) or instead that “The candidate has had economic success in their life”; and Republicans chose the rich by 63%/27%, while Democrats chose the rich by 52%/43%. Independents chose the poor by 49%/44%. Independents there were the least conservative, the most progressive, though not very progressive; Republicans, by contrast, were extremely conservative, very authoritarian, wanting their boss as their President. The most authoritarian region of the country was the South, which chose the rich candidate by 59%/35%. The West was close behind: 54%/39%. Third was Midwest: 49%/42%. Least authoritarian was Northeast, which preferred the poor candidate by the bare margin of 47%/46%.

As regards population-density, Urban and Suburban were both authoritarian by 55%/38%, and Rural were barely authoritarian, by 48%/43%. Young were the least authoritarian, old were the most. Overall, Americans were authoritarian, preferring the rich candidate by 53%/40% (as if, other things being equal, the poor candidate shouldn't be expected to have overcome greater obstacles and shown more skill of political leadership in order to achieve a given degree of political renown and appeal than the rich candidate who has achieved that same political level). It's a population unlikely to sustain democracy — fundamentally hostile toward democracy, favorable toward aristocracy; more respectful of people who take for themselves than of people who give of themselves; more trusting of people who exploit than of people who serve; more-comfortable being led by the callous than by the compassionate — a fundamentally myth-dependent deceived population.

Here are some of my previous reports summarizing the research on that political-cultural disease — the disease of a nation rather than of merely a person — conservatism:

<http://www.washingtonsblog.com/2014/04/29908.html>

“Study Shows Republicans Favor Economic Inequality”

Posted on April 5, 2014

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-zuesse/the-rich-and-educated-bel_b_4377474.html

“The Rich And Educated Believe Wealth Correlates With Virtue, Says Study”

Posted: 12/05/2013

<http://www.washingtonsblog.com/2014/04/first-ever-political-study-top-1-found-extreme-conservatism-intense-political-involvement.html>

“First-Ever Political Study of Top 1% Has Found Extreme Conservatism, Intense Political Involvement”

Posted on April 2, 2014

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-zuesse/gallup-poll-finds-democrats_b_4683688.html

“Gallup Poll Finds Democrats More Compassionate; Republicans More Psychopathic”

Posted: 01/29/2014

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-zuesse/studies-find-that-conservatives_b_4558541.html

“Studies Find that Successful People Tend to Be Bad”

Posted: 01/10/2014

<http://www.washingtonsblog.com/2015/03/gallup-finds-among-conservatives-education-increases-false-belief.html>

“Gallup Finds: Among Conservatives, Education Increases False Belief”

Posted on March 29, 2015

<http://www.washingtonsblog.com/2014/04/breakthrough-study-proves-good-luck-causes-people-become-conservative.html>

“Breakthrough Study Proves: Good Luck Causes People to Become More Conservative”

Posted on April 2, 2014

Concerning that last-mentioned one, more should be said here about it:

That February 2014 study, by Andrew J. Oswald and Nattavudh Powdthavee, is one of the most important ever done. Its title was [“Does Money Make People Right-Wing and Inegalitarian? A Longitudinal Study of Lottery Winners.”](#) It was important because, as it noted at the end, “To our knowledge, these are the first fixed-effects results of their kind, either in the economics literature or the political science literature.” Freed of scholar-speak, that was saying: No previous scientific study has been done of whether the correlation that conservatism generally accompanies wealth is causal in either direction: from wealth to ideology, or from ideology to wealth. They found a definite causal relationship: wealth causes conservatism. Or: “[lottery] winners tend to support a right-wing political party, and also to be intrinsically less egalitarian.” Furthermore: “This money-to-right-leaning relationship is particularly strong for males (we are not certain why). It is also of a ‘dose-response’ kind: the larger the win, the more people tilt to the right.” There was no other difference between people who won lotteries and people who didn’t; the winners simply became more conservative after they won. Here is how the “Abstract” put that: “Money apparently makes people more right-wing.”

This helps to explain why other studies have found that “Successful People Tend to Be Bad,” and why “Gallup Poll Finds Democrats More Compassionate; Republicans More Psychopathic,” and why “Study Shows Republicans Favor Economic Inequality.”

It also helps to explain why the exit polls in the 2012 Obama-Democrat v. Romney-Republican U.S. Presidential contest showed that [Romney’s voters tended to be much higher income than Obama’s voters.](#) Unfortunately, public-opinion polls don’t often ask questions to find correlations between party-affiliation and income, but all of the evidence that does exist on this important topic indicates that conservative voters tend to be richer than progressive voters.

Furthermore, the Americans on both the Forbes and on the Bloomberg lists of billionaires are about 70% Republicans and 30% Democrats, versus the usual norm amongst the U.S. population, of [55% Democrats to 45% Republicans \(not including Independents\)](#). The Oswald-Powdthavee study helps to explain why that’s the case: lucky people tend to be conservatives; it’s not the case that conservatives tend to be lucky people. Conservatives are no luckier than non-conservatives. They’re also not more competent than non-conservatives. Instead: Success causes one to be a conservative. No matter how progressive or conservative one is before one becomes rich, one become even more so after one has become rich.

Investigative historian Eric Zuesse is the author, most recently, of [They’re Not Even Close: The Democratic vs. Republican Economic Records, 1910-2010](#), and of [CHRIST’S VENTRILOQUISTS: The Event that Created Christianity](#), and of [Feudalism, Fascism, Libertarianism and Economics](#).

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