


Political Conservatives' Affinity for Obedience to Authority Is Loyal, Not Blind

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Abstract

Liberals and conservatives disagree about obeying authorities, with conservatives holding the more positive views. We suggest that reactions to conservative authorities, rather than to obedience itself, are responsible for the division. Past findings that conservatives favor obedience uniformly confounded obedience with conservative authorities. We break down obedience to authority into its constituent parts to test the divisiveness of each part. The concepts of obedience (Study 1) and authority (Study 2) recruited inferences of conservative authorities, conflating results of simple, seemingly face valid tests of their divisiveness. These results establish necessary features of a valid test, to which Study 3 conforms. Conservatives have the more positive moral views of obedience only when the authorities are conservative (e.g., commanding officers); liberals do when the authorities are liberal (e.g., environmentalists). The two camps agree about obeying ideologically neutral authorities (e.g., office managers). Obedience itself is not ideologically divisive.

Keywords

ideology, obedience, authority, in-group favoritism

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Gay marriage, racial tensions, environmental concerns, recreational drugs, wealth disparities, foreign wars, and abortion license are among the issues that divide the contemporary U.S. population (Saad, 2010). These issues represent the modern instantiation of an ongoing “cultural war” between liberals and conservatives; a war that has developed for over 50 years. The rift began to expand in the context of Vietnam War protests and the civil rights movement with Rosa Parks disobeying both a law and a bus driver’s authority demanding that she move to the “negro section” of the bus. Muhammad Ali flouted the authority of the U.S. government by refusing to be drafted for the Vietnam War. And Abbie Hoffman and the anti-war movement ignored Mayor Richard J. Daley’s refusal to grant protest permits at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. All of these critical events involved left-wing activists disobeying right-wing authorities.

To conservatives like Edwin Meese (a high-ranking advisor to Ronald Reagan), disobedience stoked a negative sentiment: “[The sixties] was the age of selfishness. It was the age of self-indulgence. It was the age of anti-authority. It was an age in which people did all kinds of wrong things.” (Davis & Talbot, 2005). To left-wing cultural leaders like Arlo Guthrie, the times called for disobedience:

We had reached a moment in history where our traditional thoughts and traditional adherences—to custom and to authority—had

brought us to the brink of a global disaster, the likes of which the world had never even thought about . . . And enough people said, “No, we’re not doing this anymore. We’re not just going thoughtlessly anymore. We gotta think for ourselves. You can’t trust the authority.” (Davis & Talbot, 2005)

This article presents evidence that these apparent differences between liberals and conservatives are real—conservatives more so favor obeying authorities. However, this difference is a product of differing sentiments toward conservative authorities, not toward obedience. In three studies, we break down obedience to authority into its constituent parts—obedience and authority—and examine the divisiveness of each. The act of obedience elicits similar moral sentiments from the two camps; whereas the authorities elicit different sentiments. When authorities have a liberal agenda, liberals have the more positive moral sentiments toward obedience. Positive sentiments toward authorities that represent one’s own ideological group drive the political rift.

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Two Explanations for the Divisiveness of Obedience to Authority

We next examine two explanations for the liberal–conservative disagreement over obedience to authority: (a) the *act of obedience* itself is divisive, and (b) liberals and conservatives both favor *authorities* that represent their own ideology.

Explanation 1: Obedience Is Divisive

This account posits that *the act of obedience itself* elicits more positive moral sentiments from conservatives than from liberals. In this view, liberals and conservatives have differing opinions about how people should behave and how society ought to be structured (Sowell, 2002). Liberals hold an “enlightened” view of individuals as being compassionate and rational, capable of freely co-existing in harmony. Liberals are open to new experiences (McCrae, 1996); in their view, new ideas and the free thinkers who challenge the traditional order usher in social progress toward human perfection. Authorities and traditions are thus entities worth questioning for the sake of social progress. In contrast, conservatives hold a pessimistic view of human nature: People require traditions, conventions, and strict authorities to curb presumed selfishness, and thereby maintain civility, stability, and social order (Lakoff, 2002).

Past research *seems* to suggest that the act of obedience is divisive. Right-Wing Authoritarians (who tend to be conservative) “believe strongly in submission to established authorities” (Altemeyer, 2004, pp. 85-86). People high in Social Dominance Orientation (who tend to be conservative) prefer a hierarchical social structure to an egalitarian one (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). People who endorse values of conformity and tradition tend to be ideologically right of center (Schwartz, Caprara, & Vecchione, 2010). And Moral Foundations Theory (MFT; Haidt, 2012) suggests that conservatives and liberals disagree about acts of “obedience, disobedience, respect, disrespect, submission, or rebellion, with regard to authorities perceived to be legitimate” (p. 144). One possible explanation for the cultural war is that the act of obedience itself elicits different feelings from liberals and conservatives.

Explanation 2: Liberals and Conservatives Both Favor Their Own Authorities

A second explanation for the divisiveness over obedience to authority concerns sentiments toward the authorities demanding it. We suggest that sentiments regarding obedience to authority are highly sensitive to whether the authority represents one’s own political ideology (PI). People may favor authorities that share their ideology to maintain a positive social identity and/or because they trust leaders who share their values.

This may explain historical exceptions to the general rule that conservatives are more sympathetic to obedience than are liberals. In the aftermath of World War I, a Conservative Revolutionary Movement rose in Germany, aimed at curbing the rising tide of democracy and communism—by revolution if necessary. More recently, the Egyptian Army overthrew the conservative, democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood. Egyptian conservatives called for open revolt against the military rule, whereas liberals appealed for calm. And conservative political leaders in the United States regularly disrespect the more liberal president, Barack Obama.

In-group favoritism is “among the most well-established phenomena in social psychology” (Brewer, 2007, p. 729), dating back to Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, and Sherif’s (1961) Robber’s Cave experiment. Sherif and colleagues assigned summer campers to one of two groups. The boys quickly formed in-group solidarity, spontaneously naming their groups the “Rattlers” and “Eagles,” respectively. Out-group hostility (e.g., name-calling, threatening, and raiding) quickly became rampant. In-group loyalty runs deep.

Few commonalities among group members are required to instigate groupishness (e.g., Billig, 1973; Sachdev & Bourhis, 1984). However, in-group favoritism is strongest when groups of attitudinally similar individuals (Allen & Wilder, 1975) feel that they have freely chosen membership (Efferson, Lalive, & Fehr, 2008), and experience threat from another group (Yokota, 2009). All of these are at play in the cultural war. Thus, the liberal versus conservative divide is likely to cohere individuals into functional groups.

Whereas some researchers have concluded that conservatives are more prejudiced and liberals more tolerant toward a variety of social groups (e.g., Sibley & Duckitt, 2008), the recent Ideological Conflict Hypothesis posits that both conservatives and liberals are biased against groups whose values are inconsistent with their own (Brandt, Reyna, Chambers, Crawford, & Wetherell, 2013; Chambers, Schlenker, & Collisson, 2013; Crawford & Pilanski, in press; Wetherell, Brandt, & Reyna, 2013). People on both the extreme right and the extreme left censor, deal harshly with, and withhold freedoms from their ideological opponents (McClosky & Chong, 1985). Both liberals and conservatives see their favored candidates in presidential elections as the more righteous (Skitka & Bauman, 2008). A shared social identity may be a precondition for obedience: “Teachers” in the Milgram studies only obeyed the “Experimenters” while the Teacher and Experimenter shared a mission to advance science (Haslam & Reicher, 2012; Reicher & Haslam, 2011).

Congruent with these findings, we suggest that liberals and conservatives feel the same about obedience toward authority. Conservatives tend to favor obedience to authority primarily because authorities tend to be conservative—not because of any special feelings toward obedience.

Existing Evidence Is Ambiguous

Past research within a Western context (e.g., Altemeyer, 2004; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Pratto et al., 1994) has found that, compared with liberals, conservatives favor obedience to authority. The source of the disagreement remains unclear because these studies uniformly conflated obedience with conservative authorities. For example, a representative item on the Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale is “It is always better to *trust the judgment* of the proper authorities in *government and religion* than to listen to the *noisy rabble-rousers* in our society who are trying to create doubt in people’s minds.” (Altemeyer, 2004, p. 86, emphasis added). This item conflates obedience (“trust the judgment”) with conservative authorities (“proper authorities in government and religion” as opposed to “noisy rabble-rousers”). And a representative item on the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ) is: “If I were a soldier and disagreed with my *commanding officer’s* orders, I would *obey* anyway because that is my duty.” (Graham et al., 2009, p. 1044, emphasis added). Whether conservatives’ higher endorsement of this item is the product of elevated sentiments toward *obedience* or elevated sentiments toward *military officers* remains unclear.

We suggest that (Western) liberals favor items on the MFQ and RWA less than conservatives do, not because of different views about whether to obey, but because of the “elephant¹ in the room”: a relative aversion for actions advancing authorities like the military and religion. If this is correct, the nature of the disagreement between liberals and conservatives will reverse if the authority demanding obedience were a liberal (e.g., a civil rights leader). Supporting this contention is past evidence that, in the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), “Right Wing Authoritarians” tend to be leftists (McFarland, Ageyev, & Abalakina-Paap, 1992).

Present Research

To understand which feature of obedience to authority is driving the division, we break down the construct into its constituent parts and examine their individual divisiveness. In three studies, we present evidence that obedience itself is not ideologically divisive; rather, liberals and conservatives favor obedience to their respective authorities. Studies 1 and 2 lay the “ground rules” for a valid test of the ideological divisiveness of the elements of obedience and authority. And Study 3 provides the first valid test of the divisiveness of obedience itself.

Studies 1 and 2 report simple tests of the divisiveness of obedience and authority. However, careful follow-up analyses showed these tests to be *invalid* due to “failed” manipulation checks. The concepts *obedience* and *authority* each draw inferences of *conservative authorities*. These inferences, coupled with in-group favoritism, may explain why obedience to

Table 1. Demographics of the Samples.

Sample	n	Gender	Ethnicity	Age, M (SD)	Ideology, M (SD)
		% female	% Caucasian	Years	
A	83	41	81	33 (11)	-0.7 (2.0)
B	55	40	84	37 (12)	-0.9 (2.4)
C	101	18	69	29 (10)	-0.9 (2.0)
D	172	40	76	33 (12)	-0.5 (2.1)
E	214	34	79	33 (13)	-1.1 (2.0)

Note. The full ideology scale was -4 (strongly liberal) to 0 (neutral) to 4 (strongly conservative).

authority *appears* to be a privileged feature of the conservative moral mind when, in fact, it is not. These results also establish that a valid test of the divisiveness of obedience must include moral judgments of a *specific authority whose perceived ideology is neutral*.

In Study 3, we provide the first valid test of the inherent divisiveness of the constituent parts of obedience to authority (viz., obedience and authority), and find that authorities—and not obedience—are responsible for ideological clashes.

Study 1a

In this study, we presented a seemingly face valid test by asking participants to simply express moral sentiments toward obedience itself (with no specified authority) and, separately, toward liberal and conservative authorities. Divisive constructs are those that yield non-zero correlations between rater PI and moral sentiments. We predicted that obedience would elicit the same sentiments ($r \sim 0$) from liberals and conservatives, whereas liberal and conservative authorities would elicit different sentiments ($|r| > 0$).

Method

Samples. In this and all subsequent studies, participants were Americans on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk website, each of whom received US\$0.40 for participating. In all cases, we collected demographics data after participants responded to the study variables. Table 1 reports the demographics of the five samples.

Procedure. Liberal and conservative participants (Sample A) reported *moral sentiments* toward target concepts representing obedience, conservative authorities, and liberal authorities. A second set of participants (Sample B) completed a manipulation check on the perceived ideology of the authorities.

Targets. Obedience concepts ($\alpha = .80$) included five forward scored items (*obey, respect, do as told, behave politely, and conform*) and five reverse scored items (*disobey, disrespect, disregard orders, behave rudely, and resist*). Conservative authorities ($\alpha = .73$) were *religious authority, traditions,*

commanding officer, police, and the law. Liberal authorities ($\alpha = .49$)² were *environmentalist, civil rights activist, the latest trend, whistleblower, and revolution*. We generated the authorities loosely based on items in existing scales (e.g., the MFQ and RWA scales; Altemeyer, 2004; Graham et al., 2009). The 20 items appeared in intermixed and random order.

Moral sentiments. The instructions asked participants to “indicate whether each concept represents something that is morally bad or wrong [−2], not morally relevant [0], or morally good or right [2].”

Participant political ideology. In this and all subsequent studies, we measured PI in 3 domains (viz., social, economic, and foreign policy) on a nine-point scale from −4 (*strongly liberal*) to 4 (*strongly conservative*). Across the various samples, the three items were strongly inter-related ($.56 \leq r_s \leq .87$), so we aggregated the three domains into a single PI score ($\alpha_s \geq .85$). (Using only social PI as a predictor yielded virtually identical results.)

Manipulation check (perceived ideology of the authorities). Participants rated the degree to which each of 10 authorities “tends to publicly advance a liberal or conservative agenda in society” on a scale ranging from −4 (*strongly liberal agenda*) to 0 (*neutral agenda*) 4 (*strongly conservative agenda*). Agreement among raters was high (Intraclass Correlation = .98).

Results

Manipulation check. All manipulation checks passed. Averaging across all five authorities, the nominally conservative authorities were judged to be on the conservative side of political neutrality, $M = 1.80$, $SD = 1.04$, $t(54) = 12.85$, $p < .001$. Similarly, the nominally liberal authorities were judged to be on the liberal side of political neutrality, $M = -1.97$, $SD = 1.26$, $t(54) = 11.64$, $p < .001$. All five conservative targets were conservative and all liberal targets were liberal, with all $ps < .007$.

Sources of division. The left panel of Figure 1 shows that—counter to our prediction—conservatives expressed more positive moral sentiments toward the act of obedience than did liberals, $r(81) = .25$, $p = .02$. (We show in Study 1b that this result subtly conflated obedience with conservative authorities.) The right panel of Figure 1 shows that, as predicted, conservatives had more positive moral sentiments toward conservative authorities than did liberals, $r(81) = .47$, $p < .001$. And liberals made more favorable judgments of liberal authorities than did conservatives, $r(81) = -.42$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

A simple test appears to show that both components of obedience to authority—obedience and authority type—are

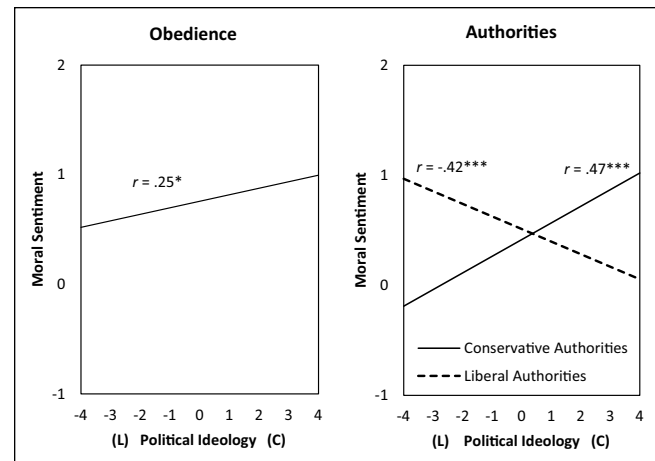


Figure 1. Moral sentiments toward obedience (left panel) and toward liberal and conservative authorities (right panel) appear to be divisive. The obedience items turn out to subtly conflate obedience with conservative authorities (see Study 1b).

Note. L = liberal judges; C = conservative judges.

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

divisive. The finding that, compared with liberals, conservatives favor obedience is consistent with past findings (e.g., Piurko, Schwartz, & Davidov, 2011; Schwartz et al., 2010; Stenner, 2005). However, we posit that these simple tests of the divisiveness of obedience are invalid because participants *inferred* a conservative authority. In Study 1a, the obedience items appeared as transitive verbs (e.g., “obey”). Unstated was the semantically necessary object of obedience (viz., whom to obey). Participants needed to infer one.

Study 1b

Study 1b tested what people infer when they think about obedience. We predicted that they infer a conservative authority.

Method

Samples and procedure. Sample B reported the first thought that came to mind for the 10 acts of obedience in Study 1a (i.e., obey a _____, respect a _____, . . . , behave rudely toward _____, resist against _____). On a subsequent page, participants then reported their first intuition about the ideological agenda of each obedience object that they themselves listed (see Study 1a “Manipulation check” section for the measure’s wording).

Results

After combining semantically equivalent responses, the most common objects of obedience were: *everyone* (8.4%), *elders* (8.0%), *the police* (6.9%), *the law* (4.9%), *rules* (2.9%), *authority* (2.4%), and *judge* (2.0%). Averaging across each

participants' 10 ratings ($\alpha = .66$), we found that objects of obedience tended to be on the conservative side of ideological neutrality, $M = +0.75$, $SD = 1.04$, $t(54) = 4.98$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.67$.

Discussion

The concept of obedience carries “cognitive baggage,” recruiting thoughts of conservative authorities. Insofar as participants in Study 1a inferred that the objects of obedience were conservative authorities, the finding that conservatives prefer obedience is prone to the same confound as in past research: Conservatives may have more positive moral sentiments about obedience, (inferred) conservative authorities, or both. Note how this confound was subtle. Nowhere did the stimulus material imply conservatism. Participants perceived conservatism nonetheless. We defer the question of why they did this to the “General Discussion” section.

Study 2

Our original intent for Study 2 was to eliminate the room for inference in Study 1 by specifying that the authorities demanding obedience have no ideological agenda. In so doing, we stumbled on a second cognitive association that confounds simple tests of the inherent divisiveness of obedience: The concept of *authority* invites inferences of *conservative authorities*.

Participants named authorities and non-authorities. As an intended manipulation check, we asked participants to then rate the ideological agenda of each authority and non-authority. We expected that both authorities and non-authorities would lack a net ideological agenda (perceived PI ~ 0). The manipulation check “failed.”

Method

Sample and procedure. Sample C nominated authorities and non-authorities then rated the perceived ideological agenda of each of their nominees.

Authority and non-authority nomination. Each participant listed three authorities and three non-authorities. The authority prompt was,

Think of jobs or roles that involve having authority over other people. By having authority, we mean that (a) people that have this position of authority (“superiors”) have power over other people (“juniors”), (b) these superiors give orders and instructions to juniors, and (c) these juniors take direction from them and are to do as they are told. Name any three jobs or roles that involve having authority.

In the non-authority prompt, we replaced “involves having authority over other people” with “do not involve

having authority over other people,” with an analogous change to the final sentence.

Perceived ideological agenda. See Study 1 for item wording.

Results

The most commonly generated authorities were *police officer* (17% of respondents), *office manager* (9.9%), *president* (8.9%), *CEO* (7.9%), and *judge* (5.3%). The most commonly reported non-authorities were *janitor* (14%), *cashier* (8.9%), *salesperson* (4.0%), *fast food worker* (3.6%), and *waiter* (3.6%).

We aggregated the perceived ideology of the three authorities ($\alpha = .49$). Participants perceived authorities to be pursuant of a conservative agenda, $M = +1.00$, $SD = 1.43$, $t(100) = 7.00$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.70$. To a lesser but still significant extent, participants perceived non-authorities ($\alpha = .62$) to be pursuant of a liberal agenda, $M = -0.51$, $SD = 1.19$, $t(100) = -4.32$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.43$.

Discussion

Study 2 found that, in the abstract, the concept of authority recruits inferences of conservative authorities. Study 1 showed that the concept of obedience does the same. These findings may explain why obedience to authority *appears* to be a concept that conservatives favor over liberals. Moreover, these findings also establish necessary features of a valid test of the divisiveness of obedience itself: the authority needs to be specified (Study 1) and perceived to be ideologically neutral (Study 2). To our knowledge, Study 3 is the first test that satisfies these criteria.

Study 3

Liberal and conservative participants reported their moral sentiments about obeying 20 different authorities. A second set of raters reported the perceived ideological agenda of each authority. We predicted that conservatives would favor obedience more than liberals would ($r > 0$) only when the authority was conservative. And liberals would report more positive moral sentiments than conservatives ($r < 0$) when the authorities were liberal. Finally, we predicted that obedience to authorities that have no stereotypical agenda (an unconfounded test of the ideological divisiveness of obedience) would elicit similar sentiments ($r \sim 0$) from liberals and conservatives.

Analytic Strategy

The elemental design is a correlation between PI (conservatism) of the judge and moral sentiment toward obeying a particular authority. Positive r s mean conservatives have the more positive sentiments than liberals. Negative r s

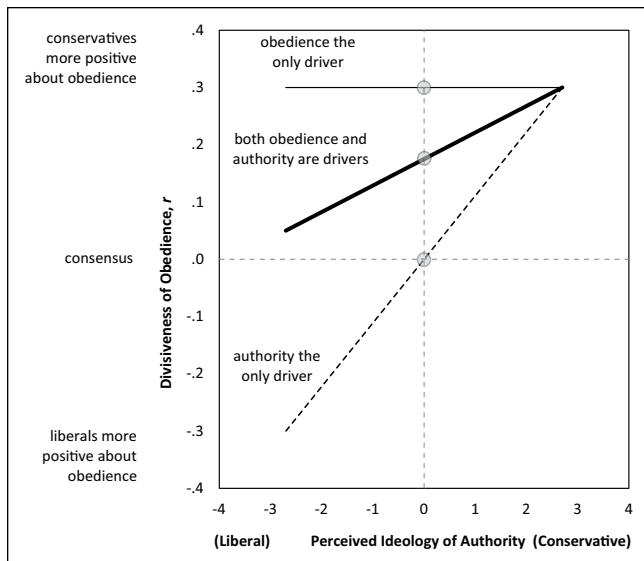


Figure 2. What makes liberals and conservatives disagree about obeying authority? Three predicted results based on three accounts: (a) sentiments about obedience only, (b) sentiments toward authorities only, or (c) both obedience and authority. Note. The gray dots represent the divisiveness of obedience when the authority is ideologically neutral.

mean that liberals have the more positive sentiments. And $r \sim 0$ means that liberals and conservatives have similar sentiments. To replicate past research, we predicted that conservatives would express the more favorable moral sentiments ($r > 0$) concerning obedience to conservative authorities.

The critical observation concerns sentiments toward obeying liberal authorities, which will allow us to infer the inherent divisiveness of obedience to neutral authorities. Three general scenarios are possible. Figure 2 shows how the perceived ideology of the authority will or will not influence which ideology prefers obedience, depending on which process is driving the disagreements. The first possibility is that the act of obedience is the *only* driver of the disagreement over obedience to authority. If so, then conservatives will still experience the more favorable sentiments when the authority is liberal ($r > 0$). The second possibility is that *only* the ideology of the authority is driving the disagreements over obedience. If so, then liberals will experience the more favorable sentiments when the authority is a liberal ($r < 0$). The third possibility is that *both* obedience and the authority's agenda drive the disagreement. If so, obedience to liberal authorities will elicit conflicting moral sentiments for each camp (e.g., for liberals, positive toward the authority, negative toward obedience; for conservatives, vice versa), canceling out disagreements, and yielding agreement among the camps.

Using the divisiveness scores from all 20 targets at once, we infer the inherent divisiveness of each element: obedience and authority. The steepness and range of the authority

PI-divisiveness slope indicates the divisiveness of the authority; the authority PI intercept (at PI = 0) indicates the divisiveness of obedience.

Method

Samples and procedure. Sample B indicated whether each of 20 authorities seem to have a liberal or conservative agenda (predictor variable). Samples D and E reported moral sentiments toward obeying the 20 authorities (outcome variable).

Authorities. The authority targets were all of those examined in Studies 1a and 2, which included people/entities that people perceive as promoting a wide spectrum of ideological agendas. The 20 entities were *religious authority, traditions, commanding officer, the police, the law, environmentalist, civil rights activist, the latest trend, whistleblower, revolution, police officer, office manager, president, CEO, judge, janitor, cashier, salesperson, fast food worker, and waiter.*

Perceived ideology of the authorities. We used the same data as those generated in Studies 1a and 2.

Moral sentiments about obeying authorities. Participants indicated their moral sentiments (see Study 1a for scale) toward target concepts, each representing obedience to a particular authority (see Table 2 for precise target wording). Samples D and E each rated 10 different sets (Sample D rated the first 10 items listed above, Sample E the second).

Results and Discussion

Obedience to conservative authorities. The authorities with the most (highest ranking) conservative agendas were *religious authority* (2.73), *traditions* (2.60), and *commanding officer* (1.45). Conservatives expressed more positive moral sentiments than did liberals about obeying religious authorities, $r(170) = .34, p < .001$, respecting traditions, $r(170) = .35, p < .001$, and doing as told by a commanding officer, $r(170) = .29, p < .001$. Table 2 and the top-right corner of Figure 3 show that (a) these authorities have a conservative agenda, and (b) obedience toward these authorities elicits more positive moral sentiments from conservatives. These results replicate past research showing that conservatives more so favor obedience to authority (Altemeyer, 2004; Graham et al., 2009; Pratto et al., 1994). In so doing, these results demonstrate that this past research confounded obedience with conservative authorities.

Obedience to liberal authorities. The authorities with the most liberal agendas were *civil rights activist* (-2.82) and *environmentalist* (-2.51). Liberals now expressed the more positive moral sentiments to obeying environmentalists, $r(170) = -.23, p = .002$, and doing as told by a civil rights activist,

Table 2. Target Phrases Representing Obedience to 20 Different Authorities, Ordered From Most Favored by Conservatives to Most Favored by Liberals.

Item	Reliability, <i>r</i>	Ideology	Divisiveness, <i>r</i>
Respect (disrespect) traditions	.68	2.60	.35***
Obey (disobey) a religious authority	.74	2.73	.34***
Do as told by (disregard orders from) a commanding officer	.70	1.45	.29***
Behave politely (rudely) toward the police	.65	1.47	.21**
Conform to (resist) the law	.50	0.73	.18*
Obey (disobey) a police officer	.70	1.44	.10
Do as told by (disregard orders from) a company president	.52	1.80	.06
Behave politely toward (resist against) a CEO	.36	1.96	.04
Conform to what a judge says (behave rudely toward a judge)	.44	1.00	.03
Respect (disrespect) the latest trend	.53	-1.49	.00
Obey (disobey) a janitor	.35	-0.09	.00
Show respect (disrespect) to a cashier	.41	-0.65	.00
Show respect (disrespect) to an office manager	.55	0.47	-.03
Conform to what a waiter says (behave rudely toward a waiter)	-.17	-0.89	-.04
Behave politely (rudely) toward a whistleblower	.44	-1.22	-.06
Do as told by (disregard orders from) a salesperson	.11	-0.04	-.08
Conform to (resist) the revolution	.32	-1.84	-.09
Behave politely toward (resist against) a fast food worker	.19	-0.82	-.09
Obey (disobey) an environmentalist	.57	-2.51	-.23***
Do as told by (disregard orders from) a civil rights activist	.49	-2.82	-.25***

Note. Words in parentheses indicate reverse scored item substitution. The full perceived ideology scale was -4 (strongly liberal agenda) to 0 (neutral agenda) to 4 (strongly conservative agenda). Divisiveness is the correlation between rater PI and their moral sentiment toward obedience. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

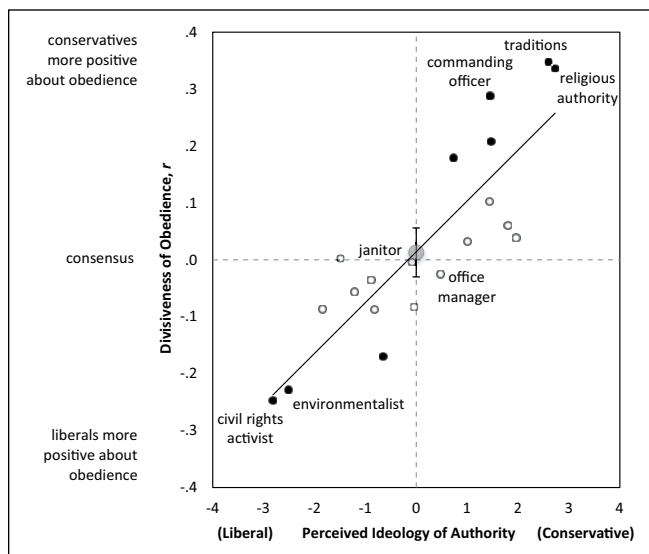


Figure 3. Obedience itself is not ideologically divisive. Liberals and conservatives feel differently about obeying authority only when the authority has a political agenda.

Note. Filled dots represent authorities that elicited significantly divisive moral sentiments (*p* < .05). See Table 2 for the precise item wording. The gray dot represents the divisiveness of obedience when the authority is ideologically neutral (error bars represent 95% confidence interval).

r(170) = -.25, *p* = .001. Table 2 and the bottom-left corner of Figure 3 show that (a) these authorities have a liberal agenda

and (b) obedience toward these authorities elicits more positive moral sentiments from liberals than from conservatives.

Obedience to ideologically neutral authorities. *Office manager* (0.47) and *janitor* (-0.09) were typical examples of authorities with no stereotypical ideological agenda. Judges’ PI did not predict the favorability of moral sentiments regarding obedience to these ideologically neutral authorities, $|r|(212) \leq .03, ps \geq .66$, in spite of the reasonably large sample size. Table 2 and the middle area of Figure 3 show that (a) people perceive these sorts of authorities to be ideologically neutral, and (b) obedience toward these authorities elicits equally positive moral sentiments from liberals and conservatives.

The ideology of the authority almost entirely explains divisiveness. To accurately infer the divisiveness of obedience to (ideology-neutral) authority, we regressed the ideological divisiveness of all 20 authorities on their perceived ideological agenda (see Figure 3 trend line). The results clearly support the “authority only” explanation of the divisiveness (see Figure 2).

Divisiveness of authority. Perceived ideology of the authority almost perfectly accounted for divisiveness, $r(18) = .86, p < .001$,³ explaining 74% of the variance. Within the spectrum of perceived authority, ideology in this study, model-implied divisiveness spanned a range of *r* = .52 (from -.25 to +.27).

Divisiveness of obedience. The constant in the regression equation represents the divisiveness of obedience to ideology-neutral authority; that correlation is effectively zero, $r = .01$,⁴ $p = .53$, 95% confidence interval (CI) = $[-.03, .06]$.

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first unconfounded test of the ideological divisiveness of obedience to authority. The findings suggest that obedience itself is not ideologically divisive. Counter to the intuition that obedience itself is a mode of conduct that conservatives preferentially champion, these data suggest that liberals and conservatives have the same sentiments about obedience. Conservatives only favor obedience when they perceive the authority to be a conservative. Liberals also favor obedience when the authority shares their ideology.

General Discussion

Hidden beneath the bitter disagreements between liberals and conservatives are differing moral sentiments about obeying authorities. Three studies supported the claim that this disagreement is primarily sourced to sentiments toward the authorities demanding obedience rather than to sentiments toward obedience itself.

Past research may have been prone to three different confounds when drawing inferences about obedience. The first is glaring: Items assessing obedience included conservative authorities (e.g., commanding officers; see Study 3). The next two are subtle: the concepts of *obedience* and *authority* recruit inferences of conservative authorities (Studies 1 & 2). We suggest that these associations, coupled with in-group favoritism, are responsible for the division over obedience to authority.

Study 3 provided an unconfounded test of the divisiveness of the constituent features of obedience to authority. Conservatives had more positive moral sentiments about obedience only when the authorities were conservative (e.g., commanding officers). Liberals had more positive moral sentiments about obedience when the authorities were liberals (e.g., environmentalists). And the two camps agreed about obedience to ideologically neutral authorities (e.g., office managers). The model-implied divisiveness of obedience is effectively zero. Obedience itself is not ideologically divisive.

“Obedience” and “Authority” Recruit “Conservative”

Obedience and authority concepts carry cognitive baggage, inviting inferences of conservatives. We required three attempts to work around these inferences and create a valid test of the divisiveness of obedience to ideology-neutral authorities. During the first two attempts (Studies 1 & 2), we discovered that unforeseen cognitive associations created interpretive problems. Specifically, when people think about obedience, they assume that the object of obedience is

conservative; and when people name authorities, the roles/people they name have conservative leanings. Therefore, when we asked people to morally judge the act of obedience, they unwittingly judged obedience to conservative authorities. The same conflation was at play when judging nominated authorities; authorities defaulted to conservatism. For a test of the divisiveness of obedience to be valid, the authority needs to be specified, removing room for inference about the object of obedience. Moreover, the specified authority needs to be perceived as ideologically neutral, removing room for inference that the authority is conservative. We suggest that Study 3 is the first valid test of the divisiveness of obedience.

Obedience and authority carry cognitive baggage in the sense that they activate biased associations. The months of April, May, and June carry cognitive baggage too. Thinking about these months conjures images of flowers, sunshine, and gardens. However, flowers and sunshine are not intrinsic to these months. Neither is spring. In the southern hemisphere, April, May, and June conjure images of darkness, falling leaves, and hot cocoa. In a similar vein, obedience and authority conjure images of conservative authorities, such as religious leaders, commanding officers. Future research should examine whether culture or ideology moderates the nature and strength of connotations associated with obedience and authority.

Through a rather subtle process, these associations may be responsible for the common intuition that conservatives are the ones favoring obedience to authority. The act of obedience is not ideologically divisive. However, the concept of obedience activates notions of a conservative authority, which are a matter of moral divisiveness. We believe that this inference, coupled with in-group favoritism, is what divides liberals and conservatives. Thus, the two “failed” attempts to test our core claim turn out to help explain the common belief that conservatives are the ones who favor obedience to authority.

Why? These findings raise a new question: Why do the concepts of obedience and authority recruit conceptions of the political Right? We offer three speculative possibilities before deferring the question to future investigation

Inaccurate stereotype. Perhaps the perception that authorities are conservatives is an inaccurate stereotype. Authorities may vary in their ideology, with no net leaning; yet people expect them to lean right. If true, future research should investigate the basis of this misperception. The remaining possibilities assume that the perception is accurate—that authorities actually are conservative.

Conservatives become authorities. Conservatives may be more likely to enter authority positions. Conservatives have an elevated need for certainty and order (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Arguably, the first job of an authority is to stabilize and promote social order. Only rarely can authorities institute change. Ambiguity

and uncertainty upset liberals less than they do conservatives (Jost et al., 2003), reducing liberals' need for social structure, and enabling them to support upheaval and social justice (Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013). Conservatives may be more likely to enter authority positions. Or becoming an authority may make a person more conservative.

Liberalization of society manifests conservative authorities. Authorities being conservative may alternatively be a result of a liberalizing shift in the contemporary United States. As societal attitudes shift toward the left (e.g., on abortion, recreational drugs, civil rights, and gay rights), the attitudes and practices of the authorities would too, albeit with a lag. As an example, U.S. attitudes regarding same-sex marriage have become more liberal over the past 20 years. Public opinion has climbed from 27% to 53% in support since 1996 (Jones, 2013). Meanwhile, the number of U.S. states that legalized same-sex marriage also climbed over the same time period (from 0% of states to 32%). Note how both the public and the authority (the states) are moving left, the latter with a lag. Laws take longer to change than public opinions. The net effect is that authorities are right of the public within a left-trending country.

The Moral Mind of Liberals and Conservatives

Do the psychological intuitions and emotions supporting obedience to authority belong within a moral foundation (viz., authority/subversion) psychologically distinct from in-group biases (viz., loyalty/betrayal)? According to MFT, a psychological module supporting authority (e.g., obedience) and a *distinct* psychological module supporting in-group loyalty evolved in response to unique social/environmental challenges. The loyalty foundation manifests as love for in-group members and hate for out-group rivals, which serve the adaptive benefit of creating and maintaining strong coalitions that outcompete lone individuals and other groups for scarce resources. Manifest as respect and fear, the authority foundation evolved independently to support social hierarchy within groups, which enhances within-group efficiency and harmony. Authority figures take responsibility for maintaining order and justice, while the subordinates defer to them (viz., obey order; Haidt, 2012).

Our data are consistent with the broad claim that moral cognition is about general cognitive processes, rather than distinct ones. Instead of being divided into separate moral modules (obedience to authority vis-à-vis in-group loyalty), moral judgments seem to respect long-standing processes—people have an in-group preference. This account is consistent with findings that moral cognition is sensitive to domain-general cognitive processes such as intention, causation, and suffering. Synthesizing these factors, Gray, Young, and Waytz (2012; Gray, Schein, & Ward, in press) suggested that seemingly distinct moral cognitions are based in a singular dyadic template of two perceived minds: an intentional

agent harming or helping a suffering patient. Congruently, in-group loyalty and obedience to authority may not be separate functions of the moral mind, but, rather, two components of a single process that promotes groupishness.

Conclusion

In a quote that opened this article, the liberal-minded Arlo Guthrie affirmed rebellion against the establishment. More recently, the Occupy Wall Street movement justified ignoring police and court orders on the grounds of justice, democracy, and protection of individual rights (New York City General Assembly, 2011). Conservative groups such as the U.S. Tea Party and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood too have challenged authorities. Both liberals and conservatives have the moral psychology for flaunting the orders of authorities. Preference for obedience is contextually bound; both liberals and conservatives call for rebellion when the authorities are from the “other team.”

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Notes

1. The symbol for the more conservative party in the United States (Republican) is an elephant.
2. Removing the *latest trend* improved reliability to $\alpha = .62$ but did not change the pattern of results. We retain this item in all subsequent analyses.
3. Analyzing the data from Samples D and E separately yields virtually the same result, $r_s(8) = .98$ and $.81$, $ps \leq .005$, respectively. The (model-implied) divisiveness of ideology-neutral authorities are similarly close to 0: $r = .08$ and $r = -.04$, respectively.
4. Removing from the analysis, the three authorities that had low reliability ($r < .30$) had little consequence. Doing so neither changed the inherent divisiveness of obedience, $r = .02$, nor the degree to which authority ideology moderated the divisiveness of obedience, $r = .86$.

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