

Conservative values have a different effect on political orientation in Central and Eastern European countries than they do in the West.

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2013/07/31/conservative-values-have-a-different-effect-on-political-orientation-in-central-and-eastern-european-countries-than-they-do-in-the-west/

31/07/2013

*Certain values, such as conservatism and liberalism, are assumed to have a close link to the political orientation of citizens. However is this effect the same across all European countries? **Anna Aspelund** presents the findings of a study on the link between conservative values and left-right political orientation in 28 European countries. The results show that while values such as 'resistance to change' and an 'acceptance of inequality' are closely linked to right-wing political orientation in Western Europe, they have a very different effect in Central and Eastern Europe. Only a small number of Central and Eastern European countries show a link between these values and right-wing political orientation, suggesting that we should be careful about making pan-European generalisations on the link between values and politics.*



Political conservatism and its relationship to left-right orientation has been an object of significant interest for political psychology over the past 10 years. Numerous studies have identified a conservative belief cluster that encompasses a resistance to change and acceptance of inequality, and that characterises right-wing ideology in the United States and Western Europe. Its opposite, liberalism, characterises left-wing orientation in the Western world and is typified by open-mindedness, mental flexibility, and endorsement of social and economic equality.

It has often been speculated that the relationship between political conservatism and left-right orientation might be different in societies that are politically different from the United States and Western Europe – such as former communist Central and Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, the evidence has been scarce and inconsistent, and the results vary depending on the measures used and the countries examined. Despite several efforts, the question of whether conservatism is related to left-wing or right-wing orientation in former communist Central and Eastern Europe has remained largely unanswered.

There are, however, two issues that should be taken into account when studying conservatism in former communist Central and Eastern Europe. First, despite some shared history, there is considerable diversity in the political landscape across the various countries. Contrary to a common (Western) assumption, communism did not completely reshape the ideological life of societies affected by it, but equally, if not even more significant than the shared communist past, are the differences between the countries before, during and after the communist era. These include differences in socioeconomic development, religion, social class structure, the state of democratisation and the strength of political movements. Consequently, support for tradition and preserving status hierarchies may mean different things in different Central and Eastern European countries.

Another potential issue with many studies on the topic is the use of Western, culture-specific measures. These measures, such as the Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) Scale and the Social Dominance Order (SDO) Scale merge all or some of the components of conservatism (resistance to change, acceptance of inequality, right-wing orientation, etc.) By doing this, a study will be searching only for those conservatives who fit the Western idea of conservatism and will lose sight of all other potential forms of conservatism that may be more relevant in other countries.

In a [recent study](#), we tried to avoid these problems by using basic human values to measure the two core aspects of political conservatism: 'resistance to change' and 'acceptance of inequality'. In his [theory of values](#), Shalom Schwartz has identified 10 motivationally distinct types of values that are ordered along two major dimensions:

conservation (versus openness to change) and self-enhancement (versus self-transcendence). Based on earlier studies, these two value dimensions capture the same right-wing conservative ideological cluster in the West, as do RWA, SDO, and other traditional measures of conservatism. However, because the value model and its measurement have been validated across more than 200 samples in more than 60 countries, the value approach can also be reliably used in non-Western settings. Further, we examined the relationship between political conservatism and left-right orientation in 13 Central and Eastern European countries separately, without assuming any differences or similarities between the countries.

Our results confirm the assumption that has been much speculated about, but so far has not been systematically studied: The relationship between left-right orientation, resistance to change, and acceptance of inequality can be different in countries that are culturally and politically different from the United States and Western Europe. As we expected, the relationship between political conservatism and left-right orientation also differed between the Central and Eastern European countries. The Table below shows the effect of ‘resistance to change’ on political orientation in Central and Eastern European countries.

Table: Effect of ‘resistance to change’ on political orientation in Central and Eastern European countries (2006 – 2008)

Effect of ‘resistance to change’ on political orientation	Countries
Resistance to change is associated with right-wing political orientation	Croatia, Slovenia
Resistance to change is associated with left-wing political orientation	Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Slovakia
Resistance to change is not associated with any political orientation	Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia
Results are inconsistent between 2006 and 2008	Poland, Romania, Ukraine

Note: The table is based on data from the [European Social Survey](#) from the years 2006 and 2008. It shows statistically significant correlations between an individual’s left-right orientation (on a scale from 0-10) and their ‘resistance to change’ (determined using sum scores of responses to questions measuring conservation vs. openness to change). See our article in [Political Psychology](#) for full correlation figures.



Resistance to change in the West: ‘machine trashing’ during the Industrial Revolution (Public Domain)

While all 14 of the Western European countries in our study showed a correlation between resistance to change and right-wing political orientation in 2006 (and 13 in 2008), the results in Central and Eastern Europe, shown in the Table, were very different. Four types of countries were found in this group: Western-like countries where resistance to change was related to right-wing orientation (Croatia and Slovenia), countries where resistance to change was related to left-wing orientation (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, and Slovakia), countries where no associations were found (Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and Russia), and countries where the association had changed during the two years from 2006 to 2008 when the data was collected, either from positive to no association (Poland), from negative to no association (Romania), or from positive to negative association (Ukraine).

One potential factor which explains these diverse results may be the post-communist economic and political development: Countries that are politically and economically more similar to the West may be more likely to resemble the West in other respects. Political and economic development is, however, definitely not the only contributing factor and possibly not even the most important one for explaining variation in the relationships between resistance to change, acceptance of inequality, and political orientation, as results from several of the countries (such as Estonia) cannot be explained with this argument.

The other value in our study, 'acceptance of inequality', was also associated with right-wing political orientation in the majority of Western European countries (10 in 2006, and 12 in 2008). However it was only weakly, if at all, related to the left-right orientation in most Central and Eastern European countries. This raises a question of whether left and right have the same meaning for ordinary laymen in the former communist countries as they do in the West. There are surprisingly few studies on the subject, but based on studies on party policies and the views of political experts in former communist countries, it seems that issues such as religion, ethnicity, or views on democratisation may be sometimes more relevant distinguishers of left versus right than the economic or class conflict.

Generally, our findings suggest that cultural tradition and the way people understand the left-right continuum may shape the relationship between different aspects of conservatism and left-right orientation. The results also imply that the former communist Central and Eastern European countries cannot be grouped together simply because they share a communist past, and similarly, that research conducted in any single country cannot be generalised to the entire region. Further research on the topic is still needed to fully understand the relationship between political conservatism and left-right orientation in former communist Central and Eastern Europe, and the cultural and political factors affecting this relationship.

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPPE – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/12NEOMJ>

About the author

Anna Aspelund – *University of Helsinki*

Anna Aspelund is a PhD candidate at the University of Helsinki. She is particularly interested in the psychology of political ideology.

-

