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Abstract

In two studies, we demonstrated that liberals underestimate their similarity to other liberals (i.e., display *truly false uniqueness*), whereas moderates and conservatives overestimate their similarity to other moderates and conservatives (i.e., display *truly false consensus*; Studies 1 and 2). We further demonstrated that a fundamental difference between liberals and conservatives in the motivation to feel unique explains this ideological distinction in the accuracy of estimating similarity (Study 2). Implications of the accuracy of consensus estimates for mobilizing liberal and conservative political movements are discussed.

Keywords

social perception, motivation, political ideology, truly false uniqueness, need for uniqueness

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At the height of the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011, the liberal movement had garnered mass support and possessed potential for enacting meaningful change (Desvarieux, 2011). However, supporters of the movement struggled to develop consensus on both large-scale (e.g., creating a shared agenda) and small-scale (e.g., determining how to respond to the New York City Police Department's request to take down signs) issues, which hindered the movement's ability to progress toward social change (Cook, 2011). As one blogger argued, "The Occupy movement is as good as dead. It will have achieved nothing legislatively, it will have elected no one, and, in the end, it has had no material impact on American life" (Ostroy, 2012, para. 7). In contrast, supporters of the conservative Tea Party movement reached consensus on important goals and successfully founded a congressional caucus (http://teapartycaucus-bachmann.house.gov/).

The inability of liberal Occupy Wall Street protestors to achieve consensus on vital issues ultimately contributed to the movement's failure to develop solidarity and enact political change. Although developing actual consensus within a group's ranks is important for mobilizing collective action, research has shown that perceiving consensus—even if that perception is not entirely grounded in reality—is similarly a vital step in motivating collective social change (van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer, & Leach, 2004). Differences in perceptions of consensus might explain in part why some social movements are more effective at promoting social change than others. In the present research, we therefore examined the timely and important questions of whether liberals and conservatives differ in their perceptions of consensus with like-minded others and whether these perceptions are grounded in reality. Furthermore, we grounded ideological differences in perceiving consensus in a motivational process by examining whether liberal-conservative differences in the accuracy of consensus estimates can be explained by the motivation to feel unique. These questions have important implications for the mobilization and success of political movements but, as of yet, have remained unexplored.

The extent to which individuals perceive consensus for their beliefs is a frequently explored topic in psychology, and previous research has overwhelmingly shown that individuals view their beliefs and preferences to be more common than they actually are (e.g., Krueger & Clement, 1994). In the present research, we extended previous research on the accuracy of consensus estimates in two key ways. First, we examined the unanswered question of whether liberals perceive their beliefs and preferences to be more unique than they actually are

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among other liberals (i.e., display the *truly false uniqueness effect*). We also examined whether conservatives perceive their beliefs and preferences to be more common than they actually are among other conservatives (i.e., display the *truly false consensus effect*; Krueger & Clement, 1994). Second, we extended previous research by linking the accuracy of consensus estimates to the basic psychological desire to feel unique. Specifically, we propose that a liberal-conservative distinction in estimating one's similarity to political in-group members (i.e., individuals sharing one's political beliefs) stems from a fundamental difference between liberals and conservatives in the desire to feel unique and resist conformity (e.g., Feldman, 2003). In addition, given that motivational differences between liberals and conservatives are not domain specific (i.e., do not solely influence political judgments; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003), we examined the generality of these processes by including items about topics that are related to politics (e.g., beliefs about abortion) and items about topics that are not related (e.g., beliefs about coffee).

Because political moderates constitute a large part of the American population (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2005), we also included moderates in our samples. Moderates act as a reference group in determining whether liberals deviate from the average psychological process (i.e., whether moderates and conservatives show similar effects and differ from liberals) or whether conservatives deviate from the average psychological process (i.e., whether moderates and liberals show similar effects and differ from conservatives). Although existing research on the psychological processes of political moderates is sparse, past research has shown that individuals generally perceive their beliefs to be relatively common unless a strong motivational force drives them to perceive otherwise (e.g., Simon et al., 1997). Thus, we theorized that liberals would underestimate their similarity to other liberals, whereas both moderates and conservatives would overestimate their similarity to others who shared their political beliefs.

Relation of the Desire for Uniqueness to Perceived Similarity and Political Ideology

Although individuals often believe that others hold views similar to their own (e.g., Ross, Greene, & House, 1977), ideological differences in specific psychological motives might lead liberals to underestimate the prevalence of their beliefs and preferences among political in-group members relative to moderates and conservatives. Specifically, we predicted that the motivation to feel unique would explain ideological differences in accurately perceiving similarity to political in-group members. Individuals who have an active motive to feel unique, compared with individuals who lack such a motive, are more likely to endorse a minority (as opposed to a majority) viewpoint (Imhoff & Erb, 2009) and to resist conforming to peer judgments (Duval, 1976). Similarly, individuals who are deprived (vs. not deprived) of feelings of uniqueness (Fromkin, 1968; Simon et al., 1997) or possess a dispositionally stronger need for uniqueness (Kernis, 1984) are less likely to think that other people share their beliefs.

Indirect evidence has also suggested that liberals possess a particularly strong dispositional desire to feel unique. For example, creativity is a means through which people express their uniqueness and individuate the self within the group (Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Schimel, 1999; Rank, 1932/1989), and liberals on average display greater preferences for unconventional and unique expressions of creativity in art and poetry than do conservatives (Dollinger, 2007; Jost et al., 2003; Wilson, Ausman, & Mathews, 1973). In addition, liberals hold more negative attitudes toward conforming to others' beliefs and values than do conservatives (Cavazza & Mucchi-Faina, 2008; Tarr & Lorr, 1991).

Given that individuals who possess a strong desire to feel unique are motivated to hold unique beliefs and preferences (e.g., Fromkin, 1968), and that evidence has suggested that liberals possess a particularly strong desire to feel unique (e.g., Dollinger, 2007), we predicted that (a) liberals would display truly false uniqueness with political in-group members, whereas moderates and conservatives would display truly false consensus with political in-group members; and (b) liberals' greater desire for uniqueness would partially explain why they underestimate the prevalence of their beliefs and preferences among political in-group members relative to moderates and conservatives.

To test these hypotheses, we employed a well-validated methodology for examining truly false consensus and truly false uniqueness effects (Krueger & Zeiger, 1993). In adapting this method to the present research, we developed a procedure in which participants were asked to indicate their beliefs and their preferences for a series of items and then estimate the beliefs and preferences of political in-group members. To test for truly false uniqueness and truly false consensus effects, we compared the extent to which participants perceived that political in-group members shared their beliefs and preferences with the extent to which political in-group members actually shared participants' beliefs and preferences.

Method

We conducted two studies in which participants reported their beliefs and preferences and estimated the beliefs and preferences of political in-group members who were either fellow participants in the study (Study 1) or members of the general American population (Study 2). This

procedure allowed us to examine whether similar patterns of effects would emerge even when participants thought about political in-group members in different contexts. In Study 2, we replicated and extended Study 1 by examining whether the desire to feel unique explains in part ideological differences in estimating similarity to political in-group members. Finally, previous research has shown that individuals perceive more similarity between their own beliefs and those of other individuals (i.e., perceive greater consensus) when the beliefs are socially desirable (e.g., Sherman, Chassin, Presson, & Agostinelli, 1984) or personally important (Crano, 1983). To rule out the possibility that these factors explain ideological differences in perceiving similarity to political in-group members, we measured the perceived social desirability of the items to which participants responded in both studies. In addition, in Study 2, we measured the personal importance of the items to rule out the possibility that this factor would explain ideological differences in perceiving similarity.

Participants

In Study 1, 292 participants (171 women, 121 men; mean age = 35.89 years, range = 18–77), and in Study 2, 287 participants (162 women, 125 men; mean age = 35.36 years, range = 18–82) were recruited from the Mechanical Turk Web site (see Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011, for a discussion of this platform as a research tool; for a full description of the data collection, see Supplemental Analyses in the Supplemental Material available online).

Procedure and materials

Beliefs and preferences. Participants were provided with a link on Mechanical Turk's Web site that took them to the study, which was programmed using Qualtrics online-survey software. Participants read 41 statements and indicated whether they agreed or disagreed with each statement. Drawing from previous research on consensus estimation (e.g., Krueger & Clement, 1994; Simon et al., 1997), we obtained 22 of the statements from the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (Butcher, Dahlstrom, Graham, Tellegen, & Kaemmer, 1989). All Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory items are nonpolitical in nature (example item: "I like poetry"). We created an additional 19 statements, many of which were political in nature (example item: "America should strive to strengthen its military"). All statements are listed in Consensus Items in the Supplemental Material.

Perceived in-group consensus. To measure perceived in-group consensus, we had participants read the same 41 statements in random order on separate pages. For each item, participants were asked to "please estimate the percentage of people who share your political beliefs who would agree with this item." Participants made their estimate using a sliding scale that ranged from 0% to 100%. Participants in Study 1 made this consensus estimate in reference to other participants completing the study, and participants in Study 2 made this estimate in reference to Americans in general.

Perceived social desirability and personal importance of topics in items. Participants were then shown the 41 items again. In Studies 1 and 2, participants indicated the perceived social desirability of endorsing each item; responses were made using scales from 1 (*socially undesirable*) to 9 (*socially desirable*). In Study 2, participants additionally indicated the personal importance of the topic in each item; responses were made using scales from 1 (*not at all important*) to 9 (*very important*).

Political ideology. Following from previous research on the accuracy of consensus estimates (e.g., Krueger & Clement, 1994), we obtained a categorical measure of ideology to assess actual agreement of beliefs and preferences among liberals, moderates, and conservatives (Fox & Williams, 1974; Tetlock, Bernzweig, & Gallant, 1985). Participants selected whether the description of liberal (Study 1: $n = 137$; Study 2: $n = 125$), moderate (Study 1: $n = 93$; Study 2: $n = 96$), or conservative (Study 1: $n = 62$; Study 2: $n = 66$) best applied to them.

Need for uniqueness. Participants in Study 2 completed 11 items from the Need for Uniqueness Scale ($\alpha = .76$; Snyder & Fromkin, 1977); responses were made using scales from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).[1] Higher scores indicate a greater need for uniqueness.

After completing all items, participants were debriefed and paid through their Mechanical Turk accounts.

Results

Analytic strategy

To test for truly false uniqueness and truly false consensus effects, we calculated within-subjects accuracy correlations (see Calculation of Within-Subject Accuracy Correlations in the Supplemental Material; see also Krueger & Zeiger, 1993). To rule out the alternative explanations discussed earlier, we adjusted for the perceived social desirability of endorsing each item (Studies 1 and 2) and the personal importance of the topic in each item (Study 2) when we calculated the within-subject accuracy correlations.[2] As shown in Figure 1, positive correlations indicate overestimating similarity to political in-group members (i.e., truly false consensus), negative correlations indicate underestimating similarity to political in-group members (i.e., truly false uniqueness), and

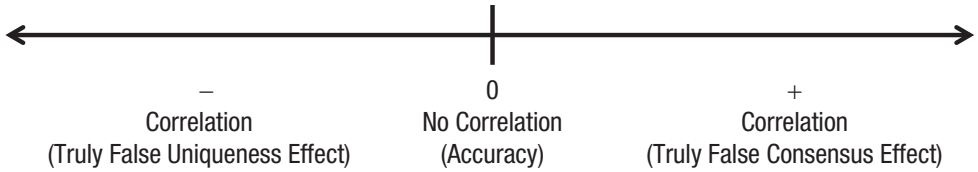

Fig. 1. Schematic showing signs of within-subject accuracy correlations that indicate truly false uniqueness and truly false consensus effects.

no correlation indicates accurately estimating similarity to political in-group members (see also Krueger & Funder, 2004). Following from previous research (e.g., Krueger & Zeiger, 1993; Sanders & Mullen, 1983), we converted the within-subject accuracy correlations to Fisher's z scores that can be used as dependent variables in analyses. The average within-subject correlations (resulting from r-to-z-to-r transformations; see McNemar, 1962) are shown in Table 1 for each ideological group.

To test (a) whether liberals displayed the truly false uniqueness effect and (b) whether the desire to feel unique explained in part why liberals underestimated the prevalence of their beliefs and preferences among political in-group members relative to the extent to which moderates and conservatives overestimated their similarity, we conducted two main analyses with accuracy z scores as the dependent variable. First, we tested the accuracy z scores of liberals, moderates, and conservatives against 0 using two-tailed t tests to determine whether members of each group on average displayed the truly false uniqueness effect, displayed the truly false consensus effect, or were accurate in their estimates (see Fig. 1). Second, we compared liberals' accuracy z scores with the scores of moderates and conservatives to examine whether liberals underestimated the prevalence of their beliefs and preferences among political in-group members relative to the extent to which moderates and conservatives overestimated their similarity. This analysis allowed for an examination of whether liberals differ from moderates and conservatives in the direction in which they inaccurately estimate the degree to which political in-group members share their beliefs. In addition, the examination of liberals' underestimation relative to moderates' and conservatives' overestimation enabled us to further conduct a mediational analysis to test whether liberals' greater need for uniqueness explains in part why they underestimate their similarity to other liberals.

Do liberals show the truly false uniqueness effect?

As shown in Table 1, liberals' average accuracy z scores were significantly below 0 in both studies, $t(136) = -4.88$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.42$ (Study 1) and $t(124) = -3.86$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.35$ (Study 2), which indicates that liberals underestimated their similarity to political in-group members (i.e., displayed the truly false uniqueness effect). As also shown in Table 1, moderates' average accuracy z scores, $t(92) = 2.32$, $p = .02$, $d = 0.24$ (Study 1) and $t(95) = 2.67$, $p = .009$, $d = 0.27$ (Study 2), and conservatives' average accuracy z scores, $t(61) = 3.20$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.41$ (Study 1) and $t(65) = 6.52$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.80$ (Study 2), were significantly above 0 in both studies, which indicates that moderates and conservatives overestimated their similarity to political in-group members (i.e., displayed the truly false consensus effect). Thus, all participants were inaccurate in their consensus estimates, but there were ideological differences in the direction in which participants were inaccurate. Liberals underestimated their similarity to political in-group members, whereas moderates and conservatives overestimated their similarity to political in-group members.

Do liberals underestimate their similarity to political in-group members relative to the extent to which moderates and conservatives overestimate their similarity?

Consistent with Krueger and Clement (1994), we conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with perceiver ideology as the independent variable and accuracy z scores as the dependent variable. In Study 1, there was a main effect of ideology, $F(2, 289) = 19.82$, $p < .001$,

Table 1. Mean Accuracy Correlations as a Function of Perceiver Ideology in Studies 1 and 2

Study	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative
1	$-.09_a$	$.05_b$	$.09_b$
2	$-.09_a$	$.07_b$	$.22_c$

Note: Positive correlations indicate overestimating similarity to political in-group members (i.e., truly false consensus), negative correlations indicate underestimating similarity to political in-group members (i.e., truly false uniqueness), and no correlation indicates accurately estimating similarity. Correlations were adjusted for the perceived social desirability of endorsing each item (Studies 1 and 2) and the personal importance of the topic in each item (Study 2). Within a row, correlations with different subscripts are significantly different ($p < .05$).

η_p^2 = .12. Liberals underestimated their similarity to political in-group members relative to moderates, $t(289) = -4.87$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.57$, and to conservatives, $t(289) = -5.53$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.65$ (see Table 1). Moderates and conservatives did not differ in the accuracy of their estimates, $t(289) = -1.14$, $p = .26$, $d = 0.13$.

Consistent with Study 1, Study 2 showed that there was a significant main effect of ideology, $F(2, 284) = 32.12$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .18$. Liberals underestimated their similarity to political in-group members relative to moderates, $t(284) = -4.44$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.53$, and to conservatives, $t(284) = -7.90$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.94$ (see Table 1). In addition, moderates were less likely to overestimate their similarity to political in-group members relative to conservatives, $t(284) = -3.71$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.44$. These findings confirm our prediction that liberals underestimate the extent to which political in-group members share their beliefs and preferences relative to moderates and conservatives.[3]

Does the need for uniqueness explain ideological differences in truly false uniqueness and truly false consensus?

To examine whether the need for uniqueness explains ideological differences in truly false uniqueness and truly false consensus, in Study 2, we first tested the prediction that liberals would report a stronger need for uniqueness than would moderates and conservatives. We conducted an ANOVA with perceiver ideology as the independent variable and need for uniqueness as the dependent variable. There was a main effect of ideology, $F(2, 284) = 11.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$. Confirming our prediction, results showed that liberals ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.04$) expressed a stronger need for uniqueness than did moderates ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 0.96$), $t(284) = 2.41$, $p = .02$, $d = 0.29$, or conservatives ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.08$), $t(284) = 4.83$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.57$. Moderates also expressed a stronger need for uniqueness than did conservatives, $t(284) = 2.55$, $p = .01$, $d = 0.30$.

We next examined whether the need for uniqueness in part explained why liberals underestimated the prevalence of their beliefs and preferences among political in-group members relative to the extent to which moderates and conservatives overestimated their similarity (see the mediation model in Fig. 2). We used the MEDIATE macro for SPSS (Hayes & Preacher, in press) to test for mediation with ideology as a multicategorical predictor. Liberals were chosen as the reference group for the predictor variable because their responses were consistently different from the responses of moderates and conservatives in all previous analyses. The dependent variable in the model shown in Figure 2—overestimation of consensus—indicates the direction of inaccurate perceptions of in-group consensus. A bootstrap analysis of the significance of the indirect effects of ideology predicting overestimation of in-group consensus through the need for uniqueness yielded 95% confidence intervals (CIs) that did not contain 0 (liberal vs. moderate: 95% CI = [0.0010, 0.0309]; liberal vs. conservative: 95% CI = [0.0036, 0.0570]), which indicated significant mediation ($\alpha = .05$). These results provide support for the conclusion that liberals, compared with moderates and conservatives, underestimated their similarity to political in-group members partially as a result of their greater desire for uniqueness.

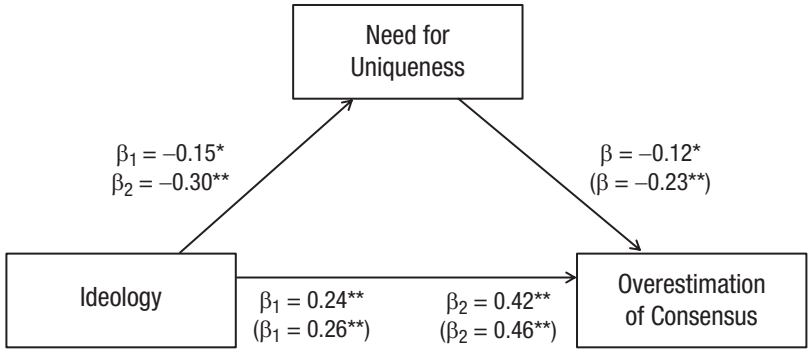

Fig. 2. Mediation model showing the effects of ideology on overestimation of consensus as mediated by the need for uniqueness. β_1 paths indicate the comparison of moderates with liberals, and β_2 paths indicate the comparison of conservatives with liberals (see Hayes & Preacher, in press, for a full description of this analytic strategy for testing mediation with a multicategorical predictor). All values are standardized coefficients. Values in parentheses represent direct relationships; values without parentheses represent relationships after all variables were included in the model. Asterisks show significant paths (*$p < .05$, **$p < .001$).

Discussion

In two studies, we found that liberals underestimated their similarity to other liberals, whereas moderates and conservatives overestimated their similarity to other moderates and conservatives, respectively. In addition, in Study 2, results from a mediational analysis provided support for the idea that liberals underestimated the prevalence of their beliefs and preferences among political in-group members relative to the extent to which moderates and conservatives overestimated their similarity in part because they possess a greater dispositional desire to be unique.

Although researchers have extensively examined the extent to which individuals perceive that others hold beliefs and perceptions similar to their own (e.g., Marks & Miller, 1987), little research has touched on the accuracy of individuals' perceptions of consensus (but see Hoch, 1987; Krueger & Clement, 1994). For example, in a meta-analysis of research on the false-consensus effect, Mullen et al. (1985) pointed out that researchers examining this phenomenon make predictions that have "no direct bearing on whether subjects will overestimate, underestimate, or accurately estimate the actual consensus for their own behavior" (p. 263; see also Krueger, 2007). In other words, researchers do not generally examine whether individuals make erroneous or correct estimates of their similarity to others.

In studies on the accuracy of consensus estimates (i.e., research examining truly false consensus and truly false uniqueness effects), researchers have generally found that individuals overestimate their similarity to others (e.g., Krueger & Zeiger, 1993). In turn, the truly false uniqueness effect has come to be viewed as a scarce and elusive phenomenon (Krueger, 1998; Suls & Wan, 1987). In fact, Krueger and Clement (1994) found that even after they educated participants about the truly false consensus effect and provided them with information about actual consensus, participants still overestimated their similarity to others, which led the authors to describe the truly false consensus effect as "an ineradicable and egocentric bias in social perception" (p. 596). Thus, our finding that liberals underestimated their similarity to other liberals both extends previous research findings regarding individuals who underestimate their similarity to in-group members and sets liberals apart from moderates and conservatives, given liberals' failing to display the generally observed, though understudied, tendency to overestimate one's similarity to others. In addition, our finding that liberals, compared with moderates and conservatives, underestimate their similarity to political in-group members in part because they possess a strong desire to feel unique underscores the role that dispositional motivations play in the accuracy of consensus estimates.

In the future, researchers could examine the boundary conditions of the present findings to determine exactly when the observed effects will and will not occur. For example, through measuring and systematically altering the amount of information individuals have about the beliefs of in-group members, researchers could examine how much information about in-group members' beliefs must be provided for liberals to no longer underestimate their similarity to other liberals, as well as for moderates and conservatives to no longer overestimate their respective similarity to other moderates and conservatives. Moreover, researchers could examine whether the type of group (e.g., political or nonpolitical) to which individuals estimate their similarity affects the extent to which liberals underestimate their similarity and conservatives overestimate their similarity. It is possible that liberals' desire to feel unique and conservatives' desire to conform play a pivotal role when individuals estimate similarity to political in-group members but that the influence of these motives would be attenuated if the group in reference did not activate these motivational concerns. We believe that these are interesting questions for future research.

In the present research, we examined one motivational factor, the dispositional desire to feel unique, which in part explained ideological differences in the accuracy of similarity estimates. However, liberals and conservatives differ on a variety of dispositional motivations (e.g., need for closure and uncertainty avoidance; Jost et al., 2003) that likely also in part explain why liberals and conservatives differ in the accuracy of their similarity estimates. Future research could examine the multiple underlying processes that explain ideological differences in accurately estimating similarity to political in-group members by testing models that include multiple simultaneous mediators.

The present findings also have important implications for mobilization within political movements. Specifically, perceiving consensus within a group's ranks mobilizes individuals toward social change (e.g., van Zomeren et al., 2004). Thus, liberals' greater desire for uniqueness likely undermines their ability to capitalize on the consensus that actually exists within their ranks and hinders successful group mobilization, whereas moderates' and conservatives' weaker desire to feel unique (i.e., greater desire to conform) could work to their advantage by allowing them to perceive consensus that does not actually exist and, in turn, rally their base. This question could be tested in future research.

In the present research, we have shown that ideological differences in basic psychological motives affect the extent to which individuals accurately perceive their similarity to others who share their political beliefs. In recent years, America has seen the demise of media outlets in

which liberal commentators and listeners provided similar positions on political issues (e.g., Air America), whereas their conservative counterparts (e.g., *The Rush Limbaugh Show* on the radio and *The O'Reilly Factor* on television) continue to thrive and create influential political discourse.[4] The present research suggests that the failure of media outlets that promote consensual opinions among liberals may be due in part to liberals' greater desire to develop beliefs and preferences unique from those of other liberals. As political movements like Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party continue to develop over the coming years, dispositional motivations associated with the political ideologies of the movements' members could inform the extent to which members accurately perceive the consensus that exists within their ranks and ultimately affect the groups' ability to strive toward and successfully achieve collective goals.

Author Contributions

All authors developed the study concept and contributed to the study design. C. Stern and P. G. Schmitt performed the testing and collected the data. C. Stern analyzed and interpreted the data under the supervision of T. V. West. C. Stern drafted the manuscript. T. V. West and P. G. Schmitt critically revised the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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Supplemental Material

Additional supporting information may be found at http://pss.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data

Notes

1. Items were taken from Factor 2 of the Need for Uniqueness Scale (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977) because this factor most closely reflects the desire to express uniqueness and eschew conformity.
2. The overall pattern of results is consistent when no covariates are included in the calculation of the within-subjects correlations.
3. The overall pattern of results is similar for political and nonpolitical items. A full report of the results, separated by item type, is included in Supplemental Analyses in the Supplemental Material.
4. We thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this example to our attention.

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