



Ideology and International Relations

DOI:

[10.1016/j.cobeha.2020.03.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2020.03.006)

Document Version

Accepted author manuscript

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Gries, P. H., & Yam, P. C. (2020). Ideology and International Relations. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 34, 135–141. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2020.03.006>

Published in:

Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences

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Ideology and International Relations

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“revise and resubmit”

For Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences

special issue on “[Political Ideologies](#)”

edited by John Jost, Eran Halperin, Kristin Laurin

ABSTRACT

What is the relationship between ideology and international relations (IR)? The extant literature focuses on how the former shapes the latter. Confrontation between Liberalism and Fascism, Communism, and Authoritarianism have sequentially structured IR over the past Century. While such all-encompassing Ideologies may *unify* the people of different nations in (often opposing) worldviews, liberal/left and conservative/right ideologies can *divide* citizens within nations. Dimensions of ideology like social dominance orientation and right-wing authoritarianism also shape international attitudes in distinct ways. These individual-level ideologies and their attendant worldviews shape state-level foreign policies and system-level IR (the micro-macro link) through elite decision-making and public opinion. An emerging literature also reverses the causal arrow, exploring how health, terrorism and other system-level threats can shape individual-level ideologies. This review reveals how ideologies powerfully shape the very worlds that we experience and act upon—and their vital role in driving war and peace.

INTRODUCTION

Does ideology—widely shared and comprehensive theories about how the world does and should work—shape international relations (IR)? And do system-level international affairs shape individual-level ideologies? Political scientists have long been sceptical. In 1964 Phillip Converse claimed that most Americans lack coherent ideologies and foreign policy attitudes [1]. In the over half a century since then, US public opinion scholars and pollsters like Northwestern’s Benjamin Page [2] and Pew’s Andy Kohut [3] have dismissed ideology’s effects on even individual-level international attitudes. Most IR theory today, meanwhile, focuses on the system-level, such as the Realist focus on how the objective balance of military and economic power between states drives war or peace [4], or the Constructivist focus on how (anthropomorphized) states actively make their worlds. Mainstream political science, therefore, largely dismisses any significant impact of individuals (elites or broad publics) and their ideologies on IR.

In 2006, John Jost declared an “end of the end” of ideology in social psychology, arguing that two decades of work on ideologies like social dominance orientation (SDO) and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) was coming together into a coherent research program [5]. Since then,

psychological research on the effects of ideology has extended well beyond the study of racial and gender relations within societies to the study of international attitudes. A small group of political scientists, meanwhile, have begun exploring the psychological micro-foundations of IR [6], sometimes touching on ideology.

[Figure 1 HERE]

Figure 1 integrates ideologies, international attitudes, and international relations into a single conceptual model that structures this review. We begin with path a: how individual-level ideologies both unite and divide us in our worldviews. “Big I” all-encompassing Ideologies like Liberalism, Fascism, Communism, and Authoritarianism can unite fellow nationals in their worldviews—and have powerfully shaped IR over the past century. “Small i” ideologies nonetheless differentiate the worldviews of liberals/left and conservatives/right within nations. Such unidimensional approaches to conceptualizing and measuring ideology have been joined by multidimensional approaches, exploring the differential effects of ideologies like SDO and RWA on international attitudes. Does the impact of these ideologies on worldviews matter for IR? We then review research on the micro-macro link: how individual-level ideologies and their consequent worldviews shape state-level foreign policies (path b), and ultimately system-level IR (path d). The final section reverses the causal arrow, briefly reviewing path c: “conservative shift” and other research on the *effects* of system-level international affairs such as terrorism and global financial and health crises on individual-level ideologies.

Figure 1 also delimits the scope of this review by focusing our gaze on paths a, b, and c. (Path d is not explored here, as it is closer to the field of foreign policy analysis than the study of ideology.) Ideologies are theories or systems of *beliefs* and not identities, so we do not explore the literature on how partisan identifications / party politics shapes foreign policy. They are also *comprehensive* theories, simplifying our complex social, economic, and political worlds so we can make sense of them. We do not, therefore, explore the literature on the structure of foreign policy attitudes, which is too narrow a set of beliefs to include in a parsimonious review of ideology.

Finally, because ideologies are *descriptive* and *prescriptive*, they powerfully shape both the world that we apprehend, and the world order that we desire—revealing the indispensability of a political psychology of IR. Mainstream Realist approaches largely reduce IR to the objective distribution of dollars and rockets in the world system. Social constructivist approaches move beyond this materialism, but remain at the system-level, exploring how anthropomorphized states actively construct their worlds. The study of ideology shifts our gaze to the individual-level, allowing us to interrogate why we too often experience and desire different worlds, contributing to international conflict.

LIBERALISM, FASCISM, COMMUNISM, AND AUTHORITARIANISM

“Big I” all-embracing Ideologies unite the people of different nations in (sometimes opposing) worldviews. Ideological differences between nations can heighten their perception of mutual threat, increasing the odds of great power conflict [7]. Liberalism comprehensively celebrates

individual freedom, from the democratic citizen (politics) and capitalist entrepreneur (economics) to the Protestant believer (religion), with his direct relationship with God. First Liberalism vs. Fascism and then Liberalism vs. Communism structured 20th Century IR. Conflict between the Allied and Axis powers before and during World War II (1939-45), and then between the Western and Eastern Blocs during the Cold War (1946-91) were more than geopolitical rivalries; they were intensified by conflicting Liberal, Fascist, and Communist views about how the world does and should work. All-inclusive Ideologies are increasingly shaping IR in the 21st Century as well, with Liberalism confronting a rising Authoritarianism in China and Russia. With a “Beijing Consensus” of Authoritarian Capitalism pit against a “Washington Consensus” of Liberal Democracy, there is less common ground in the worlds that we experience and desire.

IR theorists, however, have largely ignored Ideology. Materialists have favoured the study of geopolitics, while constructivists have focused more on identity. Historians have led the way in filling the gap. In a pioneering book, Michael Hunt argued that Ideology has consistency guided US foreign policy [8**]. Chen Jian has argued that a Communist Ideology of “continuous revolution” profoundly shaped Cold War China’s domestic *and* international politics [9]. More recently, Hal Brands has argued that competing Ideologies are central to the nascent confrontation between Liberalism and Authoritarianisms [10].

Within IR, Democratic Peace (DP) Theorists have been the primary exception to the rule, exploring how Liberal Ideology shapes war/peace. Building on the work of Immanuel Kant [11], and focusing on the meso, state-level, Michael Doyle [12], Bruce Russett [13] and others have theorized that democracies don’t usually fight each other because of their shared Liberal values of compromise and non-violence. Recent work, however, has begun exploring the micro, individual-level foundations of the DP, such as the relative pacifism of democratic citizens [14], the underlying drivers of both international amity and enmity among democratic publics [15], and why democracies are more likely to act covertly when aggressing against fellow democracies [16].

LIBERALS, CONSERVATIVES, AND THE WORLD

Small “i” ideologies divide us. Liberals and conservatives differ fundamentally in their views of human nature. For liberals, man is born good, so can make the world a better place; for conservatives, human nature is essentially flawed, so laws and traditions are needed to protect us from ourselves. Much work in psychology conceptualizes and measures ideology on a *unidimensional* liberal/left–conservative/right continuum [17]. This research initially focused on the epistemic (i.e. certainty), existential (i.e. security), and relational (i.e. solidarity) needs *causing* the liberal-conservative divide [17,18*].

More recent research has explored the *consequences* of liberal-conservative ideological differences for IR [19*]. In general, greater conservative needs for certainty and security are associated with preferences for tougher foreign policies to ensure cultural dominance and national security. For instance, conservatives have been found to be more likely than liberals to oppose immigration [20–23], prefer exclusionary solutions to the Syrian refugee crisis [24],

support lethal drone strikes [25], and dislike Iran and the Palestinians [26]. They are also more tolerant of enemy collateral casualties in conflicts [27], and more opposed to affording human rights protections to terrorists [28]. Conservatives are particularly sensitive to the threats and uncertainties that bias IR-related information processing [18]. For example, they are more likely to perceive Syrian refugees as terrorists, and to view their enemies as less physically formidable, so more easily defeated through force [29*]. Positive contact with immigrants is also less likely to improve conservative views of them [21].

Greater needs for security and certainty contribute to conservative rationalizations of the status quo as fair and legitimate (cf. [17]), including in IR. Conservatives are less willing to act against foreign human rights violations [30], and are less supportive of foreign economic aid [19*, 31,32]. They also tend to defend the existing economic system, and downplay climate change [33].

Liberals and conservatives also differ in their moral foundations [34], contributing to differences in their foreign policy preferences. For instance, liberals value care/compassion more than conservatives, extending their “circle of empathy” further. Greater compassion is associated with greater liberal than conservative support for immigrants [19*,20], the UN [19*], and humanitarian interventions abroad [19*,35*]—and opposition to Brexit [36]. Stronger in-group loyalty and deference to authority among conservatives help account for their greater support for the use of military force [19*], nuclear weapons [37], and greater opposition to immigration [19*,20].

DIMENSIONS OF IDEOLOGY

A growing body of research takes a multidimensional approach to ideology. The predominant approach pits cultural (RWA) against socioeconomic (SDO) dimensions [38,39]. RWA [40] is rooted in a view of the world as a dangerous place, heightening deference to authority, cultural traditions, and the status quo; SDO [41] is rooted in a “competitive jungle” worldview, resulting in greater support for social hierarchies and acceptance of inequalities.

These distinct ideologies differentially shape international attitudes. Those high on RWA are more likely to view other states as hostile and prefer hawkish/conservative foreign policies [42,43] and adopt pro-torture attitudes against terrorists [44]. In the US, the “traditionalism” facet of RWA, which focuses on “culture war” issues like sex and drugs, and is strongly associated with the biblical literalism of the Christian Right [45**], has been associated with hostility towards “Red” China (for its “Godless” communism), secular France and Germany (for being sexually permissive), and Mexico for Hispanic immigration’s threat a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) American identity [19*,20]. Those high in SDO are more likely to view international affairs in zero-sum terms, such as opposing free trade if it benefits a trading-partner, reducing the relative advantage for one’s own country [46]. SDO is also a unique predictor of Americans’ negative feelings towards coloured countries in Latin America, the Middle East, and East Asia—but not the white countries of Europe [19*].

The mapping of RWA and SDO onto the social and economic domains is less than perfect, however. Preferences for free trade and economic protectionism can be a result of concerns

about the country's financial stability (as reflected in RWA). Likewise, terrorism and immigration can pose threats to a country's dominance and competitiveness (as reflected in SDO). Indeed, SDO has predicted fear of terrorism and support for counter-terrorism policies like border control [47], while RWA has been associated with economic protectionism [48*] and opposition to free trade [49]. Interestingly, some studies have found *opposite* effects of RWA and SDO on economic issues ([49], see [50*] for an explanation)**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

HOW IDEOLOGY SHAPES INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Do individual-level ideologies and international attitudes actually shape state-level foreign policies and IR? The micro-macro link (path b) between ideology and IR operates both *directly* through the decisions foreign policy elites make, and *indirectly* through the influence of public opinion on those same elite decision-makers.

First, elite politicians are not aliens completely divorced from the publics they represent; socialized within the same national contexts, they share similar ideologies and international attitudes as their constituents. For instance, US President Woodrow Wilson's progressive vision for a postwar League of Nations cannot be understood apart from the Social Gospel. "Wilsonianism was essentially an expression of Christian reformism," historian Andrew Preston thoughtfully writes, "simply because Wilson could not escape who he was" [45**]. Similarly, President George W. Bush's reaction to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks is best understood through his "born-again" Christian view of evil—and the need to respond to it with force [19*]. With its focus on states and the international system, IR scholarship has long neglected the role of individual leaders. As scholars "bring the statesmen back" into the study of foreign policy and IR [51], their worldview-shaping ideologies should be central to that project (e.g. [52]).

Second, ideology also has an *indirect* impact on foreign policy via public opinion. An early longitudinal analysis of survey data revealed that changes in American public opinion on international affairs regularly *preceded* changes in U.S. foreign policy [53]. Mechanisms of causation were soon sought in the same "political responsiveness" that characterizes the making of domestic policies in democracies: self-interested politicians, attuned to the "electoral connection," are *responsive* to the views of those who elect them [54,55*]. Democratic publics also *select* through voting for political leaders who deliver foreign policies that align with their own ideologically shaped preferences [55*, 56], especially when a political opposition can act as whistleblower, conveying foreign policy information to the media [57].

More recent work in political science on the foreign policy preferences of left- and right-wing governments reflects work on the psychological underpinnings of liberal (e.g. welfare and fairness) and conservative (e.g. order and security) ideologies [17]**Error! Bookmark not defined.** Right-wing governments are associated with greater state aggression [58*]. Right-wing legislators vote more to support military deployments [59] and increase military budgets [60]. Left-leaning governments, by contrast, are more likely to favour spending on foreign aid than on the military [61]. These ideological effects are not reducible to partisanship. For instance, over

the past half century, ideological polarization has uniquely predicted voting in the US Senate over foreign policy, beyond the effects of the usual jockeying for partisan advantage [62].

Has the rise of social media shaped the micro-macro link (path b) between ideology and IR? Scholarship in US political communication has long dismissed the American public as 1) ignorant of both ideology and the world [1], and therefore 2) reliant upon top-down cues from partisan political elites [63] and/or the traditional media [64] to acquire their international attitudes. The overwhelming evidence presented above that American and other publics possess both coherent ideologies and attendant worldviews (path a) challenges this predominant “ignorant of ideology and the world” view. And the emergence of bottom-up social media challenges an exclusively top-down model. Today, social media users increasingly self-select news about the world aligned with their ideologies [65]. This could limit access to the information publics needed to constrain their leaders, *weakening* the micro-macro link [66]. Conversely, it could be that in the Age of Twitter, political elites are becoming more attuned to the worldviews and desires of their core constituents, *tightening* the “electoral connection.” More research is needed on the relationships between ideology, social media, and international relations.

THE ‘FIRST IMAGE’ REVERSED: HOW THE WORLD SHAPES IDEOLOGY

Research on ideology and IR has begun to explore not just how ideology shapes IR, but also how system-level IR shapes individual-level ideologies (path c). For over half a century, IR theorists have analytically distinguished between first (individual), second (state/domestic politics), and third (international system) “images” or levels of analysis to explain IR, with the latter (third, system-level) dominating explanations of IR over the past 40 years [4]. A “second image reversed” approach, however, first explored not how domestic politics shapes IR (second image), but how IR shapes domestic politics [67]. More recently, IR scholars have begun exploring a “first image reversed”—not how individuals shape IR (first image) but how IR shapes individuals, such as the effects of war on ex-combatants, and the effects of exposure to violence on victimized communities [6].

Psychologists have similarly begun exploring how international affairs can shape individual-level ideologies. Much of this research centres on the “conservative-shift” hypothesis: threatening events may make people more conservative ideologically to cope with anxiety and insecurity (cf. [18*,68]). Studies of “conservative-shift” after actual terrorist attacks have provided mixed results. Research suggests that terrorist attacks contribute to increased self-reported levels of RWA and SDO [69], the endorsement of right-wing political attitudes such as prejudice against Muslims and immigrants [70*,71], and even support for torture against terrorists [44]. But other studies argued that “conservative shift” was either non-significant [72,73], or more pronounced among liberals [74,75]. Intergroup emotions may help reconcile these mixed results. A two-wave panel study before and after the Charlie Hebdo Attacks in 2015 Paris found that different emotions (anxiety and anger) differentially predicted conservative shift among those on the left and the right, respectively [70*].

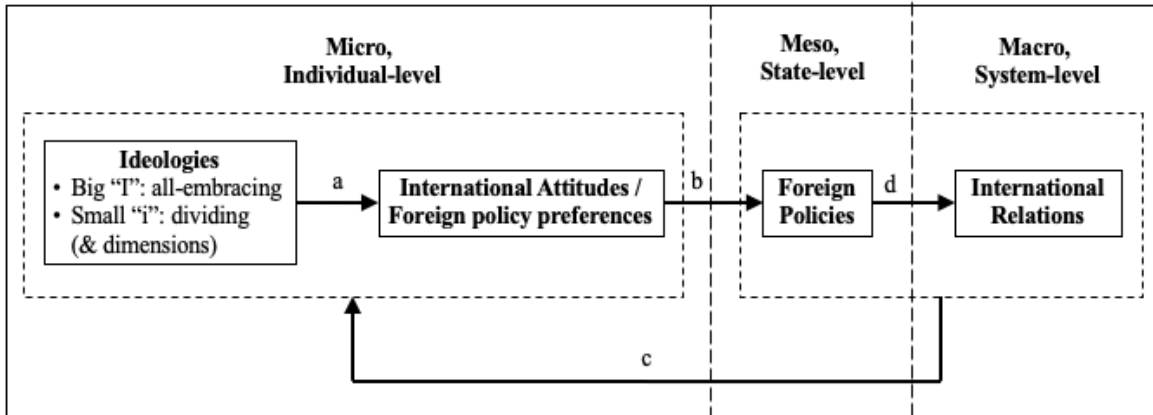
Other threatening real-world events also shape ideology. Ecological stressors like disease, harsh climates, wildfires and earthquakes can produce politically conservative people who prefer hierarchy and authoritarianism [76*]. The prevalence of disease-causing pathogens in a region predicts the pervasiveness of authoritarian personalities there—and the emergence of authoritarian governments [77]. The threat of Ebola outbreaks was associated with increased support for conservative political candidates in elections [78]. Similarly, financial crises are consistently followed by increases in support for far-right political parties [79]. Conversely, in the absence of threat, liberal shift also appears possible. Priming participants with physical safety leads conservatives to become more liberal socially (but not economically) [80], suggesting that periods of world peace could lessen ideological divides.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In 2020, we can safely declare an “end to the beginning” of the study of the relationship between ideology and IR. Psychologists and political scientists are beginning to pull together different strands of research on how individual-level ideologies shape international attitudes and foreign policy preferences (path a), and how these subsequently shape state-level foreign policy making (path b) and IR (the micro-macro linkage). They have also begun flipping the causal arrow, exploring how terrorist, financial, health and other threats arising from the world system shape individual-level ideologies (path c, the macro-micro linkage).

More work is needed on the mechanisms of micro-macro linkage, especially in authoritarian countries that lack an “electoral connection.” In general, the literature is US and Eurocentric, with little work on ideology outside the West, and less still on the relationship between ideology and IR outside the West (cf. [81]). Today, as Liberalism confronts the rise of Authoritarianism, and ideological polarization continues within Western democracies, the study of ideology and IR cannot be content with the generation and refinement of theory. Interventions are urgently needed to decrease the odds that clashing ideologies will again contribute to conflict.

Figure 1: Ideologies, International Attitudes, and International Relations, an Integrative Model



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