My Country, Right or Wrong:
Activating System Justification Motivation Eliminates the
Liberal-Conservative Gap in Patriotic Attachment

Jojanneke van der Toorn,\textsuperscript{a} Paul R. Nail,\textsuperscript{b} Ido Liviatan,\textsuperscript{c} and John T. Jost\textsuperscript{d}

\textsuperscript{a} Corresponding author
Department of Psychology, Yale University, P.O. Box 208205, New Haven, CT 06520, USA
Email: j.vandertoorn@yale.edu, Phone: +1-917-293-1216

\textsuperscript{b} Department of Psychology and Counseling, University of Central Arkansas, 201 Donaghey Ave., Conway, AR 72035, USA. Email: pnail@uca.edu, Phone: +1-501-450-5414

\textsuperscript{c} Department of Education and Psychology, Open University, Israel
Email: idoli@openu.ac.il, Phone: +972-9-7781316

\textsuperscript{d} Department of Psychology, New York University, 6 Washington Place, New York, NY 10003, USA. Email: john.jost@nyu.edu, Phone: +1-212-998-7665
Abstract

Ideological differences in nationalism and patriotism are well-known and frequently exploited, but the question of why conservatives exhibit stronger national attachment than liberals has been inadequately addressed. Drawing on theories of system justification and political ideology as motivated social cognition, we proposed that increased patriotic attachment is one means of satisfying system justification goals. Thus, we hypothesized that temporarily activating system justification motivation should raise national attachment among liberals to the level of conservatives. Three experiments conducted in New York, Arkansas, and Wisconsin support this hypothesis. In the first two experiments, liberals exhibited weaker national attachment than conservatives in the absence of system justification activation, consistent with prior research. However, exposure to system criticism (Experiment 1) and system-level injustice (Experiment 2) caused liberals to exhibit stronger national attachment, eliminating the ideological gap. Using a system dependence manipulation in Experiment 3, this pattern was conceptually replicated with respect to patriotic but not nationalistic attachment, as hypothesized. Thus, chronic and temporary variability in system justification motivation helps to explain when liberals and conservatives do (and do not) differ in terms of national attachment and why.

Keywords: Political ideology; motivation; patriotism; nationalism; system justification

Highlights: *In the absence of system justification activation, conservatives exhibit stronger national attachment than liberals. *Activating system justification motivation eliminates the ideological gap by strengthening national attachment among liberals. *This effect is specific to patriotic (rather than nationalistic) attachment. *Converging evidence is provided using highly diverse samples, contexts, and methodological operations.
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‘My country, right or wrong’ is a thing no patriot would ever think of saying except in a
desperate case. It is like saying ‘My mother, drunk or sober.’

(G.K. Chesterton, 1901/2005, p. 68)

It is a truism of street politics and social science that national attachment is stronger on
the political right than the left (e.g., Bealey, 1999; Karasawa, 2002; Schatz, Staub, & Lavine,
1999). Accordingly, a recent Gallup Poll found that 48% of self-identified conservatives in the
U.S. described themselves as “extremely patriotic,” in comparison with only 19% of liberals
(Morales, 2010). Although these differences are well-known and frequently exploited for
partisan gain (e.g., Fahey, 2007), the question of why conservatives exhibit greater patriotism
than liberals has not been seriously addressed at the level of social, personality, or political
psychology. Given that national attachment is seen as providing the basic foundations for
society (Bar-Tal & Staub, 1997) and exerts profound effects on policy preferences (Kosterman
& Feshbach, 1989) and social and political attitudes (Billig, 1995; Blank & Schmidt, 2003;
Sidanius, Feshbach, Levin, & Pratto, 1997; Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006), the psychological
origins and dynamics of ideological differences in national attachment should be of great
theoretical and practical interest.

In this article we draw on system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994) and the
theory of political conservatism as motivated social cognition (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, &
Sulloway, 2003) to explain the ideological gap in national attachment. Specifically, we propose
that conservatives possess an especially strong attachment to their nation insofar as it provides
one means of attaining a chronic psychological goal to justify (or vindicate) the existing social system and to defend it against criticism or attack (cf. Jost & Hunyady, 2005). However, circumstances that temporarily activate the system justification goal should increase national attachment (especially patriotic attachment) among liberals and others who are not typically as attached to national symbols and institutions. Indeed, Gallup Polls conducted in the years after 9/11—an event that apparently produced heightened levels of system justification motivation (e.g., see Jost et al., 2010, pp. 183-4; Nail & McGregor, 2009; Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007)—found that 70% of Americans overall (and 57% of liberals) described themselves as “very” or “extremely patriotic” (Carroll, 2005). Although survey data such as these are suggestive of the possibility that conditions that increase system justification motivation would reduce or eliminate the ideological gap, an experimental approach is needed to isolate the causal effects of system justification motivation on national attachment among liberals and conservatives. Using convergent methods to activate system justification motivation, we conducted a series of experiments in New York, Arkansas, and Wisconsin to address just this possibility. These three states differ considerably in terms of their political and cultural contexts. According to the results of extensive Gallup polling, New York is one of the 10 most “liberal” states, Arkansas is one of the 10 most “conservative” states, and Wisconsin is between the two (see Jones, 2011). To the extent that similar effects are observed in these three contexts, the results may be considered to be highly generalizable, at least in terms of the United States frame of reference.

Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition

In a meta-analytic review of 88 studies, which were carried out in 12 countries over a 44-year period, Jost and colleagues (2003) observed that left-right (or liberal-conservative) political orientation was linked to situational and dispositional variability in epistemic and
existential needs to reduce and manage uncertainty and threat. For example, the adoption of a conservative (vs. liberal) orientation was associated with greater intolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity, less openness to new experiences, and stronger needs for order, structure, and closure (see also Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling, & Ha, 2010). Conservatism was also associated with more intense perceptions of danger, threat, and death anxiety. These basic findings have since been replicated and extended in a variety of ways with respect to attitudinal, behavioral, and physiological (including neurocognitive) orientations toward uncertainty and threat (e.g., Amodio, Jost, Master, & Yee, 2007; Federico, Ergun, Hunt, & Kurowski, 2011; Jost, Napier, et al., 2007; Kanai, Feilden, Firth, & Rees, 2011; Matthews, Levin, & Sidanius, 2009; Nail, McGregor, Drinkwater, Steele, & Thompson, 2009; Oxley et al., 2008; Shook & Fazio, 2009). More pertinent to the current investigation, research has also substantiated Jost et al.’s (2003) suggestion that political conservatism is associated with system justification motivation, that is, the desire to defend, bolster, and justify existing social, economic, and political arrangements (see Jost & Banaji, 1994). Thus, conservatives score higher on various scales designed to measure system justification tendencies (including the rationalization of inequality), and they also exhibit implicit as well as explicit preferences for order, stability, tradition, and conformity over chaos, flexibility, progress, and rebelliousness (Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008; see also Matthews et al., 2009; Napier & Jost, 2008).

Situational Activation of System Justification Motivation

While system justification tendencies differ between individuals, such as between liberals and conservatives, contextual variability in system justification motivation has also been observed. Several experiments have shown that criticisms of the social system (i.e., threats to its stability and legitimacy) lead people to display more conservative, system-justifying tendencies,
such as the use of stereotypes to rationalize inequality in society (Jost, Kivetz, Rubini, Guermandi, & Mosso, 2005; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005; Lau, Kay, & Spencer, 2008; Ledgerwood, Mandisodza, Jost, & Pohl, 2011; Liviatan & Jost, 2011; Wakslak, Jost, & Bauer, 2011). Similarly, threats to the perception that the social system is fair and just tend to stimulate compensatory efforts to justify or rationalize extant outcomes, consistent with just world theorizing (e.g., Feinberg & Willer, 2011; Hafer & Bègue, 2005; Lerner, 1980; Nail et al., 2009). Finally, situational manipulations of system dependence (e.g., emphasizing the extent to which one’s quality of life depends upon the nation or government) also activate system justification motivation and produce effects that are parallel to those elicited by criticisms of the system (e.g., Kay et al., 2009; Laurin, Shepherd, & Kay, 2010; see also Van der Toorn, Tyler, & Jost, 2011).

It follows, then, that although there are rather strong individual differences between liberals and conservatives in terms of system justification tendencies, the situational activation of system justification motivation may erase such ideological differences. Insofar as nearly everyone is motivated to maintain the legitimacy of the societal status quo (cf. Jost & Banaji, 1994)—situational triggers such as exposure to system criticism, system-level injustice, and system dependence should activate motivated system defense (including expressions of national attachment) even, or perhaps especially, for those who are generally disinclined to justify the system, thereby reducing differences between liberals and conservatives.

Indeed, some evidence suggests that system justification goals may be triggered momentarily and lead those who are chronically low on system justification motivation to exhibit the same system-justifying tendencies as those who are chronically high (Banfield, Kay, Cutright, Wu, & Fitzsimons, 2011; Jost et al., 2005; Ledgerwood et al., 2011). Most notably,
Banfield et al. (2011) showed that exposure to system criticism caused low (but not high) system-justifiers to be more supportive of the organizational status quo and more likely to prefer domestic over foreign consumer products. A parallel set of observations has emerged in research on authoritarianism. Specifically, Hetherington and Suhay (2011) found that perceived threat from terrorism is associated with greater support for restrictions on civil liberties and the “war on terror” for low but not high authoritarians (who are already in favor of restrictive, aggressive policy stances). In addition, Nail and colleagues (2009) found that liberals’ attitudes concerning capital punishment, abortion, and homosexuality were more “reactive” to (i.e., affected by) a situational manipulation of mortality salience threat, in comparison with the attitudes of conservatives, who tend to be chronically affected by death anxiety (Jost et al., 2003, 2007). Our present line of thinking is comparable in nature.

National Attachment as a Means of Attaining the System Justification Goal

Consistent with an analysis of ideology as motivated social cognition, we hypothesize that strengthening one’s attachment to the nation provides a means of attaining the goal of system justification (Carter, Ferguson, & Hassin, 2011), defined as the motivated defense of (in this case) national institutions, arrangements, and authority figures (see also Liviatan & Jost, 2011). National attachment is typically understood to represent love for and pride in one’s country (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989). It is associated with loyalty and commitment to the welfare of one’s national group and a willingness to contribute to its success even at some personal cost. Insofar as it involves mobilizing mental (and perhaps material) resources in the service of protecting the nation against both symbolic and material threats, national attachment may represent a straightforward means of attaining the system justification goal. Consistent with this idea, numerous experiments have demonstrated that criticisms and other threats directed at
the national system elicit defensive efforts to maintain the perception that the system is legitimate and good (Banfield et al., 2011; Kay et al., 2005; Liviatan & Jost, 2011; Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007; Wakslak et al., 2011).

National attachment might also help to satisfy the epistemic, existential, and relational needs that are theorized to underlie the system justification goal (Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008). For example, it has been suggested that identification with one’s national group reduces uncertainty (Hogg, 2007), provides a sense of security (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997), and helps people feel connected to others in their group (Brewer, 1991). Thus, strengthening one’s national attachment might not only fulfill the proximal system justification goal, but also more distal needs that underlie system justification strivings (see also Carter et al., 2011).

The Distinction between Patriotism and Nationalism

It has been noted often that identification with or attachment to one’s country can take various forms. The most common distinction made in political science is between two types of national attachment, namely nationalism and patriotism. While both imply a subjectively positive identification with the nation, customary usage is such that nationalism involves “a perception of national superiority and an orientation toward national dominance” (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989, p. 271), whereas patriotism does not (see also Blank & Schmidt, 2003; Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, Halevy, & Eidelson, 2008; Schatz & Staub, 1997). Although nationalism and patriotism are positively correlated, they are differentially related to specific policy opinions (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989), attitudes toward minorities (Blank & Schmidt, 2003; Sidanius et al., 1997), reactions to moral violations committed by ingroup members (Roccas et al., 2006), and political ideologies (Karasawa, 2002; Schatz et al., 1999).
Because we conceptualize the relationship between national attachment and system justification motivation (and its underlying epistemic, existential, and relational needs) as a means-goal association, the question of whether patriotism and/or nationalism serve as effective means of legitimizing the country (and what it stands for) may be answered only in connection with an individual’s political ideology. Insofar as nationalism involves antipathy toward other countries, there is reason to assume that liberals will find it to be far more objectionable than patriotism. Consistent with this idea, Schatz et al. (1999) reported that the gap between liberals and conservatives was far greater for “blind patriotism” (an analogue of nationalism) than “constructive patriotism.” Karasawa (2002), too, found that internationalism was a hallmark of liberal (but not conservative) ideology. To the extent that nationalism is at odds with liberal ideology, we might expect that for liberals it would not serve as an acceptable means of fulfilling system justification motivation, even in response to system criticism, injustice threats, or system dependence. Thus, we would expect that temporary activation of system justification motivation would reduce liberal-conservative differences in patriotism but not nationalism. This specific hypothesis was tested in our third and final experiment.

Overview of Research

Previous research in political science on so-called “rally effects” has focused on surges in presidential approval ratings during times of societal-level threat (e.g., Brody & Shapiro, 1989; Mueller, 1970). To our knowledge, no previous study has investigated the hypothesis we address here, namely that temporary activation of system justification motivation would reduce or eliminate liberal-conservative differences with respect to patriotic attachment. Perhaps the closest precedent was conducted by Lambert and colleagues (2010), who found that participants rated a variety of patriotic symbols (e.g., the United States, statue of liberty, and American flag)
as more favorable after watching video footage of the 9/11 terrorist attacks (compared to a control condition). The authors noted that this main effect was not moderated by participants’ right-wing authoritarianism scores, but the sample “contained a large percentage of ‘superliberals’ who walked into the laboratory with intense dislike toward the sitting president at the time, George W. Bush” (p. 889). Thus, the findings of this experiment are consistent with the notion that system threat increases patriotic sentiment primarily among liberals. Similarly, Moskalenko, McCauley, and Rozin (2006) found that (predominantly liberal) college students scored higher on national identification soon after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (vs. before), but they did not investigate the possibility that political orientation would moderate such effects.

In the present research program, we examine potential interaction effects between liberalism-conservatism and strength of system justification motivation with the aim of shedding light on the psychological processes that help to explain when liberals and conservatives will (and will not) differ in terms of national attachment and why. In three experiments conducted in diverse political and cultural contexts, we investigated the hypothesis that liberals would exhibit weaker national attachment than conservatives in the absence of system justification activation, but that liberals would increase to the level of conservatives under experimental conditions that heighten system justification motivation (Hypothesis 1). In Experiments 1 and 2, we tested this prediction using convergent manipulations of system justification activation and divergent measures of national identification. In Experiment 3, we distinguished empirically between patriotic and nationalistic forms of attachment to determine whether the liberal increase in national attachment following the activation of system justification motivation would be specific to patriotic (vs. nationalistic) attachment (Hypothesis 2).

EXPERIMENT 1: NEW YORK
Method

Participants

One hundred and fifty-eight New York University students (70.3% female; mean age = 19.59, SD = 1.13) participated in this study, which was conducted in 2005, in exchange for partial course credit.¹

Procedure

To activate system justification motivation, we exposed participants to a system criticism passage. Following a procedure developed by Jost et al. (2005), participants were first asked to read and memorize details of a journalistic excerpt that described the social, economic, and political circumstances in the U.S. as either highly problematic (high system criticism condition) or not (low system criticism condition; see below). Past research has shown that exposure to system criticism does not affect personal or collective self-esteem, but it does affect system-relevant attitudes (e.g., Kay et al., 2005). After completing filler tasks, we assessed participants’ levels of national attachment by asking them to rate the extent to which they identified with America on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much). Participants also placed themselves on a scale of political orientation ranging from -5 (extremely liberal) to 5 (extremely conservative).

Activation of System Justification Motivation

Participants assigned to the high system criticism condition read the following journalistic excerpt:

These days, many people in the United States feel disappointed with the nation’s condition. Many citizens feel that the country has reached a low point in terms of social, economic, and political factors. People do not feel as safe and secure as
they used to, and there is a sense of uncertainty and pessimism regarding the country’s future. It seems that many countries in the world are enjoying better social, economic, and political conditions than the U.S. More and more Americans express a willingness to leave the United States and emigrate to other nations.

Participants assigned to the low system criticism condition instead read this excerpt:

These days, despite the difficulties the nation is facing, many people in the United States feel satisfied with the nation’s condition. Many citizens feel that the country has reached a stable point in terms of social, economic, and political factors. People feel safer and securer than they used to, and there is a sense of confidence and optimism regarding the country’s future. It seems that compared with many countries in the world the social, economic, and political conditions in the U.S. are relatively good. Fewer and fewer Americans express a willingness to leave the United States and emigrate to other nations.

Results and Discussion

We performed a multiple regression analysis, with all variables entered simultaneously, regressing national attachment on (a) mean-centered political orientation score, (b) system criticism condition (0 = low vs. 1 = high system criticism), and (c) their interaction term. We adjusted for participant gender in all three experiments because previous research has shown that males score higher than females on measures of nationalism and patriotism (e.g., Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p. 284). Our analysis yielded a significant main effect of political orientation, $b = .27, SE = .07, \beta = .40, t(144) = 3.83, p < .001$, indicating that increasing conservatism (or decreasing liberalism) was associated with stronger national attachment. The analysis also
yielded a marginally significant interaction between political orientation and system criticism condition, $b = -0.19$, $SE = 0.11$, $\beta = -0.18$, $t(144) = -1.71$, $p = 0.09$.

Planned analysis of simple slopes indicated that the effect of political orientation on national attachment was significant in the low system criticism (i.e., control) condition, $b = 0.27$, $SE = 0.07$, $\beta = 0.40$, $t(144) = 3.83$, $p < 0.001$, but not in the high system criticism condition, $b = 0.08$, $SE = 0.09$, $\beta = 0.12$, $t(144) = 0.95$, $ns$. Furthermore, conservatives were strongly identified with the nation regardless of experimental condition, $b = -0.24$, $SE = 0.37$, $\beta = -0.08$, $t(144) = -0.64$, $ns$, whereas liberals tended to express greater national identification following exposure to the high vs. low system criticism passage, $b = 0.64$, $SE = 0.35$, $\beta = 0.21$, $t(144) = 1.81$, $p = 0.07$. These patterns, which are concordant with Hypothesis 1, are illustrated in Figure 1.

EXPERIMENT 2: ARKANSAS

Our first experiment revealed that criticism of the system causes liberals to strengthen their identification with America, thereby eliminating the ideological gap in national attachment. Our second experiment constituted a conceptual replication and extension in several ways. First, we conducted the study in a rural, relatively conservative location (Arkansas), in contrast to the urban, liberal context (New York City) examined in Experiment 1. Second, we used a different method of activating system justification motivation in Experiment 2; specifically, we exposed participants to a system-implicating case of injustice (or not). Third, we measured political orientation in a separate session that occurred prior to the experimental session. Fourth, we measured political ideology not merely in terms of liberal-conservative self-placement but also in terms of several specific attitudes about political issues and candidates. This is a methodological improvement insofar as one assumes that attitudinal measures are better than self-placement items at capturing the complex, content-laden nature of political ideology (but
see Knight, 1999). Fifth and finally, we pitted national identification against other forms of personal and social identification to ensure that the interactive effects of system justification motivation and political orientation were specific to national attachment.

**Method**

**Participants**

Forty-eight introductory psychology students (62.5% female; mean age = 22.65, $SD = 5.87$) at the University of Central Arkansas participated successfully in both sessions of this study, which took place in 2007, in exchange for course credit.

**Procedure**

In Session 1, participants provided demographic information and answered questions designed to measure their political ideology. In Session 2, participants were exposed to a system-level injustice (or not) and asked to rank the importance of various identities and values from a list that included being an American.

**Materials**

**Political ideology.** Participants placed themselves on a scale ranging from 1 (*extremely liberal*) to 5 (*extremely conservative*) and reported their attitudes concerning the following 10 political stimuli on a scale ranging from -5 (*very unfavorable*) to 5 (*very favorable*): “National Organization for Women,” “Equal rights for gay and lesbian couples,” “Republicans,” “President George W. Bush,” “Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton,” “Democrats,” “Abortion rights,” “Increasing military spending,” “Affirmative action,” and “National Rifle Association.” Responses were coded so that higher scores represented more conservative attitudes (cf. Nail et al., 2009; $\alpha = .77$). Because ideological self-placement and political attitudes were highly correlated ($r \ [46] = .69$) and yielded similar results in separate regression analyses, we
combined them to create a composite political ideology score. Specifically, we rescaled all items to run from 0 (very liberal) to 1 (very conservative) and averaged participants’ ideological self-placement scores and the means of their political attitudes.³

*Activation of system justification motivation.* Following a procedure developed by McGregor, Nail, Marigold, and Kang (2005, Study 3; see also Nail et al., 2009, Study 1), participants assigned to the high system injustice condition read about a failure of the American justice system whereby an evidently guilty white-collar criminal was expected to be released because of a technicality; under low system injustice, the criminal’s prosecution was described as likely. Specifically, in the high system injustice condition, participants read the following news summary:

According to an article that appeared recently in the Houston Chronicle, former Enron executive, Robert E. Jefferies, III, will not be prosecuted in all likelihood despite strong evidence that he obstructed justice by lying under oath to Justice Department officials investigating the collapse of Enron Inc. The collapse began in October of 2001 soon after it was first revealed that Enron’s profits had been grossly inflated through the hiding of over 1 billion dollars in debt, most of it through “complex arrangements with thousands of offshore partnerships.” A spokesperson for the Justice Department stated, “The evidence indicates that Jeffries provided false and misleading testimony during our investigation. However, he did not profit personally from the company’s false valuation of assets and bogus deals like other Enron executives.” The spokesperson continued, “Jeffries received no huge bonuses, and he did not dump his Enron stock, like other top executives, before the price fell. Obstruction of justice and lying under
oath are difficult to prove in court, and thus, we are currently leaning against prosecution given the much greater wrongdoing committed by other Enron executives.”

In the low system injustice condition, participants instead read:

According to an article that appeared recently in the Houston Chronicle, former Enron executive, Robert E. Jefferies, III, will be prosecuted in all likelihood due to strong evidence that he obstructed justice by lying under oath to Justice Department officials investigating the collapse of Enron Inc. The collapse began in October of 2001 soon after it was first revealed that Enron’s profits had been grossly inflated through the hiding of over 1 billion dollars in debt, most of it through “complex arrangements with thousands of offshore partnerships.” A spokesperson for the Justice Department stated, “The evidence indicates that Jeffries provided false and misleading testimony during our investigation. However, he did not profit personally from the company’s false valuation of assets and bogus deals like other Enron executives.” The spokesperson continued, “Jefferies received no huge bonuses, and he did not dump his Enron stock, like other top executives, before the price fell. Still, obstruction of justice and lying under oath are serious crimes, and thus, we are currently leaning in favor of prosecution despite the much greater wrongdoing committed by other Enron executives.”

National attachment. Participants were asked to rank order the following identity descriptions from 1 (most important) to 7 (least important): “Student,” “American,” “Religious beliefs,” “Scientific knowledge and advancement,” “Political issues and debates,” “Music, arts,
theater, and literature” (i.e., the arts), and “Improving Society.” The last five dimensions were taken from Allport and Vernon’s (1931) Study of Values Scale. Rankings were reverse-coded, such that a higher score would indicate greater importance.

Results and Discussion

We regressed each of the identity rankings on (a) mean-centered composite political ideology scores, (b) system injustice condition (0 = low vs. 1 = high), and (c) their interaction term, adjusting for (d) participant gender. With respect to American identification, the analysis yielded a significant interaction between political ideology and system injustice condition, $b = -6.85, SE = 3.37, \beta = -.37, t(43) = -2.03, p < .05$. Under low system injustice, conservatives tended to rank American identification as more important than liberals did, $b = 4.18, SE = 2.27, \beta = .34, t(43) = 1.84, p = .07$, but this ideological difference was erased in the high system injustice condition, $b = -2.66, SE = 2.50, \beta = -.21, t(43) = -1.07, ns$. Whereas the system injustice manipulation exerted no effect on conservatives’ national identification, $b = .10, SE = .80, \beta = .02, t(43) = .12, ns$, liberals ranked “American” as being significantly more important to them in the high (vs. low) system threat condition, $b = 2.37, SE = .81, \beta = .58, t(43) = 2.93, p < .01$ (see Figure 2).

We observed the opposite interaction effect with respect to identification with the arts, $b = 5.30, SE = 2.66, \beta = .35, t(43) = 2.06, p = .05$. Under low system injustice, liberals tended to identify more strongly with the arts compared to conservatives, $b = -3.42, SE = 1.79, \beta = -.34, t(43) = -1.91, p = .06$, but in the high system injustice condition liberals and conservatives were equivalently identified with the arts, $b = 1.88, SE = 1.97, \beta = .18, t(43) = .95, ns$. The activation of system justification motivation exerted no effect on conservatives’ identification with the arts, $b = .20, SE = .63, \beta = .06, t(43) = .31, ns$, but liberals were significantly less identified with
the arts in the high (vs. low) system injustice condition, $b = -1.57, SE = .64, \beta = -.47, t(43) = -2.45, p < .05$ (see Figure 3). With respect to the other identity rankings, the analysis yielded only a significant main effect of political ideology on religious identification, $b = 3.49, SE = 1.70, \beta = .39, t(43) = 2.06, p < .05$. Not too surprisingly, conservatives ranked “Religious beliefs” as more important to them than did liberals.

In Experiment 2, then, we conceptually replicated the effects observed in Experiment 1, drawing our participants from a different population and using a different manipulation of system justification motivation and additional measures of political ideology and national attachment. Despite these changes, the activation of system justification motivation again increased American identification for liberals, thereby eliminating the liberal-conservative gap in national attachment. Interestingly, the system injustice threat did not strengthen liberals’ prioritization of “liberal” values, such as the arts; instead, system justification motivation tended to weaken attachment to the arts, consistent with a motivated social cognition perspective. Thus, Experiment 2 speaks to the issue of specificity with regard to the effects of system justification motivation; in strong support of Hypothesis 1, we found that exposure to system injustice increased only the relative importance of national identification.

EXPERIMENT 3: WISCONSIN

In our final experiment we sought to replicate and extend the findings from our first two experiments, this time drawing our participants from a non-student community sample in Wisconsin. In addition, we used a new manipulation of system justification motivation in terms of system dependence (e.g., see Kay et al., 2009; Van der Toorn, Feinberg, Jost, Kay, Tyler, Willer, & Wilmuth, 2011) and measured patriotism and nationalism separately (e.g., Blank & Schmidt, 2003; Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989). Given that these two forms of national
attachment seem to reflect different mindsets and attitudinal correlates, it is especially useful to know whether liberals’ stronger attachment to the nation when system justification motivation is activated is due to an increase in patriotism, nationalism, or both. This question cannot be answered on the basis of results from the first two experiments because participants might have interpreted the national identification measures as expressing either patriotism or nationalism. In the third experiment, we predicted that high (vs. low) system dependence would lead liberals to express more patriotism (positive attitudes toward one’s own country) but not necessarily more nationalism (negative attitudes toward other countries). This was Hypothesis 2. Insofar as nationalism (but not patriotism) is perceived as unacceptable by liberals (i.e., as incompatible with liberal ideology, outside of their “latitude of acceptance,” to use Sherif and Hovland’s [1961] phrase), we expected that even under conditions of increased system justification motivation liberals would reject it as a means of fulfilling their psychological motivations.

Method

Participants

In the summer of 2010, we successfully recruited 77 adult participants in rural Wisconsin (59.7% female; mean age = 51.94, $SD = 16.97$) through flyers, newspaper advertisements, and radio announcements, and offered a modest cash incentive for study participation.

Procedure

According to a procedure developed by Kay et al. (2009), participants were asked to read and answer questions about one of two excerpts allegedly from a newspaper article; this constituted the system dependence manipulation. After responding to filler questions, participants completed a manipulation check and separate measures of nationalism and
patriotism.

*Materials*

*Activation of system justification motivation.* Participants assigned to the high system dependence condition read an article describing a sociological study concluding that governmental decisions “play a major role in determining the average American’s quality of life.” Participants assigned to the low system dependence condition read instead that the government plays a minor role in affecting citizens’ quality of life.

More specifically, the article in the high system dependence condition was entitled “Government Perceived as Highly Relevant” and the accompanying text read as follows:

Do political decisions actually matter? Yes, suggests a recent study showing that the government's decisions play a major role in determining the average American’s quality of life. Dr. Michael Johnson, a UCLA sociology professor, says, “Trends over the last fifty years show that federal government policies have enormously broad effects on the life and well-being of Americans. In terms of financial well-being, for instance, the taxes you pay, the job and investment opportunities made available to you, the general state of the economy—to a large extent, these things are under the control of the federal government.” Over the past several decades, the United States has seen many different governments. Though they often appear similar, many governments’ decisions are drastically different from one another. Because of this, one’s social and personal well-being are fairly dependent on which political party is in power. For example, the quality of social services (e.g., health and education) is dependent on government decisions. “In their approach to many issues, political parties vary widely, so
which party is in power can make a dramatic difference in one's everyday life,”
says Dr. Johnson. Finally, a 2009 Pew survey suggests that many older Americans
now see how their lives were affected by changes in government. “Looking back,
I see how my quality of life depended on which government was in power,” said
one survey respondent. In short, these studies suggest that decisions in
Washington greatly affect one’s quality of life, and have considerable influence
on your day-to-day activities.

In the low system dependence condition, the article was entitled “Government Perceived as
Highly Irrelevant” and read:

Do political decisions actually matter? Not really, suggests a recent study showing
that the government's decisions only play a minor role in determining the average
American’s quality of life. Dr. Michael Johnson, a UCLA sociology professor,
says, “Trends over the last fifty years show that federal government policies have
very limited effects on the life and well-being of Americans. In terms of financial
well-being, for instance, the taxes you pay, the job and investment opportunities
made available to you, the general state of the economy—to a large extent, these
things are rarely affected by government decisions.” Over the past several
decades, the United States has seen many governments. Though they often appear
different, many governments' decisions are fairly similar to one another. Because
of this, one's social and personal well-being are often unaffected by which
political party is in power. For example, the leisure activities you have access to
and time to pursue are independent of government decisions. “In their approach to
many issues, political parties differ only on minor points, so which party is in
power often makes little difference in one’s everyday life,” says Dr. Johnson.

Finally, a 2009 Pew survey suggests that many older Americans now see how their lives were unaffected by changes in government. “Looking back, I see how my quality of life didn't depend on which government was in power,” said one survey respondent. In short, these studies suggest that decisions in Washington have little effect on one's quality of life, and have only minor influence on your day-to-day activities.

Manipulation check. Participants were asked to indicate on a scale ranging from 1 (definitely not) to 7 (definitely) whether: (a) “The decisions and actions of the federal government affect me personally,” and (b) “Individual Americans’ success depends on the government making good decisions.” These two items were averaged, $r(75) = .62, p < .001.

Patriotism. To measure patriotism, we administered the following items taken from research by Federico, Golec, and Dial (2005): (a) “I am proud to be an American,” (b) “I find the sight of the American flag very moving,” (c) “Every time I hear the national anthem, I feel strongly moved,” (d) “The symbols of the United States (e.g., the flag, Washington monument) do not move me one way or the other,” and (e) “I have great love for my country.” For these and also for the nationalism items, participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A composite measure of patriotism was obtained by taking the mean of the five items above following reverse-scoring of the fourth item ($\alpha = .85$).

Nationalism. To measure nationalism, we administered the following items, also taken from Federico et al. (2005): (a) “The more the United States actively influences other countries, the better off these countries will be;” (b) “The United States should not dominate other countries,” (c) “For the most part, America is no more superior than any other industrialized
country in the world,” (d) “To maintain our country’s economic superiority, aggressive economic policies are sometimes necessary,” and (e) “To maintain our country’s superiority, war is sometimes necessary.” A composite measure was obtained by taking the mean of these five items following reverse-scoring of the second and third items. Because scale reliability was low ($\alpha = .34$), we also report item-level analyses below.

**Political ideology.** Participants answered the following question using a scale from 1 (extremely liberal) to 9 (extremely conservative): “In terms of social and cultural issues in particular, how liberal or conservative are you?”

**Results and Discussion**

Concerning the manipulation check, an independent samples $t$-test confirmed that participants assigned to the high system dependence condition felt significantly more dependent on the system ($M = 6.09, SD = .95$) than did those assigned to the low system dependence condition ($M = 5.03, SD = 1.47$), $t (65) = -3.79, p < .001$.

We conducted separate regression analyses for patriotism and nationalism with the following predictors: (a) mean-centered political ideology scores, (b) system dependence condition (0 = low vs. 1 = high), (c) their interaction term, adjusting for (d) participant gender. With regard to patriotism, the analysis yielded a significant main effect of political ideology, $b = .29, SE = .08, \beta = .55, t (72) = 3.73, p < .001$, indicating that conservatives were more patriotic overall than liberals. This main effect was qualified by a significant interaction between political ideology and system dependence, $b = -.24, SE = .11, \beta = -.32, t (72) = -2.13, p < .05$. As illustrated in Figure 4, the ideological gap was present in the low system dependence condition, $b = .29, SE = .08, \beta = .55, t(72) = 3.73, p < .001$, but not in the high system dependence condition, $b = .05, SE = .08, \beta = .09, t(72) = .61, ns$. Furthermore, conservatives were highly
patriotic in both conditions, $b = -.15$, $SE = .36$, $\beta = -.06$, $t(72) = -.42$, $ns$, whereas liberals were significantly more patriotic in the high (vs. low) system dependence condition, $b = .94$, $SE = .36$, $\beta = .39$, $t(72) = 2.64$, $p = .01$. These findings closely parallel those observed in the preceding experiments but with a different situational manipulation of system justification motivation.

With respect to nationalism, the analysis yielded only a significant main effect of political ideology, $b = .15$, $SE = .05$, $\beta = .41$, $t(72) = 2.66$, $p = .01$, indicating that conservatism was associated with greater nationalism. Neither the main effect of system dependence nor the interaction term attained significance, $t$’s < 1. Because reliability was so low for the nationalism scale, we also computed separate regression models for each of the nationalism items. No significant interaction effects were observed, $t$’s < 1.4, but conservatism predicted significantly greater agreement with the first and last items and marginally more agreement with the second item (following reverse-scoring). Thus, in support of Hypothesis 2, temporarily activating system justification motivation with the use of a system dependence manipulation erased the liberal-conservative gap with respect to patriotism but not nationalism.

General Discussion

It was during World War II that George Orwell (1941/2000) argued strenuously against the notion that patriotism was the province of the political right: “Patriotism has nothing to do with Conservatism. It is actually the opposite of Conservatism, since it is a devotion to something that is always changing and yet is felt to be mystically the same. It is the bridge between the future and the past” (p. 103). Indeed, liberals and socialists in Europe and the U.S. rose up en masse in patriotic defense of their own countries (as well as other countries) against the threat of fascism in the 1930s and 1940s.
We submit humbly that Orwell was only half right. In the absence of situational triggers such as exposure to system criticism, threats of injustice, and outcome dependence, it does appear that conservatives are generally more patriotic (as well as nationalistic) than progressives. We believe that this disparity can be explained, at least partially, by chronic individual differences in system justification motivation (and its underlying epistemic, existential, and relational needs; see also Carter et al., 2011; Jost et al., 2003, 2008; Liviatan & Jost, 2011). When external events activate system justification motivation—because the system is heavily criticized or threatened by injustice or individuals feel especially dependent upon the system—liberals undergo a clear escalation of patriotic (but not nationalistic) sentiment, thereby erasing the typical ideological gap in national attachment.

In Experiment 1 we found that liberal participants in New York City who read a journalistic account that was highly critical of the nation’s circumstances displayed stronger levels of national identification than those who did not; conservative participants were strongly identified in any case. In Experiment 2, we conceptually replicated these findings using a sample from Arkansas, a different system justification manipulation, and additional measures of political ideology and national attachment. Once again, we found that the activation of system justification motivation caused liberals (but not conservatives) to identify more strongly with America, but it did not increase other forms of identification, such as identification with stereotypically liberal values and pursuits. In Experiment 3, which was conducted in Wisconsin, we demonstrated that activating system justification motivation through the use of a system dependence prime increased patriotism among liberals, but it did not increase nationalism, presumably because antipathy toward other nations is at odds with liberal ideology (e.g., Karasawa, 2002; Schatz et al., 1999).
Thus, in support of our hypotheses, we found that in the absence of system justification
activation, conservatives tended to exhibit higher levels of national attachment (Experiments 1
and 2) and patriotism (Experiment 3) than liberals. However, in all three experiments this
ideological gap was erased when system justification motivation was activated. Remarkably
similar results were obtained in the context of three very different samples and political contexts
and with the use of three different methods employed in previous research to activate system
justification motivation (i.e. system criticism, injustice threat, and system dependence).

To our knowledge, this article is the first to draw on social psychological theory and
research to try to explain the liberal-conservative (or left-right) gap in national attachment. The
results of three experiments clearly implicate system justification motivation. At the same time,
it would be useful to incorporate additional factors, such as the role of emotion. In an exploration
of the psychological basis of “rally effects,” Lambert and colleagues (2010) discovered that
feelings of anger played a significant role in producing attitudinal shifts in presidential approval
ratings following exposure to threat and that anger partially mediated the effect of threat on
participants’ positive evaluations of national symbols (such as the Statue of Liberty and the
American flag). Given that the endorsement of system-justifying beliefs alleviates moral outrage
and serves a palliative function in general (Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007), future research
would do well to investigate the role of discrete emotions in the psychological processing of
system-relevant information, especially in light of chronic and temporary forms of national
attachment.

The results of our research program may provide welcome news for those who prioritize
national unity and cohesion in the face of crisis and perhaps also for candidates and parties
seeking to combat stereotypes of liberals as unpatriotic or “un-American” (see Sheets, Domke,
& Greenwald, 2011). When the system was criticized or challenged, we found no difference between liberals and conservatives in terms of national identification. Whether this is good news for the country or the world is another story. Given prior evidence that system justification motivation facilitates rationalization of inequality and denial of systemic problems (e.g., Jost et al., 2010), it seems likely that when system justification motivation is activated, individuals are prone to adopt an overly credulous stance concerning the actions of their leaders, institutions, and fellow countrymen. As Chesterton (1901/2005) famously observed, desperate circumstances have prompted many a citizen over the years to declare, ardently and unreservedly, “My country, right or wrong.”
References


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Figure 1. Interactive Effects of Political Ideology and System Criticism Condition on National Attachment (Experiment 1)
Figure 2. Interactive Effects of Political Ideology and System Injustice Condition on National Attachment (Experiment 2)
Figure 3. Interactive Effects of Political Ideology and System Injustice Condition on Identification with the Arts (Experiment 2)
Figure 4. Interactive Effects of Political Ideology and System Dependence Condition on Patriotic Attachment (Experiment 3)
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Notes

1 For all three experiments, we inspected box-and-whisker plots for extreme (i.e., outlying) values on political ideology, national attachment, and social identification (see Howell, 2010). We first calculated the interquartile range (the difference between scores at the 25th and 75th percentiles) and defined extreme values as those that were more than 1.5 times the interquartile range above the 75th percentile or 1.5 times the interquartile range below the 25th percentile. Using these as the cut-off criteria, we excluded four outliers from Experiment 1, five from Experiment 2, and two from Experiment 3. Final sample sizes and demographic characteristics are listed in the text.

2 With respect to all three experiments, we considered the possibility that conservatives’ lack of “movement” in national attachment as a function of system justification activation would be attributable to “ceiling effects.” In Experiment 1, mean ratings for conservatives (estimated at 1 SD above the sample mean on ideological orientation) were 7.05 and 6.81 on a 9-point scale in the low and high system criticism conditions, respectively. In Experiment 2, estimated mean ratings were 4.30 and 4.39 on a 7-point scale in the low and high system injustice conditions, respectively. In Experiment 3, estimated mean ratings were 6.33 and 6.18 on a 7-point scale in the low and high system dependence conditions, respectively. These results indicate that, with the possible exception of Experiment 3, conservatives possessed sufficient “room” on the scales to increase their levels of national attachment. A more plausible interpretation involves what Banfield et al. (2011) referred to as a “psychological ceiling effect,” namely an unwillingness on the part of certain participants to further increase national attachment in response to manipulations of system justification motivation.

3 Highly similar results were obtained when political ideology was calculated by simply
averaging across the 11 items ($\alpha = .79$).

4 Degrees of freedom for data analyses with respect to all three experiments are affected by missing values. For this specific comparison, degrees of freedom were reduced because the variances were unequal between the two system dependence conditions, as indicated by Levene’s test.