

Uncertainty, Need for Closure, and the Differing Neighborhood Preferences of Liberals and Conservatives

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SPGS Experimental Lab Proposal for Spring 2019

Introduction:

This proposal represents the third of a projected four interrelated studies within a larger research project. The overall research question, described in greater detail in my SPGS Lab proposal of one year ago, concerns the relationship between individuals' political ideology and their preferences for urban versus suburban living environments: Why are conservatives consistently more favorable than liberals to low-density, suburban-style living? Why are liberals significantly more favorable than conservatives to living in dense, mixed-use, walkable, mass transit-accessible neighborhoods? I posit that one or more deep-seated predispositions may underlie the relationship between ideology and urban/suburban preferences, at least in part. In other words, individual traits that are *correlated* with political ideology may have important influences on urban-development preferences.

My Spring 2018 SPGS Lab study surveyed 332 students, and found a handful of individual traits that demonstrated a relationship to urban/suburban preferences. For example, individuals' "need for closure," as well as certain personality characteristics were significantly associated with preferring suburban over urban living environments.

The current proposed study would further examine one psychological orientation, Need for Closure. Need for Closure (abbreviated NfC by social psychologists) is an individual orientation that has been widely studied, and is known to be correlated with political conservatism. NfC also was among the traits most strongly linked, in my Spring 2018 study, to a preference for suburban living over urban living. In Fall 2018, I used the SPGS module within the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey to further test the relationship between NfC and urban/suburban preferences among a representative national sample. Like the Spring 2018 study, however, the CCES study was observational rather than experimental.

My study proposed for Spring 2019 is experimental. I aim to activate (or make relevant) individuals' need for closure by priming a related contextual consideration: personal *uncertainty*. After the priming exercise, an evaluation of photos and survey items about urban and suburban environments will be used to determine whether the experimentally primed group is more pro-suburban and/or anti-urban than a control group. In this way, I will be able to investigate whether *situational* considerations that evoke a need for closure would motivate an impulse against urban environments in a fashion similar to chronically high *dispositional* NfC. One possibility to test for is that liberals and conservatives will be affected differently by the experimental activation of uncertainty and lack of closure.

Significance of the Proposed Study:

Political psychologists have increasingly found that deep-seated, ostensibly "non-political" traits and predispositions play a role in shaping the very different policy views and judgments of liberals and conservatives. In particular, the theory of conservatism as *motivated social cognition* (Jost et al. 2003) points to deeply held motivations that operate subconsciously to push individuals toward a conservative worldview, particularly on social issues. For example, conservatives show greater sensitivity to threat and loss, express a greater need for order, closure, and predictability, and have a lower level of the personality trait Openness to Experience than liberals. Such tendencies are thought to motivate in

conservatives a “tough” posture toward criminal justice and national security, and greater opposition to unconventional lifestyles (e.g., same-sex marriage).

In this research project, I extend this line of thinking to individual views on urban development and land use. I hypothesize that a deeply held need for closure and preference for certainty and predictability will tend to induce a wariness of dense cities, with their mixture of different activities and land uses. Instead, conservatives are motivated to prefer low-density, single-family residential environments where “everything is in its proper place.”

There are competing hypotheses, however. (I attempt to control for these in my study.) Perhaps it is actually conservatives’ racial antagonism that provokes their opposition to urban living, since cities tend to house relatively high proportions of minorities. Or perhaps environmentalism among liberals induces that group to oppose suburban sprawl and the overconsumption of land and resources by large-lot suburban housing. Alternatively, it may be the association of big cities with “big government” that tends to attract liberals and repel conservatives. That being said, however, the zoning and building regulations that are necessary to produce large-lot, residential-only suburban neighborhoods actually represent a substantial degree of heavy-handed government intervention into the land market.

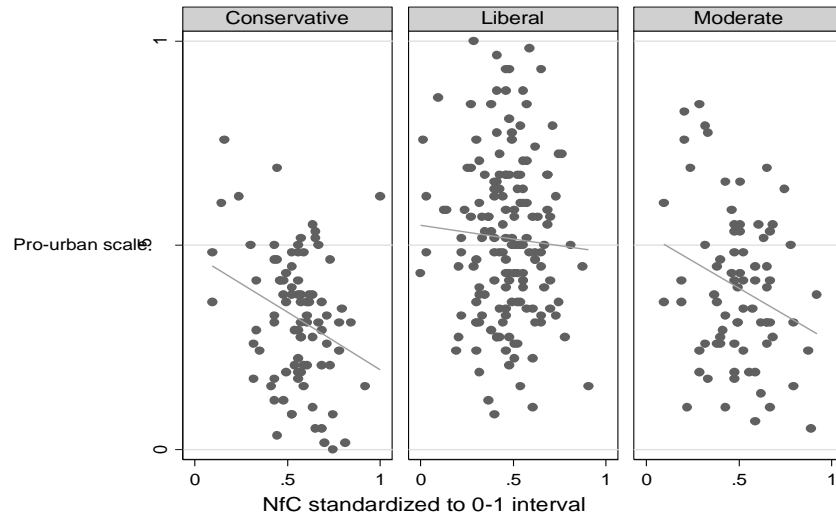
In the academic field of urban studies, several researchers have called attention to a persistent finding that liberals are more pro-urban in their housing-consumption preferences than conservatives are, even after controlling for many demographic and socioeconomic characteristics (see review in Lewis 2015). The reasons for this ideological difference remain somewhat of a mystery, however. Meanwhile, some studies in political geography investigate self-selected sorting of liberals and conservatives into different types of localities (Gimpel & Hui 2018; Bishop 2009). I intend my project to connect the scholarly debate in urban studies with that in political psychology. In addition, from a practical standpoint, local officials and developers are likely to be interested in the underlying factors that attract Americans to various types of neighborhood environments.

Relevant Findings from Spring 2018 SPGS Lab Study:

In my survey in Spring 2018, 332 undergraduates rated a series of photographs of prototypically “urban” and “suburban” neighborhoods, indicating for each picture how much they would like to live in such a place (or work or shop there, as appropriate) after graduation. Several key findings emerged. First, opinions on the set of urban-oriented photographs, and on the set of suburban-oriented photographs, each hang together very well as indexes (i.e., alpha scores of .84 and .82, respectively). Surprisingly, the index of scores on the urban photos has a correlation of essentially zero with the index of scores on the suburban photos. In part this may be due to item-response behavior on a Likert scale, in which some subjects tend to give relatively high ratings to everything while other subjects tend to give lower ratings across the board. I found that the “cleanest” way to differentiate pro-urban from pro-suburban preferences is to subtract each subject’s suburban-photo ratings from their urban-photo ratings. (Adjusted R-squared statistics are about .29 for a model predicting urban-minus-suburban ratings, compared to only .16 for the pro-urban index and .20 for the pro-suburban index.) Moreover, the urban-minus-suburban photograph rating index is correlated strongly ($r=.57$) with a pro-urban index that is based on verbal questions about preferred neighborhood environments.

Based on regression results thus far, the traits that are associated with *pro-urban* preferences include the personality trait Openness and an orientation toward the moral foundation of Care (on moral foundations, also called moral intuitions, see Haidt 2012). The traits most clearly connected to *pro-suburban* preferences are Need for Closure, the personality traits of Extraversion, Agreeableness and

Emotional Stability, and an orientation toward the moral foundation of Authority. The association between Need for Closure and pro-suburban preferences was significant among conservatives ($r = .29, p < .01$) and moderates ($r = .26, p < .03$), but not among liberals ($r = -.05$); see graph below. This pattern is consistent with the notion of conservatism as motivated social cognition.



Somewhat surprisingly, measures of disgust sensitivity, disease anxiety, and the related moral foundation of Purity were consistently unrelated to urban/suburban preferences (though it is possible that physiological measures of disgust arousal might yield different results than self-reports). Finally, a striking finding was that political ideology (the 7-point liberalism/conservatism scale) continued to be the strongest predictor of urban/suburban preferences, even when controlling for these other traits and orientations. Thus, there was little initial evidence that ideology's influence on urban attitudes is heavily mediated by psychological orientations.

Hypotheses to Be Tested in this Study:

1. Subjects in the uncertainty condition, probably due to the manipulation's activation of their need for closure, will rate the suburban photos (relative to the urban neighborhood) more highly than their counterparts in the control condition.
2. The priming of uncertainty will differentially affect liberals and conservatives in their ratings of urban vs. suburban neighborhoods. Based on the findings from the Spring 2018 study, the effects of uncertainty may be more pronounced among conservatives than among liberals. However, given that conservatives have a more "chronic" need for closure (i.e., they are more "set in their ways"), there is an alternative hypothesis: The uncertainty prime may instead induce more change among liberals than among conservatives, because liberals will be more open to having their evaluations influenced by the situation or context.
3. The type of neighborhood environment that is most familiar to an individual will mediate the effect of uncertainty priming on his or her urban/suburban attitudes. Uncertainty is expected to unconsciously activate "compensating conviction" among individuals, who will seek to bolster their sense of self-esteem and identity. If so, those who grew up in low-density suburbs will more strongly express suburban preferences, whereas those from urban environments may bolster their preference for city-like neighborhoods.

Design for this Projected Study:

I prefer to run an in-person study for this experiment, bringing in groups of students and randomly assigning each subject to either the experimental or control group (e.g., numbering the arriving students, and assigning the odd numbers to the experimental group). The reason an in-person mode would work better in this case is that the experimental prime is “bottom-up”; it asks students to write a short (i.e., paragraph-length) passage describing something in their life about which they currently have considerable uncertainty. In theory, I could ask the same question during an online survey. However, I am dubious that students sitting alone in their home and trying to speed through an online survey would comply sufficiently well with this instruction.

The design is between-subjects. Each subject will complete a questionnaire that consists of a series of question batteries, with the experimental manipulation midway through. Wherever possible, standard question wording from the literature or from my past study will be used. My current inclination is to have the subjects fill out the questionnaire using pen- or pencil-on-paper, due to my suspicion that physical writing will provoke more cognitive engagement than typing. Completing the questionnaire on laptops, however, could be an option (and the photos of urban and suburban neighborhoods would be easier to view clearly on a computer screen). To obscure the aim of the study, subjects will be told at the outset that the survey instrument consists of several unrelated questionnaires related to different research projects. To improve data quality, students will be told to take their time, and that no one will be allowed to leave the room until they have finished or until a certain amount of time has elapsed (probably 30 minutes), whichever takes longer. I or a TA will be available in the room to answer questions and to monitor students. Students will be instructed not to look at cellphones or other electronic devices, not to wear earbuds, etc., during the experiment.

Please refer to the **Appendix** for the proposed “flow” of the questionnaire that each student would fill out. Beyond the urban/suburban ratings and the experimental manipulation, other sections of the questionnaire aim to collect data for potential control variables – not only questions about demographic characteristics, but also items relating to alternative hypotheses about urban/suburban preferences (e.g., racial resentment, environmentalism). At the end of the exercise, students will be thanked. Debriefing information will be sent in the form of an email at the end of the semester.

Number of Subjects Requested: Ideally, 150-200. Admittedly, there may be some logistical challenges with bringing this number of students in for in-person studies. However, it is quite possible that the effect size of the priming manipulation will be only moderate. Looking at the difference between subjects in my Spring 2018 survey who were in the top quartile and bottom quartile on Need for Closure suggests an effect size on suburban preference of about .45. At that effect size, to get a power of .8 in a two-sided t-test would require having 157 students (78.5 per group). However, it is not clear whether experimentally inducing uncertainty in subjects would lead to effects of similar size as the survey-based measure of NfC. Also, if I run a regression it would be good to have sufficient degrees of freedom to handle the several control variables that will be generated by the various scales in the questionnaire. Obviously, if I ran this study online instead of in-person, it would be feasible to have a much larger sample. However, I worry about students complying sufficiently with the uncertainty writing exercise in an online environment.

Length of Study: Approximately 30-45 minutes, including check-in and introduction.

Preferred Date of Study: To allow for further study design, questionnaire development, and IRB submission and approval, a study date after Spring Break would be preferred.

Appendix: Outline of Questionnaire Flow

1. Consent statement, brief overall instructions
2. Questions about political ideology, party ID, presidential performance rating
3. Question ascertaining the type of neighborhood the subject grew up in, e.g.: “Think about the neighborhood where you lived for most of your childhood, or the place you consider your ‘hometown.’ Was it a neighborhood mainly composed of (a) detached, single-family houses, (b) a neighborhood with a mix of apartment buildings, single-family houses, and stores or commercial buildings, or (c) something in between (a) and (b), or (d) none of the above?”
4. Brief personality battery (Ten Item Personality Inventory)
5. Racial resentment scale (intermingled with questions about less sensitive ideological topics, such as preferences about taxes, government regulation of business)
6. Questions about environmentalist values. (I will seek a standard battery from the literature.)
7. Questions from the “belief in a dangerous world” scale and “belief in a competitive jungle” scale. Duckitt et al. (2002) found that these predict Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Social Dominance Orientation, respectively. I am curious whether “belief in a dangerous world,” specifically, may predict anti-urban attitudes.
- 8. The experimental manipulation:** The experimental group will first complete the Need for Closure scale. They will then be asked to think about, and then write approximately a page about, a situation or feature in their life that is unresolved, and about which they are deeply uncertain. (For example, uncertainty in a personal relationship, romantic relationship, situation at the university, post-graduation career plan, etc.) A number of psychological studies have primed uncertainty in this manner. The control group will be given a distraction task that will also require writing and occupy the same amount of time (e.g., writing about their activities on a typical weekday).
9. Brief affect battery (PANAS scale) – intended as a manipulation check to see if the experiment affected subjects’ mood and their level of uncertainty.
10. View approximately 10-15 photos of prototypically urban (dense, mixed-use, walkable) and suburban (low-density, single-use, driving-oriented) neighborhoods, rating how much they would like to live in each when they are 5-10 years past their college graduation. (I will choose the photos from my previous survey that have the best discriminant validity.)
11. Four-question battery about land-use tradeoffs, repeated from my prior surveys (e.g., “Would you prefer to live in a small house with a small backyard but a short commute to work? Or would you rather live in a large house with a large backyard but a long commute to work?”)
12. For the control group only, the Need for Closure scale will appear here. (I need an NfC measure for each participant.)
13. Demographic items: Sex, race/ethnicity, age, parents’ educational attainment, etc.
14. Probe for suspicion about purpose of study; Closing text.