

# Proposing a multi-dimensional, context-sensitive approach to the study of ideological (a)symmetry in emotion

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Political psychologists studying ideology have been increasingly examining its relationship with emotion. Much of this work has focused on potential ideological differences in the intensity of emotional experiences, leading to conflicting findings. Some work has supported the perspective according to which fundamental psychological differences exist between ideological leftists and rightists, while other work has challenged this view, demonstrating ideological symmetry in emotion. The present review highlights recent advances that can shed further light on this debate, adopting a multi-dimensional, context-sensitive approach to the study of ideological differences in emotional processes. Accordingly, we propose that instead of asking whether or not ideological differences in emotion exist, researchers should ask when, in what ways, and under what circumstances they exist.

## Addresses

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Emotions, defined as ‘states that comprise feelings, physiological changes, expressive behaviors and inclinations to act’ [1, p. 5], have captured the interests of scholars for centuries [e.g. Refs. 2–4]. Because they serve as powerful engines of behavior and decision making, the study of emotions has rapidly evolved in recent years, with ‘affective science’ emerging as a field of research in its own right [5]. This fascination has not escaped the research agendas of political psychologists studying ideology, and the last decade has seen an accumulation of research on the relationship between ideology and emotion [e.g. Refs. 6\*,7,8\*,9\*]. Such interest is only natural, as emotions drive appraisals of all new information, shaping how we see the world and influencing

decision-making across domains [10–12], rendering emotions fundamentally important for our understanding of complex social realities and social change. This perspective, based on the Appraisal Tendency framework [12], means that emotions can both shape ideological worldviews and — because the motivations associated with ideologies influence appraisals [13\*\*] — be shaped by them. Nonetheless, most of the research conducted thus far has asked some form of the following general question: Are there ideological differences in these affective processes? We argue that this question, though interesting, may be too simplistic.

In addition to being multi-dimensional processes [1], emotions are highly context-dependent, with different targets and situations shaping them in important ways [14,15]. Any attempt to boil the ideology-emotion link down to whether or not emotional processes are symmetrical across the ideological spectrum is thus all but doomed to deliver a partial answer that may not be replicable across processes and situations. Accordingly, we argue that to fully understand the relationship between ideology and emotions we need to a) study multiple elements of the emotional process, complementing the current focus on intensity; and b) contextualize the examination of ideological differences in these emotional processes. To this end, we first briefly review the ideological symmetry versus asymmetry debate as it relates to emotional intensity. Next, we elaborate on our argument and review research that lends support to our approach. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the promise contained in a multi-dimensional, context-sensitive approach to the study of potential ideological differences in emotion.

## Ideological (a)symmetry in affective processes

Much of the ongoing research on the psychology of political ideology — defined as an ‘interrelated set of attitudes, values, and beliefs with cognitive, affective, and motivational properties’ [10, p. 315] — has focused on the task of identifying differences between ideological leftists and rightists in fundamental psychological processes. Several prominent researchers [13\*\*,17,18\*] have repeatedly and consistently demonstrated such differences, arguing that they are a central factor behind differential gravitation towards competing ideologies. Challenging this ideological asymmetry approach, other researchers have called into question either the

assumptions underlying it, the magnitude of asymmetry identified, or specific findings that have been used to support it [19\*\*,20,21].

Of particular relevance to the present review, part of this debate has centered on affective processes, focusing on ideological differences in the intensity with which people experience negative affect. For example, extensive research suggests that rightists are more reactive in their responses to fear-inducing [17,22\*,23,24] and disgust-inducing [25–28,29\*,30,31] stimuli, and that these emotions can even shift people further to the right [22\*,32–34]. More recent research has challenged these prior conclusions, proposing certain boundary conditions for ideological differences or arguing that the processes are actually symmetrical. For example, Choma and Hodson [35] have found greater reactivity to fear-inducing (i.e. threatening) stimuli to be associated with certain dimensions of rightist ideology (i.e. right-wing authoritarianism), but not others (i.e. social dominance orientation). Similarly, proponents of the symmetrical approach argue that physiological data provide no evidence for asymmetry [6\*], that different fear-inducing stimuli shift attitudes to either the right or the left [36], or that extremity rather than ideology influences fear reactions [21]. Crawford [37] echoes all of these critiques, proposing that both rightist ideology (i.e. conservatism) and threat were too broadly conceptualized in previous accounts, and that differences are limited to how intensely *social* conservatives versus liberals react specifically to *physical* threats (for similar arguments regarding ideological differences in disgust sensitivity, see Refs. [7,26]).

These disagreements among researchers have not been limited to negative affect, with some of the discussion focusing on more positive emotional processes, such as happiness and empathy. Examining general happiness, several researchers have found that rightists (i.e. conservatives) report higher levels of happiness than leftists (i.e. liberals) [38,39,40\*]. The reason for this appears to be that rightist ideologies serve a palliative function, allowing people to better manage threat [40\*] and exposure to different forms of injustice [41\*\*]. Work by Wojcik and colleagues; however, has yielded seemingly contradictory results, suggesting that despite greater self-reported happiness among rightists, leftists actually experience more positive affect as judged based on their facial expressions [42]. Nonetheless, recent findings support the notion of a self-protective mechanism, demonstrating a link between rightist economic ideology and dampened negative emotional reactions — be they self-reported, physiological or expressive — to instances of economic inequality [41\*\*]. This debate, therefore, has also yet to be definitively resolved.

Finally, scholars have also tried to determine whether ideological differences also relate to differences in

empathic reactions. Initial findings suggest ideological asymmetry in the experience of empathy, with leftists experiencing more empathy in general [43–45] or in specific contexts [46] and extending empathy across more distant social categories than do rightists, whose empathic concern is limited to members of more proximal groups [47]. A central reason for this appears to be differences in tendencies towards universalism — more in line with leftists' views on social equality — versus patriotism or nationalism — more in line with a desire to see one's own group triumph within social hierarchies that are perceived as more inevitable by rightists [44,47]. The idea that these differences are limited to less proximal groups, however, challenges the notion that there are actual fundamental differences in empathy between rightists and leftists, arguing that previously documented differences may have stemmed from the specific empathy targets employed [47].

These contradictory approaches and seemingly contradictory findings paint the picture of an intractable conflict between two camps — ideological symmetry versus asymmetry. This conflict appears to become more ideological and more polarized as the debates continue. We suggest, however, that the dispute is, in fact, tractable, at least when it comes to the study of ideological differences in emotional processes. Nonetheless, the road to its resolution is not as straightforward as the arguments of either camp — taken to their extreme — would suggest.

### Adopting a multi-dimensional, context-sensitive approach to the ideology-emotion link

As we have reviewed above, the lion's share of the debate on ideological (a)symmetry in emotions has focused on emotional intensity. But intensity is only one element of the emotional process, which is in its essence complex and multi-dimensional. In fact, individuals' emotional reactions reflect a combination of automatic and more deliberative, regulated processes. Furthermore, emotions are associated with action tendencies, but the latter may be activated to varying extents depending on multiple factors. To understand individuals' emotional processes, we thus need to understand how and why they regulate their emotions, the action tendencies associated with their emotions, and the ways in which the features of the context shape all of these. Accordingly, we argue that in order to truly understand potential ideological differences in emotional processes, we must tease these elements apart and examine them in context. By doing this, we can distinguish fundamental differences in fully automatic reactions from differences stemming from more symmetrical ideology consistent motivations and regulatory strategies. Very little research has thus far been undertaken towards this end, but ongoing efforts have already yielded some promising findings.

First, an important construct that dramatically influences both the intensities with which people feel emotions and how they express them is emotion regulation, meaning the strategies people employ to alter the magnitude, frequency, experience, and expression of their emotions [48]. It is thus important to consider emotion regulation when trying to understand the emotions that people ultimately experience. Cognitive reappraisal — an emotion regulation technique involving changing the meaning of a stimulus — is often cited as an especially constructive strategy, as using it effectively modulates the emotional experience (at least for lower intensities of emotion) while maintaining long-term benefits such as recall and improved long-term coping [48,49]. Interestingly, there is evidence that increased reappraisal leads to reduced support for conservative policies [50] and increased support for dovish policies relating to leftist ideology in intergroup conflict [51–53], perhaps because support for these policies demands the consideration of an issue from multiple perspectives — an element of reappraisal. More recent research has demonstrated possible links between ideology and expressive suppression, a strategy associated with modulation of the expression — but not the experience — of an emotion [48]. Specifically, both self-reported and physiological evidence indicates that ideological rightists' (versus leftists') faces are less emotionally expressive [18\*], findings that match earlier work demonstrating that rightists view emotions less favorably than leftists [54]. Such fundamental differences in expressive suppression can also help settle the seemingly contradictory findings that leftists *express* more happiness than rightists, despite reporting less happiness [42]. Just as ideological differences have been identified in reappraisal and suppression, they may emerge in other emotion regulation strategies as well. For example, previous findings on greater uncertainty avoidance among rightists [16] may indicate that rightists would be more likely to employ situation selection to regulate their emotions, avoiding novel situations that are rife with uncertainty.

While the above findings point to potentially fundamental ideological differences in emotion regulation, other differences may be more context-dependent. For example, a cognitive reappraisal-based intervention to reduce political intolerance was more effective in reducing rightists' than leftists' intolerance towards members of the adversary group in a violent conflict, but had similar effects on both groups when the targets of intolerance were members of each individual's least-liked group [52]. Similarly, ideological differences have been identified in how people choose among emotion regulation strategies, but these differences are also dependent on the content of the emotion-provoking stimuli [9\*]. Congruent with previous findings that people prefer disengaging emotion regulation strategies (i.e. distraction) over engaging strategies (i.e. reappraisal) when experiencing higher

intensities of emotion [49], ideological differences in the choice between engaging and disengaging emotion-regulatory strategies emerged only for content to which leftists responded more intensely than rightists (i.e. the suffering of an adversary outgroup). Interestingly, leftists were more likely than rightists to *disengage* from this content due to their more intense experiences of it [9\*]. In other words, the ideologically congruent differences between hawks and doves in emotional intensity — echoing the above-reviewed findings on the expanse of empathy — fully explained their differing regulatory choice patterns. Furthermore, these differences were limited to a certain kind of emotion-inducing content, suggesting context-dependent rather than fundamental ideological differences.

Beyond modes of emotion regulation, the *motivations* people have — be they hedonic or instrumental — are known to impact the direction towards which they regulate their emotions [55], thereby shaping their emotional experience. For example, Porat *et al.* have demonstrated that ideology is a central predictor of the emotions people *want* to feel towards the adversary group in a violent conflict, with leftists more motivated to experience empathy and rightists more motivated to experience anger — motivations that partially explain observed differences in emotional experience [46]. They have also found that when faced with existential threat, leftists are *motivated* to feel collective angst — related to existential fear — because this emotion can prompt and justify support for aggressive policies to protect the ingroup [56]. This finding may offer insight into the above-reviewed evidence that fear moves people to the right. Relatedly, in the context of intergroup conflict, leftists and rightists may both manage their fear through reappraisal, but the new cognitive meaning they give fear-inducing stimuli appears to be shaped by their motivations to maintain ideology-congruent beliefs about the ingroup and outgroup [57]. Finally, previous findings on ideological differences in empathy appear to at-least-partially stem from differences in the *motivation* for empathy: While both rightists and leftists appear to have a lower motivation for outgroup-targeted empathy than for ingroup-targeted empathy in the context of ideological conflict, leftists generally have a higher motivation for empathy than do rightists, across targets [8\*]. Individuals' motivation for empathy is known to determine whether they try to upregulate or downregulate their empathy [58], which may explain *how*, as stated above, leftists' stronger adherence to universalist beliefs leads them to experience more empathy through the motivated upregulation of this emotion. Taken together, this body of research demonstrates that previously-observed ideological differences in emotional intensity, often thought of as reflecting purely automatic reactions, can at least in part be explained by similar motivations to experience emotions or maintain beliefs congruent with each camp's ideological beliefs.

The action tendencies associated with emotions constitute another important attribute, and a central reason for researchers' interest in emotions [1,59]. An underlying assumption of much of the research referenced above, then, is that ideological differences in emotion are important because they predict corresponding differences in behavior. Interestingly, however, recent research has found that emotions may not equally motivate *changes in attitudes and behavior* for leftists and rightists. For example, within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, emotions — even when experienced at similar intensities across the ideological spectrum — have been found to lead to corresponding changes in policy support only or mostly among leftists, having little or no effect on the policy preferences of rightists [60]. Similarly, aspects of conservative ideology in the U.S. appear to dampen or even reverse the effects of empathy [61] and anger [62] inductions on support for social welfare and racial equality promoting policies, respectively. But context seems to be central here: This dampening effect was replicated when examining the effects of fear on fleeing tendencies further to an ideologically-relevant stimulus (i.e. a political uprising by an outgroup), but the effect was reversed when responding to an ideologically irrelevant threat (i.e. an epidemic) [15]. In other words, rightists may be less emotion-driven than leftists, but only when their ideology provides clear guidelines on the 'appropriate' attitudinal response — indicating a context-specific motivated process rather than a fundamental psychological difference.

Finally, it is important to note that emotions in general and ideological differences in emotions in particular cannot be examined in a vacuum, as they are fundamentally embedded in social reality and context [63,64]. Indeed, for each element above, we have already identified contextual factors that dramatically alter the extent and/or direction of ideological differences. One such factor is the content of stimuli. This may refer to the identity of a group towards which emotion is experienced, which we and others have found to shape the effectiveness or mode of emotion regulation [9,52], motivations for emotions (e.g. empathy [8]), and the intensity of intergroup negativity [19]. Likewise, it can refer to whether or not a given stimulus directly relates to the contents of one's ideological beliefs, determining whether those beliefs can provide motivations and/or guidelines for specific reactions [15]. Another relevant contextual factor is emotional climate. Research has shown that individuals' emotions are often shaped by intragroup emotional influences [65], meaning that different emotional norms could explain ideological differences in emotion on the individual level, and these may be further exacerbated by documented ideological differences in needs for a shared reality [66]. These are only examples, but they powerfully illustrate how context fundamentally shapes each and every process reviewed above. Accordingly, we propose that features of the social

context be taken into account when examining ideological differences in emotional processes. In other words, we argue that instead of asking whether or not ideological asymmetry exists in emotional processes, we should ask *when, in what ways, and under what circumstances* such asymmetry exists.

## Conclusion

Taken together, these advances in the study of the ideology-emotion link support our contention that a more nuanced, context-sensitive examination of emotion holds the key to understanding the extent to which rightists and leftists differ in their affective processes. More specifically, these advances point to a potential resolution of the debate on ideological symmetry versus asymmetry: certain processes appear to more fundamentally differ across the ideological spectrum (e.g. the regulatory strategies that people employ when experiencing emotions in their daily lives), while others reflect motivated differences stemming from more symmetrical motivations to experience the world in an ideology-congruent manner. Future research can test these propositions by further breaking down emotions into their various parts when assessing potential ideological differences. Furthermore, studying each element across multiple contexts can offer the best tool for distinguishing between more fundamental differences and those that depend on the relationship between the content of one's beliefs and specific stimuli or outcomes.

## Author contributions

Ruthie Pliskin and Anat Ruhrman conducted the literature review. Ruthie Pliskin led the writing of the manuscript, and all authors provided feedback at different stages, reviewed, edited, and approved the manuscript.

## Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

- of special interest
- of outstanding interest

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The authors set out to replicate Oxley et al.' (2008) findings that conservatives have stronger physiological responses to threatening stimuli than liberals, using pre-registered direct and conceptual replications.

Their studies do not yield evidence for a broad ideological difference in responses. Considering the prevalence of earlier evidence for asymmetry, the failed replication poses new questions on the conditions under which such differences can and do emerge.

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8. Hasson Y, Tamir M, Brahm KS, Cohrs JC, Halperin E: **Are liberals and conservatives equally motivated to feel empathy toward others?** *Personal Soc Psychol Bull* 2018, **44**:1449-1459.

With large sample in three countries, the authors demonstrate liberals, on average, want to feel more empathy and experience more empathy than conservatives, but also that both groups want to feel less empathy toward outgroup members than toward ingroup members or members of a nonpolitical group. This is the first study to examine intergroup empathy in the context of ideological outgroups, and is groundbreaking in identifying asymmetrical alongside symmetrical motivational processes in the emergence of empathy.

9. Pliskin R, Halperin E, Bar-Tal D, Sheppes G: **When ideology meets conflict-related content: Influences on emotion generation and regulation.** *Emotion* 2018, **18**:159-170.

In two lab studies, the authors demonstrate differential reactions by rightists and leftists to intergroup-conflict related emotional stimuli, with leftists consistently experiencing depictions of harm to the outgroup more intensely than do rightists. These more intense reactions lead leftists to show a greater preference than rightists for disengaging (versus engaging) emotion regulation strategies. This was the first study to examine competing hypotheses stemming from two approaches in the study of emotion regulation (i.e. motivation and regulatory choice), and its counter-intuitive (but theory-congruent) findings are important to consider when assessing the potential outcomes of ideological differences in motivations for empathy.

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The authors present the findings of a meta-analysis of almost 300 studies of epistemic, existential, and relational motivations, finding reliable ideological asymmetries with respect to a wide range of measures of these motivations. They also find reliable evidence for modest ‘conservative shifts’ in public opinion following threatening events. This comprehensive meta-analysis is essential to the present review as it is the most up-to-date review of empirical research on ideological (a)symmetry in motivation, presenting compelling evidence for the existence of meaningful differences between liberals and conservatives.

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17. Hibbing JR, Smith KB, Alford JR: **Differences in negativity bias underlie variations in political ideology.** *Behav Brain Sci* 2014, **37**:297-307.

18. Peterson JC, Jacobs C, Hibbing J, Smith K: **In your face: emotional expressivity as a predictor of ideology.** *Polit Life Sci* 2018, **37**:53-67.

The authors find, across a series of studies, ideological differences in self-reported emotional expressivity, in facial emotional expressivity measured physiologically, and in the perceived emotional expressivity and

ideology of political elites. Consistently, conservatives are (judged as) less expressive than liberals, potentially explaining previous inconsistencies among research projects trying to assess ideological differences in emotion through the examination of facial expressivity.

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In this theoretical paper, the authors propose that to better understand prejudice, a wide array of possible prejudice targets should be taken into account. While arguing for this approach more broadly, they also relate this directly to the study of ideology as it relates to both the expressers and the targets of prejudice. This approach speaks to the importance of considering context, more broadly defined, when examining emotions and individual differences in emotional processes.

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Similar to Jost (2017), this paper presents a comprehensive meta-analysis (134 samples), but this time focusing on ideological differences in fear and existential needs to reduce threat. The analysis yielded partial support for previous findings, identifying links between conservatism and both mortality salience and perceptions of threat. Considering the long-standing debate on whether ideological differences in threat do or do not exist, this meta-analytic strategy is especially useful, as its identification of constructs that do or do not reliably relate to ideology.

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Using eye-tracking methodology, the authors find social (but not economic) conservatism to be associated with less attentional engagement with disgust stimuli, but not with fear stimuli scenes and more attentional engagement toward neutral scenes. These findings support previous work on ideological differences in disgust sensitivity, but importantly extend this work by demonstrating that differences go as deep as affecting actual attention. This paper is also relevant to the present review in that its nuanced approach to types of conservatism and types of negative stimuli helps distinguish between differences that are more fundamental (i.e. affecting attention) and those that may be more related to motivational differences.

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