

Conflict Orientation and Political Behavior

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Increasingly, research into political behavior has found that individuals' personalities and predispositions—even those that appear to have little to do with politics--influence their political choices. To this end, the ANES has included additional psychological measures, such as the Ten Item Personality Inventory, in recent Time Series studies. However, measuring basic personality traits like the Big Five is only the first step in unpacking the ways in which stable psychological traits vary across Americans and inform their vote choice and political participation. I propose that individuals' predispositions towards conflict, an inherent part of the political process, provide further insight into political behavior, particularly in the contemporary context of heightened incivility, disagreement and polarization. I offer evidence from multiple online surveys and past research by other scholars to demonstrate the relationship between political participation and conflict orientation, as well as the importance of conflict orientation to political science as a discipline.

Background¹

Conflict orientation is a stable personality trait that determines how people experience and react to conflict—whether they are excited by arguments, uncomfortable when others fight in public, or happy to handle a disagreement face-to-face (Bresnahan, Donohue, Shearman, & Guan, 2009; Goldstein, 1999; Testa, Hibbing, & Ritchie, 2014). At one extreme, an individual can be highly conflict-avoidant, finding disagreement and argument uncomfortable and anxiety-inducing. These people will dislike confrontation and face-to-face resolution of conflict and will ultimately institute strategies in their personal and political lives to minimize their exposure to

¹ Elements of the “Background” and “Data and Measures” sections of this proposal borrow extensively from previous unpublished dissertation work.

potential conflict situations. At the other extreme are the conflict-approaching people, who have no problem expressing disagreement, are excited by the prospect of a debate, and are happy to air their arguments face-to-face in any environment. These people are not disturbed by the presence of conflict around them, and can even thrive in a high-conflict environment. Therefore, they will not shy away from disagreements in their personal social networks, nor from environments that will expose them to conflict between other people. Most people, as I will show below, fall somewhere in the middle—leaning slightly towards conflict avoidance.

Political scientists have tried to measure individual predispositions towards conflict in a variety of ways, many of which focus on conflict as it is specifically expressed in politics. Ulbig and Funk (1999) conceptualize conflict orientation as variation in an individual's desire to engage in interpersonal conflict. The measurement of this preference raises some concerns when considering its relationship to political engagement. Specifically, Ulbig and Funk argue that an individual is conflict-avoidant if they report that they try to avoid political discussion because it raises the potential for argument, and conflict-approaching if they enjoy political discussion. This strategy makes it difficult to tease apart conflict orientation and simple enjoyment of political activity. This enjoyment may be because of one's comfort with conflict, but it may also be related to political interest, the people with whom one typically discusses politics, or myriad other individual-level characteristics that are related to political discussion. This measure assesses citizens' aversion to political conflict by asking them if they avoid political conflict, rather than determining what psychological traits might lead them to avoid that conflict.

Other research has also examined conflict orientation through the lens of political conflict. Testa et al (2014) argue that conflict-approaching and conflict-avoidant tendencies

should be conceived as two separate dimensions of conflict orientation.² In other words, it is possible for an individual to score highly on both the conflict-avoidant and conflict-approaching scales, or enjoy talking about politics and simultaneously be hesitant to do so. Testa and his colleagues use responses to a series of statements about citizens' interest in or their reluctance to talk about politics as measures of these two dimensions. While this measure improves upon Ulbig and Funk's in that it requires respondents to articulate why they like or dislike political talk, it falls into a similar tautological trap by using self-reported reasons for liking or disliking *political* discussion to explain individuals' likelihood of engaging in political discussion. The measure captures individuals' perceived motivations for approaching or avoiding conflict, rather than the mental experience of conflict. This measure should be highly correlated with the adapted scale I propose, but that scale better captures the psychological experience instead of the motivation to approach or avoid conflict.

Mutz uses several different, non-political measures of conflict orientation in her work on substantive disagreement, individual-level predispositions, and political behavior (Mutz, 2006; Mutz & Martin, 2001; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). She measures conflict avoidance through statements about one's reactions to conflict, argument and disagreement in a non-specific environment, thereby capturing the concept independent of its connections to any political activities.

Building on Mutz's use of social psychological scales of conflict orientation for political science research, I propose that the ANES include a subset of questions from the Conflict

² To measure conflict orientation, Testa et al specifically ask: "People choose to talk or not talk about politics for a variety of reasons. Please tell us which of the following statements apply to you (True/False): I am sometimes reluctant to talk about politics: (N1) Because I don't like arguments; (N2) Because it creates enemies; (N3) Because I worry about what people would think of me. When I talk about politics I do so: (P1) Because it is enjoyable or entertaining; (P2) Because I like to debate and argue about politics; (P3) Because I want to share my views and convince others.

Communication Scale (CCS; Goldstein, 1999). The CCS is not as widely used as traditional managerial grid approaches to conflict resolution, but it is designed to measure the variability in the experience of conflict rather than strategies for reducing it. It is designed to provide measures that are relevant for conflict intervention such as mediation, but also broad enough to assess both cultural and individual differences in communication style in conflict situations. The CCS is designed around five subscales drawn from cultural research on the dimensions of conflict response: confrontation, public/private behavior, self-disclosure, emotional expression, and conflict approach/avoidance. While not widely cited in social or organizational psychology literature, it has previously been adapted to political questions (Mutz & Reeves, 2005).

Data and Measures

For this proposal I rely on data from four surveys conducted using online convenience and nationally representative samples through Mechanical Turk, Project Implicit, and Survey Sampling International. Across the four surveys, over 3,600 individuals completed the adapted Conflict Communication Scale that I am proposing here.

#	Sample Source	N	Date Collected
1	Project Implicit (online convenience)	1,800	March 2012
2	Mechanical Turk (online convenience)	600	August 2014
3	Survey Sampling International (nationally representative)	600	April 2014
4	Mechanical Turk (online convenience)	775	December 2012 & June 3013

All five questions on the adapted CCS are drawn from a single subscale. The conflict approach/avoidance scale is designed to gauge individuals' willingness to tolerate and engage in conflict at all. Do they ignore or avoid issues? Do they attempt to change the situation to minimize conflict or address it directly? In politics, like most situations, citizens have a choice about whether they will embrace conflict—by listening to Rush Limbaugh or by joining a

protest—or change the channel to avoid the situation altogether. Table 1 presents the wording of each of the five statements.

Table 1: Adapted Conflict Communication Scale Question Wording

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.
(Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

I enjoy challenging the opinions of others.
I find conflicts exciting.
I hate arguments.
Arguments don't bother me.
I feel upset after an argument.

Each of the five statements from the adapted Conflict Communication Scale captures individuals' general feelings when they face a situation with conflict communication. Two of the items acknowledge positive responses to argument or disagreement—enjoyment or excitement—and two associate conflict with negative feelings of hate or being upset. Agreement with the final statement, “Arguments don't bother me,” suggests at minimum a neutral attitude towards conflict. As Table 2 demonstrates, all five items hang together relatively well, using the Pearson correlation coefficient as an index of the degree of association between items. The strongest inter-item correlations are between pairs that express similar emotions. Hating arguments and feeling upset after an argument have a correlation of 0.65, and both have equally high correlations with the statement “arguments don't bother me” (0.64 and 0.68, respectively). The positive statements—that one enjoys challenging others or is excited by conflict—are more weakly correlated with one another at 0.34, and experience a greater range of correlations (from 0.14 to 0.62) with each of the other items. While the statement “I enjoy challenging the opinions of others,” has a much weaker correlation with the other items when measured across the combined four studies than when examined in each sample individually.³ Judged against normal

³ Due to space constraints, these correlations are not published here, but are available from the author upon request. When examined across the individual samples, the “challenge” measure correlates with the other

standards, these correlations are all quite strong, suggesting that the difference experiences articulated by the items do represent a coherent psychological reaction.

Table 2: Inter-item Correlation, Adapted Conflict Communication Scale

	Challenge	Excite	Hate	Bother	Upset
Challenge others	--				
Conflicts excite	0.34	--			
Hate arguments	0.31	0.58	--		
Arguments don't bother	0.24	0.62	0.64	--	
Upset after argument	0.14	0.51	0.65	0.68	--

Source: Combined results, all four surveys. Note: Statements are given in full in Table 1.

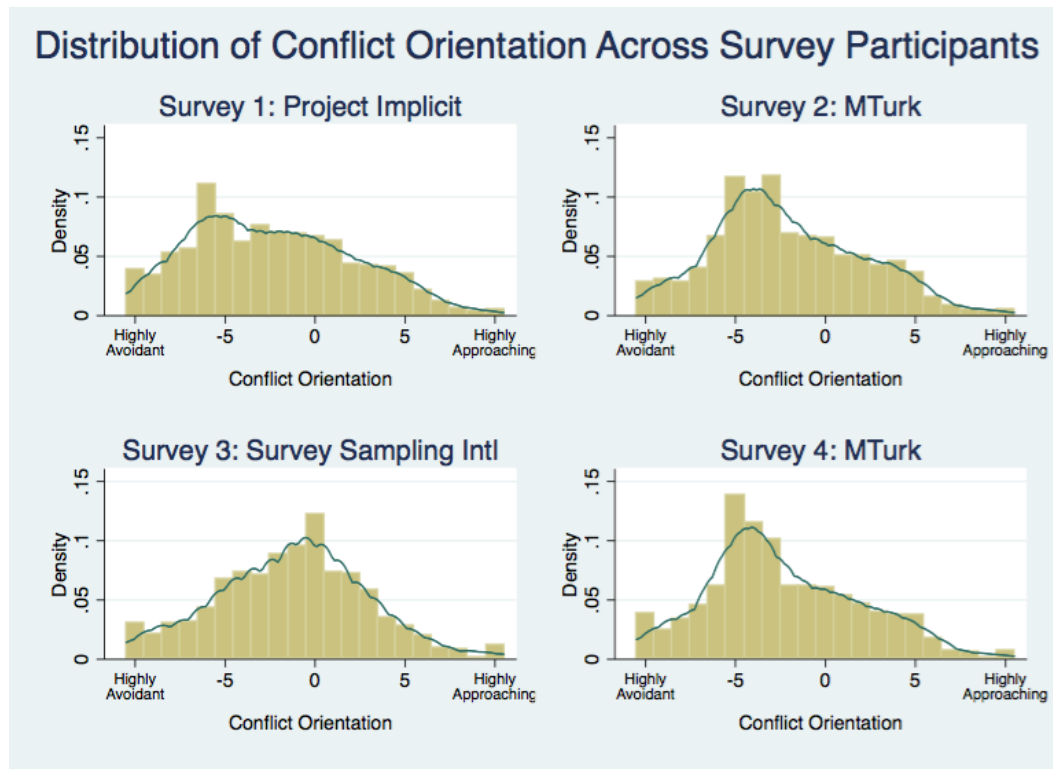
Participants' responses to the five questions, considered as an additive index, demonstrate that conflict orientation varies substantially across individuals. Figure 1 shows the distribution of participants across the CCS in each of the four studies. Participants fall along all points on the scale, from -10 (the most conflict-avoidant) to 10 (the most conflict-approaching), with the average score typically falling just to the left of the neutral zero point indicating slight conflict avoidance.

Empirical Performance and Results of Past Usage

Not only do the components of the adapted Conflict Communication Scale capture the underlying latent concept of conflict orientation, but they also explain a range of behavioral reactions, from emotional responses to incivility in the media to participation in certain forms of political participation. Investigating conflict orientation within the context of the ANES would not only confirm these relationships within a nationally representative probability sample, but it would also facilitate a greater understanding of the relationship between conflict orientation and other important dynamics of voting behavior, such as race and racial identity, issue salience, and qualitative reasons for liking/disliking parties or candidates.

four items between 0.24 and 0.62, with the correlation between "challenge" and feeling upset after an argument consistently the weakest.

Figure 1



Data from survey 1, however, speaks directly to questions about the relationship between conflict orientation and political engagement and replicate Ulbig and Funk’s finding that participation in “high-conflict” political activities is influenced by conflict orientation. For the purposes of these surveys, I identify high-conflict political activities as those in which an individual is more likely to experience either disagreement or incivility: protesting, commenting on blogs, calling one’s representative to advocate for an issue, or persuading others to vote for a particular candidate. For each of these activities, Figure 2 shows a significant relationship between the likelihood of participation and conflict orientation such that more conflict-approaching individuals are more likely to participate, holding constant many other factors that are known to influence political participation. Conflict orientation makes no difference in participants’ likelihood of reporting engagement in any of the other six political activities, including donating money or voting.

Beyond basic relationships between political activity and conflict orientation, this survey data also suggests that there are interesting interactions between personality and demographic characteristics that would benefit from further study using ANES data. Specifically examining the interaction between race and conflict orientation and its effects on participation in political protests, Figure 3 suggests that while conflict orientation does little to effect white protest, it plays a dramatic role in which African Americans are more likely to protest. Across the range of conflict orientations, white respondents' likelihood of reporting having protested hovers around 20 percent. Conflict-avoidant African American respondents look very similar; they too have about a 20 percent likelihood of reporting protest activity. Conflict-approaching African Americans, however, have at least a 60 percent likelihood of having participated in a protest in the past year, and for the most conflict-approaching, that number increases to around 90 percent.

Figure 2 (Source: Project Implicit, survey 1)

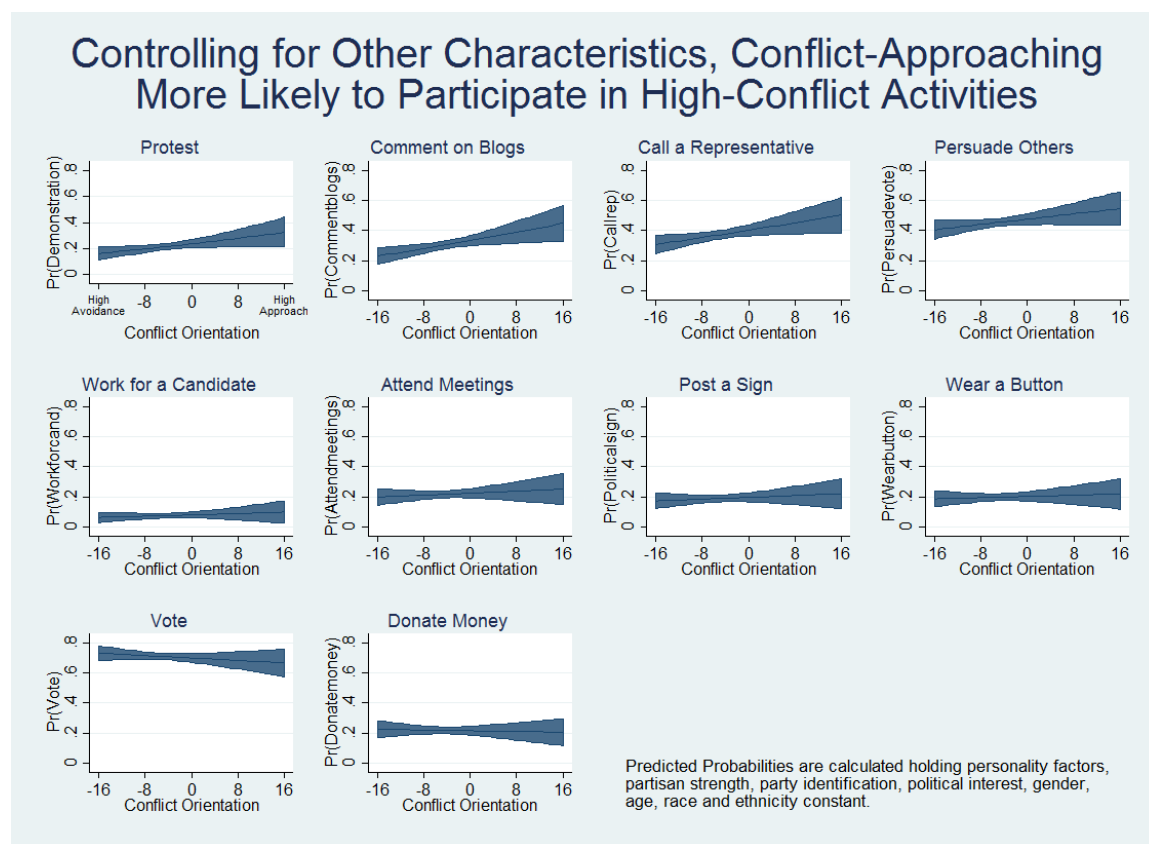
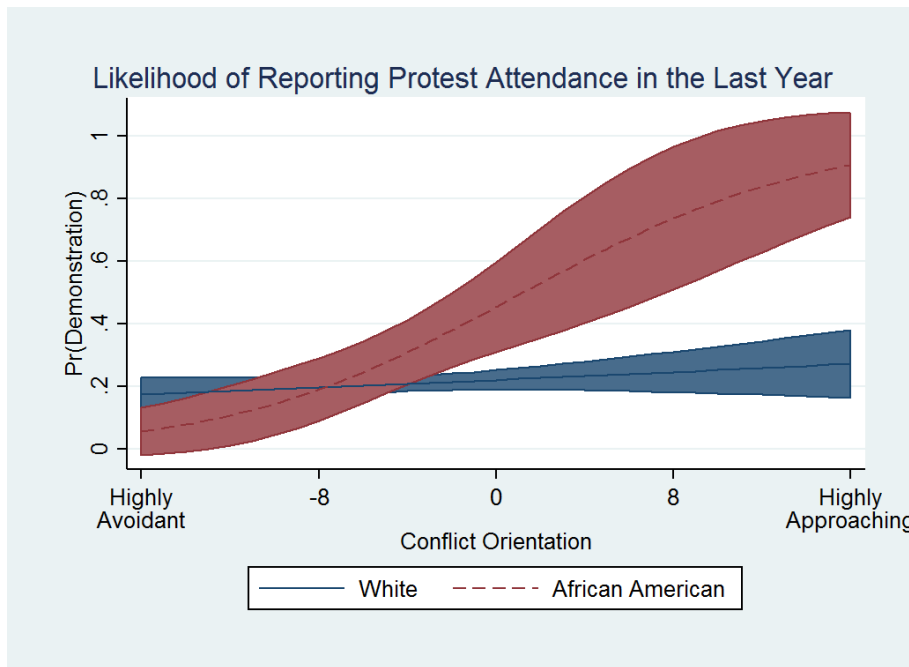


Figure 3 (Source: Project Implicit, survey 1)



This finding warrants further investigation, especially given that these data were collected in 2012, before police brutality increased the saliency of race relations and the prevalence of protest and other forms of political participation within the African American community. Adding the adapted Conflict Communication Scale measures to the ANES can help us understand not only this finding but also how it might connect to citizens' feelings of linked fate, attitudes towards the police and other contested political issues, and other forms of political behavior.

Conclusion

The adapted Conflict Communication Scale proposed here captures individuals' underlying psychological predispositions towards or against conflict, also known as their conflict orientation. It does so in a reliable and valid way, as evidenced both by my own survey work and that of the scale's creators (Goldstein, 1999). This individual-level characteristic has been found to influence a range of political behaviors and to interact with demographic characteristics

to further our understanding of the oft-asked question: who participates? In this case, it is those individuals who are most comfortable with the conflict inherent in much political activity, those who thrive on shouting, disagreement and confrontation. The CCS will offer important insight into political behavior on its own, but researchers will particularly benefit from examining its effects in concert with the wide range of other citizen attitudes and ideas the ANES captures.

Works Cited

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