Researchers help define what makes a political conservative

By Kathleen Maclay, Media Relations | 22 July 2003 (revised 7/25/03)

BERKELEY – Politically conservative agendas may range from supporting the Vietnam War to upholding traditional moral and religious values to opposing welfare. But are there consistent underlying motivations?

Four researchers who culled through 50 years of research literature about the psychology of conservatism report that at the core of political conservatism is the resistance to change and a tolerance for inequality, and that some of the common psychological factors linked to political conservatism include:

- Fear and aggression
- Dogmatism and intolerance of ambiguity
- Uncertainty avoidance
- Need for cognitive closure
- Terror management

"From our perspective, these psychological factors are capable of contributing to the adoption of conservative ideological contents, either independently or in combination," the researchers wrote in an article, "Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition," recently published in the American Psychological Association's *Psychological Bulletin.*

Assistant Professor Jack Glaser of the University of California, Berkeley's Goldman School of Public Policy and Visiting Professor Frank Sulloway of UC Berkeley joined lead author, Associate Professor John Jost of Stanford University's Graduate School of Business, and Professor Arie Kruglanski of the University of Maryland at College Park, to analyze the literature on conservatism.

The psychologists sought patterns among 88 samples, involving 22,818 participants, taken from journal articles, books and conference papers. The material

originating from 12 countries included speeches and interviews given by politicians, opinions and verdicts rendered by judges, as well as experimental, field and survey studies.

Ten meta-analytic calculations performed on the material - which included various types of literature and approaches from different countries and groups - yielded consistent, common threads, Glaser said.

The avoidance of uncertainty, for example, as well as the striving for certainty, are particularly tied to one key dimension of conservative thought - the resistance to change or hanging onto the status quo, they said.

The terror management feature of conservatism can be seen in post-Sept. 11 America, where many people appear to shun and even punish outsiders and those who threaten the status of cherished world views, they wrote.

Concerns with fear and threat, likewise, can be linked to a second key dimension of conservatism - an endorsement of inequality, a view reflected in the Indian caste system, South African apartheid and the conservative, segregationist politics of the late Sen. Strom Thurmond (R-South S.C.).

Disparate conservatives share a resistance to change and acceptance of inequality, the authors said. Hitler, Mussolini, and former President Ronald Reagan were individuals, but all were right-wing conservatives because they preached a return to an idealized past and condoned inequality in some form. Talk host Rush Limbaugh can be described the same way, the authors commented in a published reply to the article.

This research marks the first synthesis of a vast amount of information about conservatism, and the result is an "elegant and unifying explanation" for political conservatism under the rubric of motivated social cognition, said Sulloway. That entails the tendency of people's attitudinal preferences on policy matters to be explained by individual needs based on personality, social interests or existential needs.

The researchers' analytical methods allowed them to determine the effects for each class of factors and revealed "more pluralistic and nuanced understanding of the source of conservatism," Sulloway said.

While most people resist change, Glaser said, liberals appear to have a higher tolerance for change than conservatives do.

As for conservatives' penchant for accepting inequality, he said, one contemporary example is liberals' general endorsement of extending rights and liberties to disadvantaged minorities such as gays and lesbians, compared to conservatives' opposing position.

The researchers said that conservative ideologies, like virtually all belief systems, develop in part because they satisfy some psychological needs, but that "does not mean that conservatism is pathological or that conservative beliefs are necessarily false, irrational, or unprincipled."

They also stressed that their findings are not judgmental.

"In many cases, including mass politics, 'liberal' traits may be liabilities, and being intolerant of ambiguity, high on the need for closure, or low in cognitive complexity might be associated with such generally valued characteristics as personal commitment and unwavering loyalty," the researchers wrote.

This intolerance of ambiguity can lead people to cling to the familiar, to arrive at premature conclusions, and to impose simplistic cliches and stereotypes, the researchers advised.

The latest debate about the possibility that the Bush administration ignored intelligence information that discounted reports of Iraq buying nuclear material from Africa may be linked to the conservative intolerance for ambiguity and or need for closure, said Glaser.

"For a variety of psychological reasons, then, right-wing populism may have more consistent appeal than left-wing populism, especially in times of potential

crisis and instability," he said.

Glaser acknowledged that the team's exclusive assessment of the psychological motivations of political conservatism might be viewed as a partisan exercise. However, he said, there is a host of information available about conservatism, but not about liberalism.

The researchers conceded cases of left-wing ideologues, such as Stalin, Khrushchev or Castro, who, once in power, steadfastly resisted change, allegedly in the name of egalitarianism.

Yet, they noted that some of these figures might be considered politically conservative in the context of the systems that they defended. The researchers noted that Stalin, for example, was concerned about defending and preserving the existing Soviet system.

Although they concluded that conservatives are less "integratively complex" than others are, Glaser said, "it doesn't mean that they're simple-minded."

Conservatives don't feel the need to jump through complex, intellectual hoops in order to understand or justify some of their positions, he said. "They are more comfortable seeing and stating things in black and white in ways that would make liberals squirm," Glaser said.

He pointed as an example to a 2001 trip to Italy, where President George W. Bush was asked to explain himself. The Republican president told assembled world leaders, "I know what I believe and I believe what I believe is right." And in 2002, Bush told a British reporter, "Look, my job isn't to nuance."