

Study finds political beliefs shape the way the public interprets history

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Research shows that when exploring attitudes in the U.S., UK, Italy, South Africa, Mexico, and Poland—countries with different economies, cultures and political regimes (past and present)—right- compared to left-

wing supporters evaluated the past more positively.

The data reveal that, in part, this occurs because right-wing supporters are more nostalgic about tradition. While the right looked more favorably to the past, in the U.S. and Poland (and potentially in the UK too), the left was more optimistic about what humanity can potentially achieve in the future. Though these observations indicate that political opinions matter when people consider the past and the future, the study found no difference in how people on the right versus left evaluate the present.

Published in the journal *Political Psychology*, the [paper](#) shows that how [history](#) is interpreted is central not only to [political elites](#) but also to lay people reporting divergent political opinions. These findings are particularly relevant today, given the number of prominent election campaigns taking place this year.

Politics and history

When looking at classical political texts, one realizes that the way history is interpreted is one of the major aspects. Marxism, for example, offers a view of history where, following original communism characterizing ancient hunter-gatherer societies, new economic systems replace old ones, with class conflict being common to all. This process is believed to culminate in a new age of communism, where economic scarcity is finally overcome and class conflict ends.

As another example, central to many classical liberal writings is the idea that, before civilization emerged, mankind lived in a state of nature where individuals survived without being part of an institutionalized community. History is central to fascist ideology too, where people are mobilized towards a struggle to recreate a mythical past during which the folk expressed all its power and glory.

As these examples illustrate, the pivotal role of history in the thinking of political elites is well established. This raises the following question: is history interpreted differently also by laypeople with divergent political opinions?

Assessing history

To understand more about how history is assessed by lay people reporting different political orientations, Dr. Francesco Rigoli, Reader in the Department of Psychology at City, conducted an online study with 1,200 participants from the U.S., the UK, Italy, South Africa, Mexico, and Poland where, in addition to reporting their positioning on a left-right political spectrum, participants evaluated the recent past (i.e., the period ranging from 1950 to 2000), the present, and the near future (i.e., society in 25 years).

The data show that, in all countries, right- compared to left-wing supporters evaluated the past as more positive. To elucidate this effect, a second study manipulated the appraisal of the past between groups, but found that this did not influence participants' political ideas.

A third study manipulated the prominence of political opinions between groups. Here, the high-prominence group displayed a stronger link between political ideas and evaluation of the past, indicating that embracing certain political opinions encourages a specific interpretation of the past.

Exploring the factors mediating this effect, one last study found that nostalgia for tradition partially explains why right-wing supporters cherish the past more.

Dr. Rigoli said, "It is remarkable that the rhetoric employed by politicians often evokes images of the past or visions of the future, such

as the recent slogans of Barack Obama ('Yes we can') and Donald Trump ('Let's make America great again'). I wanted to explore whether these messages resonate with the general public by exploring whether people on the right of the political spectrum appraise the past, present, and future differently from people on the left.

"My observations indicate that a better appraisal of the past distinguishes the right from the left, an effect evident in all nations and thus reflecting a general phenomenon. Moreover, the data suggest that this does not arise because people with a better [opinion](#) about the past are attracted towards the right, but rather because the right-wing ideology provides a framework to interpret the past as being a better age.

"This suggests that nostalgia for tradition might mediate this effect, at least partially: people on the right report a longing for tradition, for hierarchical order, and for family connections, which they attribute to the recent past.

"The analyses also reveal that left-wing supporters believe that human actions can make a difference: their opinion is that, if appropriate choices are made, the future can improve substantially. However, the left's optimism was evident only in the U.S., Poland and possibly the UK, indicating that this is not a general phenomenon.

"These observations may help to clarify why people on the right often resist change: this may occur not much because they like the present, but, rather, because they like the past and they may view change as being a further step away from the past."

More information: Francesco Rigoli, Ideology shapes evaluation of history within the general population, *Political Psychology* (2024). [DOI:](#)

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