

# **Liberalism and Conservatism, for a Change! Rethinking the Association Between Political Orientation and Relation to Societal Change**

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*According to common wisdom, which is supported by extant psychological theorizing, a core feature of political conservatism (vs. liberalism) is the resistance to (vs. acceptance of) societal change. We propose that an empirical examination of the actual difference in political liberals' and conservatives' attitudes toward change across different sociopolitical issues may call into question this assumed association between political orientation and relation to change. We examined this proposition in four studies conducted in Germany. In Study 1, we assessed lay people's intuitions about liberals' and conservatives' attitudes toward change. Results of this study concur with theoretical assumptions that liberals accept and conservatives resist change. In Study 2a, Study 2b, and Study 3, self-identified liberals and conservatives were asked whether they would resist or accept change on various sociopolitical issues. Results of these studies suggest that both conservatives and liberals resist and accept societal changes, depending on the extent to which they approve or disapprove of the status quo on a given sociopolitical issue. Overall, our findings provide no evidence for a one-directional association between political orientation and the tendency to accept or resist change. These findings therefore challenge theoretical and lay assumptions regarding general, context-independent psychological differences underlying political ideologies.*

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**KEY WORDS:** conservatism, liberalism, political orientation, resistance to change

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“Why don't you join our neo-conservative movement?”

“I prefer our liberal ideas because I always did.” German joke

Almost all societies are divided between those who seek to preserve stability and conserve the societal status quo and those who accept societal change, innovation and reform (Mill, 1991).

Traditionally, it is this stance towards change that is thought to differentiate political conservatives from liberals: Those individuals or parties who resist societal change are called “conservative,” whereas those individuals or parties who endorse reform and accept change are called “liberal” (Hibbing, Smith, & Alford, 2014; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003a). With this in mind, one may ask whether such general, context-independent psychological differences indeed exist between political conservatives and liberals. The present research questions this general view by suggesting that both conservatives and liberals accept certain changes and resist others, revealing no one-directional, stable association between political ideology and relation to societal change.

Looking at current political events, one readily notices exceptions to this “rule.” One prominent example is the upcoming changes in the Turkish constitution. Here, the “conservatives” seem to accept the new development, whereas the “liberals” resist this change and seek to maintain a strong democracy. If the labels of “liberals” and “conservatives” would be solely based on their stance towards change, the current situation in Turkey could be a clear case of mislabeling because conservatives currently accept and liberals currently resist change.

The following question thus arises: How did the association between political conservatism and resistance to change emerge, despite evidence to the contrary? When people think about “liberal” and “conservative,” they often have particular sociopolitical issues in mind (Kahnemann & Miller, 1986) that fit their assumptions about liberals and conservatives, and they may neglect or ignore the less fitting sociopolitical issues (e.g., labeling them “exceptions”). Typical sociopolitical issues that come easily to mind include political topics such as immigration policies (e.g., limiting immigration), minority rights (e.g., resisting same-sex marriage), or drug legalization, on which conservatives are typically reluctant to accept change. However, a broader variation of sociopolitical issues or themes is necessary for one to assess whether liberals and conservatives actually differ in their general stance towards change or whether their stance towards change is in fact issue-dependent (Brunswick, 1955; Wells & Windschitl, 1999). The present work examined two competing hypotheses: The first was that self-identified liberals and conservatives differ in their basic stance towards societal change, such that liberals generally tend to accept change and conservatives to resist change. The second was that both liberals and conservatives tend to accept and resist change depending on the topic in question, revealing no consistent relation between political orientation and relation to societal change.

### *Political Orientation and Relation to Change*

Political ideology has been conceived of as “an interrelated set of attitudes and values about the proper goals of society and how they should be achieved” (Tedin, 1987, p. 65; see also Jost, 2006). In their most basic conceptualization, political orientations can be arranged along a dimension ranging from political conservatism to liberalism, with conservatism representing the rejecting of change and liberalism the acceptance of societal change. Such a view is not only in line with the formal definitions of the terms “conservative” and “liberal,” but it also reflects the historical origins of the distinction between the “left” and the “right,” which derives from the seating order of the French Assembly at the time of the French Revolution (Laponce, 1981); the aristocrats who accepted the ancient regime were placed on the right side and those sympathizing with the revolution on the left side. More broadly, by the beginning of the 20th century, those who wanted social reform or greater equality, like socialists and communists, were described as being to the left, while reactionaries and defenders of the current establishments and constitutions were described as being to the right.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>We acknowledge that liberalism versus conservatism and left versus right are not parallel distinctions with regard to many sociopolitical dimensions and that the definitions of these categories largely depends on the historical and political context at hand. Nevertheless, as this research focuses on the association between political orientation and relation to societal change, we use liberal/left and conservative/right interchangeably, consistent with the theoretical literature arguing for such an association (e.g., Jost, 2017).

This association between political conservatism and resistance to societal change is therefore not only reflected in the discourse and the lay uses of the term, but it has also been central to various analyses of conservatism in the extant scientific literature (e.g., Conover & Feldman, 1981; Mannheim, 1986; Wilson, 1941).

Resistance to change is also considered a core feature of political conservatism in the psychological literature (e.g., Duckitt, 2001; Feldman & Huddy, 2014; Jost, 2006; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway, 2003a, 2003b; Kerlinger, 1984; Muller, 2001; Wilson, 1973). Importantly, the assumed differences between political liberals and conservatives in terms of their attitudes towards change are considered to be rooted in deep-seated psychological differences between them: Conservatives presumably demonstrate higher perceptual sensitivity to threatening stimuli compared to liberals (McLean et al., 2014; Oxley, Smith, & Alford, 2008; Vigil, 2010), and they are more likely to perceive the world as dangerous (e.g., Altemeyer, 1996; Duckitt, 2001) and to fear crime, terrorism, and death (e.g., Jost et al., 2003a). This relatively higher sensitivity to threat supposedly leads conservatives to consistently seek order and structure in their personal, social, and political environments. Indeed, research suggests that conservatives, compared to liberals, express more discomfort and intolerance towards uncertainty and ambiguity (Chirumbolo, Areni, & Sensales, 2004; Jost, Kruglanski, & Simon, 1999; Jost et al., 2003b; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). As a result, conservatives supposedly tend to protect, legitimize, and justify the existing social order and the status quo and to oppose societal changes (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Jost et al., 2003a; Jost, Napier, Thorisdottir, Gosling, Palfai, & Ostafin, 2007). These system justification tendencies of conservatives are thought to reduce the perceived necessity of change and increase the acceptance of the status quo. In contrast, liberals tend to demonstrate more openness to experience and higher cognitive flexibility, both of which are related to higher tolerance of ambiguous stimuli and to higher ability to endure change, which often entails more uncertainty and ambiguity (Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; Hibbing et al., 2014).

Notwithstanding the intuitive appeal of such a view, the issue seems to be more complex than is generally acknowledged, at least by the psychological literature on political ideology. Even the arch-conservative Edmond Burke (1790) suggests in his comments on the revolution in France that “a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation” (p. 27). Huntington (1957) similarly suggests that although conservatives are critical of change, they do not oppose change as such. Insofar as the “essence of conservatism is the passionate affirmation of the value of existing institutions” (p. 455), when societal changes do not interfere with the fundamental elements of society, or even promote the preservation of traditional institutions, ideas, practices, and norms, conservatives may see it as acceptable and even necessary (e.g., Alexander, 2013; Oakeshott, 1991; Robin, 2011). Greenberg and Jonas (2003) similarly argue that conservatives seem to be more in favor of change than liberals may assume and that liberals are not necessarily in favor of all societal and political changes (see also Brandt, Reyna, Chambers, Crawford, & Wetherell, 2014; Morgan, Skitka, & Wisneski, 2014). To support their claim, they provide counterexamples, similar to the above described changes to the constitution of Turkey, in which conservatives accept change and liberals oppose it.

According to Jost and colleagues (2003b), such counterexamples are merely exceptions to the rule, which in fact prove the rule. This argument is clearly correct, as single examples of conservatives accepting change or liberals resisting change hardly disprove a general tendency (e.g., a correlation). However, the current research suggests that evidence for a systematic opposite pattern (i.e., a reverse correlation) between political conservatism and resistance to change may indeed disprove such general assumptions by indicating that the direction of this association is issue-dependent, rather than general. To date, however, no studies have been conducted to put such assumptions into proper empirical test. To do so, one should examine the association between political orientation and attitudes towards change on a variety of sociopolitical issues.

The following question therefore arises: For which issues do political conservatives tend to accept change and political liberals to oppose it? Generally, we assume that when people disapprove of the status quo on a given issue, they wish to change it. Conversely, when they approve of the status quo on a given issue, they wish to maintain it. Although this seems to be stating the obvious, providing systematic evidence that one's stance towards change depends on their relation to the status quo, rather than on their political orientation, may constitute a challenge to the assumption that liberals are generally change accepting and conservatives change averse.

#### *Political Orientation and Relation to Reactionary Versus Progressive Change*

During the French Revolution, the political left was seen as accepting progressive change as they tended to overthrow the old system along the lines of liberty, equality, and solidarity. In contrast, the political right did not necessarily want to maintain the current state of affairs but rather trended towards accepting reactionary change by reinstalling the old regime. Along these lines, Wilson (1973) noted that conservatives may indeed resist progressive change (i.e., accepting recognized trends within society) but accept reactionary change (i.e., reversal of social trends, return to the status ante). Jost and colleagues (2009) concur with this view, noting that conservatives do not always resist change but may instead opt for reactionary change under certain circumstances.

The distinction between reactionary and progressive change is not straightforward. To define progressive change as an improvement of society and reactionary change as a deterioration of society would be an empty definition, as it implies ideology-based judgment. Similarly, to define any type of change accepted by liberals as "progressive" and any type of change accepted by conservatives as "reactionary" would count as a tautological definition which is empirically untestable. A potentially useful characterization of progressive change would thus be all change that pursues current trends. Reactionary change, by contrast, would be all change that pursues a reversal and undoing of recent changes. For instance, if new policies have been implemented against terrorist threat (e.g., surveillance), pushing towards additional measures to prevent terrorist attacks would be progressive. In contrast, the undoing or removal of these recently implemented changes would be reactionary. However, it is not entirely clear how to make the qualification "recent change" more precise. It could refer to the last months, years, or decades, which may lead to divergent interpretations of change as progressive or reactionary. The best practice, we argue, would be to define reactionary and progressive change as relative constructs.

Although political conservatives and liberals are thought to differ in the direction of change they desire (in addition to their very acceptance of change), no empirical research has thus far been conducted to investigate their acceptance or rejection of reactionary and progressive change across different issues. Although some conservatism scales include items referring to change (e.g., Knight, 1999; see also Jost et al., 2003a), an empirical exploration of attitudes toward change across different societal and political issues is needed to uncover potential differences in attitudes toward change between liberals and conservatives, but also potential commonalities.

#### *The Current Studies*

The goal of the current studies is to offer a systematic empirical examination of how political conservatives and liberals relate to societal and political change of different types (reactionary vs. progressive) across a variety of sociopolitical issues. The basic assumption underlying these studies is that the extent to which political liberals and conservatives accept or resist societal change is qualified by the extent to which they approve or disapprove of the status quo on the sociopolitical issue in which change is proposed or considered. Contrary to the common wisdom, according to which liberals generally accept progressive change and conservatives generally resist change or accept reactionary change, we hypothesized that conservatives (and liberals) will resist societal change when they approve of the status quo on a given issue, and they will accept change when they disapprove

of the status quo. Put differently, we propose that political orientation (political conservatism vs. liberalism) does not imply “conservatism” (i.e., resistance)/”liberalism” (i.e., acceptance) with regard to societal change.

Although our hypotheses regarding the association between political orientation and resistance to change were straightforward, the conditions under which liberals and conservatives will support reactionary versus progressive change were left open for exploration in the present research. Nevertheless, we expected no systematic one-directional relation between political conservatism and acceptance of reactionary change, or liberalism and acceptance of progressive change.

To test these hypotheses, we conducted four studies in the German context. In Study 1 (student sample), we assessed lay conceptions of the differences between liberals and conservatives in their relations towards change, as such lay intuitions might diverge from the common knowledge of experts. In Study 2a (student sample) and Study 2b (general population sample), we asked participants about their desire for change (*acceptance* vs. *resistance*) and in which direction the desired changes should occur: *progressive* (i.e., accepting recognized trends within society) or *reactionary* (i.e., reversing social trends, returning to the status ante) on various political and societal issues that represent points of dispute between liberals and conservatives in the German political discourse. Since Studies 2a and 2b were based on assumed differences in conservatives’ and liberals’ approval/disapproval of the status quo on the chosen issues, Study 3 (general population sample) assessed participants’ actual approval/disapproval of the status quo for each of the selected issues and examined the effects of actual approval/disapproval on the acceptance/rejection of progressive/reactionary change.

## STUDY 1

Although researchers may generally share the conception that liberals accept change and conservatives resist change (e.g., Jost, 2017), ordinary citizens may not share the intuition. In Study 1, we examined lay intuitions about conservatives’ and liberals’ attitudes towards change. We hypothesized that participants would rate political conservatives as more resistant to change compared to political liberals. Thus, we expected lay people’s intuitions about conservatives and liberals to mirror past findings on the relation between political orientation and relation to change.

### Method

#### *Participants*

One hundred and nineteen students volunteered to participate in this study. After excluding seven participants who were not native German speakers, the final sample included 112 participants (84% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 21$ ,  $SD = 2.30$ ).

A sensitivity power analysis for paired samples *t*-tests, using G\*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009), indicated that Cohen’s  $d_z = .23$  would be the minimum effect size that the study can detect with 80% power ( $\alpha = .05$ ).<sup>2</sup> In post hoc power analyses with  $N = 112$  and Cohen’s  $d_z = 1.84$ , which was the mean effect size obtained in the *t*-tests we carried out, the resulting power was of 1.00 ( $\alpha = .05$ ).

#### *Procedure and Measures*

Participants rated the extent to which they believe political conservatives and liberals typically *rely on tradition*, want to *maintain the status quo*, and *accept societal change* (reverse coded) to tap different aspects of attitudes towards societal change (see Jost et al., 2003a, 2003b). The same three

<sup>2</sup>One hundred percent of significant effects obtained in the *t*-test analyses conducted in this study were equal or greater than this cut-off point, indicating that all effect sizes were detected with at least .80 power.

items were used twice: once referring to liberals, and once referring to conservatives.<sup>3</sup> All six items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*).<sup>4</sup> Then, participants indicated their political orientation on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*political left*) to 7 (*political right*).

## Results and Discussion

We conducted three dependent samples *t*-tests to examine whether conservatives and liberals are perceived as different in terms of their attitudes toward change (acceptance of change, desire to maintain the status quo, and reliance on tradition). Results are presented in Table 1. As shown in Table 1, conservatives were rated as significantly more resistant to change compared to liberals on all items (all *t*-values > .10, *ps* < .001).

Finally, we correlated the ratings on each of these six items with participants' political orientation. Participants' political orientation was not significantly correlated with either of these items ( $-.08 < r_s < .08$ , *ps* > .363), indicating that liberals and conservatives did not differ in their intuitions regarding the relation between political orientation and resistance to change.

To summarize, the results of Study 1 reveal that political conservatives are perceived as more resistant to change than liberals across the political spectrum. Thus, results of Study 1 suggest that the proposed distinction in the core characteristic of conservatism and liberalism—resistance versus acceptance of change—reflects broadly consensual intuitions.

## STUDIES 2A AND 2B

The aim of Studies 2a and 2b was to empirically assess political conservatives' and liberals' attitudes toward change on various sociopolitical issues which are salient in the German discourse. In Study 2a, we asked liberal and conservative students to what extent they accepted change with regard to the selected topics and in which direction they accept such change (reactionary vs. progressive). We hypothesized that the association between political orientation and acceptance (vs. resistance) to change will be either positive or negative, depending on whether the status quo on the issue at hand is typically approved by liberals or conservatives, respectively. We further hypothesized that the extent to which liberals and conservatives accept progressive versus reactionary change will vary across issues, rather than being consistently associated with their political orientation. In Study 2b, we replicate these findings using a more diverse sample taken from the general population, with some improvements to our scales (see the Measures section).

## Method

### *Participants and Procedure*

One hundred and seventy-four students volunteered to take part in Study 2a. After excluding 15 students who were not German native speakers, the final sample included 159 participants (84% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 21.22$ ,  $SD = 2.94$ ). In order to attain a more diverse sample, 150 participants were recruited for Study 2b using an online survey platform ([www.soscisurvey.de](http://www.soscisurvey.de)). After excluding two participants who were not native German speakers, the final sample included 148 participants (50% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 29.94$ ,  $SD = 12.44$ ). A sensitivity power analysis for a bivariate normal model, using

<sup>3</sup>These items did not form reliable scales among conservatives ( $\alpha = .64$ ) or liberals ( $\alpha = .43$ ), although they all loaded onto one factor in a factor analysis. Hence, we conducted our analyses on each item separately. As shown in the results section, results were consistent across all items.

<sup>4</sup>Unrelated to the present study, we also assessed whether participants perceive conservatives as more supportive of social equality than liberals. Results indicate that liberals were indeed seen as more supportive of equality than conservatives across the political spectrum.

**Table 1.** Means and Standard Deviations of Attitudes Towards Change Attributed to Liberals and Conservatives (Study 1)

	<i>M [SD]</i> Conservatives	<i>M [SD]</i> Liberals	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI of the Mean Difference
1. "... rely on tradition."	4.43 [.56]	2.36 [.68]	22.71	< .001	[1.88, 2.24]
2. "... want to maintain the status quo."	3.98 [.78]	2.43 [.78]	13.98	< .001	[1.33, 1.76]
3. "... accept change." [reverse]	4.19 [.56]	1.97 [.79]	21.58	< .001	[2.01, 2.42]

*Note.* For the rating of conservatives, the items read "Conservatives ..."; for the rating of liberals the item read "Liberals ...." CI = confidence interval.

G\*Power (Faul et al., 2009), indicated that the  $lrl = .20$  would be the minimum effect size that Studies 2a and 2b can detect with 80% power ( $\alpha = .05$ ).<sup>5</sup> In post hoc power analyses with  $N = 159$  and  $lrl = .26$ , which was the mean effect size we got in the correlation tests we carried out in Study 2a, the resulting power was of .96 ( $\alpha = .05$ ). Setting  $N = 148$  and  $lrl = .46$ , which was the mean effect size we got in the correlation tests we carried out in Study 2b, the resulting power was of .99 ( $\alpha = .05$ ).

Participants' responses in Study 2a were collected using a paper-pencil questionnaire and in Study 2b using an online questionnaire. First, participants in both studies rated their acceptance of versus resistance to reactionary and progressive change across various issues. For Study 2a, we selected 22 societal and political issues that represent debated topics between liberals and conservatives in German society. Ten of these issues were used in Study 2b<sup>6</sup> (see Table 2 for the full list of issues). In each study, half of the issues represented a current state of affairs (i.e., status quo) that is typically approved by conservatives and disapproved by liberals ("conservative issues"; e.g., "The rate of approval of asylum applications in Germany currently stands at 9%"), and half of the issues represented a current state of affairs that is typically approved by liberals and disapproved by conservatives ("liberal issues"; e.g., "In Germany, it is difficult to monitor extremists since the video surveillance in the public sphere is regulated by law"). Finally, participants rated their political orientation and completed a demographic questionnaire.

### Measures

Unless indicated otherwise, identical measures were used in Study 2a and Study 2b.

*Acceptance of vs. resistance to change.* Participants rated their acceptance (vs. rejection) of change on each given issue on a scale ranging from 1 (*We should preserve this situation*) to 5 (*We should change this situation*) in Study 2a, and from 1 to 7 in Study 2b.<sup>7</sup> Higher scores indicate greater acceptance of change. Participants' ratings on these issues were used to create mean scores of acceptance of change on "liberal issues" (i.e., issues on which the status quo is approved by liberals and disapproved by conservatives; Study 2a:  $\alpha = .66$ , Study 2b:  $\alpha = .63$ ), and on "conservative issues"

<sup>5</sup>As shown in Table 3, 85% of significant correlations obtained in Study 2a, and 89% of those obtained in Study 2b, were equal or above .20. Thus, the majority of correlations in these studies were detected with at least .80 power.

<sup>6</sup>As Study 2b was an online study conducted using a general population sample, we used only selected stimuli from the pool of stimuli used in Study 2a in an attempt to shorten the questionnaire and increase participants' rate of study completion. In choosing the stimuli for Study 2b, we avoided using those issues that were found not to correlate with political orientation in Study 2a.

<sup>7</sup>In Study 2b, we chose to use broader scales of acceptance versus resistance to change, reactionary versus progressive change, conservatism, and ideological self-placement, in order to increase the potential variance of responses on these measures. As can be seen in the results of Studies 2a and 2b, our findings were not affected by the range of the scales.

Table 2. Issues Used to Measure Reactionary and Progressive Change (Study 2a and 2b)

Issue	Conservative Issues (status quo approved by conservatives and disapproved by liberals)	Reactionary Change (reversing social trends in order to return to the status ante)	Progressive Change (promoting recognized trends within society)
In Germany, gay couples currently do not have the same rights as heterosexual couples.	Homosexual couples should have less rights.	Homosexual couples should have more rights.	Homosexual couples should have more rights.
Kerosene and aviation fuel is tax-free in Germany.	There should be more tax privileges for air traffic in Germany.	The German state should collect taxes on kerosene and aviation.	The German state should collect taxes on kerosene and aviation.
Environmental protection has relatively low priority in Germany.*	Environmental protection should have lower priority in Germany.	Environmental protection should have higher priority in Germany.	Environmental protection should have higher priority in Germany.
The rate of approval of asylum applications in Germany currently stands at 9%.*	The rate of approval should be lowered.	The rate of approval should be raised.	The rate of approval should be raised.
Germany is the only European nation where no general speed limit applies on highways.*	There should be even less speed limits on German highways.	There should be a general speed limit on German highways.	There should be a general speed limit on German highways.
The number of subcontract workers in Germany has reached its highest peak.	The number of subcontract workers in Germany should be lowered.	The number of subcontract workers in Germany should be raised.	The number of subcontract workers in Germany should be raised.
In the German federal budget of 2015, 900 million Euros are allocated for child care subsidies ('stay-at-home parenting credit').	Less money should be allocated for child care subsidy.	More money should be allocated for child care subsidy.	More money should be allocated for child care subsidy.
The health system in Germany is characterized by liberal reforms.	The health system in Germany should be liberalized less.	The health system in Germany should be liberalized even more.	The health system in Germany should be liberalized even more.
In Thuringian registry offices everyone can get access to addresses, age and religion of all citizens for a fee of €5.	Access to such data should be stricter regulated.	Access to such data should be less regulated.	Access to such data should be less regulated.
In German cities, it is almost impossible to move freely without being filmed by a video camera.*	The number of video cameras in German cities should be decreased.	The number of video cameras in German cities should be increased.	The number of video cameras in German cities should be increased.
In the course of the "war on terror," numerous antiterrorist measures have been implemented in Germany.*	Germany should apply less anti-terror measures.	Germany should apply more antiterror measures.	Germany should apply more antiterror measures.
<b>Liberal Issues (status quo approved by liberals and disapproved by conservatives)</b>			
In Germany, it is difficult to monitor extremists, since the video surveillance in the public sphere is regulated by law.	The video surveillance should be more strictly regulated in Germany.	The video surveillance should be less strictly regulated in Germany.	The video surveillance should be less strictly regulated in Germany.
The rights of the German police to intervene in demonstrations are quite limited.*	The German police should have fewer rights to intervene in demonstrations.	The German police should have more rights to intervene in demonstrations.	The German police should have more rights to intervene in demonstrations.



<p>The retention of data on German citizens is currently limited to seven days.</p>	<p>Retention of data should be limited to less than seven days.</p>	<p>Retention of data should be allowed for more than seven days.</p>
<p>Since 2011, German banks have been required to bear the cost of future banking crises themselves.<sup>*1</sup></p>	<p>German banks should be held accountable less for banking crises.</p>	<p>German banks should be held accountable even more for banking crises.</p>
<p>Gender equality in Germany is higher than in any other country in Europe.</p>	<p>German men and women should be treated according to their qualifications.</p>	<p>Gender equality in Germany should be further extended.</p>
<p>Immigrants are well integrated in Germany.</p>	<p>Less immigrants should be allowed in Germany.</p>	<p>Integration of immigrants should be further extended.</p>
<p>In 2011, the Federal Government of Germany has decided to phase out nuclear power by 2022.</p>	<p>Nuclear power in Germany should be phased out later or not at all.</p>	<p>Nuclear power in Germany should be phased out earlier.</p>
<p>Religion has very little influence on national and international politics in Germany.</p>	<p>Religion should have stronger influences on German politics.</p>	<p>Religion should have no influence at all on German politics.</p>
<p>In Germany, women can get the “morning-after” pill without a prescription at the pharmacy.<sup>*1</sup></p>	<p>Access to the “morning-after pill” in Germany should be made more complicated.</p>	<p>Access to the “morning-after pill” in Germany should be made even easier.</p>
<p>The juvenile justice system in Germany is characterized by relatively mild supervising sanctions.<sup>*1</sup></p>	<p>Supervising sanctions should be tougher.</p>	<p>Supervising sanctions should be even more lenient.</p>
<p>In Germany, trade unions have the right to strike even if it causes considerable disadvantages for the general population (e.g., longer waiting times when traveling by train).<sup>*1</sup></p>	<p>The right to strike in Germany should be restricted.</p>	<p>The right to strike in Germany should be further extended.</p>

*Note.* <sup>\*</sup> indicates issues that were used in Study 2b.

Table 3. Acceptance of Change and Direction of Change for Topics Used in Study 2a and 2b. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations With Political Orientation

Issue	Study 2a			Study 2b			
	Acceptance (vs. resistance) to change <i>M</i> [ <i>SD</i> ]	Acceptance (vs. resistance) to change <i>r</i>	Progressive (vs. reaction-ary) change <i>M</i> [ <i>SD</i> ]	Progressive (vs. reaction-ary) change <i>r</i>	Acceptance (vs. resistance) to change [ <i>SD</i> ]	Progressive (vs. reaction-ary) change [ <i>SD</i> ]	Progressive (vs. reaction-ary) change <i>r</i>
<b>Conservative Issues (status quo approved by conservatives and disapproved by liberals)</b>							
The rate of approval of asylum applications in Germany currently stands at 9%.	3.88 [1.17]	-.53***	3.96 [1.17]	-.50***	5.56 [1.73]	5.23 [1.86]	-.44***
In Germany, gay couples currently do not have the same rights as heterosexual couples.	4.64 [.77]	-.46***	4.62 [.77]	-.44***			
Germany is the only European nation in which no general speed limit applies on highways.	2.61 [1.60]	-.39***	3.37 [1.60]	-.27**	3.69 [2.44]	4.54 [1.85]	-.13
Environmental protection has relatively low priority in Germany.	4.66 [.59]	-.30***	4.63 [.59]	-.27***	5.98 [1.67]	6.15 [1.28]	-.11***
In German cities, it is almost impossible to move freely without being filmed by a video camera.	3.36 [1.25]	-.18*	2.47 [1.25]	.31***	4.42 [1.96]	3.47 [1.70]	.39***
In the course of the “war on terror” numerous of anti-terrorist measures have been implemented in Germany.	2.29 [1.16]	-.25**	3.39 [1.16]	.21*	3.81 [2.07]	4.03 [1.64]	.48***
The health system in Germany is characterized by liberal reforms.	2.64 [1.17]	-.20*	3.13 [1.17]	.12			
In the federal budget 2015, 900 million Euros are allocated for child care subsidies (“stay-at-home parenting credit”).	3.26 [1.10]	-.15*	2.89 [1.10]	.08			
Kerosene and aviation fuel are tax-free in Germany.	3.48 [1.21]	-.23**	3.60 [1.21]	-.19*			
In Thuringian registry offices everyone can get access to addresses, age and religion of all citizens for a fee of € 5.	4.54 [.76]	.06	1.41 [.76]	.00			
The number of subcontract workers has reached its highest peak.	3.64 [1.04]	.04	2.33 [1.04]	.01			

Liberal Issues (status quo approved by liberals and disapproved by conservatives)								
In Germany, trade unions have the right to strike even if it causes considerable disadvantages for the general population (e.g., long waiting times when traveling by train).	2.35 [1.39]	.41***	3.16 [1.39]	-.46***	2.93 [2.22]	.41***	4.33 [1.84]	-.50***
The rights of the police to intervene in demonstrations are quite limited.	2.59 [1.20]	.37***	3.08 [1.20]	-.24**	3.46 [2.14]	.48***	4.23 [1.65]	.56***
The juvenile justice system in Germany is characterized by relatively mild supervising sanctions.	2.34 [1.28]	.31***	2.69 [1.28]	-.31***	3.32 [2.10]	.32***	3.43 [1.38]	-.33***
In Germany, women can get the "morning-after pill" without a prescription at the pharmacy.	1.85 [1.35]	.30***	2.77 [1.35]	.32***	2.42 [2.15]	.33***	4.52 [1.85]	-.37***
Immigrants are well integrated in Germany.	1.89 [1.27]	.20*	1.48 [1.27]	.55***				
Since 2011, German banks have to bear the costs of future banking crises themselves.	2.08 [96]	.19*	2.13 [96]	.33***	1.83 [1.42]	.13	5.85 [1.34]	-.21*
In Germany, it is difficult to monitor extremists since the video surveillance in the public sphere is regulated by law.	2.68 [1.24]	.16*	2.95 [1.24]	.23*				
Data retention on German citizens is limited to seven days.	2.84 [1.32]	-.08	3.65 [1.32]	-.31***				
Religion has relatively little influence on national and international politics in Germany.	1.70 [1.00]	.01	4.18 [1.00]	-.20*				
Gender equality in Germany is higher than in any other country in Europe.	1.49 [97]	.09	2.02 [97]	.30***				
In 2011, the German Government has decided to phase out nuclear power by 2022.	2.11 [1.38]	-.03	1.97 [1.38]	.34***				

*Note.* Correlation between acceptance of (vs. resistance to) change and political orientation: Positive correlations indicate that conservatives accept change more than liberals; negative correlations indicate that liberals accept change more than conservatives. Correlation between acceptance of progressive (vs. reactionary) change and political orientation: Positive correlations indicate that conservatives support progressive change (and liberals support reactionary change); negative correlations indicate that conservatives support reactionary change (and liberals progressive change). Acceptance of change and support for progressive (vs. reactionary change) were measured on 5-point scales in Study 2a, and on 7-point scales in Study 2b.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

(i.e., issues on which the status quo is approved by conservatives and disapproved by liberals; Study 2a:  $\alpha = .59$ , Study 2b:  $\alpha = .58$ ).<sup>8</sup>

### *Reactionary vs. progressive change*

For each issue, participants indicated which kind of change they would prefer, on a scale ranging from 1 (*reactionary change*) to 5 (*progressive change*) in Study 2a, and from 1 to 7 in Study 2b. Higher scores indicate acceptance of progressive (vs. reactionary) change. The wording of the scale points representing progressive change (acceptance of recognized trends within German society) versus reactionary change (reversal of these trends) differed as a function of the given issue (see Table 2). Importantly, this item was rated by all participants across all issues, regardless of their responses to the acceptance versus resistance to change item. Choosing the scale midpoint (3) indicated that no change is desired, neither reactionary nor progressive.

*Political Orientation* was measured using two measures: The first measure was the validated German version of the 24-item Wilson-Patterson Conservatism Scale (Schiebel, Riemann, & Mummendey, 1984; Wilson & Patterson, 1968). For each item (e.g., “homosexuality,” “abortion,” “life-long marriage”) participants were asked to indicate their approval from 1 (*total disapproval*) to 5 (*total approval*) in Study 2a ( $\alpha = .80$ ), and from 1 to 7 in Study 2b ( $\alpha = .88$ ). Higher scores indicate higher conservatism. The second measure was the ideological self-placement item, rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*extreme left*) to 7 (*extreme right*) in Study 2a, and on a scale ranging from 1 to 101 in Study 2b.

## **Results and Discussion**

Participants in Study 2a and Study 2b were relatively liberal/leftist: On both political orientation measures, participants scored on average below the midpoint (conservatism:  $M = 2.42$ ,  $SD = .39$  [1–5] in Study 2a;  $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = .83$  [1–7] in Study 2b; ideological self-placement:  $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = .97$  [1–7] in Study 2a;  $M = 34.84$ ,  $SD = 21.39$  [1–101] in Study 2b).

In both studies, the conservatism scale and ideological self-placement item were strongly and positively correlated (Study 2a:  $r = .59$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Study 2b:  $r = .71$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that leftists in Germany are relatively liberal and rightists relatively conservative. Therefore, we calculated a mean “political orientation” score used in subsequent analyses, with higher scores representing more conservative/rightist orientation.

### *Political Orientation and Acceptance of Versus Resistance to Change*

To examine the relationship between political orientation and acceptance of or resistance to change, we correlated participants’ political orientation score with their acceptance of change ratings, once across all issues in which that status quo is approved by conservatives (“conservative issues”) and once across all issues in which the status quo is disapproved by conservatives (“liberal issues”).

As hypothesized, participants’ scores on the political orientation scale correlated negatively with their acceptance of change scores on “conservative issues” ( $r = -.50$ ,  $p < .001$  in Study 2a, and  $r = -.51$ ,  $p < .001$  in Study 2b), indicating that the more conservative participants were, the less they accepted change (i.e., the more they resisted change) on these issues. Also, as hypothesized, the reverse pattern was found for their acceptance of change scores on “liberal issues” ( $r = .39$ ,  $p < .001$  in

<sup>8</sup>Since we were aiming at the largest possible diversity of issues (rather than creating internally consistent scales), the internal consistency between issues in each category was relatively low, as expected. Nevertheless, we find the same pattern of results when analyzing each individual issue separately.

Study 2a, and  $r = .67, p < .001$  in Study 2b), indicating that the more conservative they were, the more they accepted change (i.e., the less they resisted change) on these issues. Participants' acceptance of change scores on "conservative issues" and on "liberal issues" did not correlate significantly in Study 2a ( $r = -.08, p = .329$ ), and correlated negatively in Study 2b ( $r = -.35, p < .001$ ).

We then tested whether the correlation between political orientation and the acceptance of change on "conservative issues" significantly differs from the correlation between political orientation and the acceptance of change on "liberal issues" in each study by using software by Lee and Preacher (2013) that implements Steiger's (1980) method to test the equality of two correlation coefficients obtained from the same sample, with the two correlations sharing one variable in common. These analyses indicate that these correlations were indeed significantly different from each other (Study 2a:  $z = 8.57, p < .001$  [two tail], Study 2b:  $z = 10.68, p < .001$  [two tail]).

Table 3 presents correlations for each individual issue, showing the same pattern of results. For nine out of 11 conservative issues political orientation correlated significantly negatively with acceptance of change ( $-.53 > rs > -.15$ ). In contrast, for seven out of 11 liberal issues, political orientation correlated significantly positively with acceptance of change ( $.16 > rs > .41$ ). Similar results were obtained when using the ideological self-placement and conservatism scales separately, as indicators of political orientation.

To summarize, these findings suggest that the extent to which liberals/leftists and conservatives/rightists accept (vs. resist) change on various sociopolitical issues is qualified by the extent to which the status quo on each particular issue is considered acceptable by liberals/conservatives, respectively.

#### *Political Orientation and Acceptance of Progressive Versus Reactionary Change*

To examine the relationship between political orientation and relation to progressive versus reactionary change, we correlated participants' political orientation score with their ratings on the acceptance of progressive (vs. reactionary) change item, on each of the issues on which there was a significant correlation between political orientation and acceptance of change in the previous analysis (see the full list of items in Table 2).

Table 3 presents the correlations between political orientation and the acceptance of progressive (vs. reactionary) change for each of these issues, in each study (Study 2a, Study 2b). As shown in Table 3, political orientation was positively associated with acceptance of progressive change on some liberal/conservative issues and negatively associated with acceptance of progressive change (indicating support for reactionary change) on others, revealing no consistent association between political orientation and the direction of the accepted societal change. Similar results were obtained when using the ideological self-placement and conservatism scales separately, as indicators of political orientation.

Taken together, the results of Studies 2a and 2b challenge the idea that conservatives show a general tendency to resist societal change, compared to liberals. Instead, we find that the association between these variables is context dependent, such that on issues on which the status quo is typically approved by conservatives (and disapproved by liberals), we find a *negative* association between conservatism and resistance to change. It therefore seems that conservatives' and liberals' actual preferences regarding societal change do not fit the intuitive characterization of conservatives as generally change resistant and liberals as generally change accepting. Although this seems to be a very obvious statement, it challenges the view that resistance to change is a core defining feature of political conservatism.

The findings of these studies also challenge the argument that to the extent that conservatives support change, it is generally a reactionary, rather than progressive change. More specifically, our findings indicate that conservatism is in some cases associated with the acceptance of progressive

change and liberalism with reactionary change. Finally, in some cases, the direction of accepted change is not at all associated with political orientation.

These findings, however, are based on our choice of issues on which liberals' and conservatives' support of the status quo was assumed, rather than measured. Therefore, Study 3 aims to measure liberals' and conservatives' approval/disapproval of the status quo on various issues, taking participants' actual approval ratings into account when investigating the relation between political orientation and acceptance of change.

### STUDY 3

Study 3 was designed to clarify whether approval/disapproval of the status quo with regard to various sociopolitical issues can account for the relations between political orientation and acceptance of societal change. We assumed that both liberals and conservatives would accept change only to the extent that the change can create their desired state of affairs on a given issue (i.e., they disapprove of the current status quo) and resist change when they approve of the status quo on a given issue. We also made some improvements to our measures compared to the ones used in Studies 2a and 2b (see the Method section). Finally, we added measures of fear of change and perceived possibility of change with regard to each issue, to broaden our examination of potential differences between liberals and conservatives in their relation to societal change.

### Method

#### *Participants and Procedure*

Two-hundred and twenty-two participants were recruited for Study 3 using an online survey platform ([www.soscisurvey.de](http://www.soscisurvey.de)). After excluding four participants who were not native German speakers, the final sample included 218 participants (64% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 30.23$ ,  $SD = 13.55$ ). Sensitivity power analyses for a bivariate normal model, independent  $t$ -tests, and multiple linear regressions, using G\*Power (Faul et al., 2009), indicated that  $|r| = .17$ , Cohen's  $d = .37$ , and  $f^2 = .04$ , would be the minimum effect sizes that the study can detect with 80% power ( $\alpha = .05$ )<sup>9</sup>. In post hoc power analyses, with  $N = 218$  and  $|r| = .28$ , Cohen's  $d = .49$ , and  $f^2 = .97$ , which were the mean effect sizes we got in the tests we carried out, the resulting power was of .95–1.00 ( $\alpha = .05$ ).

For Study 3, we chose eight issues (some of which were used in Studies 2a and 2b) that represent points of dispute between liberals and conservatives in German society. For four of the issues, we expected self-identified liberals to show a higher degree of approval of the current state of affairs than conservatives ("liberal issues"; e.g., "In Germany, a lifelong prison sentence lasts only 15 years. In other countries a lifelong sentence is much longer"), whereas for the rest of the issues we expected conservatives to show a higher degree of approval than liberals ("conservative issues"; e.g., "Germany currently increases arms exports. As a result, German companies increased their sales by 10%."; see Table 4 for the full list of issues).

#### *Materials*

*Approval vs. disapproval of the status quo.* Approval of the status quo on each issue was measured using one item ranging from 1 (*strongly disapprove*) to 6 (*strongly approve*). Higher scores indicate greater approval of the status quo on this issue.

<sup>9</sup>One hundred percent of significant effects obtained in the correlations,  $t$ -tests and regression analyses conducted in this study were equal or greater than these cut-off points, indicating that all effect sizes were detected with at least .80 power.

**Table 4.** Items Used to Measure Reactionary and Progressive Change (Study 3)

Issue	Reactionary Change (reversing social trends in order to return to the status ante)	Progressive Change (accepting recognized trends within society)
In 2012, an unemployed person in Germany “cost” the public budget about 18,600 Euro <sup>L</sup> .	The state support for the unemployed should be increased.	The state support for the unemployed should be reduced.
In Germany, a lifelong prison sentence lasts only 15 years. In other countries a lifelong sentence is much longer <sup>L</sup> .	Prison sentences in Germany should be much harsher.	Prison sentences in Germany should be less harsh and should enhance the chance of re-integration.
In November 2015, 206,101 asylum seekers were registered in Germany. Thus, the number of asylum seekers in Germany increased to about 965,000 people since January 2015 <sup>L</sup> .	The influx of asylum seekers in Germany should be restricted (better border control, upper limit of asylum seekers).	The humanitarian aid for asylum seekers in Germany should be increased.
Germany lately increased its arms exports <sup>C</sup> .	Arms exports in Germany should be restricted.	Arms exports in Germany should be further increased.
Homosexual couples in Germany are not allowed to adopt children <sup>C</sup> .	The rights of homosexual couples in Germany should be further restricted (e.g., civil partnership).	The rights of homosexual couples in Germany should be extended.
In Germany, about 10% of the population has about 66% of the overall personal-use property <sup>C</sup> .	The government should make sure that personal property in Germany is more justly distributed.	The government should intervene less in personal property issues in Germany.
Since March 2015, the “morning after” pill can be received without prescription in pharmacies. Since then, sales figures increased <sup>L</sup> .	Access to the “morning-after pill” in Germany should be made more complicated.	Access to the “morning-after pill” in Germany should be made even easier.
The clearing-up of crimes against refugees in Germany is insufficient and the scale of penalty is low <sup>C</sup> .	Crimes against refugees should be punished more severely than crimes against locals.	Crimes against refugees should be punished less severely than crimes against locals.

*Note.* C = issues chosen so as to represent “conservative” issues (issues on which the status quo is disapproved by liberals and approved by conservatives); L = issues chosen so as to represent “liberal” issues (issues on which the status quo is disapproved by conservatives and approved by liberals).

### *Acceptance of vs. resistance to change*

For each issue, participants rated the extent to which they agree with the following statement: “I wish the current situation would change.” Their responses were rated on a 6-point scale, ranging from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 6 (*totally agree*). Higher scores indicate a greater acceptance of change.

### *Reactionary change and progressive change*

As an improvement to the measurements used in Studies 2a and 2b, support for reactionary versus progressive change was assessed using two items per issue: one measuring participants’ acceptance of progressive change (e.g., “Arms exports should be increased”) and the other measuring their acceptance of reactionary change (e.g., “Arms exports should be decreased.”; see Table 4 for all items). Items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 6 (*totally agree*).

### *Fear of change and possibility of change*

For each issue, participants indicated the extent to which they feared change (“I am afraid that change might worsen the situation”) and their belief in the possibility of change (“The current state of affairs can be changed”) on scales ranging from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 6 (*totally agree*).

### *Political orientation*

As an improvement to the measures used in Studies 2a and 2b, political orientation was measured using three items: ideological self-placement item (1 = *left* to 101 = *right*), and two content-specific conservatism items: economic conservatism (1 = *economically liberal* to 101 = *economically conservative*) and social conservatism (1 = *socially liberal* to 101 = *socially conservative*). We used the mean score of these three items in subsequent analyses, with higher scores indicating higher conservatism ( $\alpha = .62$ ).<sup>10</sup>

## **Results and Discussion**

As in Studies 2a and 2b, participants in Study 3 were relatively liberal/leftist, scoring on average below the midpoint of the political orientation scale ( $M = 40$ ,  $SD = 18.49$  [1–101]).

### *Political Orientation and Approval Versus Disapproval of the Status Quo*

To compare conservatives’ and liberals’ approval (vs. disapproval) of the status quo on the different issues, we first split the sample at the scale midpoint, yielding a sample of 67 conservative and 151 liberal participants.<sup>11</sup> We then conducted a series of independent samples *t*-tests, the results of which are presented in Table 5. As shown in Table 5, liberals showed significantly lower approval of three out of eight issues (all *t*-values  $< -3.00$ ,  $ps < .002$ ; e.g., “Germany increases arms exports”). In contrast, conservatives showed significant lower approval than liberals on three other issues (all *t*-values  $> 3.00$ ,  $ps < .001$ ; e.g., “An unemployed person in Germany “costs” the public budget about 18.600€ per year”). On the remaining two issues, no significant differences were found between

<sup>10</sup>Considering the relatively low reliability of the conservatism scale, we conducted additional analyses with different specifications of the political orientation scale: When the “economic conservatism” item was taken out of the scale, the two-item conservatism scale was found to be highly reliable ( $r = .55$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Analyses with the two-item political orientation scale, as well as with each of the three political orientation items separately, evinced similar results.

<sup>11</sup>Splitting the sample based on the empirical median produced similar results.



**Table 5.** *t*-Tests for Differences Between Liberals and Conservatives in Approval (vs. disapproval) of Status Quo on All Topics Examined in Study 3

	<i>M</i> [ <i>SD</i> ] For Conservatives ( <i>N</i> =67)	<i>M</i> [ <i>SD</i> ] For Liberals ( <i>N</i> =151)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI of the mean difference
In 2012, an unemployed person in Germany “cost” the public budget about 18,600 Euro	2.58 [1.23]	3.26 [1.25]	3.71	<.001	[.32, 1.04]
In Germany, a lifelong prison sentence lasts only 15 years. In other countries a lifelong sentence is much longer	2.25 [1.54]	3.28 [1.69]	4.27	<.001	[.56, 1.51]
In November 2015, 206,101 asylum seekers were registered in Germany. Thus, the number of asylum seekers in Germany increased to about 965,000 people since January 2015	2.46 [1.40]	3.56 [1.43]	5.26	<.001	[.68, 1.50]
Germany lately increased its arms exports	2.06 [1.34]	1.48 [0.91]	-3.22	.002	[-.93, -.22]
Homosexual couples cannot adopt a child together in Germany	2.78 [1.83]	1.67 [1.29]	-4.48	<.001	[-1.60, -.61]
In Germany, about 10% of the population has about 66% of the overall personal-use property	2.34 [1.35]	1.70 [0.98]	-3.49	.001	[-1.01, -.28]
Since March 2015, the “morning after” pill can be received without prescription in pharmacies. Since then, sales figures increased	4.06 [1.80]	4.21 [1.45]	0.61	.543	[-.34, .65]
The clearing-up of crimes against refugees in Germany is insufficient and the scale of penalty is low	1.57 [1.08]	1.70 [1.31]	0.78	.434	[-.19, .45]

*Note.* CI = confidence interval.

conservatives and liberals ( $t$ -values  $< 1.00$ ; e.g., “In Germany, women can get the “morning-after” pill without a prescription at a pharmacy”).

### *Political Orientation and Acceptance of Versus Resistance to Change*

In the first step, we examined zero-order correlations between political orientation and acceptance of (vs. resistance to) change, as in Studies 2a and 2b, on each issue separately. In addition, we calculated these correlations across all “conservative issues” (i.e., issues in which the status quo was more strongly approved by conservatives and disapproved by liberals), across all “liberal issues” (i.e., issues in which the status quo was more strongly approved by liberals and disapproved by conservatives), and across both “neutral” issues (i.e., on which conservatives and liberals did not significantly differ in approval of the status quo).

Results are presented in Table 6. As shown in Table 6, and in line with the results of Studies 2a and 2b, political orientation was negatively related to acceptance of change for all “conservative” issues, indicating that the more conservative participants were, the less they accepted change on these issues. The reverse pattern was found for “liberal” issues, on which the more conservative participants were, the more they accepted change. As in Study 2a, participants’ acceptance of change on “conservative” issues did not correlate significantly with their acceptance of change on “liberal” issues ( $r = .02, p = .751$ ). Finally, for the “neutral” items, conservatism was not significantly correlated with the acceptance of change.<sup>12</sup>

As in Studies 2a and 2b, we then tested whether the correlation between political orientation and the acceptance of change on “conservative issues” significantly differs from the correlation between political orientation and the acceptance of change on “liberal issues,” using software by Lee and Preacher (2013). This analysis indicates that these correlations were indeed significantly different from each other ( $z = -8.01, p < .001$  [two tail]).

In the next step, we examined zero-order correlations between acceptance of change and approval of the status quo on each issue category. As expected, for all three issue categories (i.e., “conservative” issues, “liberal” issues, “neutral” issues), the acceptance of change was strongly and negatively related to the approval of the status quo on these issues ( $r = -.80, p < .001$  for “liberal” issues,  $r = -.62, p < .001$  for “conservative” issues,  $r = -.56, p < .001$  for “neutral” issues).

In light of these results, we conducted three multiple regression analyses to examine whether political orientation would predict acceptance of change while controlling for the extent of approval across issues. In each analysis, we regressed acceptance of change on a given issue category (i.e., “conservative”/“liberal”/“neutral”) on political orientation and on the approval ratings of the status quo across issues within that category. When approval ratings were entered into the regression analyses, the association between political orientation and the acceptance of change reduced significantly for both “liberal” and “conservative” issue categories (but, as expected, not for “neutral” issues), indicating that approval of status quo mediated the relation between political orientation and acceptance of change on these issues (see Figure 1 for the full results of the mediation analyses). We then examined these mediations using the PROCESS (model 4; Hayes, 2012) with 10,000 iterations. As expected, the relation between political orientation and acceptance of change was significantly mediated by approval of the status quo for “liberal” issues (BootLLCI = .013, BootULCI = .028, Sobel-Test,  $z = 5.57, p < .001$ ) and for “conservative” issues (BootLLCI =  $-.031$ , BootULCI =  $-.012$ ,

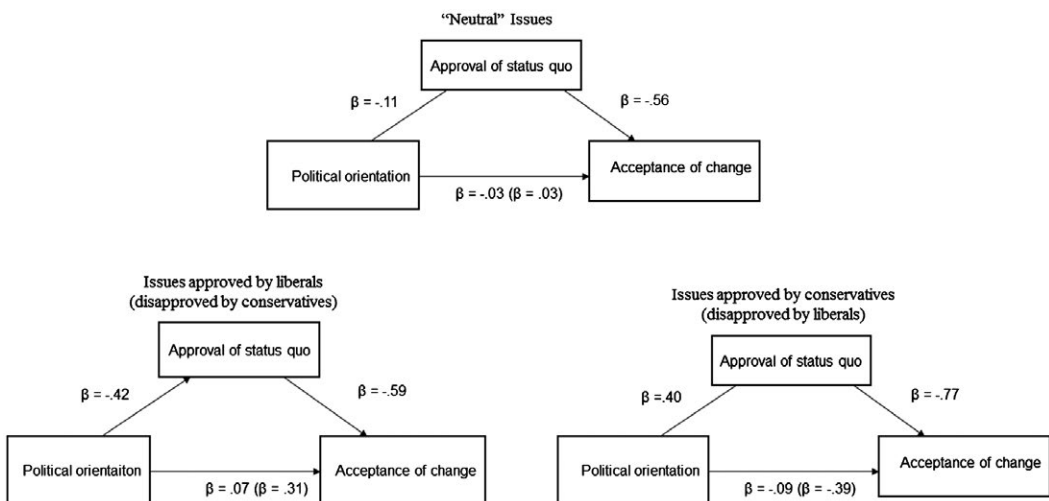
<sup>12</sup>One may suggest that approval of the status quo and political orientation may interact to predict the acceptance of change. While we found no such interaction for “conservative” issues ( $b = .00, SE = .00, t = .45, p = .655, [CI] = [-0.00, 0.01]$ ), we found a small significant interaction for “liberal” issues ( $b = -.01, SE = .00, t = -2.28, p = .024, [CI] = [-0.02, -0.00]$ ). However, this interaction indicated that the more the status quo on a given issue is approved, the more conservatives (and liberals) resist change on this issue. This finding further supports our argument that conservatives do not demonstrate a general, context-independent resistance to change.

**Table 6.** Correlations Between Political Orientation and Acceptance of (vs. resistance to) Change for All Issues Used in Study 3

Issue	<i>r</i>
<b>“Liberal” Issues (liberals approve and conservatives disapprove of the status quo)</b>	.31***
In 2012, an unemployed person in Germany “cost” the public budget about 18,600 Euro.	.09
In Germany, a lifelong prison sentence lasts only 15 years. In other countries a lifelong sentence is much longer.	.24***
In November 2015, 206,101 asylum seekers were registered in Germany. Thus, the number of asylum seekers in Germany increased to about 965,000 people since January 2015.	.32***
<b>“Conservative” Issues (conservatives approve and liberals disapprove of the status quo)</b>	-.39***
Germany lately increased its arms exports.	-.18**
Homosexual couples in Germany are not allowed to adopt children.	-.36***
In Germany, about 10% of the population has about 66% of the overall personal-use property.	-.24***
<b>“Neutral” issues (conservatives and liberals don’t differ in approval of the status quo)</b>	.03
Since March 2015, the “morning after” pill can be received without prescription in pharmacies. Since then, sales figures increased.	.09
The clearing-up of crimes against refugees in Germany is insufficient and the scale of penalty is low.	-.09

Note. *r* = correlation between acceptance of (vs. resistance to) change and political orientation: Positive correlations indicate that conservatives accept change more than liberals; negative correlations indicate that liberals accept change more than conservatives.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



**Figure 1.** Approval of status quo as mediating the relation between political orientation and acceptance of change across issue categories.

Sobel Test,  $z = -5.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Also as expected, the mediation was not significant for “neutral” issues (BootLLCI =  $-.001$ , BootULCI =  $.009$ , Sobel Test,  $z = 1.54$ ,  $p = .124$ ).

### *Political Orientation and Acceptance of Reactionary Versus Progressive Change*

Items indicating the acceptance of progressive change correlated significantly and negatively with items indicating reactionary change for each individual issue,  $r_s > -.40$ ,  $p < .001$ , with the exception of one issue (government control over the distribution of personal-use property,  $r = -.15$ ,  $p = .023$ , see Table 4 for the items’ wording).

Table 7 reports zero-order correlations between political orientation and acceptance of progressive (vs. reactionary) change for each individual issue. As shown in Table 7, and consistent with the findings of Studies 2a and 2b, political orientation was positively associated with acceptance of progressive change on some issues and negatively associated with acceptance of progressive change (indicating acceptance of reactionary change) on others, revealing no stable association between political orientation and the direction of the desired societal change.

**Table 7.** Correlations Between Political Orientation and Acceptance of Reactionary vs. Progressive Change for All Issues Used in Study 3

Issue	Progressive Change	Reactionary Change
	<i>r</i>	<i>r</i>
<b>“Liberal” Issues (liberals approve and conservatives disapprove of the status quo)</b>		
In 2012, an unemployed person in Germany “cost” the public budget about 18,600 Euro.	.33***	-.31***
In Germany, a lifelong prison sentence lasts only 15 years. In other countries a lifelong sentence is much longer.	-.46***	.41***
In November 2015, 206,101 asylum seekers were registered in Germany. Thus, the number of asylum seekers in Germany increased to about 965,000 people since January 2015.	-.49***	.57***
<b>“Conservative” Issues (conservatives approve and liberals disapprove of the status quo)</b>		
Germany lately increased its arms exports.	.20**	-.18**
Homosexual couples in Germany are not allowed to adopt children.	-.45***	.32***
In Germany, about 10% of the population has about 66% of the overall personal-use property.	.33***	-.29***
<b>“Neutral” Issues (conservatives and liberals don’t differ in approval of the status quo)</b>		
Since March 2015, the “morning after” pill can be received without prescription in pharmacies. Since then, sales figures increased.	-.05	.16*
The clearing-up of crimes against refugees in Germany is insufficient and the scale of penalty is low.	.33***	-.26***

*Note.*  $r$  = correlation between acceptance of progressive and reactionary change and political orientation: Positive correlations indicate that conservatives accept change more than liberals; negative correlations indicate that liberals accept change more than conservatives.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

*Political Orientation and Fear/Possibility of Change*

Interestingly, political orientation was not significantly related to fear of change on all issue categories ( $r = .03$ ,  $p = .665$  for “liberal” issues,  $r = .11$ ,  $p = .107$  for “conservative” issues, and  $r = .01$ ,  $p = .877$  for “neutral” issues), indicating that conservatives do not demonstrate higher fear of change than liberals. Moreover, for “neutral” issues and “conservative” issues (but not for “liberal” issues), political orientation was not significantly correlated with the belief that the change of the current state of affairs can be achieved ( $r = -.10$ ,  $p = .132$  for “conservative” issues and  $r = -.05$ ,  $p = .424$ , for “neutral” issues). However, for “liberal” issues, we found a small positive correlation between political orientation and perceived possibility of change ( $r = .16$ ,  $p = .017$ ), such that conservatives in fact perceived change as more possible than liberals on these issues.

Taken together, the results of Study 3 are consistent with the results of Study 2a and 2b, indicating that conservatives resist change on some issues and accept change on others, depending on the extent to which they approve or disapprove the status quo. In Study 3, however, approval of the status quo was measured rather than assumed. Indeed, the approval of the status quo was found to predict the acceptance of change even when political orientation was controlled for. Moreover, the approval/disapproval of the status quo mediated the relation between political orientation and acceptance of/resistance to change. This study therefore suggests that approval or disapproval of the status quo is a stronger predictor of acceptance (vs. resistance) of change than political orientation per se.

Furthermore, we find that conservatives’ fear of change is not greater than that of liberals on all issue categories and that they do not perceive societal change as less possible than liberals (in fact, they perceived it as more possible on issues on which they do not approve of the status quo). These findings provide further support for our intuition that political orientation does not delineate a general, context-independent preference towards the acceptance or rejection of societal change.

### General Discussion

The psychological differences between liberals and conservatives have been the subject of extensive empirical investigation in recent psychological-political literature (e.g., Hibbing et al., 2014; Jost et al., 2003b; Jost, 2006; Jost, 2017). However, the assumed core psychological difference between conservatives and liberals, namely, their relation to societal change, has received surprisingly little empirical attention. The goal of the present studies was to conduct an empirical examination of the extent to which liberals and conservatives resist or accept change with regard to various real-life sociopolitical issues.

Consistent with previous studies (Conover & Feldman, 2004; Converse, 2004), we found that the common wisdom that liberals tend to accept societal change and conservatives to resist it is indeed reflected in people’s intuitions about conservatives and liberals (Study 1). Nevertheless, we found no general tendency for conservatives to resist change or for liberals to accept change. Instead, whether conservatives and liberals resisted or accepted change varied with the particular issue in question (Studies 2a, 2b, and 3). We also found that liberals and conservatives are quite similar in terms of the processes that lead to the acceptance of or resistance to change: Among both liberals and conservatives, resistance to or acceptance of change are driven by the extent to which they disapprove or approve the status quo on any given issue (Study 3). Finally, liberals did not show a general tendency to perceive societal change as more possible, or less threatening, than conservatives (Study 3).

Taken together, these results suggest that preferences towards societal change may not be promising candidates for the characterization of the core differences between political liberals and conservatives. This is not to claim that such general differences do not exist. Quite to the contrary, we believe that previous findings on differences in liberals’ and conservatives’ motivations and cognitions are very promising and impressive (Jost, 2017; Jost et al., 2003b). In fact, the approval or

disapproval of certain sociopolitical issues may indeed be driven by psychological processes related to political ideology. Nevertheless, our results suggest that when it comes to attitudes towards societal change, political liberals and conservatives seem to be very similar in the processes underlying their approval for such changes. Rather than a general “conservative” or “liberal” tendency towards change, our findings suggest that political liberals’ and conservatives’ preferences depend on their approval/disapproval of the status quo on a given issue, rather than their political orientation per se.

Do our results represent exceptions that “prove the rule”? The results of our studies are in line with the arguments and examples of Greenberg and Jonas (2003), demonstrating that political conservatives are more in favor of societal change than assumptions about them would indicate. However, one may argue that there are always exceptions to this general rule, which only indicate that the correlation between political orientation and relation to change is not perfect. Indeed, the correlations between political orientation and acceptance of change in our studies were not perfect. Nevertheless, we were able to show reverse correlations between these variables, depending on the issues at hand. Hence, our findings suggest that there is no such general trend of conservatives or liberals resisting or accepting change. Rather, all attitudes towards change were driven by the approval or disapproval of the status quo on a particular sociopolitical issue. One could argue, of course, that the selection of sociopolitical issue (topics, themes) produces this pattern of results. This is certainly a possibility, however, sampling across a broader range of sociopolitical issue is precisely what allows one to detect similarities in liberals’ and conservatives’ relation to change (see Kessler & Proch, 2018; Wells & Windschitl, 1999). Put differently, we claim that it is the very selection of issues that determines the direction of the relation between political orientation and relation to change.

To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to examine the relation between political orientation and relation to change using broad sampling of sociopolitical issues. Given that resistance to change is considered a defining feature of conservatism, and considering the broad consensus this notion receives, this absence of systematic research on the subject is unsurprising. However, the present results suggest that “liberals” are more conservative and “conservatives” are more liberal than such definitions would allow, as acceptance and resistance to change varied with the social or political topic in question. Therefore, as a broad characterization of ideology or people, general assumptions of acceptance or resistance to change seem to be uninformative.

Our choice in broad sampling of stimuli not only allowed us to uncover both positive and negative relations between political orientation and resistance to change, but it also had benefits in terms of statistical power. According to Westfall, Kenny, and Judd (2014), studies that employ broad sampling of stimuli have more statistical power than traditional procedures that ignore stimulus sampling. Power consideration, however, also require sufficient sample size of participants, particularly as most studies in psychology report only small to medium effect sizes (Maxwell, 2004; Richard, Bond, & Stokes-Zoota, 2003). Sensitivity and post hoc power analyses indicate that our sample sizes were sufficient to detect consistent patterns of both positive and negative correlations between political orientation and attitudes towards change across three studies, with most effects detected with at least 80% power. Nevertheless, our studies might have been underpowered to detect smaller effects. Hence, future studies examining our hypotheses should ideally use large sample sizes of both participants and stimuli.

Another potential critique to these findings could be that in Europe (particularly in Germany), political conservatives do not typically resist change and political liberals do not typically accept change. As most studies connecting political conservatism to the resistance to change have been conducted in the United States (e.g., Jost, 2017; Jost et al., 2003b), it could be possible that people in Europe diverge from these theoretical intuitions. However, as we have shown in Study 1, students in Germany share the same intuitions about liberals and conservatives, indicating that the German context is a suitable case study for our assumptions. Future studies are nevertheless encouraged to

examine these hypotheses in other political contexts particularly in the United States, to directly challenge existing intuitions where they originated.

Considering our results, the following question arises: Where do these strong intuitions about different attitudes towards change originate from? One possible explanation for this broad consensus stems from the literal meaning of the word “conservative,” derived from the term “conserve” (lat. *conservare*), which means to maintain, to keep something as it is (i.e., to resist change). Indeed, most (if not all) definitions of the term “conservative” (vs. “liberal”) refer to resistance to change or maintenance of the status quo as a defining feature. This stereotypical notion of conservatives as resisting change and liberals as accepting change is also informed and reinforced by discussions on political issues within public discourse and within media coverage. In the data of the present studies, those items that evoked the most intuitive or stereotypical attributions to liberals and conservatives (i.e., conservatives resist change, liberals accept change) referred to topics of immigration and gay marriage, both of which are highly salient within the German media. In contrast, the items that evoked the most counter-intuitive or nonstereotypical attributions to liberals and conservatives (i.e., conservatives accept change and liberals resist change) referred to issues that are much less salient within the political discourse and media coverage (freedom of strike, the right of the police to intervene in demonstrations). Insofar as the issues on which conservatives resist change and liberals accept change are more salient, visible and readily accessible within public discourse, those issues feed our intuitions about liberals and conservatives.

Indeed, one may argue that conservatives may accept change, but only if it is reactionary (i.e., if it entails returning to an earlier state of affairs; see Wilson, 1973). However, Studies 2a, 2b, and Study 3 also demonstrated that conservatives (like liberals) advocate reactionary as well as progressive change, depending on whether moving forward or backward will achieve their desired outcome, goal, or ideal state on a given issue. The classification of acceptance of change as either progressive or reactionary is certainly debatable and depends on the criteria for such a classification. If one would suggest that all change supported by liberals is progressive and all change supported by conservatives is reactionary then one would end with a purely definitional solution, which cannot be empirically tested. Equally problematic is a classification based on the idea that only change that “improves” society would be progressive, whereas all other change is reactionary. With such a definition, only people who endorse the change (either liberals or conservatives) would see it as “progressive,” whereas the others (who resist the change) would see it as “reactionary.” Arguably, one way to make the classification of progressive versus reactionary change empirically testable is to see what trends for each issue are currently observable in society, as we have done in the current studies: All change that continues or intensifies such a trend would be progressive; all change that tends to undo current trends in society would be reactionary. For instance, arms exports have increased in Germany in the last decades. Thus, increasing arms exports further would be progressive (although it does not make society better according to liberals, but has economic advantages and therefore benefits for society according to conservatives). In contrast, restrictions of arms exports are against the current trend and would, therefore, be classified as reactionary. As liberals are strongly in favor of reducing arms exports, they tend towards reactionary change on this topic.

An open and important question for future research would be to examine whether political liberals and conservatives vary systematically on the issues in which they approve of reactionary versus progressive change (for example, on foreign policy or on social issues). Although the present results do not reveal such a clear pattern, future studies are encouraged to vary these issues systematically in order to examine whether the desired outcomes, ideals, or goals of political liberals/conservatives on different sets of issues (and in different political contexts) are consistently related to preferences of changes in a certain direction.

A systematic variation of topics can also help deal with another potential limitation of the present research: Since we chose to use a broad range of topics on which to examine the relation between

political orientation and resistance to change, the “conservative issues” and “liberal issues” (Studies 2a and 2b) did not form internally reliable scales, as would be expected. Although broad sampling of issues is precisely what allowed us to uncover both positive and negative relations between political orientation and resistance to change, and although these patterns were also demonstrated when examining each topic separately, a more systematic choice of topics and constructing scales based on their classification to broader themes could help balance between the need to sample a broad range of stimuli on the one hand and create consistent scales on the other. In fact, as was the case with the variation of topics, the different items used to measure resistance to change were meant to capture different aspects of this construct (Study 1) and thus only formed a moderately internally consistent scale. Although our findings were consistent when examining each resistance to change item separately, and although these items were relatively direct and thus face valid, future studies are encouraged to examine our hypotheses using additional, internally consistent measures of resistance to change and validate them using statistical methods.

Another avenue for future research is to examine what the desired outcomes, ideals, or goals of political liberals/conservatives on different sets of issues are, and how they develop. Identifying those may not only shed light on the circumstances in which liberals and conservatives accept or reject change but also on the specific constraints that tie single attitudes together to form ideologies (Converse, 2004; Jost et al., 2009; Wilson, 1973). Jost (2009) suggested that the preferred degree of equality may be one important constraint here. Others (Conover & Feldman, 2004, Converse, 2004) suggest that besides superordinate societal values such as equality, group processes (e.g., psychological attachment to liberal or conservative groups) may influence the formation of attitudes. More specifically, in line with the social identity approach (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979), individuals may be open to certain changes (and disapprove of the status quo on some issues) merely because they are consistent with their ideological ingroup identity and resistant to other changes because they are consistent with the ideological outgroup’s identity.

Finally, future research should also consider the role of resistance to change as a personal dispositional inclination (see Oreg, 2003) on individuals’ approval of the status quo across different issues (and consequently on their approval of change on these issues). Consistent with the logic of the present studies, personality-related resistance to changes may not necessarily indicate political conservatism. Just as both liberals and conservatives may be resistant to change on certain issues and accepting change on others, it may be that trait resistance to change may be unrelated to political orientation. Put differently, the decision whether to accept or resist change may clearly be affected by individual-level factors, alongside normative factors. Future studies are encouraged to examine the role of resistance to change personality features on acceptance of change across different issues.

To summarize, our findings suggest that the differences between political liberals and conservatives in their attitudes toward change may be more context dependent than previously acknowledged in empirical psychological research. These findings have important implications on the use of conservatism/liberalism measures in psychological research. For example, based on the present studies, it may be argued that such scales cannot be interpreted as representing attitudes towards change, unless they measure them directly. Furthermore, if scales that measure general attitudes towards change do not include a wide sample of issues, they may be biased either towards political conservatives or liberals, in a given context. More broadly, even though the present studies only focused on attitudes toward change, they may inform general research on psychological differences between political liberals and conservatives. More specifically, our studies suggest that the sampling of issues and stimuli may affect the observed differences between conservatives’ and liberals’ attitudes and tendencies. For instance, in a series of studies, Proch and Kessler (2014) find evidence that conservatives and liberals do not differ in their general tendency for disgust sensitivity, but rather on the types of stimuli that elicit their disgust. These findings suggest that liberals and conservatives may not be significantly different in their psychological processing of “disgusting” stimuli, but rather



in their evaluation of the content of disgusting stimuli. The current studies take additional steps in examining the question whether some of the “stable” psychological differences between liberals and conservatives are in fact less a matter of differences in psychological processing than of differences in the evaluation of particular social and political content.

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