**System Justification in France: Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité**

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**ABSTRACT**

Due to the legacy of the French Revolution and the post-World War II consensus on providing social welfare, France provides an intriguing context in which to investigate political ideology and system justification. We summarize the results of a large, nationally representative survey of French voters, which revealed that general system justification was associated—not with rightist ideology, as in other countries—but with leftist ideology. That is, self-identified leftists scored higher than rightists on general system justification, and system justification was positively associated with liberal and leftist preferences concerning immigration and welfare. After adjusting for political orientation, high system-justifiers in France also scored *lower* on authoritarianism, despite scoring higher on group-based dominance. These findings suggest that the Enlightenment ideals of “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité” are firmly established in France, and that liberal-leftist policies represent the status quo for most French citizens today.

One of the more persistent barriers to social change that psychologists have pinpointed is system justification motivation, defined as the tendency to defend, bolster, and justify aspects of existing social, economic, and political systems [1,2]. Leonard Doob [3], for instance, observed that: “People, in a glib but valid summary, become accustomed to the customary. Over generations . . . what has existed for a long time is hallowed by tradition and hence, it is believed, should not be disturbed” (p. 190). Empirical research confirms that people often prefer the status quo to alternatives [2,4,5], and they are especially likely to legitimize longstanding, well-established institutions, such as the caste system in India and the capitalist system in the U.S. and U.K. [6,7].

People who are politically or economically conservative are especially likely to privilege that which is traditional and longstanding over that which is “new and untried,” in Abraham Lincoln’s memorable phrase [8,9]. In terms of individual differences, self-identified conservatives and rightists score higher than liberals, leftists, moderates, and centrists on measures of general, economic, and gender-specific system justification [2]. This general pattern has been observed in Argentina, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Lebanon, Lithuania, New Zealand, Poland, Russia, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States [10,11,2]. In the U.S. system justification is positively associated with authoritarianism and social dominance orientation [2,12,13]—two other psychological dispositions that are associated with intolerance, prejudice, and support for the maintenance of hierarchy, exploitation, and oppression [14,15].

At the same time, the question has arisen as to whether system justification would ever be associated more strongly with leftist than rightist political orientation and with preferences for equality over inequality (e.g., [16]). It stands to reason that wherever a legacy of socialism or Communism has truly taken hold, people who are more “conservative” in the sense of being satisfied with the status quo and prone to defending and justifying existing arrangements would be on the left rather than the right. Thus far researchers have been unable to administer system justification scales to respondents in China, Cuba, North Korea, or other longstanding left-wing regimes. To date, there is only one country in which we have observed a significant correlation between leftist orientation and system justification: France [2,17]. The explanation for this finding, we submit, has to do with enduring support for an egalitarian tradition within the French republican model and a deeply entrenched welfare state that guarantees a certain level of social and economic equality among citizens.

**A Status Quo Rooted in French Republicanism**

The use of the left-right spatial metaphor to describe ideological orientations may be traced back to the French Revolution of 1789: supporters of the church, the crown, and the aristocracy sat to the right of the President of the National Assembly, whereas supporters of the Enlightenment and the Revolution sat on the left [18]. Over time, those in favor of social order, hierarchical traditions, and the preservation of the societal status quo came to be identified with the conservative right in general, whereas those in favor of change in the direction of social, economic, and political equality came to be identified with the progressive left [19]. These two attitudinal dimensions—support for tradition versus change and hierarchy versus equality—are correlated for historical reasons: most popular social movements since the Enlightenment have pushed for greater social, economic, and/or political equality, and so most defenders of the status quo have sought to legitimize customs and traditions that are more hierarchical [8].

In France, there can be little doubt that the Republican[[1]](#footnote-1)-egalitarian model that emerged from the Revolution—along with the Enlightenment ideals that inspired it, including liberal-leftist secular humanism—is well-entrenched. Two centuries later, French society is built on values of liberty, equality, and solidarity [20,21,22,23]. The Republican tradition has produced an assimilationist model of immigration, which stresses social integration and equality through individual citizenship rather than communitarianism. It also contributed to the expansion of the welfare state in the post-war period, known in France as the “providential state.” Official, widespread attachment to these liberal values creates what is a rarity in world politics: the status quo is defended and justified more by the liberal-left than the conservative-right, who are increasingly critical of French society. These contextual considerations provide some basis for understanding how and why system justification in France might take a very different form than system justification in other Western societies.

**Previous Research on System Justification in France**

Until very recently, little research had explored system justification processes in France. Consistent with results observed elsewhere, one research program focused on meritocratic beliefs held by school-aged children. It showed that general (or diffuse) system justification at the level of the nation was associated with the belief that school is meritocratic and that academic success depends largely on hard work and motivation—but only for boys from relatively poor families [24]. Two other programs of research by Virginie Bonnot and Silvia Krauth‐Gruber [25,26] focused on gender-specific system justification. They found, also in keeping with studies conducted in other countries, that activating system justification motivation by priming feelings of dependence on the social system had the effect of exacerbating gender stereotypes (including self-stereotypes) about math and verbal abilities. Although these studies are very useful for understanding the dynamics of system justification in the French context, they do not directly address the question of whether system justification is qualitatively different in France than in other countries.

One cross-national investigation of the relationship between system justification and political orientation included data from 23 different countries included in the European Social Survey, including France [10]. Although detailed results from individual countries were not provided, visual inspection of the pattern suggests that in France, unlike many other contexts, there was no linear association between system justification and political orientation. Instead, extremists of the left and right appeared to score lower on system justification than centrists. However, this study relied upon a very indirect proxy for system justification, namely four items about present levels of satisfaction with the economy, democracy, education, and health services in the country. Because leftists and rightists are likely to hold very different attitudes about, for instance, economics and health care provisions, this is not a straightforward means of estimating the association between system justification and political orientation in France.

**Results of a Nationally Representative Survey**

Fortunately, we were able to include a French translation of the complete 8-item general system justification scale [27] in the 2017 French Election Study [17]. The survey, which was fielded from November 2015 to June 2017 (when the French legislative elections took place), followed a panel structure in which the same respondents answered different questions in different waves. The survey had 24,369 respondents, but most of the results we summarize here are based on 18,098 respondents who participated in all waves that included the variables of interest.[[2]](#footnote-2)

System justification was measured in Wave 1 (November 2015). Respondents were asked to indicate agreement with 8 items on a scale ranging from 1 (Totally Agree) to 9 (Totally Disagree). Sample items include: “In general, you find society to be fair,” “Society is set up so that people usually get what they deserve,” and “Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness” (*α* = 0.73, this sample). We measured political orientation as ideological self-placement in Wave 1 with a single item ranging from 0 (Left) to 10 (Right) and adjusted for political orientation in all analyses in which it was not treated as an independent or dependent variable. We also administered policy questions about immigration (the preferred numbers of foreigners, refugees, and asylum-seekers residing in France) and the welfare state (reducing the number of public servants and preferences for increasing or decreasing benefits). Responses to these items were provided on 5-point scales. Demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, education, social class, religious affiliation, and household income, were also measured in Wave 1.

We administered a child rearing measure of authoritarianism in Wave 1. This measure asks respondents whether it is more important for a child: (a) to be *independent* or *respectful* toward grandparents: (b) to have an *inquiring* *mind* or to be *well-mannered*, (c) to be *creative* or *well-behaved*, and (d) to be *autonomous* or *obedient*. The latter set of preferences is taken to reflect an authoritarian disposition, which is correlated with racial and ethnic prejudice in the U.S. [28,29,30] and France [31]

Social dominance orientation (SDO) was measured in Wave 8 (November 2016) with the use of a four-item scale (see [32]). Because SDO is comprised of two independent dimensions [33] we estimated separate scores for group-based dominance (SDO-D) based on agreement with items such as “It’s probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom,” and “Inferior groups should stay in their place” (*α* = 0.63) and anti-egalitarianism (SDO-E) based on disagreement with items such as “We should do what we can to equalize conditions for different groups,” and “We should increase social equality” (*α* = 0.81). To facilitate the interpretation and comparability of results, all variables were recoded to range from 0 to 1.

The first thing to note is that system justification in France was relatively low in general (*M*= 0.39, *SD=* 0.14, *n* = 24,325), at least in comparison with U.S. samples. It was comparable to the level observed in post-Communist countries in Eastern Europe [11]. Second, system justification was associated with a leftist—rather than a rightist—ideological orientation in France (*r* = -.17, *n* = 22,777). The same association was observed in the context of a multivariate analysis in which we adjusted for a range of demographic variables, including age, sex, income, education, occupation, and religious denomination (*b=* -0.12, *SE=* 0.00, *p* < 0.01), as well as in simpler models that only adjusted only for major demographic factors. The effect held even after adjusting for support for the far-right and excluding those on the far-right from the analysis. Furthermore, respondents identifying with the center-right scored lower on system justification than those identifying with the center-left. This means that the link between system justification and leftist political orientation in France cannot be explained by the fact that right-wing extremists are low in system justification [10].

Third, system justification was associated with decreased—rather than increased—authoritarianism, even after adjusting for political orientation and demographic factors (see Figure 1). This finding is opposite from what has been observed in the U.S. context (e.g., [2]). However, this effect was weak (*b=* -0.03, *SE=* 0.00, *p* < 0.01). Fourth, system justification was unrelated to SDO-E, but it was positively related to SDO-D (*b=*0.10, *SE=*0.01, *p* < 0.05). This, too, differs from what has been found in other countries, including the U.S. Typically, system justification is positively related to both dimensions of SDO, but it is related more strongly to SDO-E than SDO-D [12,13]. One possible interpretation is that citizens who are proudest of national traditions are also more dominance-oriented in general.

System justification appears to operate differently in France than in other countries in several other ways as well. As shown in Figure 2, system justification was *positively* associated with the acceptance of foreigners in France (*b* = 0.40, *SE* = 0.01, *p* < .001). In fact, it was a stronger predictor than right-wing orientation, authoritarianism, and social dominance orientation—all of which were negatively associated with the acceptance of foreigners. System justification was also positively associated with support for increasing the number of refugees and asylum-seekers (*b* = 0.38, *SE* = 0.02, *p* < .001). This was not at all the case for the other ideological variables of right-wing orientation, authoritarianism, and social dominance orientation (see Figures 3 and 4).

System justification was also associated with the desire to preserve the French welfare state. For instance, it was positively associated with support for increasing social benefits (*b* = 0.24, *SE =* 0.01, p < 0.01) and opposition to reducing the number of public servants (*b* = 0.21, *SE* = 0.02, *p* < .001). The other ideological variables were either unrelated or negatively associated with this policy position (see Figures 4 and 5).

**Concluding Remarks**

In the context of a large, nationally representative sample of French voters, we have found that general or diffuse system justification was associated—not with rightist ideology, as in nearly every other country studied to date—but with leftist ideology. That is, self-identified leftists (vs. rightists) scored higher on system justification. In addition, even after adjusting for political orientation, system justification was positively associated with liberal and leftist policy preferences concerning open borders and the preservation of the welfare system. High (vs. low) system-justifiers in France also scored lower on authoritarianism, although they did score higher on the group-based dominance (but not the anti-egalitarian) facet of social dominance orientation.

The most plausible explanation for these findings, which differ considerably from what has been observed in other national contexts [2], is that the Enlightenment ideals of “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité” have taken hold in French society, so much so that liberal-left policies have come to represent the status quo for most citizens today. This appears to be the long-term ideological legacy of the French Revolution. Openness towards immigration, for instance, reflects faith in the legitimacy of the Republican model of integration. Unlike multicultural models, the French system promotes equality for all citizens without regard to distinctions on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, or other forms of social differentiation [34]. The belief that the state can and should integrate members of minority groups is a powerfully entrenched notion in French culture. Concerning economic policy, support for the French welfare state guarantees equality between citizens, which is another highly-prized pillar of society [23].

There is, however, an interpretational ambiguity that we are not able to resolve at the present time. Because the measure of general system justification [27] administered in the French Election Study assessed attitudes about the current state of society, rather than the underlying desire to justify the status quo *per se*, it is not possible to distinguish between motivational and non-motivational explanations for the phenomena we have observed. It is possible, for instance, that leftists in France are simply more satisfied with or more confident in the social system than rightists, and this could explain why they scored higher on general system justification. If this is true, then it is at least conceivable that people who, for dispositional reasons, are especially motivated by epistemic, existential, and relational needs to reduce uncertainty, threat, and social discord would still exhibit right-leaning ideological preferences, all other things being equal. However, the fact that system justification was associated with liberal attitudes about immigration and the welfare system (and with low levels of authoritarianism)—even after adjusting for left-right ideological self-placement—casts some doubt on the second possibility. It is also unclear why leftists would be more satisfied with the societal status quo than rightists in France—when that is not the case in democratic socialist societies such as Sweden, Finland, and Iceland [2]. In any case, the liberal-leftist underpinnings of the status quo in France constitute a distinctive “national repertoire” [21] that may be contrasted sharply with countries such as the U.S., where system justification is generally associated with the political right. Although liberty and equality were central to the development of French and American political cultures in the aftermath of their respective revolutions, a divergent emphasis on the two values has produced very different models. Concepts of individual liberty are especially salient in the U.S., whereas the French system has been built largely on equality [23]) and solidarity (Beland & Hansen, 2000). The salience of the socialist tradition in France—in contrast to the hegemony of capitalism in the U.S.—has further strengthened the French emphasis on equality over individual liberty, with collective interests outweighing the value of individual success [21].

None of this should be taken to mean that France is without social problems associated with inequality. Disparities in income and wealth, though less pronounced than in the U.S., are on the rise in France [35]. Parental social class exerts strong influences on educational attainment and occupation [36]. African immigrants and their children are especially likely to be unemployed, underpaid, and living in deprived neighborhoods [37]. Discrimination against racial minorities in labor and housing markets is also widespread [38]. The point is certainly not that France is an egalitarian paradise: it is that French Republicanism has left a lasting impact on how supporters of mainstream society are disposed to address the problems that do exist.

Nor are we suggesting that egalitarian-universalist traditions in France are never criticized or challenged within the country itself. On the contrary, the welfare state has become a frequent target of the French right since the 1990s, and especially after the 2008 economic crisis. Conservative politicians like Nicolas Sarkozy and François Fillon have attempted to reduce the number of public servants and provide tax breaks for big business. The far right has also denounced France’s immigration policies for having allegedly opened the door to unassimilable immigrants (such as non-European Muslims) who are claimed to pose a threat to national identity, economic well-being, and sociocultural unity. The National Front rejects participation in the European Union and the provision of social welfare benefits to immigrants and foreigners in France. Unlike other contexts in which system justification processes have been explored, the societal status quo in France is defended largely by liberals and leftists, and it is opposed by conservatives and rightists.

France is also the first country in which we have observed that authoritarianism and system justification clearly diverge: whereas the French authoritarian is on the right, the French system-justifier in on the left. This is intriguing, because it suggests that it is possible for a society to develop liberal-democratic, universalistic, and egalitarian traditions that are decisively anti-authoritarian and that are still capable of inspiring patriotic attachment and an ideological commitment to system maintenance. Future research on how, why, and when this occurs is necessary, because there are several countries that are arguably more leftist, overall, than France—such as Scandinavian countries—but that continue to exhibit the more typical association between system justification and right-wing orientation [2].

What we have learned thus far about system justification in France, in any case, highlights the importance of taking a *socio-ecological approach* to the study of psychological issues. The hallmark of such an approach is that it emphasizes the effects of natural, social, economic, and political contexts or environments on the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of individuals and groups in society [39,40]. System justification theory is especially conducive to a socio-ecological approach, because it focuses on the ways in which people defend, bolster, and justify the specific institutions and arrangements on which they depend, and these differ across time and place. The system, in other words, matters.

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**Figure 1**: Predictors of system justification in France: Authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, and political orientation



*Note*: Entries are multiple regression coefficient plots, adjusting for demographic variables (e.g., age, sex, income, education, profession, religion). N= 17,017. All variables have been recoded running from 0 to 1.

*Source*: French National Election Study (2015-2017).

**Figure 2:** Support for increasing the number of foreigners allowed to live in France: Effects of authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, political orientation, and system justification

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*Note*: Entries are multiple regression coefficient plots, adjusting for demographic variables (e.g., age, sex, income, education, profession, religion). N= 16,405. All variables have been recoded running from 0 to 1.

*Source*: French National Election Study (2015-2017).

**Figure 3:** Support for increasing the number of refugees and asylum-seekers: Effects of authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, political orientation, and system justification



*Note*: Entries are multiple regression coefficient plots, adjusting for demographic variables (e.g., age, sex, income, education, profession, religion). N= 16,382. All variables have been recoded running from 0 to 1.

*Source*: French National Election Study (2015-2017).

**Figure 4:** Support for increasing social benefits: Effects of authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, political orientation, and system justification



*Note*: Entries are multiple regression coefficient plots, adjusting for demographic variables (e.g., age, sex, income, education, profession, religion). N= 16,610. All variables have been recoded running from 0 to 1.

*Source*: French National Election Study (2015-2017).

**Figure 5:** Support for increasing the number of public servants: Effects of authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, political orientation, and system justification



*Note*: Entries are multiple regression coefficient plots, adjusting for demographic variables (e.g., age, sex, income, education, profession, religion). N= 17,011. All variables have been recoded running from 0 to 1.

*Source*: French National Election Study (2015-2017).

1. By *republican*, we are referring to a form of constitutional government in which political power is held by citizens and their elected representatives rather than a monarch. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The sample was quota-controlled for age, gender, professional status, size of community, and region (Île de France, Northwest, Northeast, Southwest, and Southeast). The study was conducted using Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) for the Centre de Recherches Politiques de Sciences Po by the polling institute Ipsos. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)