Ideological Responses to the EU Refugee Crisis: The Left, the Right, and the Extremes

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Abstract

The 2016 European Union (EU) refugee crisis exposed a fundamental distinction in political attitudes between the political left and right. Previous findings suggest, however, that besides political orientation, ideological strength (i.e., political extremism) is also relevant to understand such distinctive attitudes. Our study reveals that the political right is more anxious, and the political left experiences more self-efficacy, about the refugee crisis. At the same time, the political extremes—at both sides of the spectrum— are more likely than moderates to believe that the solution to this societal problem is simple. Furthermore, both extremes experience more judgmental certainty about their domain-specific knowledge of the refugee crisis, independent of their actual knowledge. Finally, belief in simple solutions mediated the relationship between ideology and judgmental certainty, but only among political extremists. We conclude that both ideological orientation and strength matter to understand citizens' reactions to the refugee crisis.

The 2016 refugee crisis marked the largest mass-scale migration in the European Union (EU) since the Second World War. Fleeing the perils of war and starvation—mostly in Syria but also in countries such as Somalia and Afghanistan—more than a million refugees sought asylum in the EU. This geopolitical event sparked fierce and heated debate among citizens and stimulated a surge of political populism across the EU. Large groups of citizens expressed humanitarian concerns and pointed at the moral duty to help people in need. Large other groups of citizens, however, were worried about the threat that Islamic refugees would bring to their own culture and safety, and for instance, feared that terrorists would enter the EU by joining the stream of refugees. These ideological differences map onto a political left–right dimension, where the political left placed relatively more emphasis on providing aid to refugees and the political right placed relatively more emphasis on stricter border control to protect the safety of EU citizens. The refugee crisis hence illuminated a strong distinction in political attitudes between the left and right.

Such a left–right distinction is consistent with theorizing on the "rigidity of the right" (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). This theoretical framework posits that there is an ideological asymmetry in cognitive style, such that closed-mindedness, and a preference for order and tradition, is stronger at the political right than at the left. As a consequence, the political right is more concerned about preserving cultural traditions, and therefore less tolerant of minority groups, than the political left. A large body of research supports this assertion.

For instance, research reveals higher levels of prejudice toward immigrants at the political right than left (Sears & Henry, 2003). Furthermore, the political right has higher levels of authoritarianism (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950) and social dominance orientation (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) than the political left, which are individual difference variables commonly associated with prejudice. Consistent with these insights, a recent study reveals that the political right considers Syrian refugees as more threatening to national security than the political left (Holbrook, López-Rodríguez, Fessler, Vásquez, & Gómez, in press).

A different comparison dimension within political psychology, however, is between the political extremes—at both sides of the spectrum—and political moderates. This comparison dimension is based on the insight that noteworthy similarities

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exist between the extreme left and right for various aspects of people's cognitive style. For instance, both the left and right derogate social categories that they perceive as different (Brandt, Reyna, Chambers, Crawford, & Whetherell, 2014; Chambers, Schlenker, & Collison, 2013; Crawford & Pilanski, 2014; van Prooijen, Krouwel, Boiten, & Eendebak, 2015; Wetherell, Brandt, & Reyna, 2013) and both political extremes reject, and consider as inferior, ideological beliefs that differ from their own (van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2017). But, how relevant is such strength of political ideology—above and beyond political orientation—to understand ideological responses to the refugee crisis? In the present research, we examine not only differences but also similarities between the extreme left and right in the context of the EU refugee crisis. We propose that while the left and right may differ in their anxiety about the refugee crisis and in the type of political solutions that they propose, both political extremes differ from moderates in their belief that there are simple solutions for this complex problem and in their judgmental certainty about this event. As such, the present study is designed to make a novel contribution by illuminating the complex effects of ideological orientation and strength in the context of the refugee crisis.

One reason to suspect extremism effects in people's ideological responses to the refugee crisis is grounded in the assumption that distressing societal circumstances contribute to a polarizing political climate. Findings from various disciplines within the social sciences support this assumption. For instance, psychological research reveals that both the left and right extremes are more anxious of their economic future than political moderates (van Prooijen et al. 2015). Likewise, people more strongly endorse extremist leaders under threatening conditions (Hogg, Meehan, & Farquharson, 2010), and existential anxiety increases the appeal of both left- and right-wing political views (Castano et al., 2011; Weise et al., 2008). Finally, macropolitical insights suggest that societal threat increases support for extremist movements. Specifically, extremist regimes—both communist (extreme left) and fascist (extreme right)—are particularly likely to rise to power under societal circumstances characterized by "ephemeral gains": a short-lived period of sizable gains (e.g., economic prosperity) followed by a period of critical losses, leading citizens to support extremist leaders who promise to reinstall their country's previous glory (Midlarsky, 2011).

A common explanation for these phenomena is that people generally respond to distressing circumstances with an increased need for meaning, which may include an epistemic desire to understand societal events (Park, 2010). Ideological groups satisfy such needs by providing a shared reality, leading people to support relatively radical views that offer epistemic clarity (Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006). Such epistemic clarity can be observed in politically extremist propositions, which often take the form of one-liners that describe the world into clear but simplistic black-and-white characterizations of good or bad (Greenberg & Jonas, 2003; Hardin,

2002). Consistent with this idea, political extremism predicts decreased integrative complexity when reasoning about societal issues (Tetlock, Armor, & Peterson, 1994; see also Conway et al., 2016). Furthermore, political extremists are more likely to believe relatively simplistic conspiracy theories (Imhoff, 2015; Inglehart, 1987; van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Pollet, 2015). Finally, political extremists classify political stimuli into simpler and more clearly defined categories (Lammers, Koch, Conway, & Brandt, in press). Extrapolating these insights to the EU refugee crisis, it may hence be expected that while the extreme left and right endorse diametrically different political solutions, they share a tendency to believe that the solution for this societal problem is simple.

Such increased epistemic clarity would imply that political extremists have a relatively strong sense of judgmental certainty: that is, exaggerated confidence in the objective correctness of their understanding of political events. Consistent with this proposition, Toner, Leary, Asher, and Jongman-Sereno (2013) investigated the relationship between political ideology and participants' attitudes toward nine policy domains. Both the left and right extremes displayed belief superiority, that is, the belief that their own position toward a specific policy domain is objectively more correct than others. Relatedly, Brandt, Evans, and Crawford (2015) found that compared to moderates, political extremists are more confident, and less influenced by cognitive anchors, when making nonpolitical judgments (e.g., numeric estimation tasks). Taken together, these findings suggest that political extremism is associated with increased confidence in one's own capacities and knowledge. We therefore predict that, independent of their actual knowledge, political extremists will express more certainty about their knowledge of the EU refugee crisis than political moderates.

We tested these ideas in a Dutch general population sample at a time when the EU refugee crisis made continuous news headlines. Our questionnaire allowed for a simultaneous test of the predicted linear (rigidity of the right) and quadratic (extremism) effects in the context of the refugee crisis. First, we measured anxiety about the refugee crisis, and consistent with the rigidity of the right framework, we expected that the political right would report more anxiety about this specific issue than the left. Second, we measured both the restrictiveness and simplicity of the political solutions that participants favor. We predicted that whereas the political left would prefer less restrictive policies (refugees should be let in) than the political right (refugees should be refused), the left and right extremes share a belief that the political solution of the refugee crisis is simple. And third, we tested the prediction that the political extremes have more judgmental certainty about the refugee crisis than moderates. To this end, we asked a range of factual knowledge questions about the refugee crisis, and after each question, participants were asked how certain they were of their answers. Besides this measure of judgmental certainty, we also measured participants' self-efficacy pertaining to their self-perceived general ability to evaluate the refugee crisis.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of the Measured Variables.

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Anxiety about the refugee crisis	3.01	1.08	—							
2. Support for left-wing solution	2.45	1.22	−.39***	—						
3. Support for right-wing solution	1.81	1.17	.39***	−.34***	—					
4. Belief in simple solutions	2.31	1.13	.01	.16***	.13**	—				
5. Self-efficacy	3.20	0.81	−.01	.13**	−.09*	.19***	—			
6. Judgmental certainty	3.52	0.62	.08	.00	.04	.14**	.40***	—		
7. Factual knowledge	7.26	1.36	.01	.00	−.05	.01	.13**	.19***	—	
8. Political ideology	4.26	1.97	.40***	−.47***	.35***	−.06	−.16***	.00	.00	—

Note. Factual knowledge and political ideology range from 0 to 10; all other variables range from 1 to 5.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Method

Participants and Design

The study took place in April 2016, at the height of the EU refugee crisis. We distributed a short online questionnaire among a randomly selected part of a large research panel. This panel was recruited through Voting Advice Applications during elections. The panel is coordinated by Election Compass (Kieskompas), a Dutch political research organization that is affiliated with VU Amsterdam. Election Compass acts in line with the strict regulations of the Dutch Authority for the Protection of Personal Information ("Autoriteit Persoonsgegevens"; registration number m1457347) and with the ethical norms of VU Amsterdam.

We sent participants a link to the study through e-mail and stopped collecting data once no further responses came in. Participation was entirely voluntary. This yielded a sample of 545 participants (355 men, 190 women; $M_{age} = 45.96$, $SD = 12.81$), which yields more than 99% statistical power to find a medium effect ($f^2 = .15$).

Measures

We measured the main independent variable—political ideology—by asking participants to place themselves on a scale ranging from 0 (*left wing*) to 10 (*right wing*) and on a scale ranging from 0 (*progressive*) to 10 (*conservative*). Participants' answers to these items were strongly correlated ($r = .65$, $p < .001$), and we averaged them into an index of political ideology.

To measure participants' self-efficacy about the refugee crisis, we asked the following 5 items (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*): "I know a lot about the refugee crisis in the Netherlands," "I am well-informed about the refugee crisis in the Netherlands," "I know more about the refugee crisis in the Netherlands than the average Dutch person," "I feel confident of my knowledge about the refugee crisis in the Netherlands," and "I have correct knowledge of the refugee crisis in the Netherlands." These 5 items were averaged into a reliable self-efficacy scale ($\alpha = .92$).

We measured participants' anxiety about the refugee crisis with the following 3 items (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5= *strongly agree*): "I worry about the refugee crisis in the Netherlands," "I am afraid of the consequences of the refugee crisis in the Netherlands," and "Because of the refugee crisis in the Netherlands I feel insecure about the future." These items were averaged into a reliable scale of anxiety about the refugee crisis ($\alpha = .85$).

We then measured participants' political solutions with 3 separate items (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Specifically, we asked participants' support for a straightforward left-wing solution to the refugee crisis ("All refugees must be let in"), a straightforward right-wing solution ("All refugees must be refused"), and their generic belief in simple solutions ("The solution to the refugee crisis in the Netherlands is actually quite simple").

To measure participants' factual knowledge of the refugee crisis, participants rated 10 statements as either "true" or "false." Example items were "In the first two months of 2016, 4318 people sought asylum in the Netherlands" (correct answer: true) or "An asylum seeker is the same as a refugee" (correct answer: false). The number of correct answers formed an index of participants' factual knowledge of the refugee crisis. Combined with the factual knowledge questions, we solicited our measure of judgmental certainty. After each factual knowledge item, we asked for participants' judgmental certainty: "How certain are you of your answer?" (1 = *very uncertain*, 5 = *very certain*). This yielded a reliable 10-item judgmental certainty scale ($\alpha = .82$).

Results

We analyzed the data with hierarchical regression analyses. In line with recommendations for quadratic regression analyses, we mean centered the measure of political ideology and then calculated the quadratic term with the centered variable (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). We entered participants' gender and age as control variables in Step 1,[1] the linear term of political ideology in Step 2, and the quadratic term in Step 3. Degrees of freedom differ slightly between measures due to missing values. The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of the measured variables are displayed in Table 1.
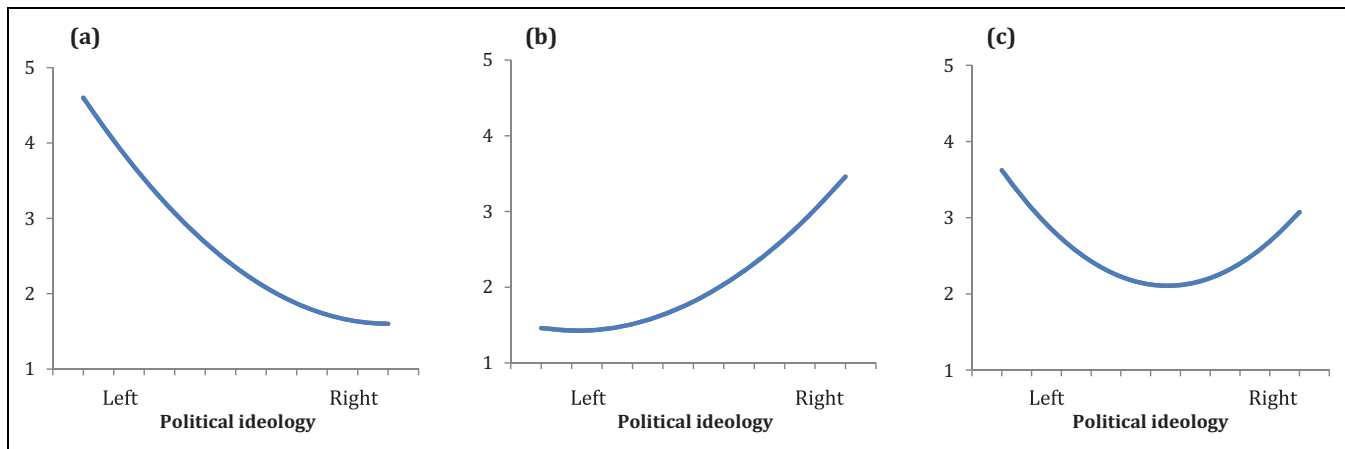
Figure 1. Quadratic relationships of political ideology with support for a left-wing solution (1a), support for a right-wing solution (1b), and belief in a simple solution (1c).

Anxiety About the Refugee Crisis

Step 1 was significant ($R^2 = .01$), $F(2, 538) = 3.55$, $p = .029$, which was due to a significant age effect, such that older participants reported more anxiety ($B = .009$, $SE = .004$, 95% confidence interval [CI] [.002, .016], $p = .017$). More important for the present purposes was the finding that Step 2 was highly significant ($\Delta R^2 = .16$), $F(1, 537) = 100.44$, $p < .001$. As predicted by the "rigidity of the right" framework, participants experienced more anxiety about the refugee crisis to the extent that they were ideologically more right wing ($B = .217$, $SE = .022$, 95% CI [.175, .260], $p < .001$). The quadratic term, which was added in Step 3, was nonsignificant, $F < 1$. In sum, right-wing ideological orientation, and not political extremism, predicted participants' anxiety about the refugee crisis.

Political Solutions

We then analyzed our 3 items about political solutions separately, that is, support for a left-wing solution (all refugees must be let in), support for a right-wing solution (all refugees must be refused), and belief in simple solutions. The quadratic relationships of political ideology with these variables are displayed in Figure 1a–c.

Support for a left-wing solution. On participants' support for a *left-wing* solution, Step 1 was significant ($R^2 = .02$), $F(2, 537) = 4.30$, $p = .014$, which was due to a significant gender effect ($B = .328$, $SE = .112$, 95% CI [.108, .549], $p = .004$). Women more strongly favored to let in all refugees ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.18$) than men ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 1.22$). Furthermore, Step 2 was significant ($\Delta R^2 = .21$), $F(1, 536) = 145.92$, $p < .001$. As might be expected, people were more strongly in favor to let all refugees in if their ideological orientation was more left wing ($B = -.289$, $SE = .024$, 95% CI [-.333, -.240], $p < .001$).

Finally, we also found a significant quadratic term in Step 3 ($\Delta R^2 = .02$), $F(1, 535) = 10.28$, $p = .001$. To examine this effect, we conducted simple slope analyses. At the right

extreme ($+1$ SD), the effect of ideology was negative ($B = -.178$, $SE = .041$, 95% CI [-.259, -.097], $p < .001$). At the left extreme (-1 SD), the effect of ideology was also negative and of increased magnitude ($B = -.422$, $SE = .049$, 95% CI [-.518, -.327], $p < .001$). In sum, a left-wing ideological orientation predicts a preference to let all refugees in, which is particularly pronounced at the left extreme.

Support for a right-wing solution. Step 1 was significant ($R^2 = .03$), $F(2, 538) = 7.40$, $p = .001$, which was again due to a gender effect ($B = -.307$, $SE = .107$, 95% CI [-.517, -.098], $p = .004$). Men more strongly supported this solution ($M = 1.93$, $SD = 1.20$) than women ($M = 1.58$, $SD = 1.06$). Step 2 was also significant ($\Delta R^2 = .11$), $F(1, 537) = 68.09$, $p < .001$. As expected, a right-wing ideological orientation predicted a stronger preference to refuse all refugees ($B = .198$, $SE = .024$, 95% CI [.151, .245], $p < .001$).

Finally, the quadratic term in Step 3 was significant ($\Delta R^2 = .01$), $F(1, 536) = 6.50$, $p = .011$. The simple slope at the left extreme was nonsignificant ($p = .074$), but the simple slope was highly significant at the right extreme ($B = .285$, $SE = .042$, 95% CI [.203, .367], $p < .001$). Mirroring the findings on belief in a left-wing solution, the preference to refuse all refugees is particularly pronounced at the right extreme.

Belief in simple solutions. We then proceeded to test the hypothesis that both extremes would perceive the solution to the refugee crisis as simple. Results revealed that Step 1 ($F < 1$) and Step 2, $F(1, 537) = 1.28$, $p = .26$, were both nonsignificant. Of importance, the predicted quadratic term that was added to the model in Step 3 was highly significant ($\Delta R^2 = .04$), $F(1, 536) = 24.08$, $p < .001$. The simple slope at the left extreme (-1 SD) was significant ($B = -.245$, $SE = .050$, 95% CI [-.344, -.146], $p < .001$), indicating that participants perceived simpler solutions for the refugee crisis to the extent that they were more extremely left wing. The simple slope at the right extreme ($+1$ SD) was also significant ($B = .144$, $SE = .043$, 95% CI [.060, .229], $p = .001$), indicating that

participants also perceived simpler solutions for this problem if they were more extremely right wing.

In sum, while the left and right extremes endorse different solutions for the refugee crisis, they share a belief that the solution to this problem is simple—distinguishing the political extremes from moderates.

Factual Knowledge and Judgmental Certainty

We first analyzed the results on participants' factual knowledge of the refugee crisis. None of the steps in the regression model were significant: Step 1, $F(2, 534) = 2.37$, $p = .094$; Steps 2 and 3, $Fs < 1$. The mean score of factual knowledge ($M = 7.26$; see Table 1) is between the expected chance score of 5.0 (i.e., if participants would be guessing entirely) and the perfect score of 10, suggesting that participants on average had some, but not perfect, knowledge of the refugee crisis. More importantly, these results indicate that the average level of factual knowledge did not differ between the left and the right or between both extremes and moderates.

We then analyzed participants' judgmental certainty ratings on the factual knowledge test. We added participants' factual knowledge score as additional control variable in Step 1. Results revealed that Step 1 was significant ($R^2 = .08$), $F(3, 533) = 14.68$, $p < .001$. Not surprisingly, participants' number of correct answers predicted their judgmental certainty ($B = .076$, $SE = .019$, 95% CI [.039, .113], $p < .001$). Furthermore, there was a gender effect ($B = -.238$, $SE = .055$, 95% CI [−.346, −.130], $p < .001$), such that men expressed more judgmental certainty ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.57$) than women ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.64$). The linear term in Step 2, then, was nonsignificant, $F < 1$.

The quadratic term in Step 3, however, was significant ($\Delta R^2 = .02$), $F(1, 531) = 11.68$, $p = .001$. The simple slope at the left extreme (-1 SD) suggested increased judgmental certainty among left-wing extremist ($B = -.088$, $SE = .027$, 95% CI [−.140, −.035], $p = .001$), and at the right extreme ($+1$ SD), the simple slope suggested increased judgmental certainty also among right-wing extremists ($B = .056$, $SE = .023$, 95% CI [.011, .100], $p = .014$). The quadratic term is displayed in Figure 2. As predicted, these findings reveal that those with a more extreme political orientation have more judgmental certainty about their domain-specific knowledge of the refugee crisis, independent of their actual knowledge.

Self-Efficacy

We then analyzed participants' generalized feelings of self-efficacy to evaluate the refugee crisis. Step 1 was significant ($R^2 = .02$), $F(2, 539) = 5.10$, $p = .006$, which was due to significant effects of gender ($B = -.201$, $SE = .074$, 95% CI [−.346, −.056], $p = .007$) and age ($B = -.006$, $SE = .003$, 95% CI [−.012, −.001], $p = .025$). Furthermore, Step 2 was significant ($\Delta R^2 = .03$), $F(1, 538) = 15.78$, $p < .001$, suggesting that the political left experienced more self-efficacy than the right ($B = -.069$, $SE = .017$, 95% CI [−.103, −.035],
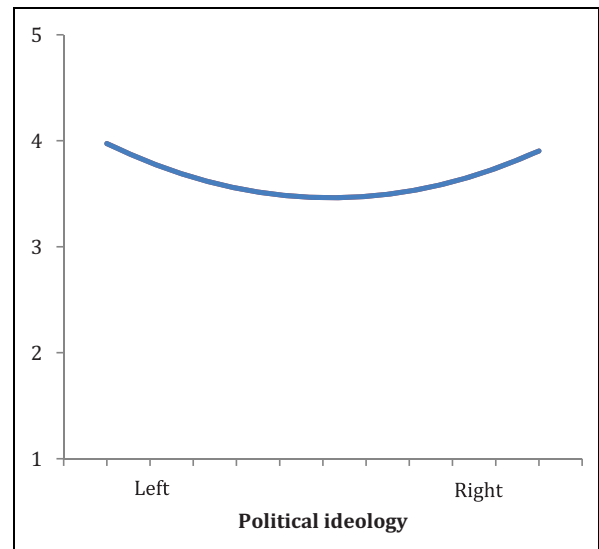

Figure 2. Quadratic relationship between political ideology and judgmental certainty.

$p < .001$). Unexpectedly, the quadratic term in Step 3 was nonsignificant, $F < 1$. Thus, while the predicted extremism effect emerged on judgmental certainty of domain-specific knowledge, it did not emerge on participants' generalized self-efficacy. In the Discussion, we revisit this finding.

Mediational Analysis

In an exploratory fashion, we then tested whether the quadratic relationship between ideology and judgmental certainty is mediated by participants' belief in simple solutions. After all, it stands to reason that people feel particularly confident of their domain-specific knowledge about societal problems that appear simple. To this end, we used the MEDCURVE macro for testing mediation effects of nonlinear variables (Hayes & Preacher, 2010; 5,000 bootstrap samples). Furthermore, we included gender, age, and factual knowledge as control variables.

The indirect effect at the left extreme was significant (-1 SD, $\theta = -.016$, $SE = .007$), as indicated by the finding that the 95% CI does not include zero, 95% CI [−.032, −.005]. The indirect effect at the right extreme was also significant ($+1$ SD, $\theta = .010$, $SE = .005$), 95% CI [.003, .022]. At the scale center, the indirect effect was nonsignificant ($\theta = -.003$, $SE = .002$), 95% CI [−.009, .0001]. These findings reveal that belief in simple solutions mediated the relationship between political ideology and judgmental certainty—but only among political extremists.

Discussion

The present study was designed to illuminate the relatively complex relationships between political ideology and psychological responses to the EU refugee crisis. Our findings reveal that both the distinction between the political left versus right

(i.e., ideological orientation) and the distinction between the political extremes versus moderates (i.e., ideological strength) are important to understand people's responses to this event. Specifically, the political right is more anxious about the refugee crisis, and favors more exclusionary policies, than the political left (see also Holbrook et al., in press). Furthermore, the political left experiences more self-efficacy to evaluate the refugee crisis than the political right. At the same time, the political extremes perceive the political solution of the refugee crisis as simpler, and therefore experience more judgmental certainty about their domain-specific knowledge of this event, than moderates. These findings underscore that while this crisis exposed a deep and fundamental difference between the political left versus right in terms of emotions and attitudes toward refugees, for a full comprehension of ideological responses toward the refugee crisis one also needs to take political extremism into account.

The results presented here extend previous findings in numerous ways. First, while political extremism has been connected to decreased integrative complexity (Conway et al., 2016; Tetlock et al., 1994), conspiracy theories (Imhoff, 2015; Inglehart, 1987; van Prooijen et al. 2015), and simpler perceptual categories (Lammers et al., in press), these findings are the first to illuminate how political moderates more strongly appreciate the complexities of specific policies in the context of concrete geopolitical events (i.e., the refugee crisis). While participants at the extreme left were more likely to believe that all refugees should simply be granted asylum, and participants at the extreme right were more likely to believe that all refugees should simply be denied asylum, both extremes perceived a simple solution to this problem. Second, previous studies found that the political extremes are more confident of their political attitudes (Toner et al., 2013) and when making numeric estimations (Brandt, Evans, & Crawford, 2015). The present study extends these previous findings by suggesting that independent of their actual knowledge, the political extremes experience more judgmental certainty in their understanding of societal events than moderates.

Two qualifications are important to address here. First, although the extremism effect emerged persuasively on participants' certainty of their domain-specific knowledge, contrary to predictions, we did not find an extremism effect on self-efficacy (i.e., participants' generalized confidence in their ability to evaluate the refugee crisis). Instead, the political left experienced more self-efficacy about this event than the political right. We suspect that these findings are due to an increased confidence in one's general reasoning and judgment capacities among participants at the political left. Specifically, research reveals that analytic thinking predicts liberal political opinions (e.g., Yilmaz & Saribay, in press), and it is possible that such cognitive skills increase people's confidence in their own capacities to evaluate complex geopolitical events. This interpretation remains speculative, however, as we did not include a measure of analytic thinking in our questionnaire.

Second, the findings of judgmental certainty emerged despite the fact that there were no linear or quadratic effects of political ideology on factual knowledge. This suggests that instead of being confident, it might be more accurate to conclude that the political extremes are *over*confident in their knowledge of the refugee crisis. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that the political extremes have an illusion of explanatory depth: Specifically, people typically know less about complex policies than they think they do, and reducing this complexity into relatively simplistic causal models enables the polarized attitudes that characterize political extremism (Fernbach, Rogers, Fox, & Sloman, 2013; see also Antonucci, Horvath, Kutiyski, & Krouwel, 2017). At the same time, we must note that some studies have observed *higher* levels of political knowledge—and hence, lower levels of simplicity—among political extremists (e.g., Sidanius, 1988). Future research may therefore focus on possible moderators of the relationship between political extremism and political sophistication.

A broader theoretical implication of the present findings is that the perspectives of the rigidity of the right versus political extremism can be complementary instead of competing when investigating people's psychological responses to impactful geopolitical events. Specifically, these theoretical perspectives often are considered as mutually exclusive frameworks to predict the psychological dynamics involving political ideology (Greenberg & Jonas, 2003; Jost et al., 2007; Lammers et al., in press; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2017). Such a competing approach is fruitful when focusing on one particular dependent variable, in order to ascertain whether ideological orientation or strength most accurately predicts a specific aspect of people's cognitive style. A high-profile societal event such as the refugee crisis does not elicit a single psychological reaction, but a rich pallet of cognitions, emotions, and motivations. It is both possible and plausible that some of these responses are best explained through ideological orientation, and other responses are best explained through ideological strength. The present findings underscore that we need both theoretical frameworks to acquire a complete picture of people's ideological responses to impactful societal events such as the refugee crisis.

The study presented here has a number of noteworthy strengths and limitations. As to strengths, our study was high-powered, focused on a general population sample, and yielded effects that are consistent with previous theorizing and findings. These considerations suggest that the results presented here provide a reliable indication of people's ideological responses to the refugee crisis. One limitation, however, is the cross-sectional nature of the study, raising questions about causality. For instance, do belief in simple solutions and judgmental certainty increase the strength of people's ideological beliefs or do strong ideological beliefs increase the simplicity of perceived political solutions and judgmental certainty? To answer questions of causality, one would need a longitudinal design that tracks changes in these variables over time. A second limitation is that we focused only on general political orientation. Political ideology is more complex than a simple left–right dimension: For instance, people may differ

ideologically on social, fiscal, or military issues (Fessler, Pisor, & Holbrook, 2017). Future research may focus on these more nuanced distinctions when examining the effects of ideological orientation versus strength.

Besides being a humanitarian disaster, the refugee crisis posed political and societal challenges across the EU. Not only in the formal political arena did the political left and right clash in their differential policy proposals to find workable solutions, but the refugee crisis also sparked large-scale protest of concerned citizens who endorsed either humanitarian or anti-immigration approaches to this issue. The present findings illuminate that the more extremely left- or right-wing people are, the more likely it is that they are confident in their understanding of the crisis and the more strongly they believe that their own preferred approach is the simple (and presumably, only) solution to this problem. These dynamics may help explain why people with different political ideological orientations pursued their ideas about the refugee crisis with zeal and conviction, making it difficult to compromise about this event in an increasingly polarized political climate.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Note

1. The results were similar if we ran the analyses without these control variables.

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