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# When Values and Attributions Collide: Liberals' and Conservatives' Values Motivate Attributions for Alleged Misdeeds

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## Abstract

Conservatives tend to make dispositional whereas liberals make situational attributions for social problems and alleged misconduct (the “ideo-attribution effect”). Three studies demonstrated a reversal of the ideo-attribution effect. Conservatives made stronger situational attributions than liberals for the behavior of Marines accused of killing Iraqi civilians (Studies 1 and 2) and police officers accused of wrongly killing a cougar running loose in a Chicago neighborhood (Study 3). Reversals of the ideo-attribution effect occurred because conservative values were more consistent with excusing the Marines' and police officers' behavior, whereas liberal values were more consistent with blaming the Marines and police officers. These results suggest that the ideo-attribution effect—and attributions more generally—are shaped by whether people's attributional conclusions are consistent or inconsistent with their salient values.

## Keywords

attributions, values, political orientation, motivated reasoning

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Conservatives and liberals tend to differ in their explanations for societal ills. Consider the plight of the more than 36 million people who live below the poverty line in the United States (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2008). Conservatives typically make dispositional attributions for the causes of poverty and emphasize personality-based explanations (e.g., the poor lack motivation, persistence, or moral integrity). In contrast, liberals typically make situational attributions for poverty and emphasize social and environmental factors (e.g., poverty is the result of unfair social institutions or difficult economic conditions; Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Furnham, 1982; Pandey, Sinha, Prakash, & Tripathi, 1982; Sniderman & Tetlock, 1986; Williams, 1984; Zucker & Weiner, 1993).

The tendency for conservatives to prefer dispositional explanations and for liberals to prefer situational explanations for social problems and alleged misconduct (the “ideo-attribution effect”) is robust. The ideo-attribution effect has been documented across a range of domains including attributions for race and success (Kluegel, 1990), homelessness (Pellegrini, Queirolo, Monarrez, & Valenzuela, 1997), unemployment (Skitka & Tetlock, 1992), obesity (Crandall, 1994; O'Brien, Hunter, & Banks, 2007), AIDS infections

(Skitka & Tetlock, 1992, 1993), foreign aggression (Sahar, 2008; Skitka, McMurray, & Burroughs, 1991; Skitka, Stephens, Angelou, & McMurray, 1993), the origins of homosexuality (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2008), and even the plight of those harmed by natural disasters (Arceneaux & Stein, 2009; Skitka, 1999). For example, when explaining crime, conservatives tend to make dispositional attributions for the actions of alleged criminals, blaming crime on alleged criminals' character flaws. In contrast, liberals tend to take situational factors into account when explaining crime, such as difficult economic times or the lack of educational or career opportunities for accused criminals (Carroll, Perkowitz, Lurigio, & Weaver, 1987).

These ideological differences in attributions for social problems and misconduct have implications for people's views on public policy. People who make dispositional attributions

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for behavior tend to punish or withhold help from individuals whom they blame, whereas people who make situational attributions tend to express a desire to help or rehabilitate individuals whom they perceive as victims of circumstance (Carroll et al., 1987; Weiner, 1993). Consequently, conservatives are less inclined than liberals to support spending on programs to help the poor (e.g., Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Sniderman & Tetlock, 1986; Williams, 1984), AIDS victims, the homeless, the unemployed, those requiring organ transplants (Skitka & Tetlock, 1992, 1993), minorities (Kluegel, 1990), victims of natural disasters (Skitka, 1999), and defeated enemies in foreign wars (Skitka et al., 1993).

The goal of the current research was to investigate the factors that shape people's attributions in general and, more specifically, lead liberals and conservatives to arrive at different conclusions about social problems and alleged misconduct. We suggest that attributional processing, and hence the *ideo-attribution effect*, is shaped by people's motivation to arrive at conclusions that are consistent with their salient value commitments. In particular, we suggest that conservatives often make dispositional attributions and liberals often make situational attributions because their values are typically consistent with doing so (Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Hutchinson, & Chamberlin, 2002). However, if people's attributions are indeed shaped by their salient value commitments, we should observe a reversal of the *ideo-attribution effect* when conservative values are more consistent with making situational attributions and liberal values are more consistent with making dispositional attributions. The current research tested these predictions.

### *Values-Related Reasoning and the Ideo-Attribution Effect*

A motivated reasoning account of the *ideo-attribution effect* suggests that, like other judgments (Kunda, 1990), people's ideologically patterned attributional conclusions are influenced by motivational factors (Skitka et al., 2002). Research on spontaneous trait inferences indicates that people initially tend to make automatic dispositional attributions for others' behavior. People only proceed to a second stage of more effortful reasoning in which they consider situational constraints and make situational attributions when they are motivated and have the cognitive resources to do so (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988; Winter, Uleman, & Cunniff, 1985). Our work extends this research by examining one specific type of motivation that shapes attributions—consistency between values and attributional conclusions.

Because people often perceive their values to be relevant to social problems (e.g., Feldman & Zaller, 1992; Tetlock, 1986), the degree of consistency between salient values and initial attributions might influence people's tendency to either maintain or situationally correct their initial dispositional

attributions (Skitka et al., 2002). When salient values are consistent with dispositional attributions, people should be relatively unmotivated to consider situational information and therefore should be more likely to maintain initial dispositional attributions. When salient values conflict with dispositional attributions, however, people should be motivated to consider situational information and therefore should be more likely to make situational attributions (e.g., Devine, 1989; see also Festinger, 1957, for a discussion of the psychological pressure toward consistency).

Values-related motivation may play an important role in explaining the *ideo-attribution effect* because liberals and conservatives express different value priorities (Rokeach, 1973; Tetlock, 1986). For example, conservatives tend to emphasize individualistic values such as self-discipline and self-reliance more strongly than do liberals (e.g., Feather, 1984), whereas liberals tend to emphasize egalitarian values such as tolerance more strongly than do conservatives (e.g., Sniderman, Tetlock, Glaser, Green, & Hout, 1989; Sullivan, Marcus, Feldman, & Pierson, 1981). Conservatives (relative to liberals) may therefore tend to make stronger dispositional attributions for social problems because individualistic values are more salient to them in the contexts studied, and these values are consistent with making dispositional attributions. For example, strong commitments to self-discipline and self-reliance are consistent with holding the poor personally responsible for their plight. In contrast, liberals (relative to conservatives) may tend to make stronger situational attributions for social problems because egalitarian values are more salient to them in the contexts studied, and these values often conflict with making dispositional attributions. For example, strong commitments to humanitarianism and egalitarianism are inconsistent with blaming the poor for their plight and therefore should motivate liberals to consider situational causes of poverty. In summary, a motivated reasoning account of the *ideo-attribution effect* predicts that, for many social problems and instances of alleged misconduct, a focus on individualism leads conservatives to make dispositional attributions whereas a focus on egalitarianism motivates liberals to make situational attributions.

The notion that conservatives' and liberals' attributions are shaped by motivational factors such as values-related reasoning is consistent with past research. For example, liberals were more likely than conservatives to demonstrate a corrected attributional pattern of response (i.e., to make a dispositional attribution first, followed by a situational attribution) when asked to write about whether government should guarantee minimum subsistence. In contrast, conservatives were more likely than liberals to respond with consistent dispositional attributions when given the same prompt (Skitka et al., 2002, Study 4). In this context, values such as egalitarianism presumably motivated liberals to make situational attributions for people's need, whereas values such as self-reliance presumably did not motivate conservatives to

consider situational information. Other evidence suggests that the *ideo-attribution* effect does not emerge when political values are not activated (e.g., in nonpoliticized contexts) because liberals and conservatives are not motivated to arrive at dissimilar attributional conclusions (Skitka et al., 2002, Study 3). For example, liberals and conservatives did not differ in their attributions when explaining why a lawyer tripped when learning a new dance step.

Although past research has documented some evidence for a motivated reasoning account of the *ideo-attribution* effect, this research has primarily been conducted in domains in which liberals should be more motivated than conservatives to make situational attributions for behavior (e.g., attributions for poverty or crime). Nonetheless, a motivated reasoning account predicts that conservatives and liberals should demonstrate a reversal of the *ideo-attribution* effect when conservatives' values are inconsistent with making dispositional attributions and when liberals' values are inconsistent with making situational attributions. For example, conservatives express commitments to values such as national security and respect for authority, laws, rules, and standards (Braithwaite, 1998; Feather, 1975; Jost, Kruglanski, Glaser, & Sulloway, 2003). A conservative commitment to respect for authority should conflict with blaming established authority figures for misdeeds and should therefore motivate conservatives to consider situational constraints when making attributions for authorities' transgressions. In a similar vein, liberals often express a commitment to humanitarian concerns (e.g., Braithwaite, 1998) and to environmental conservation (e.g., Dietz, Stern, & Guagnano, 1998; Neumayer, 2004). These value commitments are consistent with judging those who violate others' human rights or harm the environment as personally responsible and should therefore motivate liberals to make stronger dispositional than situational attributions for these transgressions. In short, a motivated reasoning account suggests that under the right conditions, the joint influence of attributional and values-related reasoning should lead to a reversal of the *ideo-attribution* effect.

Previous research provides some hints that that the *ideo-attribution* effect might reverse in particular contexts. Skitka et al. (2002, Study 3) found that conservatives were more likely than liberals to make situational attributions when explaining why a prisoner was released on parole—a reversal of the usual *ideo-attribution* effect. However, this research did not investigate the motivational mechanisms underlying conservatives' and liberals' attributions. Altemeyer's (1981) work concerning right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) is also consistent with the notion that the *ideo-attribution* effect might sometimes be reversed. RWA is a syndrome of attitudes and beliefs that is positively correlated with political conservatism and includes tendencies to (a) conform to the dictates of authority and (b) respond aggressively to those who disobey authority and convention. People high in RWA are generally more punitive than

people low in RWA toward those who violate norms or rules. However, this relation is reversed when people react to authority misconduct: People high in RWA are less punitive than those low in RWA in response to authorities' transgressions (Altemeyer, 1981). Because punitiveness is often shaped by attributions of responsibility (e.g., Carroll et al., 1987; Weiner, Graham, & Reyna, 1997), these findings suggest that high RWAs and presumably conservatives might make weaker dispositional and stronger situational attributions for authority misconduct than low RWAs and liberals. Accordingly, we identified conservatives' and liberals' reactions to alleged authority misconduct as a particularly promising domain in which to seek reversals of the *ideo-attribution* effect.

The current work extends earlier research in two ways. First, we explore additional contexts in which the *ideo-attribution* effect might be reversed; conservatives should be as motivated as liberals to make situational attributions when value conflict provides the motivation to do so. Second (and more important), we explicitly test whether the consistency between value commitments and dispositional attributions explains whether liberals and conservatives are more or less motivated to make situational attributions. In other words, a primary goal of the current research was to provide novel empirical evidence for the meditational role of values (and, specifically, the consistency of values with attributional conclusions) in explaining the relation between political orientation and attributions. Before describing these studies in more detail, however, we first clarify how we conceptualize political orientation.

### *Conceptualizing Political Orientation*

Theorists have organized a variety of overlapping personality and attitudinal variables into ideological, affective, and cognitive stylistic "resonances" (Alker & Poppen, 1973; Carroll et al., 1987). One resonance, cognitive conservatism, combines support for traditional power structures and opposition to egalitarianism with personality measures of dogmatism, authoritarianism, and intolerance of ambiguity (a resonance reminiscent of the classic work on authoritarianism; Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). The second resonance, liberal humanism, combines a liberal political orientation, egalitarianism, and humanism (e.g., Carroll et al., 1987; Eysenck, 1971).<sup>1</sup> Our position is that we will gain a more robust understanding of individual differences in ideology when we concentrate empirical effort on assessing logical indicators of these resonances rather than attempting to isolate the intercorrelated components of each resonance. Therefore, even though we frame our discussion and measures in terms of political ideology, we expect to find similar patterns of results regardless of how we operationalize these left-right resonances.

## The Current Research

The goals of the current research were to (a) test whether the ideo-attribution effect would reverse in contexts in which conservatives, but not liberals, should be motivated to consider situational causes of behavior and (b) test the role of values-related reasoning in shaping conservatives' and liberals' attributions. Although past research suggests that motivation in general shapes people's attributions, the current research manipulated, measured, and tested the role of a specific motivational factor: values-related reasoning. Studies 1 through 3 tested whether conservatives would make stronger situational attributions than liberals for alleged misconduct when salient conservative values were inconsistent with blaming those accused of wrongdoing. Studies 2 and 3 assessed the values that people perceived as relevant to their judgments of the accused and tested the degree to which differences in perceived value relevance predicted attributions for alleged misconduct.

## Study 1

Study 1 was designed to investigate conservatives' and liberals' attributions for the behavior of U.S. Marines accused of wrongly killing 24 Iraqi civilians in Haditha, Iraq. We suspected that value commitments to national security, respect for authority, and patriotism would be salient for conservatives and likely to conflict with their willingness to make dispositional attributions for the Marines' behavior. If the ideo-attribution effect is a result of values-related motivated reasoning, then conservatives (relative to liberals) should be more motivated to consider situational causes of the Marines' behavior and to make stronger situational attributions for the Marines' behavior.

## Method

**Participants.** Two hundred and ninety-six participants (155 conservatives and 141 liberals) completed the survey. The study sample was drawn from a panel of respondents maintained by Knowledge Networks (KN). KN recruits panel members using random-digit-dialing telephone selection methods. After a panel member agrees to participate, KN provides free Internet access and sometimes laptop computers in exchange for participation. Approximately 50% of the panelists did not have prior access to the web before becoming KN members. Thus, the characteristics of the panel closely match those of the U.S. Census (see <http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp/>).

KN collects a standard background profile on each of its respondents including age, education, gender, income, and political orientation. This background information allowed us to identify panelists who identified as extreme conservatives

and extreme liberals (see the Measures section for more information) and to randomly sample conservatives and liberals from these populations. Potential participants received a password-protected e-mail indicating that they were invited to participate in the study. The e-mail included a "clickable" link that allowed participants to initiate the survey. Our sample ranged in age from 19 to 90 years old ( $M = 51.11$ ); 42.9% of our sample was male. Our sample was relatively diverse in terms of participants' education: 8.8% had achieved less than a high school degree, 27.4% had achieved a high school degree, 24.3% had achieved some college, and 39.5% had achieved a bachelor's degree or higher. Our sample was also diverse in terms of household income: from less than \$5,000 a year to more than \$175,000 a year.

**Procedure.** Participants read a brief "news story" summarizing the information known at the time of the survey about real events that transpired in Haditha, Iraq:

As you may know, on November 19, 2005 a 13-man Marine unit was attacked by a roadside bomb in a residential part of Haditha, Iraq. The explosion killed one Marine. The Marines suspected five Iraqi men in the vicinity were involved, and ordered them to lie on the ground. The Marines shot and killed them when the men ran instead. The Marines then swept through nearby houses, and killed 19 more people, only one of whom was armed. Among the dead were five women and four children. Although the Marines initially claimed that 15 Iraqi civilians (in addition to the one Marine) were killed by the bomb, and another nine were killed when the Marines returned gunfire, subsequent reports acknowledged that all 24 Iraqi dead had been shot by the Marines. Military lawyers claim that the soldiers were following military rules of engagement and operating under standard protocol. Haditha residents, however, claim that the Marines knowingly massacred innocent civilians.

After reading the paragraph, participants responded to several questions that assessed their judgments of the Marines' behavior.

## Measures

**Attributions.** Participants' attributions for the Marines' behavior were assessed using four items: (a) "To what extent was the 13 Marines' behavior in Haditha under their personal control?" (b) "To what extent could the Marines have acted in any other way than they did in Haditha?" (c) "To what extent were the civilian deaths in Haditha an inevitable and uncontrollable consequence of war?" and (d) "To what extent was the 13 Marines' behavior in Haditha due to aspects of the situation they could not personally control?" Participants responded on 5-point radio-button scales with

**Table 1.** Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of Study 1 Variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age	51.11	16.87	1.00				
2. Gender	0.57	0.50	-.13*	1.00			
3. Education	2.95	1.01	-.34***	-.02	1.00		
4. Income	10.52	4.37	-.17**	-.08	.41***	1.00	
5. Political orientation	0.52	0.50	.11	-.12*	-.15*	.13*	1.00
6. Situational attributions	3.10	1.02	.22***	-.12†	-.30***	-.07	.48***

$N = 296$ . Gender was coded 0 (*male*) and 1 (*female*). Participants reported their education using four categories: (a) less than a high school degree; (b) high school degree; (c) some college, no degree; and (d) college degree. Participants reported their household income using 19 distinct categories ranging from less than \$5,000 a year to more than \$175,000 a year. Mean income was between \$40,000 and \$49,999 a year. Political orientation was coded as 0 (*liberal*) and 1 (*conservative*).

† $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

the verbal anchors *not at all* and *very much*. Responses to the first two items were reverse-scored. A principal components analysis with direct oblimin rotation indicated that the four attribution items loaded on a single factor (eigenvalue = 2.26). We therefore averaged participants' responses to the four items to yield a single attribution scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .73$ ). High scores on this measure reflected stronger situational attributions.

**Political orientation.** When participants first joined the KN panel, they answered questions that assessed the extent to which they identified as liberal or conservative and as a Democrat or Republican. Participants first responded to one item assessing whether they identified as a liberal, conservative, or neither. Participants who indicated they were liberal or conservative subsequently responded to an item that assessed how strongly they identified as a liberal or conservative. Participants responded on a 3-point scale with the verbal anchors *slightly*, *moderately*, and *very much*. Participants also responded to a parallel set of items assessing their identification as a Democrat or Republican. Participants for this study were sampled from KN panelists who identified as both very much liberal or conservative and very much Democrat or Republican.

## Results

See Table 1 for the means, standard deviations, coding schemes for categorical variables, and intercorrelations of all study variables. A one-way ANOVA compared the strength of situational attributions as a function of political orientation. As predicted, analyses revealed that conservatives made stronger situational attributions for the Marines' behavior ( $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ) than did liberals ( $M = 2.59$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ),  $F(1, 285) = 84.93$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .23$ . An ANCOVA indicated that this effect was significant even when controlling for participants' age, gender, education, and household income,  $F(1, 281) = 71.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .20$ .

## Discussion

Conservatives made stronger situational attributions than did liberals for the Marines' behavior in Haditha—a reversal of the ideo-attribution effect. These results suggest that conservatives, like liberals, are sometimes motivated to consider situational causes of others' behavior. Specifically, conservatives' value commitments to national security, authority, and patriotism presumably conflicted with blaming the Marines for their behavior and motivated conservatives to make situational attributions in this context. However, because we did not measure or manipulate the perceived relevance of specific values, we can only infer that conservatives' attributions were motivated by pressure to arrive at value-consistent conclusions. Therefore, the goal of Study 2 was to explicitly test whether values-related reasoning motivates reversals of the ideo-attribution effect.

## Study 2

Study 2 was designed to test whether conflicts between conservative values and dispositional attributions explain the reversal of the ideo-attribution effect that we observed in Study 1. To test the role of values-related motivation, we adapted the description of the Haditha incident used in Study 1 and varied whether U.S. Marines or civilian workers for the Halliburton Corporation were the primary actors. We selected Halliburton workers as counterparts to the Marines because the workers were in Iraq on behalf of a multinational corporation rather than the U.S. government. We therefore suspected that participants would be less likely to perceive Halliburton workers as authority figures acting to protect and serve the United States. In Study 2, we also measured the degree to which conservative values (i.e., security values) were activated when thinking about the Marines' or Halliburton workers' behavior, and tested the effects of values-related reasoning on conservatives' and liberals' attributions for the Marines' or Halliburton workers' behavior. We predicted

that conservatives would make stronger situational attributions than liberals for the Marines' but not the Halliburton workers' behavior and that this effect would be mediated by the perceived relevance of security values.

## Method

**Participants and Procedure.** We recruited individuals who were sitting alone in public areas on a university campus to participate in the study. Ninety-two participants completed the study; demographic information was not collected. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of two descriptions of the events in Haditha that varied whether U.S. Marines or civilian workers for the Halliburton Corporation were described as the primary actors involved in the Haditha incident. In particular, participants in the Marine condition read the following description (adapted from Study 1):

On November 19, 2005, a 13-man Marine unit was on patrol in a residential part of Haditha, Iraq—a dangerous area where it is sometimes difficult to distinguish insurgents from Iraqi civilians. While on patrol, the unit was attacked by a roadside bomb. The explosion killed one Marine. The Marines suspected that five Iraqi men in the vicinity were involved and ordered them to lie on the ground. When the Iraqi men ran instead, the Marines shot and killed them. The Marines then swept through nearby houses, and killed 19 more people. An investigation indicated that only one of the 24 Iraqi casualties was armed, and among the dead were five women and four children.

In contrast, participants in the Halliburton condition read the following description:

Halliburton is a multinational corporation, based in Houston, Texas, that has been hired by the U.S. government to handle Iraq's oil and fuel industries. On November 19, 2005, a 13-man group of American civilians working for Halliburton was driving through a residential part of Haditha, Iraq—a dangerous area where it is sometimes difficult to distinguish insurgents from Iraqi civilians. The convoy was attacked by a roadside bomb. The explosion killed one worker. The remaining workers suspected that five Iraqi men in the vicinity were involved and ordered them to lie on the ground. When the Iraqi men ran instead, the Halliburton workers shot and killed them. The workers then entered nearby houses, and killed 19 more people. An investigation indicated that only one of the 24 casualties was armed, and among the dead were five women and four children.<sup>2</sup>

After reading the description, participants responded to questions that assessed the relevance of specific values to their judgments of the target's behavior, their attributions for the targets' behavior, and political orientation.

## Measures

**Values.** The degree to which participants perceived their values as relevant to their judgments was assessed with six items: "To what extent is [national security/respect for authority/upholding the social order/patriotism/supporting our troops/respect for tradition] relevant to your judgments about the causes of the events in Haditha, Iraq?" Participants responded on 5-point radio-button scales with the verbal anchors *not important* and *of greatest importance*. A principal components analysis with varimax rotation indicated that the values items loaded on one factor (eigenvalue = 3.58). Participants' scores for all six items were therefore averaged to yield an index of the perceived relevance of security values (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ).

**Attributions.** Participants' attributions for the targets' behavior were assessed with six items: (a) "To what extent was the [Marines'/workers'] behavior under their personal control?" (b) "To what extent do you blame the [Marines'/workers] for the events in Haditha, Iraq?" (c) "To what extent was the [Marines'/workers'] behavior due to something about what kind of people they are?" (d) "To what extent was the [Marines'/workers'] behavior due to aspects of the situation that they could not personally control?" (e) "To what extent was the [Marines'/workers'] behavior due to circumstances that got out of hand?" (f) "To what extent was the [Marines'/workers'] behavior due to other people?" Participants responded on 7-point radio-button scales with verbal anchors *not at all* and *very much*. Responses to the first three items were reverse-scored. As in Study 1, scores for all items were averaged to create an attribution scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .61$ ). Higher scores reflected stronger situational attributions.

**Political orientation.** Two measures assessed participants' political orientation. First, participants completed a face-valid, self-report item: "In general, how liberal or conservative are your political views?" Participants responded on a 7-point radio-button scale with the verbal anchors *very liberal* and *very conservative* and a midpoint labeled *uncertain/other*. Second, participants responded to four items that assessed how much they liked or disliked political groups (Conover & Feldman, 1981):<sup>3</sup> "How much do you tend to like or dislike (1) liberals (2) conservatives (3) Democrats, and (4) Republicans?" Participants responded on 7-point radio-button scales with the verbal anchors *very much like* and *very much dislike*. Participants' liking scores for liberals were subtracted from their liking scores for conservatives, and liking scores for Democrats were subtracted from liking scores for Republicans. The resulting differences were averaged to yield a like-dislike measure of political orientation.

**Table 2.** Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of Study 2 Variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Political orientation	0.00	0.94	1.00		
2. Condition	0.50	0.50	.16	1.00	
3. Security values	2.70	1.02	.38***	.07	1.00
4. Situational attributions	3.62	1.01	.09	.09	.29**

*N* = 92. Political orientation scores were the average of standardized self-report and standardized like–dislike measures; higher political orientation scores reflected stronger conservatism. Condition was coded as 0 (*Halliburton*) and 1 (*Marines*).

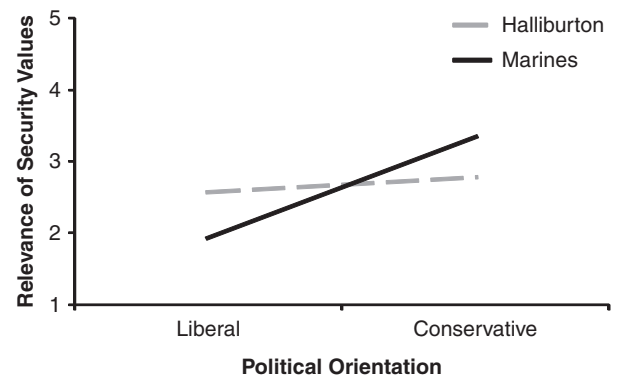
\*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

The self-report item was strongly correlated with the like–dislike measure of political orientation,  $r(89) = .74, p < .001$ . We therefore created an index of political orientation by standardizing scores for both measures and then averaging the standardized scores. Political orientation scores ranged from  $-1.65$  to  $2.24$ ; higher scores indicated greater conservatism.

## Results

**Security Values.** We predicted that conservatives would perceive national security values as more relevant than liberals in the Marine but not the Halliburton condition. A moderated regression analysis supported this prediction. Specifically, political orientation (centered), condition, and the interaction of political orientation and condition were simultaneously entered in a regression analysis to predict the perceived relevance of national security values (see Table 2 for the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of all study variables). Per Aiken and West's (1991) recommendations, we report unstandardized betas. Analyses indicated that neither political orientation,  $B = 0.11, SE = 0.15, t(84) = 0.73, p = 0.47$ , nor condition,  $B = -0.31, SE = 0.20, t(84) = -0.16, p = 0.88$ , predicted the perceived relevance of security values. As predicted, however, political orientation and condition interactively predicted the perceived relevance of national security values,  $B = 0.64, SE = 0.21, t(84) = 3.00, p < .01$  (see Figure 1). Analyses of simple slopes indicated that conservatives perceived national security values to be more relevant to the events than did liberals in the Marine condition,  $B = 0.75, SE = 0.15, t(84) = 4.86, p < .01$ . In contrast, liberals and conservatives did not differ in the perceived relevance of national security values in the Halliburton condition,  $B = 0.11, SE = 0.15, t(84) = 0.73, p = 0.47$ .

**Attributions.** We predicted that conservatives would make stronger situational attributions than liberals in the Marine condition (a context in which conservatives perceived national security values as particularly relevant) but not the Halliburton condition (a context in which conservatives did not perceive national security values as particularly relevant). A moderated regression analysis supported this prediction. Political orientation (centered), condition, and the interaction of

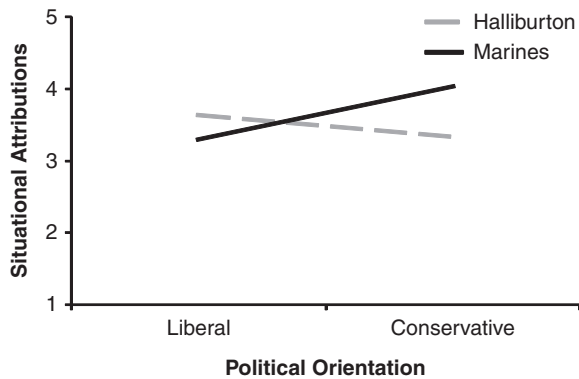


**Figure 1.** Political orientation and condition jointly influenced the perceived relevance of national security values, Study 2

political orientation and condition were simultaneously entered in a moderated regression analysis to predict situational attributions. Neither political orientation,  $B = -0.16, SE = 0.16, t(78) = -0.98, p = 0.33$ , nor condition,  $B = 0.18, SE = 0.22, t(78) = 0.80, p = 0.43$ , predicted situational attributions. As predicted, however, political orientation and condition interacted to predict situational attributions,  $B = 0.55, SE = 0.24, t(78) = 2.27, p < .05$  (see Figure 2). Analyses of simple slopes indicated that conservatives made stronger situational attributions than liberals for the Marines' behavior,  $B = 0.39, SE = 0.18, t(78) = 2.18, p < .05$ , but not the Halliburton workers' behavior,  $B = -0.16, SE = 0.16, t(78) = -0.98, p = 0.33$ .

**Mediational Analyses.** We predicted that the perceived relevance of security values would mediate the effect of political orientation on attributions for behavior in the Marine but not the Halliburton condition. We used a bootstrapping strategy to test this moderated mediation hypothesis (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007, Model 2). Analyses based on 3,000 bootstrap samples indicated that in the Marine condition, the bootstrap coefficient for the indirect effect of political orientation on attributions through the perceived relevance of national security values was 0.18, and the lower and upper bounds of the 95% bias corrected and accelerated confidence interval were 0.03 and 0.37,





**Figure 2.** Political orientation and condition jointly influenced attributions for events in Haditha, Study 2

respectively. Because the confidence interval did not contain 0, analyses indicated a significant indirect effect for national security values in the Marine condition. In other words, political conservatism was associated with stronger perceived relevance of national security values, and in turn, greater relevance of national security values was associated with stronger situational attributions for the Marines' behavior. A similar effect did not emerge in the Halliburton condition. The bootstrap coefficient for the indirect effect of political orientation on attributions through the perceived relevance of security values in the Halliburton condition was 0.03, and the lower and upper bounds of the 95% bias corrected and accelerated confidence interval were  $-0.05$  and  $0.16$ , respectively. Because the confidence interval included 0, the indirect effect of national security values in the Halliburton condition was not significant. In sum, moderated mediation analyses supported a motivated reasoning account; the perceived relevance of national security values mediated the effect of political orientation on attributions in the Marine but not the Halliburton condition.

### Discussion

Study 2 supported the prediction that the ideo-attribution effect and its reversals are the result of values-related motivated processes. Conservatives (a) perceived national security values to be more relevant than liberals in the Marine but not the Halliburton condition and (b) made stronger situational attributions than liberals in the Marine but not the Halliburton condition. Moreover, the perceived relevance of national security values mediated the effect of political orientation on situational attributions in the Marine but not the Halliburton condition. Study 2 also indicated that the reversal of the ideo-attribution effect was robust enough to be detected in a relatively small convenience sample rather than requiring a sample of extreme ideologues (the strategy used in Study 1).

Although the results of Studies 1 and 2 were consistent with a motivated reasoning account of the ideo-attribution effect, it is important to test the generalizability of these results beyond a single context. Moreover, although Study 2 demonstrated the mediational role of conservative values in explaining ideological differences in attributions, it did not test whether liberal values similarly play a role in explaining the ideo-attribution effect and its reversal. The goals of Study 3 were therefore to conceptually replicate the results of Studies 1 and 2 in a novel domain, and to test the motivational role of both liberal and conservative values in shaping people's attributions for alleged misconduct.

### Study 3

Study 3 investigated conservatives' and liberals' attributions for the behavior of police officers accused of wrongly killing a wild cougar that roamed the streets of a densely populated neighborhood in Chicago, Illinois (a real incident). We suspected that conservatives' value commitments to security and respect for authority would be salient and inconsistent with making dispositional attributions for the police officers' behavior. We also suspected that liberals' value commitments to environmental stewardship would be salient and unlikely to conflict with making dispositional attributions for the officers' behavior. Therefore, we predicted that conservatives would be motivated to make stronger situational attributions than liberals for the officers' behavior and that the relative salience of security and environmental values would mediate this effect.

### Method

**Participants.** Three hundred and ninety-seven participants completed two surveys as part of a larger study. Participants were drawn from an online panel maintained by Study Response, a nonprofit organization based at Syracuse University. The panel consists of individuals who have self-selected to participate in Internet surveys in exchange for the chance to win \$40 Amazon.com gift certificates. Our sample was restricted to U.S. residents and used quota sampling to ensure equal initial recruitment of males and females. Potential participants were selected from the panel and sent an e-mail including a "clickable" link inviting them to participate in the first survey. Those who completed the first survey were invited to complete the second survey several weeks later and were provided the same incentive to participate. Our sample ranged in age from 18 to 76 years old ( $M = 43.40$ ); 53.65% of our sample was male. Our sample was relatively diverse in terms of participants' education: 0.8% had achieved less than a high school degree, 21.9% had achieved a high school degree, 39.3% had achieved some college, and 37.5% had achieved a bachelor's degree or higher.

**Procedure.** In the first survey, participants reported their political orientation and demographic information (e.g., age, gender, and education level). In the second survey, participants read a brief paragraph describing real events that took place in a neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois:

On April 15, 2007, several residents of the Roscoe Village neighborhood in Chicago, Illinois contacted police with reports of a large cat in the area. Upon arrival at the scene, police officers discovered that a 150-pound male cougar (also known as a mountain lion or puma) was running loose in the densely populated neighborhood. Police officers responded by tracking and chasing the cougar until it was cornered in a small alley. The police officers then opened fire, firing approximately a dozen shots and killing the cougar. In the following days, many Chicago residents engaged in a heated debate about the police officers' actions. Police spokespersons claimed that the cougar posed a dangerous threat to public safety and could have injured or killed police officers, residents, or even children who played in the area. However, some citizens complained that the police officers reacted inappropriately and used undue force. Instead, these citizens argued that the police officers should have responded by bringing in trained animal-control officers who could have used a tranquilizer gun to safely capture the cougar (a protected species).

After reading the paragraph, participants reported whether they or members of their family had previous experience as emergency service personnel (e.g., as a police officer, firefighter, or emergency medical responder). Participants also reported their level of exposure to news about the cougar incident (from *not at all* to *very much*). Most important, participants responded to several questions designed to assess the perceived relevance of different values to judgments of the police officers' behavior and their attributions for the police officers' behavior.

### Measures

**Values.** The perceived relevance of participants' values was assessed with six items: "To what extent is [safety and security/law and order/respect for authority/support for emergency services/mercy/protection of nature] relevant to your judgments about the causes of the events in Roscoe Village?" Participants responded on 5-point radio-button scales with the verbal anchors *not important* and *of greatest importance*. A principal components analysis with varimax rotation indicated that the value items loaded on two factors. The first factor corresponded to values related to security (i.e., safety and security, law and order, respect for authority, and support for emergency services; eigenvalue = 2.61). The second factor corresponded to values related to environmental

stewardship (i.e., protection of nature, mercy; eigenvalue = 1.64). Participants' scores for the items associated with each factor were averaged to yield two scales measuring the perceived relevance of values related to security (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .81$ ) and the environment,  $r(395) = .65, p < .01$ .

**Attributions.** Participants' attributions for the police officers' behavior were assessed with five of the items used in Study 2: (a) "To what extent was the police officers' behavior under their personal control?" (b) "To what extent do you blame the police officers for the events in Roscoe Village?" (c) "To what extent was the police officers' behavior due to something about what kind of people they are?" (d) "To what extent was the police officers' behavior due to aspects of the situation that they could not personally control?" and (e) "To what extent was the police officers' behavior due to other people?"<sup>4</sup> Scores for all attribution items were averaged to create one attribution scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .61$ ). Higher scores reflected stronger situational attributions.

**Political orientation.** We assessed participants' political orientation using two measures. Participants first responded to one item assessing whether they identified as a liberal, conservative, or moderate/other. Participants who indicated that they were liberal or conservative subsequently responded to an item that assessed how strongly they identified as a liberal or conservative. Participants responded on a 3-point scale with the verbal anchors *slightly*, *somewhat*, and *very*. Participants who indicated they were moderate/other subsequently responded to an item that assessed whether they leaned closer to liberalism or conservatism. Participants responded on a 3-point scale with the verbal anchors *I am closer to being a liberal*, *I am close to neither*, and *I am closer to being a conservative*. Scores from these items were combined to create a single 7-point political orientation score; participants who reported leaning toward liberalism were treated as slight liberals, participants who leaned toward neither were treated as moderate/other, and participants who leaned toward conservatism were treated as slight conservatives. As in Study 2, participants also completed the like-dislike measure of political orientation. The self-report measure of political orientation was strongly correlated with the like-dislike measure,  $r(325) = .73, p < .001$ . We therefore created a single index of political orientation by standardizing scores for both the self-report and like-dislike measure and then averaging the standardized scores. Political orientation scores ranged from -1.98 to 1.97; higher scores reflected greater conservatism.

### Results

**Security Values, Environmental Values, and Attributions.** See Table 3 for the means, standard deviations, coding schemes for categorical variables, and intercorrelations of all study variables. We predicted that relative to liberals, conservatives would perceive security values as more relevant and environmental values as less relevant to judgments about the

**Table 3.** Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of Study 3 Variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	43.40	12.97	1.00								
2. Gender	0.46	0.50	-.13*	1.00							
3. Education	3.94	1.69	-.05	-.13**	1.00						
4. Personal emergency service	0.06	0.24	-.06	-.12*	-.02	1.00					
5. Family emergency service	0.10	0.30	-.14**	.03	-.03	.33***	1.00				
6. News exposure	1.49	0.96	-.18***	-.12*	.02	.07	.10*	1.00			
7. Political orientation	0.00	0.91	-.02	-.11*	-.08	.10†	.11†	.11†	1.00		
8. Security values	3.26	0.91	.06	-.07	-.12*	.07	-.02	.17**	.29***	1.00	
9. Environmental values	3.22	1.12	.03	.10†	-.06	-.01	-.08	.13*	-.27***	.09†	1.00
10. Situational attributions	2.68	0.80	-.01	-.10*	.00	-.03	-.05	.04	.28***	.22***	-.45***

Note.  $N = 397$ . Gender was coded 0 (*male*) and 1 (*female*). Participants reported their education as: (a) less than high school, (b) high school degree, (c) some college, (d) associates degree, (e) 4-year college degree, (f) some graduate school, (g) master's degree, and (h) degree beyond master's. Personal and family experience as service personnel were coded 0 (*no experience*) and 1 (*experience*).  
 † $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 4.** Regression Coefficients for Predictors of the Perceived Relevance of Security Values, the Perceived Relevance of Environmental Values, and Situational Attributions, Study 3

	Security values			Environmental values			Situational attributions		
	B	SE	t	B	SE	t	B	SE	t
Age	0.01	0.00	1.312	0.00	0.00	0.73	-0.00	0.00	-0.46
Gender	-0.06	0.10	-0.57	0.23†	0.12	1.90	-0.11	0.09	-1.15
Education	-0.06*	0.03	-1.96	-0.04	0.04	-1.14	0.01	0.03	0.52
Personal service	0.30	0.20	1.53	0.11	0.25	0.45	-0.11	0.19	-0.58
Family service	-0.28	0.17	-1.67	-0.29	0.21	-1.40	-0.18	0.16	-1.14
News exposure	0.14**	0.05	2.69	0.16*	0.07	2.38	0.04	0.05	0.72
Political orientation	0.26**	0.05	4.90	-0.30**	0.07	-4.58	0.23**	0.05	4.72

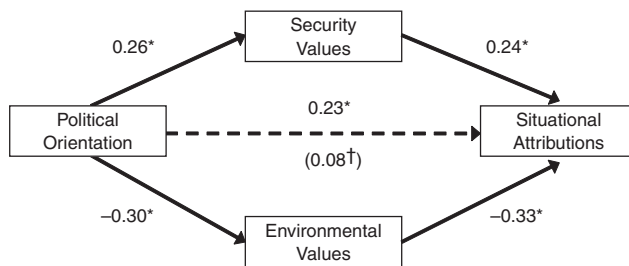
† $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

cougar incident and that conservatives would make stronger situational attributions for the police officers' behavior. Regression analyses supported these predictions. Control variables (i.e., age, gender, education level, personal and family experience as an emergency responder, and news exposure related to this incident) and centered political orientation were simultaneously entered into three separate regression equations to predict the perceived relevance of security values, environmental values, and situational attributions for the police officers' behavior. As can be seen in Table 4, increased conservatism was associated with increased perceptions that security values were relevant in the cougar situation and decreased perceptions that environmental values were relevant. Moreover, increased conservatism was associated with stronger situational attributions.

**Mediational Analyses.** We predicted that the perceived relevance of security and environmental values would mediate the effect of political orientation on attributions for the police officers' behavior. To test this prediction, we used Preacher and Hayes's (2008) bootstrapping method for testing the

direct and indirect effects of multiple mediators. Results are based on 3,000 bootstrap samples. As can be seen in Figure 3, conservatives perceived security values to be more salient to the cougar incident than did liberals, and in turn, the increased salience of security values predicted stronger situational attributions for the police officers' behavior. The bootstrap coefficient for the indirect path of political orientation on situational attributions through the perceived relevance of security values was 0.06, and the lower and upper bounds of the 95% bias corrected and accelerated confidence interval were 0.03 and 0.11, respectively. Because the confidence interval did not include 0, we can conclude that the perceived relevance of security values significantly mediated the relation of political orientation and attributions for the cougar incident.

As can also be seen in Figure 3, conservatives (relative to liberals) perceived environmental values to be less salient to the cougar incident, and in turn, the decreased salience of environmental values predicted stronger situational attributions for the police officers' behavior. The bootstrap coefficient for the indirect path of political orientation on situational



**Figure 3.** The mediational role of security and environmental values in the effect of political orientation on attributions for the police officers' behavior, Study 3

All regression equations included control variables: age, gender, education level, personal and family experience as an emergency responder, and news exposure related to the cougar incident.

† $p = .11$  ( $B$  controlling simultaneously for the mediating effects of security and environmental values). \* $p < .05$ .

attributions through the perceived relevance of environmental values was 0.10, and the lower and upper bounds of the 95% bias corrected and accelerated confidence interval were 0.06 and 0.16, respectively. Because the confidence interval did not include 0, the perceived relevance of environmental values significantly mediated the relation of political orientation and attributions.

Finally, security values and environmental values fully mediated the relation of political orientation and situational attributions when considered together. The bootstrap coefficient for the combined indirect effect of security and environmental values was 0.16, and the lower and upper bounds of the 95% bias corrected and accelerated confidence interval were 0.11 and 0.23, respectively. Because the confidence interval did not include 0, we can conclude that the combined effect of security and environmental values fully mediated the relation of political orientation and attributions. As seen in Figure 3, political orientation no longer predicted attributions for the police officers' behavior after controlling for the combined effects of security and environmental values.

## Discussion

Study 3 replicated the reversal of the ideo-attribution effect observed in Studies 1 and 2 in a novel domain. Study 3 also supported the motivated reasoning hypothesis that conservatives' and liberals' values both play mediational roles in the effects of political orientation on attributions for behavior. More specifically, conservatives perceived security values to be more relevant and environmental values to be less relevant than did liberals, and they made stronger situational attributions than liberals for the police officers' behavior. Conversely, liberals perceived environmental values to be more relevant and security values to be less relevant than did conservatives, and they made weaker situational attributions than conservatives for the police officers' behavior. Taken

together, the perceived relevance of both security and environmental values fully mediated the effects of political orientation on attributions for the police officers' behavior. In summary, Study 3 provided additional support for the notion that values-related reasoning motivates the ideo-attribution effect. When conservative values conflict with making dispositional attributions, conservatives are more likely to make situational explanations for others' behavior. Conversely, when liberal values are more consistent with making dispositional than situational attributions for others' behavior, liberals are more likely to make dispositional explanations for others' behavior.

## General Discussion

Three studies demonstrated that although people with different political orientations bring dissimilar value commitments to the table, their values similarly motivate them to arrive at desired attributional conclusions. Individuals—whether liberal or conservative—made stronger situational attributions when their values were inconsistent with making dispositional attributions for behavior. In Studies 1 and 2, conservatives made stronger situational attributions than did liberals for Marines accused of wrongly killing Iraqi civilians (a reversal of the ideo-attribution effect) because conservatives' commitment to security values were inconsistent with blaming the Marines for their behavior. Furthermore, liberals and conservatives did not differ in their attributions when Halliburton workers were implicated in the deaths of Iraqi civilians (a context that did not prime conservatives' commitment to national security values). In a similar vein, Study 3 revealed that conservatives made stronger situational attributions than did liberals when judging the behavior of police officers who shot and killed a wild cougar running loose in a Chicago neighborhood. Moreover, variance in the perceived relevance of security and conservation values fully mediated the effects of ideological orientation on attributions for the officers' behavior. In summary, people's causal explanations were shaped by whether their values were consistent or inconsistent with dispositional or situational attributions.

These findings shed new light on (a) when people might be motivated to consider situational causes for behavior, in general, and (b) the cognitive and motivational underpinnings that underlie the robust ideological differences in attributional conclusions, in particular. These results indicate that the same psychological process gives rise to both the ideo-attribution effect and reversals of the ideo-attribution effect. When salient value commitments conflict with making dispositional attributions, people—liberals and conservatives alike—are motivated to consider situational information when explaining others' behavior.

These results are a reminder of the social psychological truism that context matters. Previously, researchers had primarily studied the ideo-attribution effect in contexts in which

conservatives' concerns with self-reliance and liberals' concerns with humanitarianism were likely to be salient (e.g., when explaining poverty and crime). Therefore, one could have concluded that conservatives consistently make dispositional attributions for behavior whereas liberals make attributions that are more complex and contextually determined. Indeed, recent research on political orientation suggests that conservatives are more cognitively rigid, less tolerant of ambiguity, and less cognitively complex than their liberal counterparts (see Jost et al., 2003, for a review). The current research, however, provides evidence that is inconsistent with the notion that the ideo-attribution effect is a consequence of ideological differences in cognitive flexibility versus rigidity. Specifically, the current work demonstrates that conservatives and liberals are each capable of engaging in flexible attributional processing when sufficiently motivated to do so. Under the right circumstances, conservatives are motivated to consider situational explanations for behavior. Similarly, under the right conditions, liberals are motivated to avoid considering situational attributions for behavior. Whether liberals or conservatives make dispositional or situational attributions depends on whether circumstances (and the values or other motivations those circumstances make salient) provide the impetus to engage in easy versus more effortful forms of reasoning.

The current research also focuses on a specific motivational mechanism, the role of values, in shaping attributional conclusions. By measuring, manipulating, and empirically testing the role of values, the current research provides important evidence that values-related reasoning acts as a motivational force that shapes not only ideological differences in attributions, but attributions more generally. A particular strength of the current research is that it moves beyond the general prediction that motivation matters and instead documents a specific motivational force that shapes important real-world cleavages in people's attributional tendencies. Future research should build on this strength by exploring other motivational factors that could also influence attributions for behavior. For example, conservatives and liberals often express allegiance to specific politicians or political parties. Thus, in-group biases that are born of political allegiances could motivate making dispositional attributions for the misdeeds of political opponents and situational attributions for the misdeeds of political allies (cf. Vonk & Konst, 1998). In summary, the current research suggests that values provide an important source of motivation that shapes attributional reasoning; future research should continue to explore the specific motivational factors that influence people's attributions for events in the world around them.

Although the current research provides important evidence that liberals' and conservatives' attributions are shaped by values-related motivational processes, more research is necessary to establish whether it requires effort for conservatives to make situational rather than dispositional

attributions. Prior research has demonstrated that making situational attributions requires more cognitive effort than making dispositional attributions in Western cultural contexts (Gilbert et al., 1988; Gilbert & Malone, 1995; cf. Krull, 1993) and that the ideo-attribution effect disappears when participants make judgments under high cognitive load (Skitka et al., 2002, Study 5). Nonetheless, one goal of future research should be to verify whether cognitive load similarly interferes with the processes that lead to reversals of the ideo-attribution effect. For example, future research could explore whether conservatives maintain their situational attributions for the Marines' behavior in Haditha, the police officers' actions in Chicago, or other authorities' misdeeds when placed under cognitive load.

The finding that people adjust their attributions to ensure consistency with salient value commitments has implications that extend beyond the contexts studied here. Values-related reasoning could also motivate individuals to switch from other lower effort cognitive strategies to more effortful cognitive strategies based on which strategy is more consistent with their preferred conclusions. For example, people sometimes avoid using information about the base rates of different events because considering such information violates values that they hold dear. Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, and Lerner (2000, Studies 3 and 4) discovered that people believed that using crime-related base rates to determine the insurance prices for different neighborhoods was acceptable when the experimenter did not mention the correlation between a neighborhood's actuarial risk and racial composition. However, when connections between actuarial risk and racial composition were salient, people (and especially liberals, for whom egalitarianism is a particularly important value) vehemently objected to the use of base rate information when setting insurance prices. In a similar vein, Christian fundamentalists were perfectly willing to entertain counterfactuals when their religious values were not at stake but vehemently rejected these counterfactuals when they implicitly challenged a principle of faith (Tetlock et al., 2000, Study 5). In sum, there are reasons to believe that people's value commitments influence the information that people consider in a variety of judgment domains. Thus, future research could explore the ways that value commitments shape a variety of other cognitive biases, heuristics, and judgments.

In conclusion, we now know more than we did about the ways that people—whether liberal or conservative—understand their social worlds. Although the ideo-attribution effect is robust, the current research suggests that liberals and conservatives do not inevitably see others' behavior as dispositionally or situationally caused. Rather, conservatives and liberals make dispositional attributions when their values are consistent with doing so but make situational attributions when their values provide the appropriate motivation. People's attributions are colored by their motivation to arrive

at value-consistent conclusions—something that is equally true for those on both the political left and the right.

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### Notes

1. These resonances are the result of research that relies on college student samples drawn from the United States or from a narrow band of time (late 20th century), or both. Other possible resonances include libertarianism (strong needs for autonomy fused with support for “liberalism” on social issues and “conservatism” on economic issues) and coercive egalitarianism (envy and resentment of the wealthy fused with support for authoritarian means of redistributing wealth).
2. We pilot-tested the descriptions to ensure that they were similar across a number of variables. Participants ( $N = 42$ ) read one of the two descriptions and then responded to four questions: (a) “How easy or difficult was it to read and understand this newspaper article?” (b) “How interesting was this newspaper article?” (c) “How much do you believe that the events described in this news story actually occurred?” and (d) “How likely is it that the events described in the news story actually occurred?” Participants responded to the first item using a 5-point radio-button scale with the verbal anchors *very difficult* and *very easy*, and responded to the last three items using 5-point radio-button scales with the verbal anchors *not at all* and *very much*. Responses to the last two items were averaged to form an index of believability,  $r(41) = .66, p < .01$ . A series of ANOVAs indicated that participants perceived the Marine and Halliburton descriptions as equally easy to understand ( $M = 4.90, SD = 0.44$  vs.  $M = 4.67, SD = 0.73$ , respectively),  $F(1, 40) = 1.65, p = .21$ ; equally interesting ( $M = 4.05, SD = 0.81$  vs.  $M = 3.81, SD = 0.87$ , respectively),  $F(1, 40) < 1$ ; and equally believable ( $M = 3.93, SD = 0.75$  vs.  $M = 4.00, SD = 0.97$ , respectively),  $F(1, 40) < 1$ .
3. Although substantial evidence indicates that a single self-report measure is a valid measure of political orientation, we also included a likes–dislikes measure of political orientation to enhance measurement accuracy. People who exhibit difficulty in self-reporting their political orientation still express attraction or repulsion to political groups (i.e., people typically know whether they like or dislike Democrats, Republicans, liberals, and

conservatives). Accordingly, people often use a likability heuristic to guide their attitudes and beliefs (Conover & Feldman, 1981; Sniderman & Tetlock, 1986).

4. The item “To what extent was the police officers’ behavior due to circumstances that got out of hand?” was not included because it decreased scale reliability. The pattern of results did not differ when this item was included.

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