

# Ideology and the Limits of Self-Interest: System Justification Motivation and Conservative Advantages in Mass Politics

John T. Jost, Melanie Langer,  
and Vivienne Badaan  
New York University

Flávio Azevedo  
University of Cologne

Edgardo Etchezahar and  
Joaquin Ungaretti  
University of Buenos Aires

Erin P. Hennes  
Purdue University

It is commonly assumed that political attitudes are driven by self-interest and that poor people heavily favor policies aimed at redistributing wealth. This assumption fails to explain the popularity of economic conservatism and the degree of support for the capitalist system. Such outcomes are typically explained by the suggestion that most poor people believe they will become rich one day. In a representative sample of low-income Americans, we observed that less than one-fourth were optimistic about their economic prospects. Those respondents who believed that they would become rich one day were no more likely to endorse the legitimacy of the system and no more supportive of conservative ideology or the Republican Party, compared to those who did not believe they would become rich. From a system justification perspective, we propose that people are motivated to defend the social systems on which they depend, and this confers a psychological advantage to conservative ideology. Providing ideological support for the status quo serves epistemic motives to reduce uncertainty, existential motives to reduce threat, and relational motives to share reality with members of mainstream society. We summarize evidence from the United States, Argentina, Lebanon, and other countries bearing on these propositions—including a survey administered shortly before the 2016 U.S. Presidential election—and discuss political implications of system justification motivation.

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John T. Jost, Melanie Langer, and Vivienne Badaan, Department of Psychology, New York University; Flávio Azevedo, Center for Comparative Politics, University of Cologne; Edgardo Etchezahar and Joaquin Ungaretti, Interdisciplinary Center of Investigations in Mathematical and Experimental Psychology (CIIPME), University of Buenos Aires; Erin P. Hennes, Department of Psychological Sciences, Purdue University.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to John T. Jost, Department of Psychology, New York University, 6 Washington Place, Room 578, New York, NY 10003-6634. E-mail: [john.jost@nyu.edu](mailto:john.jost@nyu.edu)

***What is the significance of this article for the general public?***

It is commonly assumed that support for economically conservative policies is motivated by self-interest, either because an individual is already wealthy or expects to become so in the future. The research reviewed here on system justification theory suggests a different explanation. We propose that conservative ideology is often more attractive than progressive ideology because people are motivated to defend, bolster, and justify aspects of the societal status quo as something that is familiar and known. Although conservatism may address psychological needs for certainty, security, and shared reality with like-minded others, it can also lead people to downplay injustices and other social problems as they seek to maintain valued traditions.

**Keywords:** political ideology, liberalism, conservatism, economic inequality, system justification

“I understand why the Republicans get 1 percent of the vote—the richest 1 percent. That other 49% someone will have to explain to me . . .”

(Bill Maher, 2011, *Real Time with Bill Maher*)

The theory of rational choice has cast an especially long shadow over the social sciences, and the generally sensible proposition that people behave in a manner that is congruent with self-interest has often crowded out other types of explanation in psychology, politics, and related disciplines (e.g., Green & Shapiro, 1994). It is often taken for granted, for instance, that support for the societal status quo comes more or less exclusively from those who benefit in material terms from its maintenance, while those who are disadvantaged by current conditions are revolutionaries-in-waiting. Thus, one of the most influential political sociologists of the 20th century, Seymour Lipset (1960), wrote that, “Conservatism is especially vulnerable in a political democracy since, as Abraham Lincoln said, there are always more poor people than well-to-do ones, and promises to redistribute wealth are difficult to rebut” (p. 128).

A great many theorists before and after Lipset have made precisely the same assumption. As Bertrand Russell (1938) pointed out, even Karl Marx—the preeminent theorist of hegemonic ideology—concurred with orthodox economists that “economic interest could be taken as the fundamental motive in the social sciences” (p. 3). Marx did, after all, appeal famously to rational self-interest when he implored the working classes to join in international struggle on the grounds that they had “nothing to lose but their chains.” The authors of *The American Voter*, too, assumed that public opinion was best

understood in terms of the expression of “primitive self-interest” (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960, p. 205), and evolutionary theorists today rely very heavily upon the same assumption (Pinsof & Haselton, 2016; Weeden & Kurzban, 2017).

Lincoln, Marx, Lipset, and many others are quite right that throughout history the poor have vastly outnumbered the rich. Nevertheless, economic inequality persists in capitalist democracies around the world (Piketty, 2015), and there is often considerable ideological support for its maintenance (Bénabou, 2008; Wisman & Smith, 2011). Conservative and right-wing political parties and ideologies not only survive but continue to thrive throughout Europe and around the world (e.g., Angelos, 2017; Wigmore, 2015).

In the United States, self-identified conservatives outnumbered liberals for most of the 20th century (Bishop, 2005). According to the Gallup polling organization, over the past 25 years there have been one and a half conservatives for every liberal (Saad, 2015), and there have been at least two economic conservatives for every economic liberal (Jones, 2015). According to Bénabou (2008), a majority of citizens not only from the United States and Canada but also from the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, Poland, Italy, Mexico, Brazil, China, India, South Korea, Philippines, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Kenya agree that, “The free enterprise system and free market economy is the best system on which to base the future of the world” (p. 323).

Such strong support for the capitalist system is somewhat surprising given how sharply in-

come inequality has risen over the past several decades. Economists agree that by nearly every metric the rich in the United States and many other industrialized nations have grown richer, while the middle and working classes have not (e.g., [Economic Policy Institute, 2012](#); [Piketty, 2015](#); [Stiglitz, 2015](#)). Between 1979 and 2012, the earnings of the top 0.1% quadrupled in the United States, and the earnings of the top 1% more than doubled, while the earnings of the remainder of the population either remained stagnant or declined in real terms ([Bernstein, 2016](#)).

Poverty continues to afflict the lives of millions (e.g., [Corning, 2011](#)). And yet genuine efforts to redistribute wealth have been few and far between, and they have not been especially difficult to defeat, often because poor people are scarcely more likely than the wealthy to support redistributive policies—such as welfare, socialized medicine, and progressive forms of taxation—that would benefit them in material terms ([Ashok, Kuziemko, & Washington, 2015](#); [Gilens, 1999](#); [Graetz & Shapiro, 2005](#); [Kelly & Enns, 2010](#); [Luttig, 2013](#)).

Most citizens appear to reject progressive alternatives to the economic status quo. In 2016, the Democratic-Socialist Bernie Sanders received approximately 13 million votes during the Democratic primary, which was a good showing by historical standards. Nevertheless, Sanders lost the nomination to Hillary Clinton, who distanced herself from Sanders' economic views throughout the campaign. The billionaire real-estate mogul Donald Trump received 14 million votes in the Republican primary and 62 million votes in the general election—nearly five times as many as Sanders received during the primary campaign.

For decades Democratic strategists have come to depend upon liberal, self-interested voting on the part of ethnic minorities and members of disadvantaged groups to deliver a stable, if not permanent, electoral majority for the Democratic Party ([Judis & Teixeira, 2004](#); [Phillips, 2016](#); [Teixeira, 2012](#)). Political analysts often claim that demographic changes will spell the end of conservative politics over the next few decades—as European Americans lose their status as a numerical majority group in the United States ([Colby & Ortman, 2015](#); [Newport, 2013](#)).

In the final months of the 2016 U.S. Presidential campaign, nearly everyone expected Hillary Rodham Clinton to win. Indeed, she led in almost every national poll leading up to the election, and many pundits and advisors assumed that she would eventually win over the working class (see [Cohn, 2016](#)). Fatefully, these expectations proved to be overly optimistic, and Donald Trump was elected President after taking 67% of the White working-class vote ([Tyson & Maniam, 2016](#)).<sup>1</sup> As Garrison Keillor put it, “The disaffected White blue-collar workers elected a Fifth Avenue tycoon to rescue them from the elitists.” But why?

In this article, we describe previously published and unpublished pieces of evidence addressing social psychological aspects of working-class conservatism and related phenomena. In so doing, we advance a motivational analysis of political ideology and system justification that helps to explain why people who are disadvantaged by the societal status quo may nevertheless endorse its legitimacy. In many cases we find that members of disadvantaged groups hold attitudes about the social and economic system that are quite similar to those held by members of more advantaged groups. In this respect, ideology sometimes trumps self-interest. We conclude that conservative beliefs and ideologies in favor of the status quo possess certain psychological advantages over liberal or progressive alternatives to the status quo, but not for the reasons that are commonly assumed.

### **Do Poor People Support the System Because They Believe They Will Become Rich One Day?**

Commentators on the political left and right routinely float the notion that members of the working class keep the faith, especially in the

<sup>1</sup> We do not mean to oversimplify the role of economic factors in the 2016 election or to suggest that social class was the only or even the primary driver of support for Donald Trump. As others have pointed out, Trump's supporters appear to have been slightly higher than average in terms of income ([Carnes & Lupu, 2017](#)). At the same time, 35% of Trump's 63 million votes came from people who earned less than \$50,000/year, which means that 22 million people in this income group voted for him. In any case, we discuss a number of variables other than social class that appear to have influenced the election outcome in the Applications section at the end of this article.

United States, that they will one day become wealthy—and that this explains their support for conservative economic policies. “None of us is really poor,” as David Brooks put it, “we’re just pre-rich.”

Bill Maher devoted several minutes of his comedy special *Live from D.C.* to the popular ideological trope that the United States is comprised not of “Have’s” and “Have-Not’s” but rather “Haves” and “Soon-to-Have’s.” To illustrate the sentiment, he quoted from Republican presidential candidate Marco Rubio’s stump speech: “When Americans drive through a wealthy neighborhood, they’re not jealous. They say, ‘Congratulations, we’ll be joining you soon!’” And in a penetrating analysis of the conservative effort to repeal estate taxes, Graetz and Shapiro (2005) cite “wishful thinking” as one reason for the success of those efforts: “large numbers of Americans are unrealistically optimistic about their . . . economic circumstances. They underestimate the levels of inequality, overestimate their own wealth compared to others, and exaggerate their likelihood of moving up significantly and getting rich” (p. 119).

In our own research, we have seen little evidence that the majority of poor people believe that they will end up rich. In a Knowledge Networks survey of low-income Americans whose family incomes were less than \$30,000/year, we observed that most respondents were fairly pessimistic (or perhaps realistic) about their own financial futures. Specifically, when asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: “I believe that one day I may become rich,” only 24.2% of the respondents agreed. Nearly half (47.3%) disagreed with the statement, and an additional 28.6% were unsure (Rankin, Jost, & Wakslak, 2009). These data are based on a fairly small (but representative) sample of low-income respondents, so they should be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, they do provide some basis for questioning the widespread assumption that the expectation of future wealth accounts for the popularity of economically conservative beliefs, opinions, and values.

Moreover, there were very few differences between these three groups of respondents in terms of their social and political attitudes (see Table 1). Importantly, those respondents who believed that they would become rich one day

Table 1  
*Means (and Standard Deviations) of System Justification and Other Variables as a Function of Whether Participants Believed That They Would Become Rich One Day*

Variable	“I believe that one day I may become rich”		
	Disagree ( <i>n</i> = 86)	Uncertain ( <i>n</i> = 49–52)	Agree ( <i>n</i> = 43–44)
System justification (1–9)	4.62 (1.24)	4.63 (1.04)	4.58 (1.66)
Liberal-conservative (1–7)	4.38 (2.04)	4.43 (1.75)	4.00 (2.09)
Republican partisanship (1–7)	3.13 (2.16)	3.79 (2.11)	3.16 (2.17)
Religiosity (1–7)	4.53 (2.05)	4.96 (1.51)	4.66 (2.06)
Purpose in Life (1–7)	5.26 (1.21)	5.13 (1.04)	5.49 (1.26)
<i>Sense of mastery</i> (1–7)	<i>5.05<sup>a</sup> (1.23)</i>	<i>5.02<sup>a</sup> (1.15)</i>	<i>5.99<sup>b</sup> (.89)</i>
Sense of security (1–7)	4.12 (1.36)	4.39 (1.35)	4.64 (1.37)
Life satisfaction (1–7)	4.63 (1.58)	4.94 (1.43)	5.14 (1.23)
<i>Happiness</i> (1–7)	<i>4.53<sup>a</sup> (1.67)</i>	<i>4.54<sup>a</sup> (1.65)</i>	<i>5.56<sup>b</sup> (1.20)</i>
Frustration (1–7)	3.84 (1.94)	3.58 (1.77)	3.52 (1.76)
Anger (1–7)	2.92 (1.79)	3.14 (1.65)	2.98 (1.72)
Anxiety (1–7)	3.36 (1.78)	3.63 (1.74)	3.55 (1.99)
Cognitive dissonance (1–7)	3.40 (1.62)	3.41 (1.28)	3.21 (1.52)
<i>Performance self-esteem</i> (1–5)	<i>3.39<sup>a</sup> (.85)</i>	<i>3.32<sup>a</sup> (.83)</i>	<i>3.92<sup>b</sup> (.87)</i>
Social self-esteem (1–5)	4.01 (.84)	3.94 (.96)	4.14 (.70)

*Note.* Variables in which group means differed statistically according to Tukey post hoc tests of multiple comparison ( $p < .001$ ) are indicated in italics,  $F(2, 172) > 7$ ,  $p < .001$ . Unshared superscripts (within rows) indicate significant mean differences. There were no differences among groups for any of the other variables. For a full description of study details, see Rankin, Jost, and Wakslak (2009).

were not more likely to endorse the legitimacy of the American social system (as measured on the basis of Kay and Jost's [2003] general system justification scale), nor did they identify themselves as any more conservative or more supportive of the Republican Party, in comparison with those respondents who doubted that they would become rich. Financial optimism about one's own personal situation was unrelated to religiosity, a sense of security, purpose in life, and self-reported emotion. We observed only a few statistically significant differences. Individuals who believed that they would become rich one day reported being happier, having a greater sense of mastery, and having higher performance self-esteem than those who did not believe that they would become rich (Rankin et al., 2009).

We are by no means suggesting that individual and group self-interest are unrelated to political attitudes. On the contrary, we agree that there is typically a significant, albeit fairly modest, effect of self-interest on ideological preferences (Weeden & Kurzban, 2017; see also Bawn, 1999). At the same time, there are many situations in which political ideology seems to be underdetermined by considerations of self-interest (e.g., Hoffarth & Jost, *in press*), and in these situations a social psychological account may be useful (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009, 2013). As Railton (2000/2003) pointed out, "Ideological analysis is not to be confused with the sort of cynicism that attributes everything to self-interest" (p. 359).

In this article, we focus on the role of psychological needs pertaining to *system justification motivation*—which we define as the (often nonconscious) tendency to defend, bolster, and justify aspects of the societal status quo (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004)—and its implications for political ideology.

### Political Conservatism and System Justification

There is by now a great deal of evidence indicating that people who support politically conservative leaders, parties, policies, and opinions are more likely than others to believe that the "free market" system is not only efficient but just—and that the economic outcomes of the rich and poor are fair and deserved, having emanated from practices that are justified in

purely meritocratic terms (Bartels, 2008; Bénabou & Tirole, 2006; Day & Fiske, 2017; Goode, Keefer, & Molina, 2014; Jost, Blount, Pfeffer, & Hunyady, 2003; McCoy & Major, 2007; Monteith, Burns, Rupp, & Mihalec-Adkins, 2016). Conservatives, in other words, exhibit stronger tendencies to engage in *economic system justification*, in comparison with liberals and moderates. Conservatives are more likely to believe, for instance, that "Economic positions are legitimate reflections of people's achievements," "Social class differences reflect differences in the natural order of things," and "Most people who don't get ahead in our society should not blame the system; they have only themselves to blame" (Hennes, Nam, Stern, & Jost, 2012; Jost & Thompson, 2000). Political conservatism is also correlated with *general system justification*, including convictions that: "In general, the American system operates as it should," and "Most policies serve the greater good" (Everett, 2013; Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008; Kay & Jost, 2003).

To illustrate the empirical consistency and robustness of the connection between political conservatism and system justification, we provide data obtained from 26 samples of introductory psychology students at New York University between the years of 2004 and 2016 (see also Hennes, 2015). Over 10,000 students from these years reported their political orientation on a scale ranging from  $-5$  (*Extremely Liberal*) to  $5$  (*Extremely Conservative*); their demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 2. In 24 of the 26 samples, participants also completed Jost and Thompson's (2000) 17-item economic system justification scale ( $N = 9,761$ ), and in 23 samples, they completed Kay and Jost's (2003) 8-item general system justification scale ( $N = 9,487$ ). Correlational results, which are summarized in Table 3, supported the hypothesis that political conservatism would be positively and significantly associated with system justification. With respect to economic system justification, correlations ranged from .322 to .529 (weighted average  $r = .429$ ), and with respect to general system justification, correlations ranged from .174 to .461 (weighted average  $r = .335$ ).

Shortly before the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, we administered measures of ideology and system justification to a nationally representative sample of 1,500 Americans (see



Table 2  
*Demographic Characteristics of University Students Completing Measures of Ideological Self-Placement and System Justification (2004–2016)*

Demographic characteristics	Number	Percentage
Sex		
Male	3,358	32.5%
Female	6,971	67.5%
No response/missing	381	
Race/Ethnicity		
American Indian/Alaskan Native	35	.3%
Asian	2,967	29.6%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	61	.6%
Black/African American	499	5.0%
White/Caucasian	5,410	54.0%
More than one race	1,044	10.4%
No response/missing	694	
Hispanic/Latino		
Hispanic/Latino	1,240	12.4%
Not Hispanic/Latino	8,773	87.6%
No response/missing	697	
Born		
Born in the United States	8,087	78.5%
Born outside of the United States	2,219	21.5%
No response/missing	404	
Total <i>N</i> = 10,710		

*Note.* Because of an administrative error, no demographic data are available for the fall 2004 semester; this omission accounts for 338 of the missing values.

Azevedo, Jost, & Rothmund, in press). In accordance with past findings (Cichocka & Jost, 2014; Everett, 2013; Hennes et al., 2012; Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008; Jost et al., 2014), including results summarized in Table 3, we observed that respondents who identified themselves as right-wing (vs. left-wing), more socially and economically conservative (vs. liberal), more aligned with the Republican (vs. Democratic) Party, and more (vs. less) religious scored higher on general and economic system justification (see Table 4). Both forms of system justification were associated with retrospective reports of having voted for Republican presidential candidates in 2008 and 2012 and with a preference for Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton in 2016, and economic system justification was strongly associated with these political outcomes. Consistent with a self-interest perspective, income and education were positively, albeit modestly, correlated with general and economic system justification. Importantly, economic system justification was strongly associated with intentions to vote for Trump over Clinton at all levels of income and education.

The connection between political conservatism and system justification may be especially pronounced in the United States, where faith in the American Dream leads people to believe that the economic system is a truly meritocratic one and that hard work and ingenuity will be rewarded with success (e.g., Bénabou & Tirole, 2006; Bloom & Hobby, 2009; Hochschild, 1995; McCoy & Major, 2007). At the same time, these general patterns do not seem to be unique to the United States. Studies conducted in such varied contexts as Sweden, Italy, Poland, and Turkey find that general and economic system justification are associated with right-wing (vs. left-wing) political orientation (Cichocka & Jost, 2014; Dirilen-Gumus, 2011; Nilsson & Jost, 2017; Pacilli, Taurino, Jost, & van der Toorn, 2011).

In April of 2016, we surveyed a nationally representative sample of 500 adults living in Lebanon—an Arab country with rampant social and economic inequality and a deeply entrenched hierarchical political system based on religious sects (Badaan & Jost, 2017). We observed that, as in the United States and other

Table 3  
*Correlations (and Sample Sizes) Between Ideological Self-Placement (Political Conservatism) and System Justification (2004–2016)*

Semester and year	Economic system justification	General system justification
Spring 2004	.414 (338)	N/A
Fall 2004	.413 (502)	N/A
Spring 2005	.322 (382)	N/A
Fall 2005	.422 (419)	.461 (419)
Spring 2006	.472 (407)	.429 (407)
Fall 2006	.360 (490)	.419 (490)
Spring 2007	.426 (376)	.393 (376)
Fall 2007	.399 (513)	.455 (513)
Spring 2008	.431 (435)	.413 (435)
Fall 2008	.427 (489)	.334 (489)
Spring 2009	.385 (204)	.379 (204)
Fall 2009	N/A	.232 (501)
Spring 2010	N/A	.317 (446)
Fall 2010	.449 (470)	.377 (470)
Spring 2011	.408 (443)	.216 (443)
Fall 2011	.486 (478)	.334 (478)
Spring 2012	.456 (405)	.295 (406)
Fall 2012	.495 (482)	.288 (482)
Spring 2013	.398 (376)	.174 (376)
Fall 2013	.416 (395)	.258 (395)
Spring 2014	.447 (401)	.248 (401)
Fall 2014	.438 (297)	.366 (297)
Spring 2015	.424 (362)	.281 (361)
Fall 2015	.465 (431)	.313 (432)
Spring 2016	.401 (369)	.356 (369)
Fall 2016	.529 (297)	.380 (297)
Range	.322–.529	.174–.461
Unweighted average	.426	.338
Weighted average	.429	.335
Total <i>N</i>	9,761	9,487

*Note.* There were 10,710 participants who completed the ideological self-placement item; their demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 2. Of these participants, 9,761 also completed the economic system justification scale, and 9,487 also completed the general system justification scale. Economic and general system justification are scored so that higher numbers indicate greater system justification. Ideological self-placement is scored so that higher numbers indicate greater conservatism (in general). Numerical entries are zero-order, bivariate correlation coefficients (with sample sizes in parentheses). N/A = Not Administered. All correlations are statistically significant,  $p < .001$  (two-tailed).

contexts, rightists and “free market” conservatives scored higher than leftists and liberals on both general and economic forms of system justification (see Table 5). People who scored higher on general and economic system justification defended the legitimacy of the sectarian political system more than those who did not, and those who scored higher on economic system justification tended to be more religious. In terms of partisan alignment, economic (but not general) system justification was significantly associated with a preference for the neoliberal,

procapitalist “March 14” alliance over the economically leftist, socialist-leaning “March 8” alliance. Interestingly, the effects of income were opposite for general and economic forms of system justification. Poorer respondents tended to score lower on general system justification, but they scored higher on economic system justification; this last finding is hard to square with a self-interest perspective (see also Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003; Sen Gupta, Osborne, & Sibley, 2015). Less educated respondents scored higher on general system

Table 4  
*Correlations Between System Justification and Political Preferences in a Nationally Representative Sample of Americans (August–September 2016)*

Ideological and demographic variables	Economic system justification	General system justification
General conservatism	.528***	.148***
Social conservatism	.475***	.102***
Economic conservatism	.570***	.167***
Political partisanship	.511***	.109***
Religiosity	.195***	.114***
Income	.195***	.208***
Education	.099**	.124***
Retrospective vote 2008	.498***	.121***
Retrospective vote 2012	.524***	.133***
Liking for Trump	.408***	.095***
Liking for Clinton	−.395***	.068**
Voting intention 2016	.487***	.014

*Note.* Entries are zero-order, bivariate correlation coefficients ( $N = 1,500$ ). Ideological variables scored so that higher numbers indicate greater conservatism. Economic and general system justification are scored so that higher numbers indicate greater system justification. Retrospective voting variables (for 2008 and 2012) are scored so that higher numbers indicate preference for the Republican candidate (McCain and Romney, respectively) over the Democratic candidate (Obama in both cases). Likewise, voting intention 2016 is scored so that higher numbers indicate a preference for Trump over Clinton.

\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed).

justification, but there was no correlation between education and economic system justification. Overall, these results indicate that system justification—especially economic system justification, which was found to be stronger among poor respondents in this study—plays a

significant role in conservative, right-wing politics as well as support for the current sectarian political system in Lebanon (Badaan & Jost, 2017).

Thus far, we have reviewed evidence demonstrating that system justification is associated

Table 5  
*Correlations Between System Justification and Political Preferences in a Nationally Representative Sample in Lebanon (April 1–18, 2016)*

Ideological and demographic variables	Economic system justification	General system justification
Left/right ideological self-placement	.297**	.231**
Social/cultural conservatism	.034	.305**
Economic conservatism	.143**	.417**
Sectarian system justification	.222**	.525**
Religiosity	.116***	.013
Income	−.145**	.137**
Education	−.016	−.121**
Partisan alignment	.176**	.077

*Note.* Entries are zero-order, bivariate correlation coefficients ( $N = 500$ ). Economic and general system justification are scored so that higher numbers indicate greater system justification. Ideological variables are scored so that higher numbers indicate more conservative, right-wing orientations. Partisan alignment was defined in terms of preferences for one of the two major political alliances in Lebanon since 2005; it was measured using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strong support for the “March 8” alliance*, which is predominantly economically leftist/socialist) to 5 (*supporter of the “March 14” alliance*, which is predominantly economically conservative/capitalist).

\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed).



with ideological preferences that are conservative or right-wing (as opposed to liberal or left-wing) in such varied contexts as the United States, Lebanon, Argentina, Sweden, Italy, Poland, and Turkey. Consistent with the observation that there are important left–right ideological differences in system justification motivation, we wish to emphasize that in no way are we implying that everyone engages in system justification all the time, although this is a caricature of system justification theory that sometimes crops up. As with all other human motives, the strength of system justification varies according to situational as well as dispositional factors (Jost, Gaucher, & Stern, 2015; Jost & van der Toorn, 2012; Kay & Friesen, 2011).

Our collaborators and investigators from other laboratories around the world have identified a number of situational factors that trigger increased system justification motivation, including: (a) feelings of powerlessness or dependence on the system and its authorities (e.g., Shepherd & Kay, 2012; van der Toorn, Tyler, & Jost, 2011; van der Toorn et al., 2015); (b) perceptions of the status quo as inevitable or inescapable (Kay et al., 2009; Laurin, Shepherd, & Kay, 2010); (c) exposure to system criticism or threat (Jost, Kivetz, Rubini, Guermendi, & Mosso, 2005; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005; Kay et al., 2009); and (d) perceptions of the system as traditional or longstanding (Blanchard & Eidelman, 2013; Shockley, Rosen, & Rios, 2016). In all of these cases, the activation of system justification motivation through experimental means has been shown to produce significant ideological consequences, such as increased legitimization of economic, racial, and gender disparities in society.

### **Epistemic, Existential, and Relational Motives Underlying System Justification**

Phenomena such as working-class conservatism have long bedeviled social and behavioral scientists, at least in part because they appear to violate assumptions of self-interest so strenuously (Hochschild, 1981; Kelly & Enns, 2010; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lane, 1962; Lukes, 2011; Luttig, 2013; Runciman, 1969; Wisman & Smith, 2011). System justification theory was developed to explain *false consciousness* and related phenomena in social psychological

terms, that is, to analyze the cognitive and motivational processes associated with ideological activity—and not just its sociological or political outcomes or manifestations (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & van der Toorn, 2012). It helps to explain why—at least in some contexts—even relatively poor people find it difficult to reject the notion that the system on which they depend is a truly just and meritocratic one (DiMaggio, 2015; Douglas, 2016; Godfrey & Wolf, 2016; Im, 2014; Kraus & Tan, 2015; Newman, Johnston, & Lown, 2015; Wiederkehr, Bonnot, Krauth-Gruber, & Darnon, 2015).

The crux of our motivational argument is that on some level people need or want to believe that the institutions, authorities, and arrangements on which they depend are good, fair, desirable, and legitimate. Believing that the societal status quo is legitimate and stable serves epistemic motives to reduce uncertainty and unpredictability, existential motives to reduce fear and threat, and relational motives to conform to and share reality with most other members of mainstream society (Jost, Ledgerwood et al., 2008). Because conservative ideology supports social stability and maintenance of the status quo rather than social change, we argue that it is better suited—subjectively, though not necessarily objectively—to assuaging threat, uncertainty, and social discord.

The argument may be easier to grasp in its negative form. To truly challenge the status quo, one must be willing to face existential threats to one's physical safety and security (such as being arrested or beaten by the police), epistemic threats such as volatile uncertainty and unpredictability during and after protest movements, and relational threats that come when friends and family members simply do not understand what one is protesting or why. System justification theory may help to explain not only why most people prefer to make peace with the status quo, if they can, but also why stress and burnout are so high among political activists (Klandermans, 2003; Kovan & Dirkx, 2003; Rodgers, 2010).

It is possible to measure the strength of epistemic, existential, and relational needs or motives, which vary dispositionally from person to person, as well as situationally from one time and place to another. That is, people differ, both chronically and temporarily, in how much they like to ponder the uncertainties of life, how

much cognitive effort they wish to expend, how sensitive they are to potential dangers and threats, including death, and how much they value the experience of sharing a sense of reality with others. In the context of an Internet survey of 182 American-born adults ranging in age from 18 to 68, Hennes et al. (2012) administered several items designed to gauge epistemic, existential, and relational motives as well as general and economic system justification scales, ideological self-placement items, and a variety of questions about public policy preferences. The results, which are summarized in Table 6, indicated that people who scored lower on need for cognition (that is, people who reported that they did not enjoy thinking very much) and people who scored higher on death anxiety and the need to share reality with like-minded others: (a) were more politically conservative, (b) endorsed general and economic system justification to a stronger degree, (c) were more likely to endorse conservative positions on issues of climate change, health care reform, immigration policy, and plans to build a mosque near Ground Zero of the 9/11 terror attacks on New York City, and (d) were more supportive of the Tea Party movement and less supportive of the Occupy Wall Street movement. Furthermore, the effects of epistemic, existential, and relational motives on political preferences and social movement support were

statistically mediated or explained, at least in part, by economic system justification.

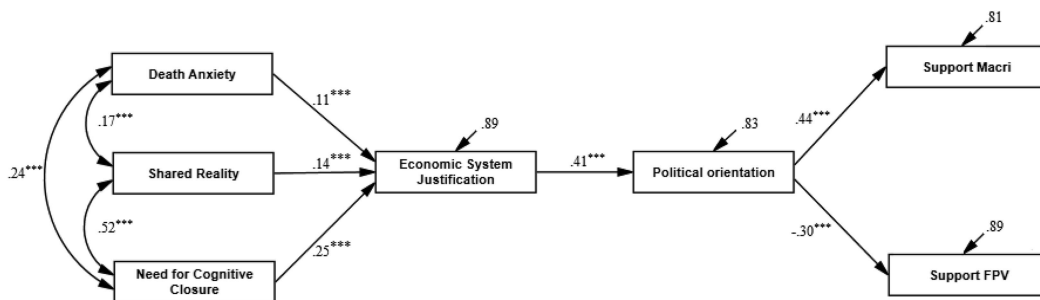
We conducted a parallel study involving 373 university students in Argentina (ranging in age from 18 to 62), in which we administered items designed to measure epistemic, existential, and relational motives as well as economic system justification, ideological self-placement, and support for the current president and opposition party. We obtained results that were similar to those obtained in the United States by Hennes et al. (2012). As illustrated in Figure 1, respondents who scored higher on the need for cognitive closure, death anxiety, and the need to share reality also scored higher on economic system justification and right-wing (vs. left-wing) orientation. Furthermore, economic system justification mediated the effects of epistemic, existential and relational motives on right-wing (vs. left-wing) orientation and partially explained support for center-right President Mauricio Macri in the preceding presidential election (and rejection of the center-left opposition party FPV or “Front for Victory” party). People who scored higher on economic system justification also rejected initiatives designed to promote open and respectful discussion of controversial issues by members of both parties and felt that it was justifiable to limit news coverage of rallies by Cristina Kirchner (leader of the FPV) to

Table 6  
*Correlations Between Epistemic, Existential, and Relational Motives and Various Ideological Outcomes, Including System Justification*

Ideological outcomes	Epistemic motivation (Need for cognition)	Existential motivation (Death anxiety)	Relational motivation (Need to share reality)
General system justification	-.12 <sup>†</sup>	.18***	.19***
Economic system justification	-.29***	.22**	.22**
Ideological self-placement (political conservatism)	-.24***	.09	.13 <sup>†</sup>
Belief in global warming	.21**	-.18**	-.25***
Approval of the Affordable Care Act	.20**	-.01	-.18*
Approval of mandatory healthcare provision	.17*	.05	-.12 <sup>†</sup>
Approval of Arizona's stricter immigration policy	-.17*	.18*	.11
Approval of Ground Zero Mosque plans	.11	-.19**	-.14*
Support for Tea Party Movement	-.18*	.22**	.09
Support for Occupy Wall Street Movement	.19**	-.05	-.24***

*Note.* Entries are zero-order (bivariate) correlation coefficients. Ideological self-placement is scored so that higher numbers indicate greater political conservatism. Economic and general system justification are scored so that higher numbers indicate greater system justification. In most cases,  $n = 182$ . For a full description of study details, see Hennes, Nam, Stern, and Jost (2012).

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed).



*Figure 1.* Economic system justification mediates the effects of existential, relational, and epistemic needs on political orientation and political preferences in Argentina. Numerical entries are standardized regression coefficients. Political orientation is scored so that higher numbers indicate greater right-wing orientation. The two outcome variables are continuous measures of support for center-right President Macri and the center-left opposition party FPV (values range from 1 = *No support at all* to 10 = *Full support*). Nonsignificant paths (not shown) were fixed to zero. The model provided an adequate fit to the data: AGFI = .949, CFI = .963, IFI = .964, RMSEA = .062 (.032–.092),  $\chi^2 = 26,721$ ;  $df = 11$ ;  $p = .005$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2,429$ . We tested indirect effects (with 95% confidence intervals) using a bootstrapping analysis and found that economic system justification mediated the effects of death anxiety { .01, .19 }, shared reality { .01, .22 }, and for need for cognitive closure { .01, .37 } on political orientation. In addition, political orientation mediated the effect of economic system justification on support for Macri { .01, .42 } and support for FPV { -.34, -.01 }. \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

prevent dissemination of their “dangerous ideas.”

Although working-class conservatism may be puzzling from a self-interest perspective, the fact that system-justifying belief systems serve underlying epistemic, existential, and relational motives may help to explain its occurrence.

### The Palliative Function of System Justification

System justification theory posits that because of underlying epistemic, existential, and relational needs, people are motivated (often nonconsciously, in a variety of situations) to defend, justify, and bolster aspects of the societal status quo, including existing social, economic, and political systems, institutions, and arrangements (Jost et al., 2010; Kay et al., 2009; Liviatan & Jost, 2014). Researchers have investigated the related notion, inspired in part by Marx’s theory of religion, that system-justifying beliefs and ideologies serve the palliative function of making people feel better about the status quo (Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Jost et al., 2014). A number of studies indicate that the expression of system-justifying sentiments is associated with increased positive affect and decreased negative affect (Bahamondes-Correa,

2016; Harding & Sibley, 2013; Jost, Wakslak, & Tyler, 2008; Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007). It is comforting, in other words, to believe that the way things are is the way they ought to be, and that prevailing institutions are legitimate, necessary, desirable, and justifiable (Kay et al., 2009). System justification may even provide members of some disadvantaged groups with a sense of control and mastery over future outcomes (Laurin, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2011; McCoy, Wellman, Cosley, Saslow, & Epel, 2013; Rankin et al., 2009). It is instructive to consider how distressing the opposite set of beliefs would be: What would it be like to live and work in a system that one experienced as irredeemably awful, unfair, illegitimate, exploitative, oppressive, and corrupt?

In line with the palliative function of system justification, studies repeatedly show that conservatives and rightists around the world report being happier and more satisfied than liberals and leftists (Napier & Jost, 2008; see also Bixter, 2015; Burton, Plaks, & Peterson, 2015; Choma, Busseri, & Sadava, 2009; Cichočka & Jost, 2014; Okulicz-Kozaryn, Holmes, & Avery, 2014; Onraet, Van Assche, Roets, Haesevoets, & Van Hiel, 2017; Schlenker, Chambers, & Le, 2012). Furthermore, system justification partially mediates (or explains) the association

between ideology and self-reported happiness (Burton et al., 2015; Cichocka & Jost, 2014; Napier & Jost, 2008; Schlenker et al., 2012). This does not necessarily mean that conservatives are genuinely happier, let alone healthier, than others (see Wojcik, Hovasapian, Graham, Motyl, & Ditto, 2015)—or that conservative societies make people happier or healthier (Okulicz-Kozaryn et al., 2014). System justification, after all, should be thought of as akin to denial, rationalization, and self-deception (Jost et al., 2010; Lerner, 1980). That is, the emotional benefits of engaging in system justification may be fairly short-lived. In the long term, the extent to which members of disadvantaged groups buy into the legitimacy of the overarching social system predicts psychological suffering in terms of lowered self-esteem, depressed entitlement, and an internalized sense of inferiority (e.g., Jost & Hunyady, 2003; see also Bahamondes-Correa, 2016; Harding & Sibley, 2013; Jost & Thompson, 2000; O'Brien & Major, 2005; O'Brien, Major, & Gilbert, 2012; Pacilli et al., 2011; Rankin et al., 2009).

Because it serves the palliative function of increasing satisfaction with the status quo (at least in the short term) and decreasing action-oriented emotions such as anger, system justification dampens support for the amelioration of inequality (Jost et al., 2012; Jost, Becker, Osborne, & Badaan, 2017; Wakslak et al., 2007). For example, Becker and Wright (2011) exposed young women to relatively subtle, “benevolent” justifications for sexism and found that this led them to express more positive affect, state that there are more advantages to being a woman, and score higher on gender-specific system justification. Exposure to benevolent sexism also reduced women’s intention to participate in feminist collective action, and this effect was mediated by system justification.

Likewise, in a nationally representative study of New Zealanders, Osborne and Sibley (2013) observed that the endorsement of system-justifying beliefs was associated with decreased psychological distress and the withholding of support for political mobilization. In addition, system justification was associated with an attenuation of the effects of (a) individual-based relative deprivation on distress and dissatisfaction with one’s standard of living, and (b) group-based relative deprivation on support for protest on behalf of one’s group. These findings

are consistent with other research on collective action, which suggests that a strong sense of injustice is a key motivator of protest activity (e.g., Goodwin & Jasper, 2006; Jost et al., 2012; Kawakami & Dion, 1995; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008).

Another potential cost to society is in terms of the motivated perception of social problems. System justification is associated not only with the belief that the economic system is fair and legitimate (Jost, Blount et al., 2003), but also with the tendency to downplay corruption in business and politics (Tan, Liu, Huang, & Zheng, 2017; Tan, Liu, Huang, Zheng, & Liang, 2016). There is some reason to think that it may also be associated with retaliation against whistleblowers (Sumanth, Mayer, & Kay, 2011). And, finally, a number of studies suggest that system justification actively promotes motivated skepticism about global warming as well as biased processing of scientific information about climate change (Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2010; Hennes, Ruisch, Feygina, Monteiro, & Jost, 2016; Jost, 2015). Thus, system justification not only undercuts the motivation to improve upon the status quo—it hinders the ability to perceive it accurately. Nevertheless, the palliative function of system justification renders conservative ideology more psychologically appealing, and this may explain why system justification sometimes trumps self-interest when it comes to the attitudes held by members of disadvantaged group members.

### Conflicts Among Ego, Group, and System Justification Motives

Importantly, we do not claim that members of disadvantaged groups are typically or ordinarily the most enthusiastic supporters of the status quo, although this is a view that has been attributed to us (Brandt, 2013; Caricati & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2012; Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, 2016). In each of the examples mentioned above, the short-term psychological comfort facilitated by system justification comes at the cost of endorsing a system that legitimates one’s own subjugation. Thus, we would not expect those who are disadvantaged to always (or even usually) exhibit higher levels of system justification than those who are advantaged. The point is that members of disadvantaged groups are sometimes reluctant to



criticize the system in which they are disadvantaged (and, in some cases, surprisingly willing to accept its legitimacy). Other theories—which only consider self-interested and/or group-interested forms of motivation—are ill-equipped to explain this phenomenon (see Carvacho et al., 2013; Dirilen-Gumus, 2011; Douglas, 2016; Durrheim, Jacobs, & Dixon, 2014; Godfrey, 2013; Godfrey & Wolf, 2016; Henry & Saul, 2006; Hoffarth & Jost, in press; Im, 2014; Jost, Blount et al., 2003; Lane, 1962; Sengupta et al., 2015; Shockley, Wynn, & Ashburn-Nardo, 2016; Pacilli et al., 2011; van der Toorn et al., 2015; Wiederkehr et al., 2015; Zimmerman & Reyna, 2013).

From the very start, system justification theory assumed the presence of at least three potentially conflicting motives or tendencies, namely ego, group, and system justification (Jost & Banaji, 1994). For members of advantaged groups, there is no real conflict or competition among motives to feel good about oneself, one's group, and the overarching social system (Jost & Thompson, 2000). The comedian Maria Bamford put it this way:

So, you guys, I love my country. And maybe that's because I'm White and rich, but things have been really looking out for me. I didn't even know there was a game on, but I am winning. I am not, technically, rich, but I do have a lot of shit that I do not need that I refuse to share with anyone. And that feels solid somehow.

By contrast, members of disadvantaged groups are frequently in the position of having to choose between feeling good about themselves (and their group) and feeling good about the system (Jost, Burgess, & Mosso, 2001), a conundrum that W.E.B. DuBois (1903) described as *double-consciousness*: “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (p. 3). To the extent, therefore, that ego and group justification motives are in opposition to system justification, members of disadvantaged groups are generally expected to justify the societal status quo less than members of advantaged groups (Jost et al., 2001; Jost & Thompson, 2000).

Nevertheless, the fact that members of disadvantaged groups often find it difficult to reject in toto the legitimacy of the social system—to simply write it off in the name of self- or group-preservation—is a testament to the power of system justification motivation. In any case,

system justification theory may be useful for understanding when members of disadvantaged groups do—and do not—develop attitudes that are consistent with self-interest. When the disadvantaged feel especially powerless or dependent on the social system, when they perceive the status quo as inevitable, inescapable, traditional, or longstanding, and when they are defending the system against criticism or threat, they should be more strongly motivated by system justification and less strongly motivated by considerations of self-interest. In contrast, when ego and group justification motives are high in salience or strength, members of disadvantaged groups should be more likely to protest against the status quo (Jost et al., 2017).

### Applications and Next Steps: The U.S. Presidential Election of 2016 and Beyond

The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016 has drawn a frenzied and eclectic set of social scientific explanations (Konnikova, 2016; Reicher & Haslam, 2016; Resnick, 2017). Perhaps the most obvious connection is to the social psychological phenomenon of *authoritarianism* (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950): “When they face physical threats or threats to the status quo, authoritarians support policies that seem to offer protection against those fears. They favor forceful, decisive action against things they perceive as threats. And they flock to political leaders [like Trump] who they believe will bring this action” (Taub, 2016). A similar account emphasizes the role of *social dominance orientation*: Trump voters clearly possessed a stronger desire than Clinton voters to enforce a hierarchical system of group-based inequality (Blair, 2016).

Authoritarianism and social dominance orientation are correlated not only with political conservatism and system justification (e.g., Jost & Thompson, 2000; Osborne & Sibley, 2014), but also with prejudice, discrimination, and ethnocentrism (Altemeyer, 1998; Carvacho et al., 2013; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Thus, explanations focusing on authoritarianism and/or social dominance are highly compatible with observations suggesting that support for Trump was related to hostility directed at immigrants, sexism, racial resentment, and opposition to increasing ethnic and cultural diversity (e.g., Don-



ovan, Redlawsk, & Tolbert, 2016; Major, Blodorn, & Major Blascovich, 2016; Schaffner, MacWilliams, & Nteta, 2017; Wayne, Valentino, & Ocen, 2016).

As mentioned earlier in this article, we surveyed a nationally representative sample of 1,500 Americans prior to the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and administered several social psychological instruments, including three measures of system justification (Azevedo et al., *in press*). The results reveal that—even after adjusting for authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, and a host of demographic variables—system justification played a significant role in support for Trump over Clinton. Specifically, when we entered general, economic, and gender-specific system justification into a logistic regression model we discovered that all three variables exerted significant (and independent) effects on voting intentions, although the effects were not all in the same direction (see Table 7). Whereas economic and gender-specific system justification were associated with an increase in the likelihood of voting for Trump, general system justification was associated with a decrease in the likelihood of voting for him. Trump supporters scored significantly higher than Clinton supporters on economic and gender-specific system justification—but the difference was quite small with respect to general system justification.

Moreover, this overall pattern emerged at every level of respondent income (see Figure 2) and education (see Figure 3). Regardless of whether they were rich or poor or highly educated or not, supporters of Trump were far more

likely to regard the capitalist economic system and the system of gender relations between men and women (including the division of labor within the family) as legitimate and justified, in comparison with supporters of Clinton. This was true of female as well as male respondents (see Figure 4). With respect to race and ethnicity, we observed that White and non-White supporters of Clinton (vs. Trump) scored significantly lower on all three types of system justification (see Figure 5).

For the most part, these findings are clearly at odds with the widespread assumption that “Mr. Trump personified the vote against the status quo” (Kuhn, 2016), that he was an “archetypal anti-establishment character” (Chasmar, 2017), and that his campaign “galvanized legions of aggrieved Americans in a loud repudiation of the status quo” (Tumulty, Rucker, & Gearan, 2016). It is true that Trump supporters rejected liberal governance under President Obama (and opposed a continuation of liberal policies under Clinton), but the results of our survey indicate that they were far from challenging the status quo in a more profound sense. Supporters of Donald Trump—like political conservatives in general—strongly defended and justified the existing degree of economic inequality as well as gender-based disparities in American society. The working-class Whites who voted for Trump may well have been deeply frustrated by the consequences of global capitalism, but there is little or no evidence that they blamed the economic system itself; in ideological terms, they appeared to be unwilling or unable to criticize

Table 7  
*Voting Intentions (Trump vs. Clinton) Regressed Onto Economic, Gender-Specific, and General System Justification, Adjusting for Demographic Variables, Right-Wing Authoritarianism, and Social Dominance Orientation*

Ideological and demographic variables	Estimate	Std. error	<i>t</i> value	Pr (>  <i>t</i>  )
(Intercept)	−10.425	.816	−12.769	.001
Economic system justification	.583	.135	4.305	.001
Gender-specific system justification	.668	.103	6.481	.001
General system justification	−.671	.095	−7.103	.001
Right-wing authoritarianism	.958	.094	10.156	.001
Social dominance orientation	.361	.079	4.556	.001
Income	.052	.050	1.049	.294
Education	−.135	.094	−1.434	.151
Age	.255	.059	4.315	.001

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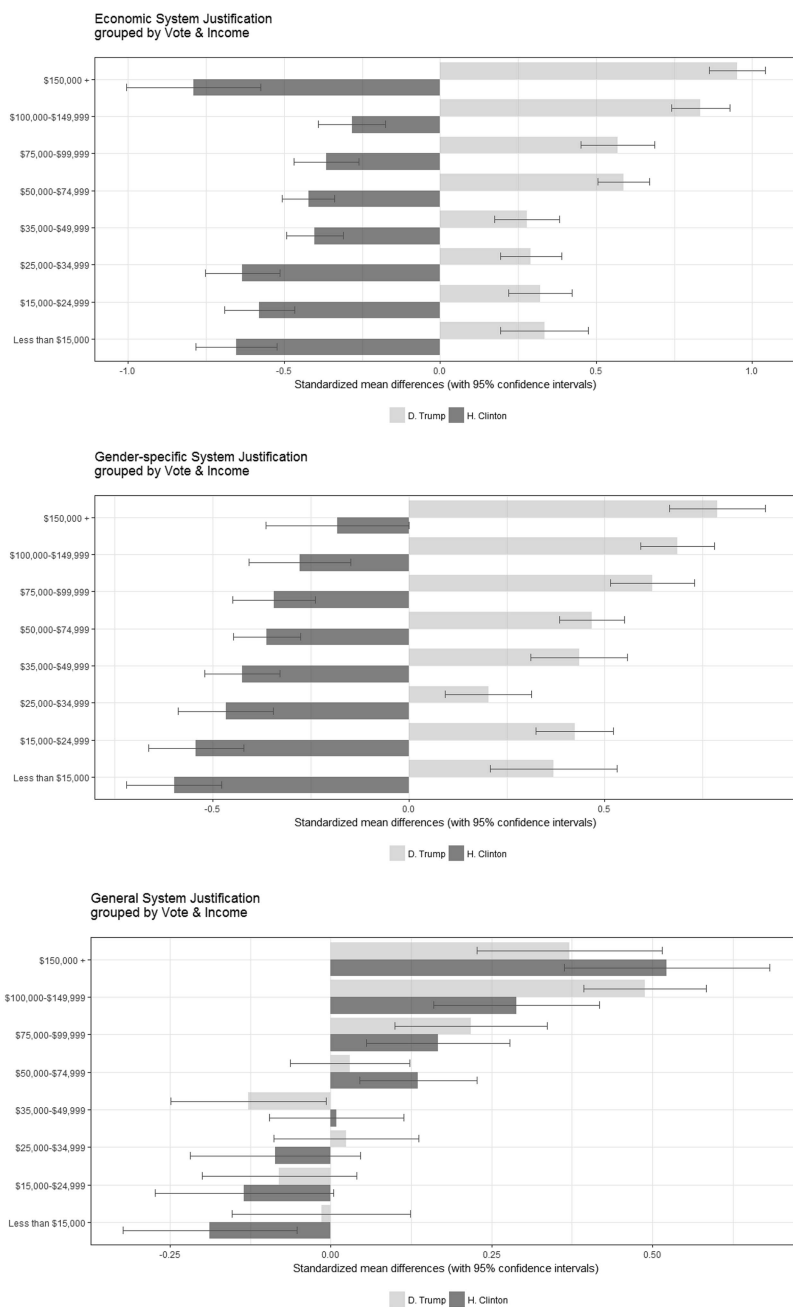
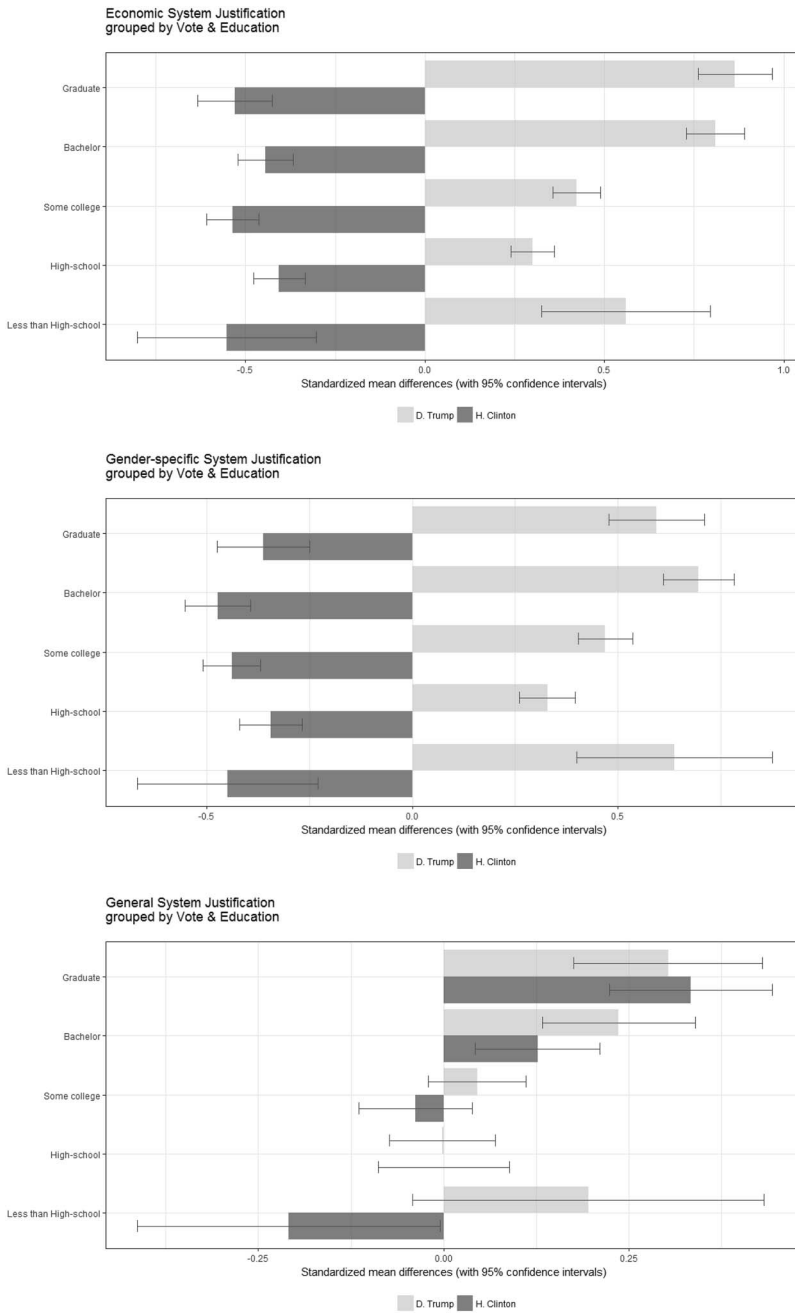
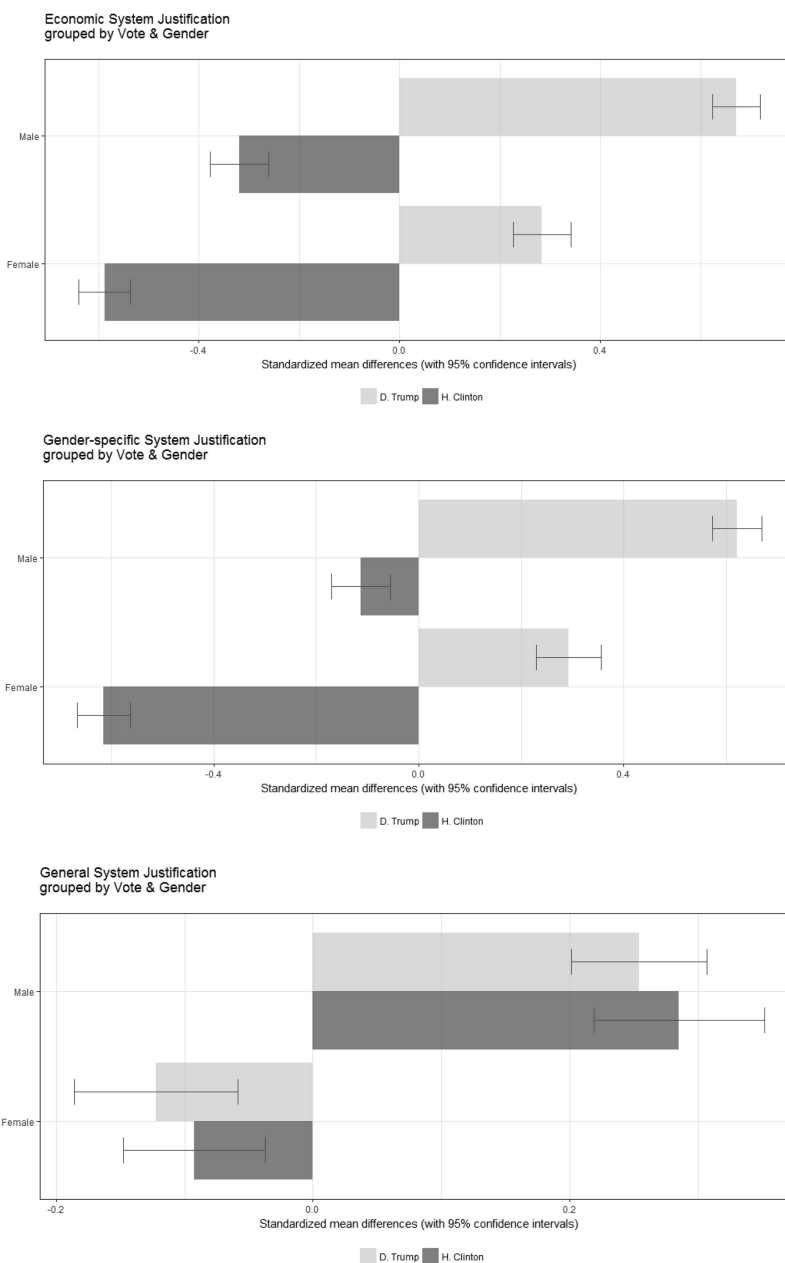


Figure 2. Economic, gender-specific, and general system justification among respondents who intended to vote for Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump as a function of income level. At every income level, Trump supporters were far more likely than Clinton supporters to regard the capitalist economic system (top panel) and the system of gender relations between men and women (middle panel) as legitimate and justified. The picture was more complicated for general system justification (bottom panel).

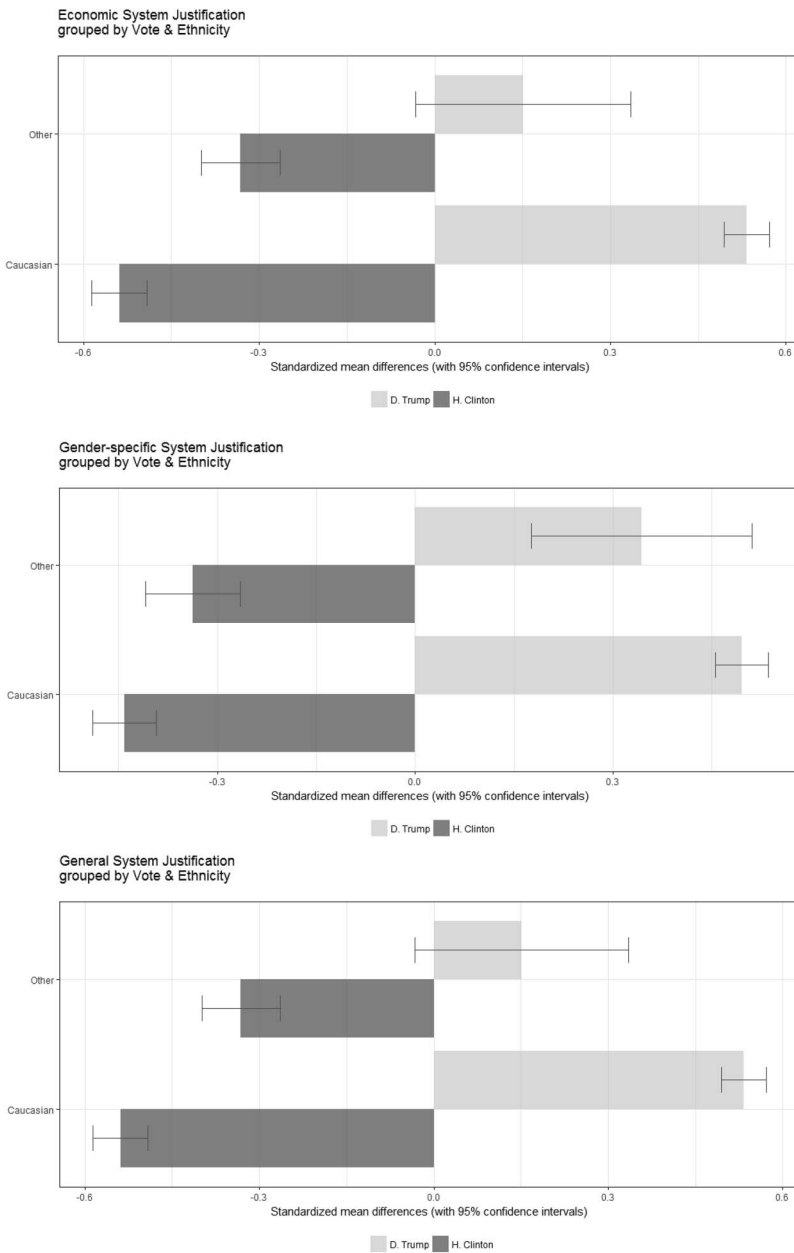
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*Figure 3.* Economic, gender-specific, and general system justification among respondents who intended to vote for Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump as a function of educational level. At every educational level, Trump supporters were far more likely than Clinton supporters to regard the capitalist economic system (top panel) and the system of gender relations between men and women (middle panel) as legitimate and justified. The picture was more complicated for general system justification (bottom panel).



*Figure 4.* Economic, gender-specific, and general system justification among male and female respondents who intended to vote for Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Male and female Trump supporters were more likely than male and female Clinton supporters to regard the capitalist economic system (top panel) and the system of gender relations between men and women (middle panel) as legitimate and justified. There were no differences between Trump and Clinton supporters in terms of general system justification for either male or female groups of respondents (bottom panel).



*Figure 5.* Economic, gender-specific, and general system justification among Caucasian and non-Caucasian respondents who intended to vote for Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Caucasian and non-Caucasian supporters of Trump were more likely than Caucasian and non-Caucasian supporters of Clinton to regard the capitalist economic system (top panel), the system of gender relations between men and women (middle panel), and the American system in general (bottom panel) as legitimate and justified.

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the capitalist system and the existing social order (see also Hennes et al., 2012).

Future research would do well to explore the notion that there are multiple meaningful dimensions (or domains) of system justification (Liviatan & Jost, 2014; Wakslak, Jost, & Bauer, 2011). The same individual may be an enthusiastic proponent of the system of traditional “family values” (or the “free market” economy) but an opponent of the liberal tradition of democratic governance in the United States (or vice versa). As Kay and colleagues (2008) demonstrated, some people seek to satisfy epistemic, existential, and relational needs through faith in God, while others prefer to place their trust in “the government.” There is, then, more than one sense in which someone may be said to accept or reject the societal status quo. We are only now at the precipice of understanding the myriad implications of this fact for political attitudes and behavior. Far from calling into question the importance or utility of ideological distinctions such as *conservative* or *progressive*, these observations highlight the fact that political actors may be motivated by a complicated mix of system-justifying and system-challenging concerns, depending (at least in part) upon the social system that is in question.

### Concluding Remarks

In this article, we have suggested that a motivational analysis may help to explain why, among other things, members of disadvantaged groups sometimes hold the same system-justifying beliefs as members of advantaged groups. One example among many is that of working-class conservatism (Hochschild, 1981; Jost, Blount et al., 2003; Lane, 1962; Lipset, 1960; Runciman, 1969). If it is true that system justification—including justification of the capitalist economic system—serves fundamental epistemic, existential, and relational needs for certainty, security, and conformity, this could help to explain why conservative economic attitudes are relatively popular even among those who do not benefit (in material terms) from conservative economic policies (DiMaggio, 2015; Frank, 2004; Lukes, 2011; Newman et al., 2015; Wisman & Smith, 2011). The conclusion that emerges from a system justification analysis is fairly clear: certain kinds of conservative beliefs and ideologies are likely to pos-

sess an advantage for motivational reasons, including the fact that they better satisfy—subjectively, but not necessarily objectively—underlying epistemic, existential, and relational needs, which everyone possesses to at least some degree.

In other words, system justification theory helps to explain the psychological appeal of conservative ideology. In this way, our analysis is consistent with that of Gerald Cohen (2011), who penned a well-known philosophical essay outlining a number of ways in which a conservative mindset—which he defined as a “natural” bias in favor of existing value—is intuitively appealing. Likewise, Samuel Scheffler (2010) observed that: “Most human beings have strong conservative impulses, in the sense that they have strong desires to preserve what they value, including what they value about past and present practices, forms of social organization, and ways of life” (p. 268). At the same time, both philosophers warn that a purely conservative attitude of this kind is problematic when it comes to questions of hierarchy and social injustice. This is “because what conservatives . . . want to conserve is that which has intrinsic value, and *injustice lacks intrinsic value (and has, indeed, intrinsic disvalue)*” (Cohen, 2011, p. 144, emphasis added).

One of the defining ethical challenges of our time, it would seem, is to distinguish clearly and forcefully between those elements of the societal status quo that possess intrinsic value—such as democratic norms, traditions, and institutions—and those that do not, such as popular forms of chauvinism, parochialism, and social exclusion. In some cases, “conservative impulses”—which are motivated by system justification concerns and a constellation of underlying epistemic, existential, and relational needs—may indeed lead us to defend and maintain forms of social organization that are truly valuable; in other cases, however, such impulses may lead us very badly astray.

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