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The Effect of Uncertainty on Explanatory Preference

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The Effect of Uncertainty on Explanatory Preference

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Abstract

Previous research on political extremism has led to two competing perspectives. One views extremists as being more knowledgeable and informed about politics than moderates, while the other claims it is moderates who know more. These two views appear to have arisen from studies that examined different types of political knowledge. This phenomenon could be explained by extremists and moderates having different preferences when it comes to their consumption of political information. We hypothesized that participants indirectly manipulated to feel more extreme conviction in their political views by manipulating them to feel uncertain would prefer more simple explanations of political issues compared to a control group. To test this, participants completed a task designed to manipulate their feelings of personal uncertainty, followed by measures designed to gauge their degree of conviction in their political views and their preference for simple vs complex explanations. No significant results were found, but correlational analyses did begin to show a link between conviction and explanatory preference, such that more extreme conviction was associated with preference for more simple explanations. Limitations and implications for future research are discussed.

The Effect of Uncertainty on Explanatory Preference

Political extremism has become more and more prominent in recent years. This extremism is reflected in our political policies and manifests in the form of political violence and other extreme acts. As people become more extreme in their views, it becomes increasingly important to understand why this extremism occurs. One factor that plays a role in a person's political views is the type of political information they consume, but it is unclear what exactly what role this plays. Many claim that consumption of simplistic and reductive information is associated with extreme beliefs, while others claim that it is moderatism that is promoted by poor understanding of political issues.

Debate Within the Literature

It is still unclear how political extremists differ psychologically from moderates. While much research has examined the differences between political extremists and moderates, this research has led to varying results. One side of the research in this area finds extremists to demonstrate more belief superiority, believing their views to be more correct than others and being less open to opposing viewpoints (Toner et al., 2013). The other side of this research finds extremists to integrate more perspectives and information into their views (Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2003). Looking specifically at political knowledge, extremists have been found to lack deep understanding of political policies, and express more moderate views after this lack of understanding is exposed (Fernbach et al., 2013). This suggests that extremism may be rooted in a false sense of understanding of political issues. On the other hand, extremists have also been found to be more politically knowledgeable and capable of adapting their cognitive models to relevant contexts than moderates (Sidanius, 1988). These results have led to two differing views of extremists, seemingly at odds with each other.

Resolving the Debate

The aforementioned studies looked at two different types of knowledge; one found that extremists lack explanatory knowledge (how policies work), while the other found that extremists possess more knowledge of basic political facts and information (knowledge of what, rather than how). It is possible that this discrepancy is due to a difference in the way extremists and moderates seek out information, resulting in extremists lacking explanatory knowledge despite having more factual knowledge about the political landscape. Examining the effect of extremity on information seeking could serve as a key component in reconciling these apparently conflicting results, as well as providing insight into how the extremity of one's political beliefs manifests in day-to-day life.

Uncertainty as it Relates to Extremism

Studying the effects of extremism can be difficult because it cannot be directly manipulated. It is also hard to use extremism as a quasi-independent variable, as most people are relatively moderate in their views. However, researchers have found ways to manipulate extremism indirectly. Specifically, manipulating participants to feel uncertain about themselves has been shown to cause them to temporarily express more extreme conviction in their political views (McGregor & Marigold, 2003; Nash et al., 2011). For example, manipulating participants to feel uncertain by having them write about an unresolved personal dilemma was found to significantly increase their conviction in their views on capital punishment and abortion (McGregor et al., 2001). Because of this, we have decided to use personal uncertainty to temporarily increase extremity within participants. Using this method, we can see how participants who feel extreme political conviction differ from those who do not.

The Present Research

This study tested for a relationship between political extremity (induced by personal uncertainty) and preference for simple vs complex explanations of political issues. Participants first completed a task designed to manipulate their feelings of uncertainty. They then answered questions about their conviction in their views on gun control and immigration. Finally, they were asked about how simple or complex they would prefer some explanations relating to gun control and immigration to be. We predicted that feelings of personal uncertainty would cause participants to prefer more simple explanations, with more extreme political conviction serving as a mediator (i.e., the reason why uncertainty increases preference for simple explanations).

Method

Participants and Design

A total of 105 undergraduate students at the University of Arkansas (76 female, 29 male; 85% white, 12% Hispanic, 3% other; mean age = 19.27) participated in exchange for class credit. Participants self-selected to participate through an online signup service. Each was randomly assigned to one of two levels (control vs uncertain) of a between-participants design.

Procedure

Participants were led to a private room by a research assistant and were told that the study was about how people respond to personal dilemmas. Informed consent was obtained, and participants completed the study on a computer. First, participants were randomly assigned to think about a personal dilemma in either their own life or the life of a friend. They then answered a series of questions about said dilemma. Next, participants selected from a list of views about either gun control or immigration (order was randomly assigned) the view that they agreed with most. Then, they answered questions designed to measure their conviction in the view they selected, as well as questions about how complex they would prefer an explanation related to the

issue to be. After doing this for both issues, participants answered questions about how uncertain they felt during the uncertainty manipulation earlier in the study. Finally, participants answered demographic questions, were debriefed, and were thanked for their time and dismissed.

Materials

Uncertainty Manipulation

To manipulate uncertainty, we used materials adapted from McGregor et al. (2001). Participants were randomly assigned to think about and name a personal dilemma either in their own life or the life of a friend. Participants were then asked to summarize their primary reason for changing and not changing, as well as list some possible immediate and long-term consequences of choosing to change, in the context of the dilemma (materials for the entire study are available in appendix A).

Conviction Measure

To measure the extremity of participants' conviction in their political views, we again used materials adapted from McGregor et al. (2001). Participants were presented with a list of views on either gun control or immigration (randomly decided) and asked to choose the statement that they agreed with most (e.g., there are pros and cons to gun control laws). They then answered questions about the firmness of their belief in the statement they selected (0 [not at all] – 10 [very]), what percent of the population they thought agreed with the statement (0 - 100), and the extent to which their emotions and intellect aligned on the topic (-5 [extremely uncharacteristic of my attitude] – 5 [extremely characteristic of my attitude]). All responses were given on a likert-type scale. After reverse-scoring where necessary and adjusting the scales so that all answers were on a 0-10 scale, we averaged our 10 conviction items into separate

conviction indexes for gun control ($\alpha = 0.79$, $M = 6.64$, $SD = 1.39$) and immigration ($\alpha = 0.81$, $M = 7.01$, $SD = 1.38$). Higher scores indicated more conviction.

Explanatory Preference Measure

To measure participants' preference for simple vs complex explanations, we asked them how complex they thought a satisfying explanation of the pros and cons of gun control (immigration) would be, as well as how complex a satisfying explanation of the efficacy of gun control (immigration policy) would be. Responses were given on a likert-type scale (0 [extremely simple] - 10 [extremely complex]). Because these two measures of explanatory preference were correlated for each issue (for gun control, $r = 0.64$, $p < 0.00$ and immigration, $r = 0.67$, $p < 0.001$) we averaged our 2 explanatory preference items in separate explanatory preference indexes for gun control ($M = 6.55$, $SD = 2.37$) and immigration ($M = 6.56$, $SD = 2.25$). Higher scores indicated preference for more complex explanations.

Manipulation Check

To check the effectiveness of our uncertainty manipulation, we asked participants how uncertain and conflicted they felt when writing about the dilemma. Responses were given on a likert-type scale (0 [not at all] – 10 [very]). We averaged our 2 uncertainty items into an overall uncertainty index given their strong relationship ($r = 0.57$, $p > 0.001$). Higher scores indicated greater uncertainty.

Ideology Measure

As one of our demographic questions, we chose to ask participants about their political ideology, as this could be a relevant variable. To measure this, we asked participants if they thought of themselves as more liberal or conservative. Responses were given on a likert-type scale (1 [very liberal] - 7 [very conservative]; $M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.56$).

Results

Manipulation Check

To test the effectiveness of our uncertainty manipulation, we submitted our uncertainty index to and independent samples T-test, which yielded significant results, $t(103) = -3.91$, $p < 0.001$. This indicated that participants in the uncertain condition ($M = 6.26$, $SD = 2.53$) felt significantly more uncertain than participants in the control condition ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 2.45$).

Gun Control

To test our hypothesis that participants in the uncertain condition would express greater conviction in their gun control views than participants in the control condition, we subjected our gun control conviction index to an independent samples T-test, which did not yield significant results, $t(103) = -0.55$, $p = 0.58$ (control $M = 6.56$, $SD = 1.59$, uncertain $M = 6.71$, $SD = 1.17$). To our hypothesis that participants in the uncertain condition would prefer more simple gun control explanations than participants in the control condition, we subjected our gun control explanatory preference index to an independent samples T-test, which yielded no significant results, $t(103) = -1.16$, $p = 0.25$ (control $M = 6.28$, $SD = 2.43$, uncertain $M = 6.81$, $SD = 2.29$).

Immigration

To test our hypothesis that participants in the uncertain condition would express more conviction in their immigration views than participants in the control condition, we subjected our immigration conviction index to an independent samples T-test, which did not yield significant results, $t(103) = 0.05$, $p = 0.96$ (control $M = 7.01$, $SD = 1.47$, uncertain $M = 7.00$, $SD = 1.30$). To test our hypothesis that participants in the uncertain condition would prefer more simple immigration explanations than participants in the control condition, we subjected our immigration explanatory preference index to an independent samples T-test, which yielded no

significant results, t (103) = 0.59, p = 0.56 (control M = 6.69, SD = 2.04, uncertain M = 6.43, SD = 2.45).

Mediation Analysis

Because none of our T-tests yielded significant results, we did not compute a mediation analysis.

Exploratory Analyses

Gender Differences

We submitted conviction and explanatory preference for both gun control and immigration to 2-way ANOVAs with uncertainty and gender as independent factors, but found no significant results. However, some patterns did begin to emerge. We expected participants in the uncertain condition to express more conviction than participants in the control condition. For gun control conviction, this was found to be true for men (control M = 6.61, SD = 1.56, uncertain M = 7.26, SD = 1.06), but not for women, whose means were nearly identical (control M = 6.55, SD = 1.62, uncertain M = 6.52, SD = 1.16). Looking at immigration conviction, we once again found that men demonstrated a greater difference between conditions than women. However, the pattern was the opposite of what we expected (control M = 7.20, SD = 0.92, uncertain M = 6.69, SD = 1.15). Women demonstrated a difference in the expected direction, which was once again smaller than that of the men (control M = 6.94, SD = 1.64, uncertain M = 7.11, SD = 1.34).

We also expected that participants in the uncertain condition would score lower on our explanatory preference index than participants in the control condition. In the context of gun control, we found the opposite to be true. This difference was once again larger for men (control M = 5.93, SD = 2.54, uncertain M = 6.82, SD = 1.71) than women (control M = 6.42, SD = 2.41, uncertain M = 6.81, SD = 2.49). Preference for immigration explanations was the exception to

this pattern, as men demonstrated a comparatively small difference, once again in the opposite direction (control $M = 6.30$, $SD = 2.21$, uncertain $M = 6.61$, $SD = 2.20$), relative to women, whose pattern was in the expected direction (control $M = 6.85$, $SD = 1.98$, uncertain $M = 6.37$, $SD = 2.55$). While these numbers are, once again, not significant, they begin to suggest that men and women may have responded to the independent variable differently. Notably, the difference between condition means was larger for men for 3 out of 4 dependent variables, and the men's and women's means went in opposite directions for 3 out of 4 dependent variables.

Correlational Analyses

We computed a correlation table for our four dependent variables and political ideology for our entire sample, as well as one for each condition (see appendix B). We expected to see that conviction and explanatory preference would be negatively correlated for both issues in all tables, and that this correlation would be strongest in the table for the uncertainty condition. While the negative correlation that we predicted did occur, it did not vary in strength across conditions. This provides support for the idea that more extreme conviction in one's political views is associated with preference for more simple explanations of political issues, but reinforces our earlier finding that feelings of uncertainty were not tied to either of these variables. Our ideology measure was weakly positively correlated with gun control conviction, and weakly negatively correlated with our other 3 dependent variables.

Discussion

We aimed to establish a causal relationship between feelings of uncertainty and explanatory preference for political issues, with the extremity of one's political conviction serving as a mediator. This would have been the first step toward resolving a debate within the existing research on extremism, as well as understanding the roots of political extremism. To do

this, we manipulated some participants to feel uncertain before measuring their degree of conviction in their gun control and immigration views, as well as their preference for simple vs complex explanations relating to gun control and immigration. Our manipulation check was successful, but our manipulation had no effect on either of our dependent variables for either political issue. The reason for this is unclear. While it is possible that our hypothesis that uncertainty would lead to preference for more simple explanations is incorrect, our uncertainty manipulation has successfully increased political conviction in participants in previous research. Reasons why we failed to replicate this finding are discussed in the limitations section.

Although only our manipulation check proved to be significant, correlational analyses began to show our expected relationship between conviction and explanatory preference. This provides initial support for our hypothesis that more extreme political conviction is associated with preference for more simple explanations of political issues, and suggests that our uncertainty manipulation's failure to cause more extreme political conviction may have been the reason it also failed to caused preference for more simple explanations.

Limitations

There are some notable limitations to this study that could have prevented our results from reaching significance. Most notably, our sample size of 105 was just over half of our target size of 200. With more data, it is possible that we would find stronger support for our hypotheses. In addition, our sample consisted solely of college students, who may be less invested in politics and have less developed views than the general population. This could explain why our sample did not respond to feelings of uncertainty with increased political conviction as we expected. Previous research has also found that uncertainty only causes increased conviction in people with high self-esteem (McGregor & Marigold, 2003). While

uncertainty has successfully been manipulated to cause increased political conviction regardless of self-esteem, it is possible that our sample had comparatively less self-esteem, resulting in us failing to replicate this effect (McGregor et al., 2001).

Future Research Directions

Future research in this area would benefit from using a larger, more age-diverse sample. Obtaining a sample large enough to use extremism as a quasi-independent variable would be ideal, as this would allow for the relationship between extremism and explanatory preference to be tested directly. The logical progression after establishing a relationship between political extremism and explanatory preference for political issues would be to find a way to use this relationship to temper extreme attitudes, perhaps by somehow manipulating explanatory preference. Making extremists more open and attracted to complex, nuanced political information could help combat dangerous extreme views.

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Appendix A

Materials

Uncertainty Manipulation

Uncertain Condition

Please try to think of an unresolved personal dilemma in your life. Such predicaments are characterized by the fact that you are not yet sure whether to take action in order to change things. You feel very uncertain and you ask yourself whether it might not be better to leave things as they are. In other words, you haven't decided to take action, but you haven't decided against it either. Please do not select a problem that is easy to solve, or that you have already made your mind up about. On the other hand, do not select one for which a solution will likely never be reached. The problem should be complex and should take the form of "Should I . . . or not?"

Please name the dilemma:

In a word or two, please summarize your primary general value associated with changing the way things are.

In a word or two, please summarize your primary general value associated with not changing, and leaving things the way they are.

With regard to the above dilemma, please take a few minutes to list possible immediate consequences, positive and negative, of making a decision that involves change.

Now please try to think of and list any possible long-term consequences that could result from the immediate consequences you listed above.

Finally, beside each consequence listed above, rate the percent certainty of occurrence.

Please list the expected difficulties that might arise in trying to implement a decision involving change.

Please take a few minutes to list possible immediate consequences, positive and negative, of leaving things the way they are and not making a change.

Now please try to think of and list any possible long-term consequences that could ensue from the immediate consequences you listed above.

Finally, beside each consequence listed above, please rate the certainty of occurrence in percentage.

Certain Condition

Please try to think of an unresolved personal dilemma in the life of a friend or acquaintance of yours. Choose a predicament characterized by the fact that your friend is not yet sure whether to take action in order to change things – but you feel like you know what would best for your friend to do. Your friend feels very uncertain and asks him or herself whether it might not be better to leave things as they are. In other words, your friend hasn't decided to take action, but hasn't decided against it either. The friends' problem that you choose should be complex and should take the form of "Should I . . . or not?"

Please name the dilemma that your friend faces:

In a word or two, please summarize what your friend thinks is the primary general value associated with changing the way things are.

In a word or two, please summarize what your friend thinks is the primary general value associated with not changing, and leaving things the way they are.

With regard to the above dilemma of your friend, please take a few minutes to list possible immediate consequences, positive and negative, of his or her making a decision that involves change.

Now please try to think of and list any possible long-term consequences for your friend that could result from the immediate consequences you listed above.

Finally, beside each consequence listed above, rate the percent certainty of occurrence.

Please list the expected difficulties that your friend might face in trying to implement a decision involving change.

Please take a few minutes to list possible immediate consequences for your friend, positive and negative, of leaving things the way they are and not making a change.

Now please try to think of and list any possible long-term consequences for your friend that could ensue from the immediate consequences you listed above.

Finally, beside each consequence listed above, please rate the certainty of occurrence in percentage.

Measures

Gun Control Conviction

Please select the statement below that you agree with most.

1.   There are pros and cons to gun control laws.

2.   Private citizens should not be allowed to own firearms.

3.   Gun control laws only prevent law abiding citizens from getting guns.

4.   Current gun laws will do until we learn more about the efficacy of gun control.

5.   Gun control has proven to reduce gun crime.

6.   Rather than control guns, society should focus on why people commit gun crimes in the first place.

7.   It is not the government's place to regulate gun ownership.

8.   Private gun ownership is necessary to maintain a free society.

9.   Guns are an essential self-defense tool.

10.   Gun crime is a necessary price to pay for the positives of private gun ownership.

11.   Private gun ownership should be allowed only for the purpose of hunting.

12.   Gun control in America is too strict.

13.   Private gun ownership is not necessary in modern civilizations.

14.   Gun control in America is not strict enough.

15.   Different geographic areas have different gun control needs.

Please refer to the statement about gun control that you selected above, and respond to the following questions by selecting a number on the ratings scale.

How firmly do you believe in this position?

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

not at all   very

How willing would you be to defend this position in an argument?

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

not at all   very

How strong is your conviction about this position?

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

not at all   very

How certain do you feel about this position?

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

not at all   very

What percentage of the population do you think would agree most with the statement that you

circled?

What percentage of the population do you think would agree with the statement that you circled?

To what extent do each of the following statements characterize your attitude toward gun

control?

I find myself feeling "torn" between the two sides of the issue of gun control; my feelings go in

both directions only.

-5   -4   -3   -2   -1   0   1   2   3   4   5

extremely   extremely

uncharacteristic   characteristic

My head and my heart seem to be in disagreement on the issue of gun control.

-5   -4   -3   -2   -1   0   1   2   3   4   5

extremely   extremely

uncharacteristic   characteristic

I have strong mixed emotions both for and against gun control, all at the same time.

-5   -4   -3   -2   -1   0   1   2   3   4   5

extremely   extremely

uncharacteristic   characteristic

My "gut" feeling about gun control lines up perfectly with what my rational intellect tells me to

do.

-5   -4   -3   -2   -1   0   1   2   3   4   5

extremely   extremely

uncharacteristic   characteristic

Gun Control Explanatory Preference

Please respond to the following questions by selecting a number on the ratings scale.

How complex do you think a satisfying explanation of the efficacy of gun control would be?

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

extremely   extremely

simple   complex

How complex do you think a satisfying explanation of the pros and cons of private gun

ownership would be?

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

extremely   extremely

simple   complex

Immigration Conviction

Please select the statement below that you agree with most.

1. People forced away from their home by violence and crime have a right to seek asylum

   elsewhere.

2. Many immigrants are a drain on our society.

3. Immigration causes more harm than good.

4. Everyone has the right to live wherever they please.

5. It should be easier to immigrate legally into the United States.

6. Immigrants bring valuable skills and knowledge to our society.

7. Immigrants take jobs from natural-born Americans.

8. Immigration is fine if it's done legally.

9. We need to tighten security at our borders.

10. Immigration causes more good than harm.

11. Immigration deprives us of our national identity.

12. Immigration laws should be made stricter.

13. The diversity produced by immigration is a strength.

14. Immigrants bring problems from their countries with them.

15. It's difficult to weigh the pros and cons of immigration.

Please refer to the statement about immigration that you selected above, and respond to the following questions by selecting a number on the ratings scale.

How firmly do you believe in this position?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

not at all   very

How willing would you be to defend this position in an argument?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

not at all   very

How strong is your conviction about this position?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

not at all   very

How certain do you feel about this position?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

not at all   very

What percentage of the population do you think would agree most with the statement that you circled?

What percentage of the population do you think would agree with the statement that you circled?

To what extent do each of the following statements characterize your attitude toward immigration?

I find myself feeling "torn" between the two sides of the issue of immigration; my feelings go in both directions.

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5

extremely   extremely

uncharacteristic   characteristic

My head and my heart seem to be in disagreement on the issue of immigration.

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5

extremely   extremely

uncharacteristic   characteristic

I have strong mixed emotions both for and against immigration, all at the same time.

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5

extremely   extremely

uncharacteristic   characteristic

My "gut" feeling about immigration lines up perfectly with what my rational intellect tells me to do.

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5

extremely   extremely

uncharacteristic   characteristic

Immigration Explanatory Preference

Please respond to the following questions by selecting a number on the ratings scale.

How complex do you think a satisfying explanation of the efficacy of immigration policy would be?

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

extremely   extremely

simple   complex

How complex do you think a satisfying explanation of the pros and cons of immigration would be?

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

extremely   extremely

simple   complex

Manipulation Check

Now please think back to earlier in the study and answer the following questions.

How uncertain did *you* feel when writing about an unresolved problem earlier in the study?

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

not at all   very

How conflicted did *you* feel when writing about an unresolved problem earlier in the study?

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

not at all   very

Political Ideology

In general, would you describe yourself more as a liberal or as a conservative?

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

very liberal   very conservative

Appendix B

Correlation Tables

Variable		ConvictGC	ExpPrefGC	ConvictIM	ExpPrefIM	ideo
1. ConvictGC	Pearson's r	—				
	p-value	—				
2. ExpPrefGC	Pearson's r	-0.206	—			
	p-value	0.035	—			
3. ConvictIM	Pearson's r	0.229	-0.141	—		
	p-value	0.019	0.153	—		
4. ExpPrefIM	Pearson's r	-0.008	0.371	-0.313	—	
	p-value	0.934	< .001	0.001	—	
5. ideo	Pearson's r	0.163	-0.187	-0.087	-0.148	—
	p-value	0.097	0.056	0.379	0.132	—

Table B1. Correlations between conviction and explanatory preference for both gun control and immigration and political ideology across our entire sample.

Variable		ConvictGC	ExpPrefGC	ConvictIM	ExpPrefIM
1. ConvictGC	Pearson's r	—			
	p-value	—			
2. ExpPrefGC	Pearson's r	-0.100	—		
	p-value	0.475	—		
3. ConvictIM	Pearson's r	0.200	-0.125	—	
	p-value	0.152	0.374	—	
4. ExpPrefIM	Pearson's r	0.095	0.322	-0.265	—
	p-value	0.497	0.019	0.055	—

Table B2. Correlations between conviction and explanatory preference for both gun control and immigration within the uncertainty condition.

Variable		ConvictGC	ExpPrefGC	ConvictIM	ExpPrefIM
1. ConvictGC	Pearson's r	—			
	p-value	—			
2. ExpPrefGC	Pearson's r	-0.297	—		
	p-value	0.032	—		
3. ConvictIM	Pearson's r	0.252	-0.155	—	
	p-value	0.072	0.273	—	
4. ExpPrefIM	Pearson's r	-0.096	0.454	-0.374	—
	p-value	0.501	< .001	0.006	—

Table B3. Correlations between conviction and explanatory preference for both gun control and immigration within the control condition.