DISPOSITIONAL SOURCES OF ECONOMIC PROTECTIONISM

CHRISTOPHER D. JOHNSTON*

Abstract Despite the increasing salience of issues related to free trade, research on citizen preferences over trade is sparse, and largely limited to economic explanations related to objective exposure. The present paper extends this literature by examining the psychological sources of the protectionist impulse. More specifically, I theoretically and empirically examine how citizens’ chronic needs for security and certainty, key traits identified by recent work in the political realm, influence their preferences for protectionism. Examining data from three different national surveys in the U.S. context, I find strong support for the role of these dispositions. In addition to extending our understanding of the antecedents of trade preferences, the present paper has implications for the study of personality and politics, suggesting heterogeneity in the relationship of dispositions to ideology across issue domains. I also discuss the broader implications for American politics, arguing that these findings suggest latent tensions within contemporary party coalitions.

Introduction

International economic integration has increased the importance of understanding the basis of public support or opposition to free trade. As Scheve and Slaughter (2006) argue, economic integration requires policies that reduce barriers to trade, yet “any model which seeks to explain policymaking for these areas … must specify the preferences of citizens in addition to the institutions that aggregate those preferences” (p. 217). Moreover, as Caplan (2002, 2008) has argued, there is a substantial gap between the mass public and economic experts in support for protectionism that may perpetuate policies that disadvantage the majority; our understanding of why this should be the case

Christopher D. Johnston is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Duke University, Durham, NC, USA. The author would like to thank Stanley Feldman and Howie Lavine for their contributions to this project. *Address correspondence to Christopher D. Johnston, Duke University, Department of Political Science, Campus Box 90204, Durham, NC 27708, USA; e-mail: christopher.johnston@duke.edu.
nonetheless remains limited. Finally, as will be shown below, political orientations show little association to preferences in this domain, suggesting that elite cleavages have yet to be clearly defined. Understanding what drives preferences over trade may give insights into strategic issues faced by elites in attempts to persuade.

This topic has received little attention by scholars, however. Moreover, existing research has focused rather exclusively on the role of economic self-interest in predicting protectionism (e.g., Mayda and Rodrik 2005; Scheve and Slaughter 2001). Although these studies have generated important insights into the antecedents of trade preferences, much research suggests that citizens’ policy preferences are only partially (and often minimally) self-interested in a strictly economic sense (Sears and Funk 1991). It is thus important to examine preferences over trade within the context of additional theoretical frameworks to fully understand their antecedents, and the implications for the politics of trade.

The present paper approaches protectionism within the context of recent theorizing regarding the influence of psychological dispositions on preferences (e.g., Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Jost et al. 2003). In the following sections, I develop a logic that connects psychological needs for security and certainty to protectionism, and derive a core hypothesis that is tested in three national samples within the U.S. context. Across all three data sets, I find strong support for the influence of these dispositions on trade preferences, with effect sizes rivaling, and sometimes exceeding, those of economic factors. I conclude with a discussion of the broader implications of these findings for the personality and politics literature and for American politics.

**Theory**

Though much recent work in political science is concerned with the influence of stable dispositions on mass preferences, the specific paradigms utilized have been diverse, lending a degree of confusion to the literature. Within psychology, however, Jost et al. (2003; see also Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009) have proposed a unified theory of dispositional influences on political preferences that extracts the commonalities observed across the various frameworks. Specifically, they propose that the variety of psychological and biological indicators shown to meaningfully predict political ideology and preferences can be understood in terms of differences in citizens’ needs for existential security (i.e., threat management) and epistemic certainty. They argue that citizens high in needs for certainty and security are differentially

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1. Work on this topic includes the use of such diverse operationalizations as “Big Five” personality traits (e.g., Mondak 2010), physiological responses (Oxley et al. 2008), neurocognitive functioning (Amodio et al. 2007), and even specific genes (Settle et al. 2010).
attracted to conservatism for its emphasis on status quo maintenance in terms of both values and socioeconomic hierarchies. In a meta-analysis of over eighty studies on the topic, Jost et al. (2003) find that indicators of political conservatism are associated with a variety of variables (e.g., threat sensitivity; intolerance of ambiguity) that all tap into these same basic needs. This theoretical framework imposes order on an unwieldy literature, and provides a straightforward language for discussing dispositional effects on preference formation.

More generally, we can consider the influence of psychological dispositions on political preferences to be the result of a “functional match” between the content of a political object, such as a policy issue, and the motive or goal represented by the disposition itself (Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009). In other words, to say that one has a dispositional “need for security” is to say that the goal of security looms large relative to other, potentially conflicting goals, such as freedom or self-direction (Feldman 2003; Schwartz 1992). As above, for example, support for traditional values (e.g., opposition to gay marriage) constitutes a functional match for citizens with high needs for certainty and security, because such policies promote stable and predictable values, as opposed to the uncertainty of changing norms and moral relativism. As Jost and Hunyady (2005) argue, “preserving the status quo allows one to maintain what is familiar while rejecting the uncertain prospect of social change” (p. 262). In seeking a relationship between needs for certainty and security and preferences over international trade, we are thus interested in the ways in which policies that aim to restrict or promote trade may differentially meet such goals.

As Scheve and Slaughter (2006) note, citizens recognize that free trade implies both benefits (e.g., lower prices) and costs (e.g., job destruction). Work in political economics argues that protectionism should thus be rooted in assessments of personal exposure to such costs, for example, citizens in industries with a comparative disadvantage globally. Holding exposure constant, however, these assessments may be further influenced by dispositions that alter the perceived cost-benefit trade-off of freer trade. Given the potential for international trade to displace domestic workers, citizens who value security at high levels generally should prefer protectionist measures to reduce the specific labor threats associated with trade. Similarly, as international trade is often associated with volatility in the labor market, and thus with labor market uncertainty (Scheve and Slaughter 2004), citizens with a strong aversion to uncertainty generally should be more likely to support government intervention to increase labor market stability and predictability. Thus, protectionism should “resonate” with citizens high in these needs because, prima facie, it promotes the goals of labor market security and certainty. From another perspective, we could characterize such individuals as particularly risk averse, with potential losses due to trade looming larger than potential gains at the margin (for a similar perspective on the relationship of these concepts, see
Higgins [1998, 1999]). The core hypothesis for the present study can then be stated as follows:

Holding constant the objective labor market position of the individual, or, in other words, at any given position in the labor market, citizens high in needs for security and certainty will support protectionist trade policies to a greater extent than citizens low in needs for security and certainty.

Methods

DATA

The data are from three waves of the American National Election Studies conducted during the 2000, 2004, and 2008 U.S. presidential elections on national samples of the U.S. public, allowing for three, nearly identical tests of the main hypothesis. Because the 2008 oversamples of Blacks and Latino Americans were too small for subgroup analyses, I focus only on Whites in this year (see below for a further discussion of this issue).

VARIABLES

The dependent variable for the present study is support for restrictions on foreign imports. The item read: “Some people have suggested placing new limits...”
on foreign imports in order to protect American jobs. Others say that such limits would raise consumer prices and hurt American exports. Do you FAVOR or OPPOSE placing new limits on imports, or haven’t you thought much about this?” This item is identical to that used by past researchers (Scheve and Slaughter 2001).

I operationalize needs for security with a scale previously used to measure authoritarianism, which asks respondents to make four pairwise comparisons of values (Hetherington and Suhay 2011; Hetherington and Weiler 2009). Citizens high in authoritarianism are particularly sensitive to threat, and this indicator serves as a proxy for general needs for security. As Hetherington and Weiler (2009) argue, “authoritarianism” serves merely as a label for the more general motives and goals (e.g., security, stability) underlying responses to these items (see also Feldman 2003; Feldman and Stenner 1997).

I operationalize needs for certainty with two items related to the need for cognition (Cacioppo and Petty 1982). The first item concerns like or dislike for the “responsibility for thinking,” and the second asks about preference for simple or complex problems. The need for cognition should be negatively related to such needs, as extensive thought about a problem, by definition, impedes the attainment of cognitive closure, and thus epistemic certainty. Research demonstrates that these two constructs are indeed negatively associated empirically (Webster and Kruglanski 1994). The constructed scale was coded so that higher values indicate a greater need for certainty.

As indicators of economic self-interest, I included education and income level. I also included several controls in all models, including age, race (1 = Black), gender (1 = male), employment status (1 = unemployed), family member union membership, partisanship, ideology, and political sophistication.

All variables were recoded to range from zero to one prior to analysis.

Results

The estimates for all three data sets are shown in table 1. Given a fair amount of nonresponse to the dependent variable, I utilized Heckman probits for estimation.5 In 2008, given the oversample of Blacks and Latinos, I estimated the model for White Americans only.6 Across all three studies, I find strong empirical support for the influence of citizens’ dispositions on trade preferences in line with the core hypothesis of this study. The most consistent indicator of support for import restrictions across the three years and across all model variables is the need for security. In all three models, the coefficient is substantively strong, in the expected positive direction, and statistically significant.

5. See Appendix B for further discussion of model estimation.
6. The sample sizes for these other groups were nonetheless too small for valid hypothesis tests. A full-sample model using sample weights produced nearly identical results to the Whites-only model.
To better interpret the substance of these effects, I generated predicted probabilities of support for import restrictions moving from minimum to maximum on needs for security, holding all other variables at their central tendencies ($\Delta p$). In 2000 and 2004, the influence of security needs is strong. In both cases, a change from low needs for security to high is associated with an increase in the probability of support for import restrictions of 0.24 on the probability scale. In 2008, the effect is smaller, with an estimated change in the probability of support of 0.09. The influence of needs for certainty, by contrast, is inconsistent. I find no significant influence of this variable in either 2000 or 2004,

Table 1. Regression Estimates for Effect of Psychological Dispositions on Support for Import Restrictions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>2000 ANES</th>
<th></th>
<th>2004 ANES</th>
<th></th>
<th>2008 ANES</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$B$</td>
<td>$SE$</td>
<td>$\Delta p$</td>
<td>$B$</td>
<td>$SE$</td>
<td>$\Delta p$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome model</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Needs for security</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs for certainty</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-0.75</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>-0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>-0.90</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>-0.34</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union member in HH</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partisanship</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophistication</td>
<td>-0.63</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>-0.88</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>-0.73</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>0.24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Selection model</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>-0.36</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>-0.58</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophistication</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan strength</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-0.49</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs for certainty</td>
<td>-0.43</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-0.62</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-1.07</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>-1.79</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>527</td>
<td>562</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note.—Entries are Heckman probit coefficients and standard errors. $\Delta p =$ change in probability (only sig. effects shown, $p < .05$).
but a substantively meaningful and significant influence in 2008. A change from low to high needs for certainty in 2008 is associated with an increase in support for protectionism of about 0.12 on the probability scale. The greater influence of needs for certainty in 2008, relative to 2000 and 2004, is perhaps unsurprising. Given that this survey took place during the heart of the financial crisis and the ensuing economic collapse, uncertainty about the economy was particularly high. Those most averse to uncertainty, generally speaking, should have been particularly likely during this period to seek government intervention in a variety of economic arenas to restore some measure of stability to the domestic economy.

Turning now to other variables, the marginal effect of education is substantively meaningful, in the expected negative direction, and statistically significant in 2000 and 2008, but minimal and insignificant in 2004. In 2000, a change in education from less than a high school degree to a postgraduate degree entails an expected decrease in support for protectionist trade policy of 0.29 on the probability scale, a substantial effect, and one consistent with previous work within political economics. In 2008, the same change entails a decrease in support for import restrictions of about 0.12. What is striking about these estimates is the comparability of the influence of dispositions to those of skill level. In both 2000 and 2008, the effect of needs for security is only slightly less than this socioeconomic indicator. In 2008, needs for certainty exert an influence of an identical magnitude to skill. Simply put, citizens’ stable dispositions appear to be just as influential as a key indicator of human capital acquisition and labor market position. The lack of an effect of education in 2004 is puzzling, and I have no ready explanation for this finding. The importance of education’s influence across 2000 and 2008 is, however, consistent with expectations.

Income level has inconsistent effects across these three models. In 2000, the effect of income is strong, and in the expected direction. An increase from minimum to maximum, holding all other variables at their central tendencies, entails an expected decrease in support for import restrictions of 0.34. This is the largest effect of the four key variables examined. I find no significant influence of income in either 2004 or 2008.

Turning to the other variables in the model, I find similar inconsistencies across years. No variable exerts a consistent influence on trade preferences across all three models except needs for security. This is, perhaps, a reflection of the relative difficulty of issues related to international trade, and the lack of clear signals from elites regarding the connection between trade issues and broader ideological and partisan cleavages (Sniderman 2000; Sniderman and Bullock 2004). With respect to the latter point, consider that partisan and ideological identifications have no significant influence on support for import restrictions in any of the three models. Overall, the one consistent finding across all three studies is that dispositions matter greatly for preferences over trade policy, and in the way predicted by theory. Across all three years, I find that needs for security
increase support for trade restrictions, and in 2000 and 2004 the effect is on the order of 25 percentage points. In 2008, a year characterized by high economic uncertainty, I find that needs for certainty increase support as well.

Conclusion

The present paper makes several important contributions to the public opinion literature. First, I find consistent evidence across three data sets that dispositional needs for security and certainty strongly structure trade preferences, and do so at a magnitude comparable to important predictors from the political economics literature. As with other political attitudes, economic self-interest, strictly defined, is only part of the story. Interestingly, however, if we are willing to expand this notion of self-interest to include subjective perceptions as well as objective factors, these results are not inconsistent with a story palatable to those emphasizing economic interests. Citizens have different and stable preferences over risk and uncertainty, and these differences should be influential in any context where the content of issues taps into such anxieties (see, e.g., Kam and Simas 2010). This is a distinct way of looking at how “personality” matters for political preference formation, but one that may be appealing to a much wider audience—an audience beyond political psychology proper. Conceptualizing dispositions and traits as chronically accessible and/or individually important goals may have great potential as a means to bridge subdisciplinary divides.

Second, these findings have implications for American politics more broadly, as they suggest latent tensions within contemporary party coalitions in the United States. As demonstrated by Hetherington and Weiler (2009), as well as others (e.g., Federico and Goren 2009), needs for security and certainty are an important foundation for partisan and ideological sorting in the contemporary American public. At the level of domestic politics, these personality-driven coalitions are held together across ideological lines as a function of symbolic rhetoric in the economic domain related to institutional stability and traditional American values (Gerber et al. 2010; Jost et al. 2003). The emphasis, however, should be on the constructed nature of the connection between dispositions and economic preferences (e.g., Shapiro and Jacobs 2010). The results above suggest that the relationship between needs for security and certainty and support for free-market institutions may be tenuous, as I find patterns exactly opposite to expectations of recent theorizing. These patterns imply that party elites face difficulties in assimilating positions on international trade with their domestic economic positions, and the potential for emerging conflict between domestic and international economic ideologies as they relate to the underlying psychological dispositions that structure contemporary party coalitions.

One limitation of the current study entails the measurement of needs for security. Although this scale has been utilized by previous research to tap the
same or similar constructs, the items do not explicitly mention security concerns. Future work should seek replications of these dynamics with varied indicators of epistemic and existential needs.

Appendix A. Variable Operationalizations

Needs for Security (“Authoritarianism”)

Although there are a number of qualities that people feel that children should have, every person thinks that some are more important than others. I am going to read you pairs of desirable qualities.

(1) Independent or Respect for Elders
(2) Curiosity or Good Manners
(3) Obedience or Self-Reliance
(4) Considerate or Well-Behaved

Needs for Certainty

(1) Some people like to have responsibility for handling situations that require a lot of thinking, and other people don’t like to have responsibility for situations like that. What about you? Do you LIKE having responsibility for handling situations that require a lot of thinking, do you DISLIKE it, or do you NEITHER LIKE IT NOR DISLIKE IT?
(2) Some people prefer to solve SIMPLE problems instead of complex ones, whereas other people prefer to solve more COMPLEX problems. Which type of problem do you prefer to solve: SIMPLE or COMPLEX?

Partisanship

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a REPUBLICAN, a DEMOCRAT, an INDEPENDENT, or what?
Would you call yourself a STRONG [Democrat/Republican] or a NOT VERY STRONG [Democrat/Republican]?
Do you think of yourself as CLOSER to the Republican Party or to the Democratic Party?

Ideology

We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place YOURSELF on this scale, or haven’t you thought much about this?
Political Sophistication

2000 AND 2004

Do you happen to know which party had the most members in the House of
Representatives in Washington BEFORE the election (this/last) month?

Do you happen to know which party had the most members in the U.S.
Senate BEFORE the election (this/last) month?

Now we have a set of questions concerning various public figures. We want
to see how much information about them gets out to the public from television,
newspapers, and the like.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2000 Only</th>
<th>2004 Only</th>
<th>Both 2000 and 2004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JANET RENO</td>
<td>DENNIS HASTERT</td>
<td>WILLIAM REHNQUIST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRENT LOTT</td>
<td>DICK CHENEY</td>
<td>TONY BLAIR</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2008

For political interest, respondents were randomly assigned to one of two
operationalizations:

A. Some people don’t pay much attention to political campaigns. How
about you? Would you say that you have been VERY MUCH inter-
ested, SOMEWHAT interested, or NOT MUCH interested in the politi-
campaigns so far this year?

B. How interested are you in information about what’s going on in govern-
ment and politics? EXTREMELY INTERESTED, VERY INTERESTED,
MODERATELY INTERESTED, SLIGHTLY INTERESTED, or NOT
INTERESTED AT ALL?

For political knowledge, the interviewer was asked the following: “R’s general
level of information about politics and public affairs seemed: Very high, Fairly
high, Average, Fairly low, or Very low.”

Both items were recoded to range from zero to one and were averaged to
form a single scale.

Appendix B. Information Regarding Heckman Probits

The Heckman models for continuous and categorical outcome variables, more
generally referred to as models with sample selection, are useful for data with
large numbers of missing observations on the dependent variable where miss-
ingness can be considered the result of some theoretical process that can be
modeled empirically. Heckman models involve two “steps,” each with its own
regression. The first models the process by which respondents come to have
a response (or not) for the dependent variable. The second models observed
dependent variable itself as a function of both independent vari-ables of interest and a term derived from the estimates of step one, called the
inverse Mills ratio. The inclusion of the latter term is the key, as its exclusion
results in potentially biased estimates of all model coefficients.

The present paper focuses on interpretation of the “outcome” model of
interest, but interpretation of the “selection” model is straightforward. One
can simply interpret the coefficients of this model in the same way as one
would for any other probit regression. For the present paper, the results for
the selection model are intuitive: Education, political interest, and political
sophistication have the largest and most consistent effects on the probability of
reporting an attitude on the issue of trade restrictions. Interestingly, and also of
theoretical interest, the need for certainty consistently, and strongly, predicts
nonresponse. Individuals most averse to uncertainty are less likely to report
an attitude on this complex issue. One might find the “need for cognition”
interpretation of these items more useful in this context, but again, these two
constructs are strongly related conceptually and empirically.

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