

Original Articles

Identity-motivated reasoning: Biased judgments regarding political leaders and their actions

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ABSTRACT

We investigate how constituents interpret information about political leaders in the course of forming judgments about them. More specifically, we are interested in the intentionality attributed to the actions and decisions taken by political leaders – whether they are perceived as designed to benefit the politician's own interests, or the interests of the public. In two field studies, we show that the political orientation of constituents plays a central role in driving constituents' judgments about political leaders and their actions (in terms of beneficiary attributions), reflecting an identity-motivated reasoning process. Political leaders of the ingroup are perceived more favorably than political leaders of the outgroup, in terms of trust and a desire to see that leader represent the country in the international arena. More interestingly, constituents are likely to attribute the actions of ingroup leaders as intended to benefit the country (national interests), and the actions of outgroup leaders as intended to benefit the political leaders themselves (egoistic interests).

1. Introduction

After winning the 2015 Israeli national elections, Benjamin Netanyahu declared that his supporters had brought victory to “**our people**.”² But who might he really have been thinking of when he celebrated victory that night? Was it himself? His family? His party? A particular political or social demographic? The whole nation? Or even humanity? In fact, any of these answers might be considered a reasonable one. Since political leaders rely on the support of their constituents to make and sustain important decisions, one might argue that what the utterances of political leaders actually mean is less important than how they are interpreted by citizens. This is the focus of the current study.

We investigate how constituents interpret information about political leaders in the course of forming judgments about them. Thus far, research on attributions has usually focused on the distinction between internal and external causes of behavior. We propose to look at attributions of intentionality in terms of beneficiaries. More precisely, we are interested in the intentionality constituents attribute to the actions and decisions taken by political leaders, distinguishing between narrow

interests of the politician (i.e., an egoistic wish to benefit him/herself) versus broader interests of the public at large (i.e., a wish to benefit the nation). We support this conceptualization in two field studies in which constituents were asked to evaluate and judge real-life episodes involving actions taken by political leaders. In addition, we argue and show that the political orientation of constituents plays a central role in this attribution process, indicating an identity-motivated reasoning process. We argue that support for political leaders and assessments of their actions in terms of beneficiary attributions are related to social identity, and as such manifest ingroup favoritism.

1.1. From classic attribution theories to attributions of intentionality

Classic theories of attribution (e.g., Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967, 1973; Kelley & Michela, 1980) argue that the most important distinction made by observers regarding their own and other's behavior, is between internal causes (e.g., the actor's traits, beliefs, abilities, or intentions) and external causes (e.g., situational incentives, demands, or pressures). However, the distinction between internal and external causes does not capture the full complexity of attributions. In a

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² “Against all odds, against all odds, we achieved this huge victory for Likud,” Netanyahu told jubilant supporters not long after the polls closed Tuesday. ‘We achieved [this] huge victory for our people. And I am proud, I am proud for the people of Israel that in the moment of truth, they knew to make the right decision and to choose the real material things over immaterial things’” (Karimi, Botelho, & Liebermann, 2015).

more contemporary theory, Malle (1999, 2004) highlights the importance of intentionality, arguing that in the course of the attribution process people make complex judgments about the specific aims or purpose of a given act by a given actor.

We draw on Malle's notion of intentionality to examine how people interpret the aims or purpose of actions performed by political leaders. We propose to conceptualize intentionality in terms of the beneficiaries of the act – those who are perceived as expected to gain the most from the actions. Naturally, the list of relevant beneficiaries differs in different contexts. With regards to political leaders, by virtue of their position, they are likely to be seen as having multiple potential beneficiaries whom they may be motivated to assist. For example, since the 2016 US presidential campaign the citizens of the United States have been divided on whether President Donald Trump sought the presidency mainly for selfish reasons, or out of an authentic love for the country and a desire to “make American great again” (CNBC, 2018; Quora, n.d.).

Across cultures and genders, politicians – regardless of whether they are competent or not, corrupt or not – are perceived as competitive and egoistic, as power-seeking, as cold and “not-us” (Fiske & Durante, 2014; Schneider & Bos, 2014). On this basis, the public may perceive politicians' actions and decisions as mainly intended to benefit their own, egoistic interests. At the same time, however, leadership positions are accompanied by responsibility to strive for realization of the goals of the group (Blondel, 1987; Chemers, 2001; Kinder & Fiske, 1986; Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999). Effective leaders are expected to put the public interest, however defined, ahead of politics (Acemoğlu & Robinson, 2013; Foti, Fraser, & Lord, 1982). On this basis, voters may perceive decisions made by political leaders as intended to benefit the broader public rather than their own egoistic interests.

From a moral perspective, these two inferences have opposing implications. The literature on morality emphasizes the superiority of caring for others, concerns about fairness and loyalty, and other ways of contributing to the group as moral foundations across cultures (Graham et al., 2011). In Kohlberg's (1973) moral development theory, egoistic justifications (avoiding punishment and obtaining rewards) comprise the lowest, most basic moral stages. In the political sphere, politicians whose decisions are seen as motivated by self-interest (a wish to be reelected) are perceived as less trustworthy and are less likely to receive votes (Bøggild, 2016), whereas politicians who act contrary to their self-interest (e.g., praising their opponent) are perceived as more trustworthy and honest (Combs & Keller, 2010).

1.2. Ingroup favoritism as a source of motivated reasoning in judgments of political leaders

Research has shown that perceptions, attitudes and attributions are colored by individuals' desired goals, yielding biased perceptions due to motivated reasoning (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Kunda, 1990). In political psychology, motivated reasoning has proven to be a fruitful framework to investigate partisan influence on public opinion formation by determining the reasoning strategies employed (for a review see Leeper & Slothuus, 2014). Research has shown, for example, that individuals are more skeptical of information not consistent with their ideology (Taber & Lodge, 2006) and construe their ideological beliefs in ways consistent with their desired outcomes (Knowles, Lowery, Hogan, & Chow, 2009). For instance, in a study conducted in the context of national elections, centrist parties were perceived by left-wing respondents as holding more dovish policies and by right-wing respondents as holding more hawkish policies (Amit, Roccas, & Meidan, 2010). Reasoning motivated by political identity not only influences judgments about issues and policies, but also judgments about and support for political candidates. The discounting of incongruent information regarding favorable (but not unfavorable) candidates has received supportive evidence both experimentally (Redlawsk, 2002) and in analysis of a decade of presidential approval ratings (Lebo & Cassino, 2007).

An important motivating force with an immense impact on judgments and attributions is the wish to create and maintain a positive image of one's group (Hewstone, Ruben, & Willis, 2002). The social groups to which people belong form an influential part of their self-concept (Lord et al., 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner & Oakes, 1986). These internalized social identities act as a source of one's personal and group beliefs (Bar-Tal, 1998). These beliefs are then strengthened and maintained in a self-serving manner to glorify the ingroup and derogate the outgroup, yielding an intergroup bias that is mainly motivated by ingroup favoritism (Brewer, 1999; Halevy, Bornstein, & Sagiv, 2008).

A notable example of such bias in the content of attributions is the ultimate attribution error (Hewstone, 1990; Pettigrew, 1979), according to which individuals tend to attribute internal causes to positive behaviors of an ingroup member, whereas the same behavior performed by an outgroup member is likely to be interpreted as driven by external causes (and vice versa). We join this line of research, aiming to expand the notion of biased intergroup attributions from the classic distinction between internal and external attributions, to attributions of intentionality in terms of beneficiaries – attributions that consider the target the action is intended to benefit (i.e., the self versus the nation).

Political orientation (e.g., Democratic or Republican, conservative or liberal, hawkish or dovish) serves as a prominent social identity, dividing nations into influential subgroups (Brewer, 2009). As such, notable group processes reflecting information processing biased in favor of the ingroup are evident in the political sphere. For example, proposals aimed at resolving conflict were devalued when ascribed to the “other side” (Maooz, Ward, Katz, & Ross, 2002) reflecting a tendency to perceive information in a way that disfavors the outgroup.

We suggest that reasoning motivated by ingroup favoritism may be also exhibited in judgments of intentionality as reflected in beneficiary attributions. Many actions performed by political leaders may be attributed to an intention to advance both egoistic and national interests. The preference for one interpretation over the other may reflect motivated reasoning. As the two interpretations differ in valence, we contend that actions performed by ingroup political leaders will more likely be interpreted as serving the national interest, whereas actions performed by outgroup political leaders will more likely be interpreted as serving egoistic interests.

1.3. Hypotheses

We contend that the way people judge political leaders' actions is based on whether the social identity (i.e., the political orientation) of the individual coincides with the affiliation of the political leader, with more favorable judgments accruing to ingroup leaders. Specifically, we hypothesize that:

H1. Social identity will be associated with judgments of the actions performed by political leaders in terms of beneficiary attributions, such that (a) the behavior of an outgroup (versus ingroup) political leader will more likely be interpreted as serving an egoistic interest, while (b) the same behavior by an ingroup (versus outgroup) political leader will more likely be interpreted as serving the national interest.

H2. Social identity will be associated with support for political leaders, with greater support for an ingroup (versus outgroup) political leader, as reflected in higher trust and greater willingness to have that leader serve as the country's representative in international affairs.

Finally, we expect attribution patterns and support for trust in the leader to be interlinked, such that support and trust in the leader are positively correlated with attributions of national interests and negatively correlated with attributions of egoistic interests, reflecting the opposing valences of the two types of attribution.

1.4. The context of the present research: Hawks and doves in Israeli politics

We tested our predictions in the context of Israeli politics. In two studies, we measured how Israeli voters interpret and evaluate decisions made by prominent Israeli political leaders. Like many other democracies, Israeli politics is divided into two main political wings – hawks and doves.³ These political positions serve as powerful bases for social identification, polarizing Israeli society into two camps (Bar-Tal, Raviv, Raviv, & Brosh, 1991), each of which tends to derogate and delegitimize supporters of the other (e.g., Bar-Tal & Vertzberger, 1997). We hence focus on social identity as defined by political orientation on the hawk-dove continuum.

In Study 1 we focused on different decisions made by the leaders of several parties in Israel, hawkish and dovish, during the election campaign of 2015. At the time, the balance between hawks and doves was unclear, and each side expressed confidence it would win the election. In Study 2, we focused on the *same behavior* by different leaders of hawkish and dovish political parties.

2. Study 1

This study was conducted in January 2015, prior to the Israeli national elections held on March 17, 2015. The extensive press coverage about politicians' decisions and actions during election campaigns provides an opportunity to test attributions about behaviors of prominent political figures on both the right wing (hawks) and left wing (doves).

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

The participants were 502 Israeli adults recruited from a local online panel.⁴ Panel participants answer surveys for monetary compensation, in a manner similar to Amazon's MTurk. Participants had an age range of 19–66, with a mean age of 29.97 ($SD = 3.82$); 50.7% were female. In terms of its political distribution, the sample is highly representative of Israeli society as a whole, as evident from a comparison between participants' self-reports of the parties they supported during the previous elections and the distribution of actual votes across parties in the 2013 elections (non-significant chi-test $p = 0.086$; Spearman $\rho(13) = 0.86$, $p < 0.001$).

The participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions (between-subjects design). Each condition presented a description of a different action taken by one of the dominant political leaders at the time. We included two candidates from the right and two candidates from the left side of the political divide. We also included two leaders who had not run during the previous elections and whose political orientation on the left/right divide was unclear at the time, since their declared party policies focused on social issues that are not at the core of the Israeli left-right divide (see Appendix A for the full descriptions). After reading the description the participants were asked to complete a set of questions that were designed to assess their perceptions of the action in terms of beneficiary attributions. They were then asked to report their support of the political leader as reflected in trust and in willingness to have that leader represent the country. We included additional measures for exploratory purposes. Finally, participants completed a series of background questions, including questions on their political orientation.

³ In Israeli society, political identification as a hawk or dove is grounded in attitudes regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with hawks objecting to territorial compromise and doves supporting it (Maoz & Eidelson, 2007).

⁴ Four participants partially completed the survey and were thus omitted from relevant analysis yielding differences in the degrees of freedom.

2.1.2. Measures

2.1.2.1. Beneficiary attributions. The participants indicated to what extent they believed the action presented to them was intended to benefit each of six targets, using a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). The two focal target beneficiaries – the actor (egoistic interests) and the country (national interests) – were negatively correlated, $r = -0.46$, $p < 0.001$. The list included four additional role-related beneficiaries: the actor's party; the actor's political wing; the region (the Middle East); and the world (humanity).

This measure was constructed based on the results of a pilot study designed to validate the centrality of attributions in terms of egoistic and national interests, and to examine the relevance of other beneficiaries. In the pilot study, 143 Israeli students (46.6% female, age range 18–29, $M = 23.0$) were presented with descriptions of political actions by Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and were asked to provide their interpretation of the intentions underlying those moves in a free format. Two independent judges, blind to the research hypotheses, were provided with background material relating to the multiplicity of potential social targets, including individuals, super-ordinate groups and subgroups. The judges were asked to identify categories of social targets, and to classify the content of the participants' answers into these categories. The results revealed a wide range of beneficiaries, including the six beneficiaries on the list. The focal beneficiary attributions of this study (egoistic interests and national interests) were mentioned by a large majority of the participants (73% and 70% respectively), supporting the centrality of those beneficiaries in attributing intentionality to political leaders.

2.1.2.2. Trust. The participants rated the trustworthiness of the political leader presented to them with two items ("X can be trusted" and "X is a decent person"), using a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). An index of trustworthiness was created by averaging the two items ($r = 0.80$), with higher levels indicating higher perceived trustworthiness.

2.1.2.3. Leader as country's representative. The participants indicated to what extent they wished the political leader to represent the country (Israel) in international relations, using a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). Four items identified four international players with whom the leader would have to deal as head of the government (the USA, Europe, the UN, and the Palestinians; e.g., "To what extent do you wish X to represent Israel in international relations with the USA?"). An index of support for the leader as the country's representative was created by averaging the four items ($\alpha = 0.97$), with higher levels indicating greater support.

2.1.2.4. Own political orientation. The participants reported their own political orientations using four statements capturing correspondence with the left-wing bloc and the right-wing bloc (reverse coded) on policies and economic affairs (e.g., "To what extent do your views on political-international issues correspond to the left-wing bloc"). An index of own political orientation was constructed by averaging the four items ($\alpha = 0.87$). Higher scores indicate stronger left-wing orientation.

2.2. Results and discussion

We first present exploratory analysis of the beneficiary attributions. We then describe our hypothesis tests and our findings regarding the effect of social identity on constituents' judgments about political leaders and their actions.

2.2.1. Exploratory analysis of beneficiary attributions

We measured six beneficiary attributions: the two focal beneficiaries for which we derived and tested hypotheses (egoistic and national interests), and four additional beneficiary attributions related to political

Table 1
Factor loadings (Study 1).

Political leader	Factor (variance explained)	Own (egoistic) interests	The interests of the party	The interests of the political wing	Public (national) interests	The interests of the region (the Middle East)	The interests of humanity (universalistic)
Right-wing leader 1 ^a	Narrow (27.668%)	0.692	0.934	0.930	-0.171	-0.129	-0.082
	Wide (57.418%)	-0.520	-0.157	0.011	0.888	0.930	0.942
Right-wing leader 2 ^b	Narrow (23.961%)	0.286	0.833	0.891	-0.055	0.020	-0.097
	Wide (55.439%)	-0.740	-0.274	0.067	0.902	0.935	0.931
Left-wing leader 1 ^c	Narrow (26.985%)	0.510	0.865	0.797	0.069	0.044	-0.017
	Wide (45.873%)	-0.633	-0.148	0.231	0.863	0.877	0.856
Left-wing leader 2 ^d	Narrow (22.514%)	0.177	0.921	0.804	0.307	0.293	0.203
	Wide (59.168%)	-0.787	-0.039	0.381	0.886	0.898	0.891
Undefined leader 1 ^e	Narrow (26.308%)	0.402	0.864	0.840	0.061	0.006	-0.009
	Wide (43.953%)	-0.064	0.010	0.193	0.898	0.942	0.930
Undefined leader 2 ^f	Narrow (30.837%)	0.625	0.892	0.808	0.003	0.113	-0.004
	Wide (41.548%)	-0.352	0.120	0.212	0.825	0.881	0.904

Notes:
^a Benjamin Netanyahu.
^b Eli Yishai.
^c Isaac (Bougie) Herzog.
^d Tzipi Livni.
^e Aryeh Deri.
^f Moshe Kahlon.

leaders as heads of their party, leaders of their political wing, actors in the region, and actors in worldwide politics. To further clarify the meaning of the two focal beneficiary attributions, we conducted exploratory factor analysis of all six beneficiary attributions using principal component analysis with varimax rotation. Two factors emerged, explaining between 22.51% and 59.17% of the variance. The first factor (labeled “Narrow”) captures a narrow social target including the interests of the party and the political wing. The other factor (labeled “Wide”) captures a wider social target, including the interests of the country, the region, and humanity (factor loadings are presented in Table 1). Interestingly, egoistic interests loaded positively on the narrow factor in five of the six cases, reflecting its narrow scope, and negatively on the wide factor in five of the six cases, reflecting a conflict between the interests of the self and the interests of the group. This structure of the beneficiary attributions reveals that the main perceptual distinction is between attributions that capture consensual groups which are relevant to all citizens (the nation and wider) and attributions that better capture groups which are not germane to (or are even rejected by) many citizens.

2.2.2. The effect of social identity on judgments of leaders and their actions

To test for the effect of social identity on judgments we used the moderation model (Model 1) of the PROCESS extension to SPSS (Hayes,

2017) with standardized variables. Participants' own political orientation was entered as the moderator and the affiliation of the political leader as the predictor. Since our hypotheses concern leaders' affiliation and not perceptions of specific leaders, we collapsed the four conditions into a single variable capturing whether the leader was affiliated with the left (coded as 1) or right wing (coded as -1). Because social identity as determined by political orientation is a key variable in our hypotheses, the two ambiguous conditions were not included in the analyses presented below, leaving a sample of 318 participants. The coefficient of the interaction term reflects the effect of the ingroup-outgroup distinction in terms of left-/right-wing political identity. We ran the analysis twice predicting judgments of the leader's actions in terms of beneficiary attributions (once as intended to advance egoistic interests and once as intended to advance national interests), and twice predicting support for the leader (once predicting trust in the leader and once predicting willingness to have that leader represent the country).

Table 2 presents the regression coefficients. All four regressions explained a substantial variance in the predicted judgments (15–32% explained variance). Unexpectedly, left-wing leaders were judged more favorably than right-wing leaders. This finding could reflect the fact that media coverage at the time tended to predict a victory for the left-wing bloc in the elections (a prediction that did not materialize).

Table 2
Regressions predicting judgments of political leaders and their actions from own political orientation, political leader's affiliation and their interaction (Study 1).

	Beneficiary attributions (H1)		Support for the leader (H2)	
	Own (egoistic) interests	Public (national) interests	Trust	Want as representative
Explained variance	14.7% $F(3, 314) = 18.095^{**}$	27.2% $F(3, 314) = 39.039^{**}$	23.0% $F(3, 315) = 31.310^{**}$	32.3% $F(3, 315) = 50.045^{**}$
Own political orientation	$\beta = 0.060$, n.s.	$\beta = 0.054$, n.s.	$\beta = -0.031$, n.s.	$\beta = 0.079$, n.s.
Political leader's affiliation	$\beta = 0.023$, n.s.	$\beta = 0.200$, $t = 4.132^{**}$	$\beta = 0.206$, $t = 4.160^{**}$	$\beta = 0.104$, $t = 2.228^*$
Ingroup/outgroup (the interaction term)	$\beta = -0.384$, $t = -7.314^{**}$	$\beta = 0.479$, $t = 9.892^{**}$	$\beta = 0.433$, $t = 8.710^{**}$	$\beta = 0.553$, $t = 11.856^{**}$

Notes: Hypothesized effects in bold.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.001$.

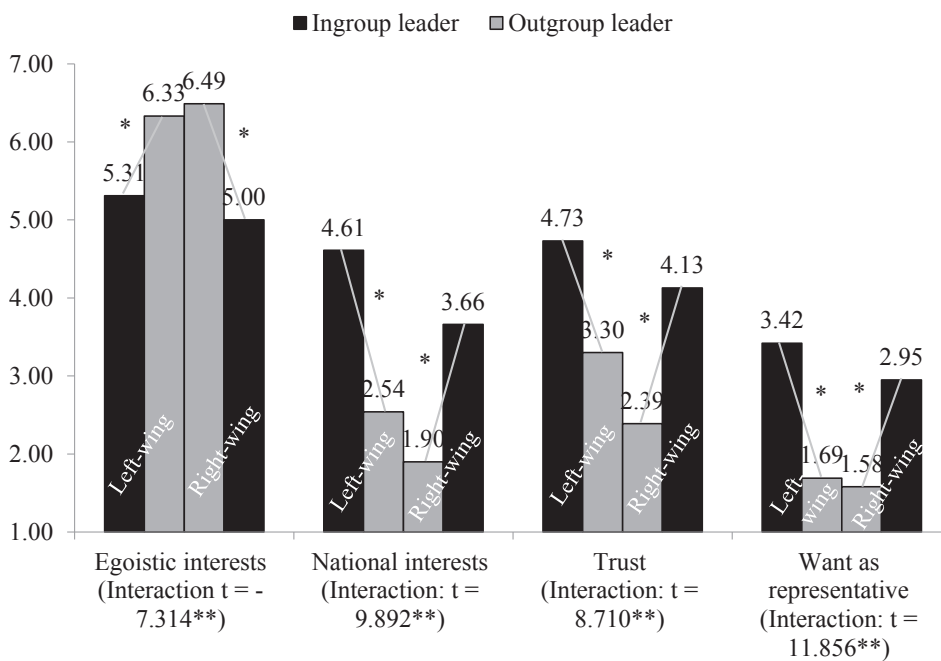


Fig. 1. Judgments of ingroup and outgroup political leaders and their actions in Study 1. *Notes:* The hypotheses were tested by comparing judgments of ingroup and outgroup leaders (comparing the black with the gray bars) as an interaction between respondents' own political orientation and the affiliation of the political leader. The diagonal lines depict simple slopes. * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.001$.

Fig. 1 provides a graphical presentation of the interactions, showing the favorable assessments of ingroup over outgroup leaders. Judgment ratings were calculated for one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean of participants' own political orientation (left- and right-wing participants respectively).⁵ To better understand the meaning of the interaction terms we conducted simple slopes analysis. The analysis confirmed that participants attributed less egoistic interests and more national interests to ingroup rather than outgroup leaders and expressed higher support for them (reflected in higher trust and wanting them as representatives). All eight simple slopes reached statistical significance. See Fig. 1.

Finally, as expected, attributing egoistic interests to the leader's behavior correlated negatively with trust (r s range from -0.620 to -0.400 , across the four right/left leaders, all $p < 0.001$) and support as representative (r s range from -0.736 to -0.466 , all $p < 0.001$). The opposite pattern was found for attributing national interests to the leader's behavior, showing positive correlations with trust (r s range from 0.559 to 0.796 , all $p < 0.001$) and support as representative (r s range from 0.576 to 0.773 , all $p < 0.001$). Thus, attribution patterns are associated with support for the leader. We discuss possible paths of causality in the General Discussion.

3. Study 2

In Study 1 we presented participants with information on different actions by different political leaders, from the right and left of the political divide. To tease apart the effect of the identity of the actor from the content of the action, in Study 2 we sought an identical action performed by different political leaders from both the right and left. We focused on a grim incident in which Jewish extremists set fire to a Palestinian home in the village of Duma in July 2015, killing three members of a family who were inside. Two of the political leaders in Study 1 and another right-wing leader voiced support for using extreme

⁵ The use of bars to present an interaction between a discrete and a continuous variable was chosen over the traditional simple slopes presentation because it is more condense, presenting all four dependent variables in a single figure rather than requiring four separate figures. It is also more easily comparable with the additional analysis presented in Study 2, and thus reflects the consistency of our findings better.

interrogation methods to find the culprits. We used this incident to test our predictions based on attributions about the same action performed by different actors. In addition, the support expressed by the political leaders of the two largest right-wing parties allowed us to examine the effect of ingroup favoritism resulting from social identity defined by support for a specific party of the same political wing rather than a more general (and heated) distinction derived from the hawkish/dovish distinction.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants and procedure

The participants were 316 Israeli adults recruited from a local online panel.⁶ Panel participants answer surveys for monetary compensation, in a manner similar to Amazon's MTurk. Participants' age ranged from 18 to 67, with a mean age of 29.73 ($SD = 5.95$); 50% were female. Upon consent, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (between-subjects design), which differed in the actor: a left-wing leader or one of two right-wing leaders. The participants in both conditions were reminded that due to recent events, homeland security forces suspect a Jewish terror cell of planning to harm Palestinians, and that criticism had been expressed regarding the extreme interrogation methods used in the investigations. They were further reminded that the political leader had publicly affirmed his support for the homeland security efforts. The participants provided their perceptions of the politician's action (the support for extreme interrogation methods) in terms of the six beneficiary attributions (self and country included), and reported their judgments of the political leader. We included additional measures for exploratory purposes.

3.1.2. Measures

3.1.2.1. Beneficiary attributions. We used the same six items developed in Study 1 to measure the six social beneficiary attributions. Attribution of actions to egoistic interests was negatively correlated with attribution of these actions to national interests, $r = -0.24$, $p < 0.001$.

3.1.2.2. Trust. We used the same two-item measure developed in Study 1 ($r = 0.77$).

⁶ Two participants partially completed the survey and were thus omitted from relevant analysis yielding differences in the degrees of freedom.

3.1.2.3. *Leader as country’s representative.* We used the same four-item scale developed in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.96$).

3.1.2.4. *Own political orientation.* We used the same four-item scale used in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.87$). Higher scores indicate stronger left-wing orientation.

3.1.2.5. *Party supported.* The participants were provided with a list of the parties running in the elections held a few months earlier and were asked to select the party they voted for.

3.2. Results and discussion

As in Study 1, we conducted an exploratory analysis of the structure of the six measured beneficiary attributions before testing our hypotheses. The hypothesis testing for this study had two parts. First, we examined the effect of social identity on judgments of the political leaders and their actions while focusing on the left-right divide. We then repeated these analyses for the two right-wing leaders, including in this analysis only the participants who reported voting for one of those leaders in the last election (61 participants).

3.2.1. Exploratory analysis of beneficiary attributions

Results for our exploratory factor analysis of the six beneficiary attributions are shown in Table 3. The findings closely replicate those found in Study 1, with a distinct split into narrow attributions including egoistic interests and wider attributions including national interests.

3.2.2. The effect of social identity on judgments of leaders and their actions

To test for the effect of social identity on respondents’ judgments, we compared judgments about the two right-wing leaders to judgments about the left-wing leader. We used the moderation model (Model 1) of the PROCESS extension to SPSS (Hayes, 2017) with standardized variables. Participants’ own political orientation was entered as the moderator and the affiliation of the political leader as the predictor. We collapsed the three conditions into a single variable capturing whether the leader was affiliated with the left (coded as 1) or right wing (coded as -1). Analyses comparing judgments of the left-wing leader with each of the right-wing leaders separately yielded similar results (see supplementary analysis in Appendix B). The coefficient of the interaction term reflects the effect of the ingroup-outgroup distinction in terms of left-/right-wing political identity. As in Study 1, we ran the analysis twice predicting judgments of the leader’s actions in terms of beneficiary attributions (egoistic and national interests), and twice predicting support for the leader (trust and willingness to have that leader represent the country). Table 4 presents the regression coefficients. Our hypotheses positing ingroup favoritism were confirmed, with significant interaction terms in all regressions.

Fig. 2 provides a graphical presentation of the interactions, showing more favorable judgments of ingroup over outgroup leaders. To better understand the meaning of the interaction terms we conducted simple slopes analysis. The analysis confirmed that participants attributed less egoistic interests and more national interests to ingroup rather than outgroup leaders, and expressed higher support for them (reflected in higher trust and wanting them to serve as the country’s representatives). Seven of the eight simple slopes reached statistical significance. See Fig. 2.

Finally, as expected, attributing egoistic interests to the leader’s behavior correlated negatively with trust (r s range from -0.468 to -0.341 across the three leaders, all $p < 0.001$) and support as representative (r s range from -0.352 to -0.269 , all $p < 0.01$). The opposite pattern was found for attributing national interests to the leader’s behavior, showing positive correlations with trust (r s range from 0.401 to 0.628 , all $p < 0.001$) and support as representative (r s range from 0.299 to 0.521 , all $p < 0.01$). Thus, attribution patterns are associated with support for the leader.

Table 3
Factor loadings (Study 2).

Political leader (orientation)	Factor (variance explained)	Own (egoistic) interests	The interests of the party	The interests of the political wing	Public (national) interests	The interests of the region (the Middle East)	The interests of humanity (universalistic)
Right-wing leader 1 ^a	Narrow (52.273%)	0.842	0.921	0.861	-0.084	-0.195	-0.174
	Wide (25.140%)	-0.270	-0.163	-0.056	0.828	0.852	0.870
Right-wing leader 2 ^b	Narrow (32.749%)	0.699	0.911	0.857	0.072	0.046	-0.269
	Wide (41.131%)	-0.352	-0.030	0.194	0.789	0.895	0.846
Left-wing leader ^c	Narrow (44.634%)	0.862	0.942	0.890	-0.031	-0.042	-0.069
	Wide (35.774%)	-0.202	-0.071	0.115	0.858	0.892	0.897

^a Benjamin Netanyahu.

^b Naftali Bennett.

^c Isaac (Bougie) Herzog.

Table 4
Regressions predicting judgments of political leaders and their actions from own political orientation, political leader's affiliation and their interaction (Study 2).

	Beneficiary attributions (H1)		Support for the leader (H2)	
	Own (egoistic) interests	Public (national) interests	Trust	Want as representative
Explained variance	6.2%	13.3%	25.8%	39.0%
	$F(3, 310) = 6.820^{**}$	$F(3, 310) = 15.795^{**}$	$F(3, 310) = 35.835^{**}$	$F(3, 311) = 66.171^{**}$
Own political orientation	$\beta = 0.116,$ $t = 2.097$	$\beta = 0.018,$ n.s.	$\beta = -0.108,$ $t = -2.204$	$\beta = -0.117,$ $t = -2.651$
Political leader's affiliation	$\beta = 0.129,$ $t = 2.343$	$\beta = -0.138,$ $t = -2.603$	$\beta = -0.001,$ n.s.	$\beta = -0.150,$ $t = -3.378^{**}$
Ingroup/outgroup (the interaction term)	$\beta = -0.179,$ $t = -3.239^*$	$\beta = 0.338,$ $t = 6.374^{**}$	$\beta = 0.497,$ $t = 10.119^{**}$	$\beta = 0.596,$ $t = 13.393^{**}$

Notes: Hypothesized effects in bold.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.001$.

3.2.3. The effect of social identity in the same political wing

In addition to the left-wing leader, leaders of Israel's two most prominent right-wing parties both voiced support for using extreme interrogation methods to find the culprits in the Duma attack. This allowed us to generalize the hypothesized effect of social identity beyond the distinction between right- and left-wing leaders. In our final analysis we examined results for the 39 supporters of right-wing party 1 and the 22 supporters of right-wing party 2. We used ANOVA to compare support for the leader and judgments about his actions as a function of participants' own party membership (supporters of party 1 or 2) and the identity of the leader (leader of party 1 or 2). The mean ratings are presented in Fig. 3. The interaction term depicting the effect of the ingroup/outgroup distinction was significant for the two support measures, marginally significant at a two-tail level for judgments of the actions as designed to benefit the national interest, and non-significant for judgments of the actions as designed to benefit egoistic interests. The weaker effects on attributions may result from the small sample size, but may also be due to the specific nature of the issue presented to participants – an issue highly related to the hawk-dove debate and unrelated to the principles distinguishing the two right-wing parties. Thus, it is possible that the right-left divide was much more accessible to participants than particular distinctions between parties of the same wing.

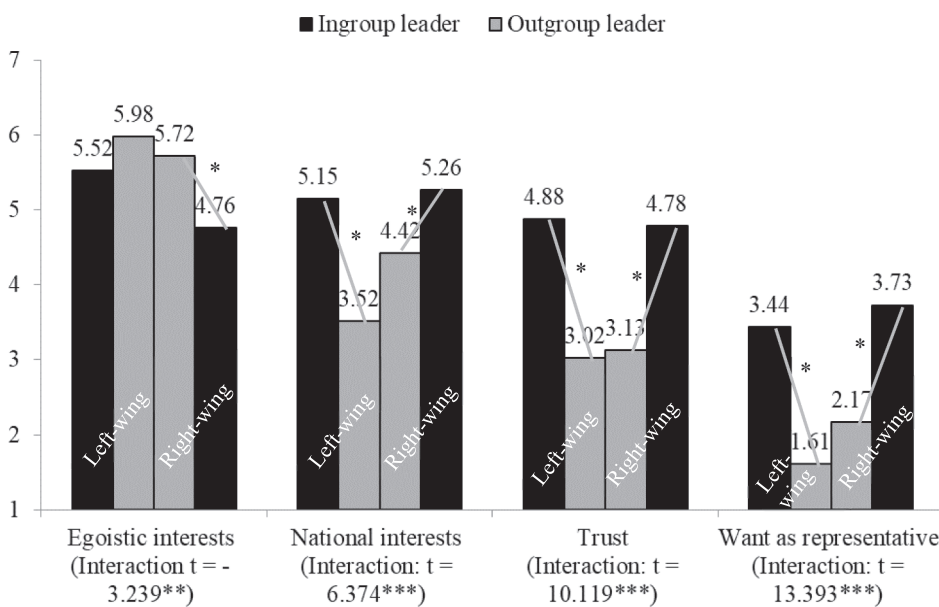


Fig. 2. Judgments regarding political leaders and their actions in Study 2. Notes: The hypotheses were tested by comparing judgments regarding ingroup and outgroup leaders (comparing the black with the gray bars) as an interaction between respondents' own political orientation and the affiliation of the political leader. * denotes significant simple slopes at the 0.05 level. ** denotes significant interaction terms at the 0.01 level. *** denotes significant interaction terms at the 0.001 level.

4. General discussion

In two field studies, we investigated attributions and judgments made by citizens of diverse political orientations with regard to behavior of real-life political leaders. A preliminary study (Section 2.1) confirmed that various social targets spontaneously pop up in observers' minds when encountering an action by a political leader, indicating that citizens perceive the complexity of the political social context. However, exploratory factor analyses replicated across the two studies revealed that the divergent social targets are grouped into two factors only, reflecting wide and narrow social beneficiaries. The factor that we labeled "Narrow" captures attributions of the political leader's behavior to a narrow social target, such as the interests of a political party or a political wing. The factor that we labeled "Wide" captures attributions of the leader's behavior to a wider social target, such as the interests of the country, the region, or humanity. Attributing the behavior to egoistic interests loaded positively on the narrow factor, reflecting its narrow scope. It also loaded, albeit to a lesser extent, negatively on the wide factor, reflecting an inherent conflict between the interests of the self and the interests of the wider group.

We further investigated how ingroup favoritism is associated with the conflicting attributions of egoistic versus national interests. These two focal beneficiary attributions were the most prominent in our pilot study (each mentioned by at least 70% of the respondents in an open-ended question).

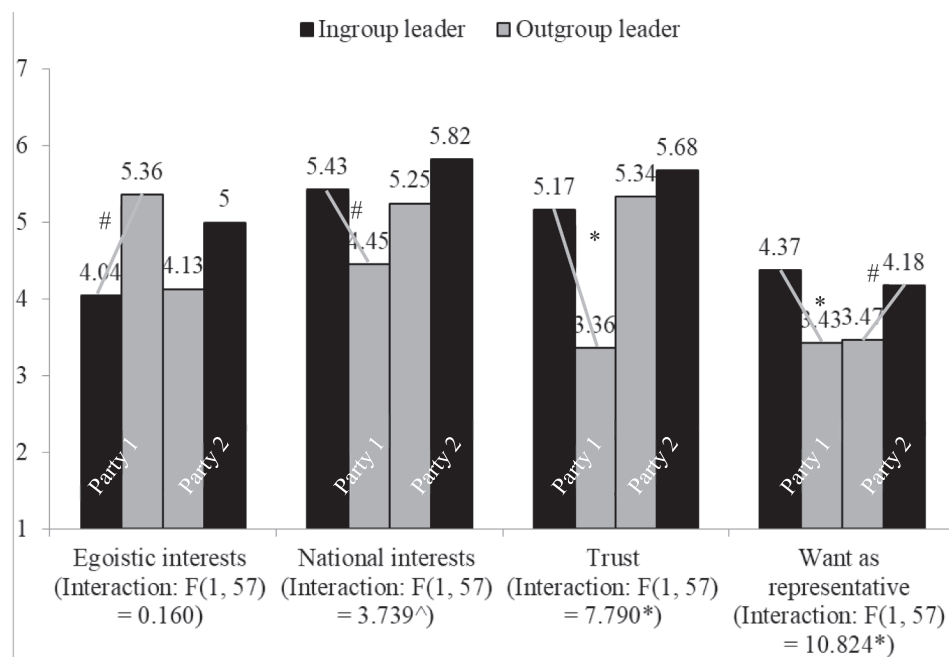


Fig. 3. Mean judgments about right-wing leaders and their actions. *Notes:* The hypotheses were tested by comparing judgments regarding ingroup and outgroup leaders (comparing the black with the gray bars) as an interaction between respondents' party affiliation and the affiliation of the political leader. * $p < 0.05$, # $p < 0.05$ one-tail.

As hypothesized, our findings indicate that citizens' attributions regarding the behavior of political leaders, and their support for those leaders, follow an ingroup favoritism pattern: the more the participants shared the political leader's orientation, the less likely they were to attribute the leader's behavior to a desire to benefit egoistic interests, and the more likely they were to attribute it to a desire to benefit national interests. Support for the leader – in terms of trust and the wish for the leader to serve as the country's representative – was also more likely the more the participants shared the leaders' political orientation.

To study the match between participants' political orientation and their leader's, we focused on the right-left divide vis-à-vis Israel's ongoing international conflict (Studies 1–2). In Study 2 we further generalized the notion of ingroup favoritism beyond the right-left distinction. The findings indicate the same pattern of associations (albeit weaker) when comparing judgments about two party leaders of the same political wing (the right) by supporters of each party.

We next discuss our findings with regard to research on attributions and research on ingroup favoritism.

We join the literature on intergroup bias and ingroup favoritism, providing additional support for the effect of the ingroup–outgroup distinction on attributions. Research on the ultimate attribution error (Hewstone, 1990; Pettigrew, 1979) indicates that when making attributions regarding outgroup members people tend to attribute internal causes to negative behaviors and failures, and external causes to positive behaviors and successes. In the current research we expand the notion of biased intergroup attributions from the classic distinction between internal and external attributions to attributions of intentionality conceptualized as potential beneficiaries – the social targets whose interests the actions is intended to benefit (the self versus the nation).

Past research has pointed to various cognitive mechanisms underlying motivated reasoning, including motivated skepticism (Taber & Lodge, 2006), reactive devaluation (Maoz et al., 2002) and motivated construal (Knowles et al., 2009). Future studies could investigate if and how these mechanisms underlie motivated reasoning regarding beneficiary attributions, and investigate additional mechanisms. For example, acknowledging that the salience of a specific social identity is context-dependent (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994), one may wonder whether information on a specific political leader may raise the salience of the superordinate identity (e.g., the nation) among ingroup members but raise the salience of a subordinate identity (e.g., the political wing or party) among outgroup members.

Research on the outgroup homogeneity effect (Park & Rothbart, 1982) suggests that outgroup members are perceived as less varied and less individuated than ingroup members. One might hence expect that outgroup leaders, more than ingroup leaders, would be perceived as motivated to act on behalf of their group rather than as individuals acting in their own autonomous and varied interests. Our findings show, however, that the behavior of outgroup leaders (more than the behavior of ingroup leaders) is attributed to egoistic interests.

Our findings also raise questions about causality. The congruency between the viewer (participants as potential voters) and the actor (the political leader) had a similar effect on beneficiary attributions and on general support for the leader. Do judgments about a person's actions (i.e., attributions) inform judgments about the person (e.g., trust)? Or do judgments about the person determine how their actions are judged? Moreover, the similar patterns may indicate a general positivity bias, raising doubts about the need to distinguish between judgments of actions in terms of beneficiary attributions and judgments of the actor in terms of trust and support. The design of the current research does not allow us to directly test these questions. Future studies could employ controlled experiments to test the distinction between beneficiary attributions and support for the leader, and, to the extent that the two are distinct, tease apart possible paths of influence.

While our research focuses on political leaders, we contend that people make inferences regarding the intentions of others, not just political leaders, in terms of the social targets that they presumably intend to benefit (i.e., beneficiary attributions). For example, it may be extended from political leaders to their followers. Future studies could test whether voting for the ingroup is perceived as intended to serve national interests whereas voting for the outgroup is perceived more as intended to benefit egoistic interests. Beneficiary attributions are relevant to additional social contexts, and the likelihood of each attribution depends on the specific circumstances (see Roccas, Sagiv, Amit, Hazan, & Oppenheim, 2018). Future research could further explore boundary conditions for the effect of identity-motivated reasoning in other cultural groups, potentially going beyond the scope of politics and testing for biased judgments in other contexts, both more competitive (e.g., sports) and more cooperative (e.g., work teams).

The effect of motivated reasoning in the political context could undermine the very essence of democracy, because it implies that rather than citizens' preferred policies determining their support for a party, party affiliation determines citizens' preferred policies (i.e., Party over Policy; Cohen, 2003). Our findings emphasize the difficulties faced by political leaders, whose actions are constantly interpreted in light of their political

affiliation and in interaction with the constituent’s own political orientation. Practically, our findings may help explain the astonishment of the losing side after elections. Encountering the results of the 2015 Israeli national elections, the left was shocked by the reelection of right-wing Benjamin Netanyahu. Similarly, Democrats in the United States were (and still are) appalled by the election of Republican president Donald Trump, failing to understand how others perceived him as a worthy advocate of national interests. Our findings show that individuals perceive the actions of political leaders in an ingroup-favorable way.

5. Supplementary material

The stimuli, code, and data from all experiments are available on the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/ec6f2/>).

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Appendix A. Leaders and actions employed in Study 1

A.1. Left-wing leaders

Left-wing leader 1. Isaac (Bogie) Herzog announced the formation of the Zionist Union – a joint list of Herzog’s Labor party and the Kadima party, led by Tzipi Livni – and declared that the two parties would run together in the forthcoming elections to the 20th Knesset (parliament).

Left-wing leader 2. Tzipi Livni announced the formation of the Zionist Union – a joint list of Livni’s Kadima party and the Labor party, led by Isaac (Bogie) Herzog – and declared that the two parties would run together in the forthcoming elections to the 20th Knesset (parliament).

A.2. Right-wing leaders

Right-wing leader 1. Benjamin Netanyahu’s actions led to the dissolution of the 19th Knesset (parliament) and to early elections.

Right-wing leader 2. Eli Yishai resigned from the SHAS party and announced that he would lead a new party in the forthcoming elections to the 20th Knesset (parliament).

A.3. Undefined leaders

Undefined leader 1. Aryeh Deri announced his resignation as leader of the SHAS party, and a couple of weeks later stated that he would lead the party again.

Undefined leader 2. Moshe Kahlon resigned from the Likud party and announced that he would lead a new party, Kulanu.

Appendix B. Supplementary analysis

Separate regressions comparing judgments of the left wing leader with each of the right wing leaders (Study 2).

	Beneficiary attributions (H1)		Support for the leader (H2)	
	Own (egoistic) interests	Public (national) interests	Trust	Want as representative
	Left-wing leader ^c vs. Right-wing leader 1 ^a			
Explained variance	9.5%	14.4%	36.9%	45.7%
	$F(3, 207) = 7.207^{**}$	$F(3, 207) = 11.612^{**}$	$F(3, 207) = 40.337^{**}$	$F(3, 207) = 57.961^{**}$
Own political orientation	$\beta = 0.128,$ $t = 1.933^{\#}$	$\beta = 0.154,$ $t = 2.376^{\#}$	$\beta = -0.033,$ n.s.	$\beta = 0.044,$ n.s.
Political leader’s affiliation	$\beta = 0.095,$ n.s.	$\beta = -0.134,$ $t = -2.070^{\#}$	$\beta = 0.128,$ $t = 2.309^{\#}$	$\beta = -0.177,$ $t = -3.449^{**}$
Ingroup/outgroup (the interaction term)	$\beta = -0.269,$ $t = -4.012^{**}$	$\beta = 0.318,$ $t = 4.876^{**}$	$\beta = 0.604,$ $t = 10.794^{**}$	$\beta = 0.653,$ $t = 12.587^{**}$
	Left-wing leader ^c vs. Right-wing leader 2 ^b			
Explained variance	4.2%	16.9%	24.9%	36.3%
	$F(3, 214) = 3.130^{\#}$	$F(3, 214) = 14.465^{**}$	$F(3, 214) = 23.668^{**}$	$F(3, 215) = 40.837^{**}$
Own political orientation	$\beta = 0.001,$ n.s.	$\beta = 0.111,$ $t = 1.773^{\#}$	$\beta = 0.115,$ $t = 1.938^{\#}$	$\beta = 0.125,$ $t = 2.291^{\#}$
Political leader’s affiliation	$\beta = 0.159,$ $t = 2.372^{\#}$	$\beta = -0.147,$ $t = -2.349^{\#}$	$\beta = -0.111,$ $t = -1.866^{\#}$	$\beta = -0.122,$ $t = -2.232^{\#}$
Ingroup/outgroup (the interaction term)	$\beta = -0.131,$ $t = -1.948^{\#}$	$\beta = 0.371,$ $t = 5.941^{**}$	$\beta = 0.478,$ $t = 8.051^{**}$	$\beta = 0.583,$ $t = 10.684^{**}$

Notes: [#] $p < 0.10,$ ^{*} $p < 0.05,$ ^{**} $p < 0.001,$ hypothesized effects in **bold**.

a. Benjamin Netanyahu. b. Naftali Bennett. c. Isaac (Boogie) Herzog.

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Declaration of interest

None.

Appendix C. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2018.12.009>.

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