

## ARTICLES

# Social Protest and Its Discontents

## A System Justification Perspective

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**Abstract:** Psychological factors that encourage—as well as discourage—participation in social protest are often overlooked in the social sciences. In this article, we draw together recent contributions to the understanding of the social and psychological bases of political action and inaction from the perspective of system justification theory. This perspective, which builds on theory and research on the “belief in a just world,” contends that—because of underlying epistemic, existential, and relational needs to reduce uncertainty, threat, and social discord—people are motivated (to varying degrees, as a function of personality and context) to defend, bolster, and justify the legitimacy of the social, political, and economic systems on which they depend. We review evidence that, alongside political conservatism and religiosity, system justification helps to explain resistance and acquiescence to the status quo in sociopolitical contexts as diverse as Lebanon, New Zealand, Argentina, and the United States.

**Keywords:** acquiescence, belief in a just world, collective action, conservatism, political ideology, religiosity, resistance, system justification

In a valiant intellectual effort to understand and appreciate why social injustice sometimes inspires rebellion and at other times is simply suffered in silence, the great social historian Barrington Moore Jr. adopted a surprisingly psychological view. He wrote, for instance, that “in a situation in which we would expect, on other grounds, to find the response of moral outrage but *fail* to find it . . . we should also find social and psychological mechanisms that take advantage of the plasticity of



human nature to inhibit anger and outrage” (1978: 14). More specifically, Moore argued that “people are evidently inclined to grant legitimacy to anything that is or seems inevitable no matter how painful it may be. Otherwise the pain might be intolerable. The conquest of this sense of inevitability is essential to the development of politically effective moral outrage” (1978: 458–459).

But why would people grant legitimacy to circumstances in which they are abused, exploited, or oppressed simply because those circumstances are regarded as inevitable or unavoidable? This state of affairs is especially puzzling from the standpoint of rational choice theories, which suggest that people weigh the costs and benefits of collective action and take to the streets when it is in their best interest to do so (e.g., Olson 1965; Opp 1989). From a psychological perspective, there are a number of other social, cognitive, and motivational factors that may prevent people from behaving in a purely rational manner when it comes to decisions about whether or not to protest (Elster 1993).

For example, Melvin Lerner (1980: 14) proposed that images of a “manageable and predictable world” are essential to the pursuit of long-term goals. Consequently, people “want to and have to believe that they live in a just world” in which suffering is seen as deserved rather than undeserved “so that they can go about their daily lives with a sense of hope, trust, and confidence in their future.” The guiding assumption of Lerner’s theory of the “belief in a just world,” which he characterized as a “fundamental delusion,” is that people are motivated to deny or minimize the existence of social injustice and to rationalize outcomes as legitimate rather than fundamentally illegitimate.

System justification theory, which was proposed by John Jost and Mahzarin Banaji (1994), drew heavily upon just world theory (as well as a number of other social-scientific perspectives, including cognitive dissonance, social identity, and Marxian-feminist theories of ideology and false consciousness; see Jost and Hunyady 2002; Jost and van der Toorn 2012). System justification theory represents a concerted attempt to understand, in social and psychological terms, why many people not only accept but defend and maintain social, economic, and political systems and institutions that contribute to human suffering, exploitation, and injustice. Much as Ted Gurr (1970) famously asked why men rebel, system justification theorists ask why (and when) men—and women—do *not* rebel (e.g., Jost et al. 2012).

A growing body of empirical research suggests that the answer, at least in part, is that subscribing to the legitimacy of the status quo serves fundamental epistemic, existential, and relational needs to

attain a subjective sense of certainty, security, and social belongingness (Hennes et al. 2012; Jost and Hunyady 2005; Jost, Langer, et al. 2017; Jost, Ledgerwood, et al. 2008). In support of the notion that system justification serves the palliative function of making people feel better about the situations in which they find themselves (Jost and Hunyady 2002), several studies indicate that the endorsement of system-justifying beliefs is associated with both increased positive affect (and self-reported happiness) and decreased negative affect (e.g., Bahamondes-Correa 2016; Napier and Jost 2008; Wakslak et al. 2007). It may be comforting, in other words, to assume that the way things are is the way they should be, and that prevailing institutions are legitimate, necessary, desirable, and justifiable.

On the other hand, it follows that sustained commitment to social protest requires that would-be participants be willing and able to tolerate a great deal of uncertainty about the future (and, at times, perhaps even chaos); physical and other threats to one's safety and security (such as being harmed by counterprotestors or the police); and interpersonal problems that arise when friends and family members, who have system-justifying motives of their own, may fail to understand or support one's contentiousness. These challenges, in turn, may help to explain why backlash against activists is common (Diekmann and Goodfriend 2007; O'Brien and Crandall 2005; Rudman et al. 2012; Yeung et al. 2014) and burnout rates among activists are extremely high (Klandermans 2003; Kovan and Dirkx 2003; Rodgers 2010).

According to system justification theory, then, people are motivated (to differing degrees, depending on personal and contextual factors) to "make peace" with and accommodate themselves to the societal status quo (Jost et al. 2009; Kay, Gaucher, et al. 2009; Liviatan and Jost 2014). As Moore (1978) had suggested, people are especially likely to rationalize unpleasant circumstances when they regard the social system as inevitable or inescapable (Kay et al. 2002; Laurin et al. 2010, 2012, 2013). By highlighting the social, cognitive, and motivational reasons why people may be tempted to defend and bolster the status quo, a system justification perspective helps to explain the psychological appeal of religious belief systems (Jost et al. 2014; Kay et al. 2008; Kay, Whitson, et al. 2009; Lerner 1980, 1991; Shepherd et al. 2017) and politically conservative ideologies (Jost 2017; Jost et al. 2003; Jost, Langer, et al. 2017; Jost, Nosek, et al. 2008).

In the remainder of this article, we describe (in necessarily abbreviated form) the results of studies we have conducted recently in such diverse sociopolitical contexts as Lebanon, New Zealand, Argentina,

and the United States. In each of these countries, we find that individual differences in system justification, political conservatism, and religiosity help to account for variability in resistance versus acquiescence to the societal status quo. We close with a brief discussion of psychological factors, which are often overlooked in the disciplines of sociology, political science, and other social sciences but nonetheless serve to encourage or discourage participation in social protest and collective action aimed at bringing about qualitative social change (see also Jost, Becker, et al. 2017).

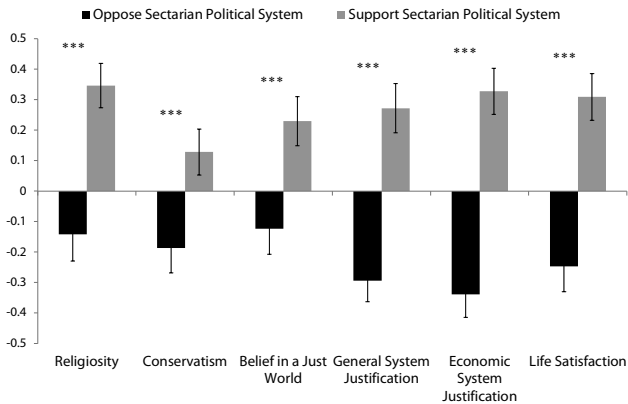
## **Support for versus Opposition to the Sectarian Political System in Lebanon**

Lebanon is a small Arab country in the Middle East, and it is one of the most religiously diverse in the region. There are at least eighteen officially recognized religious “confessions” in Lebanon; half of these are Muslim sects, yet the country is 40 percent Christian (US Department of State 2013). The current political system, which is rooted in sectarian doctrines that arose in the aftermath of World War I, enshrines religious quotas that dominate political life (from administrative posts to parliamentary seats) and systematically privileges members of some religious groups over others (Salloukh et al. 2015). The sectarian system contributed to a bloody civil war in Lebanon in which Muslims and Christians were pitted against each other in violent struggle from 1975 to 1990. The Lebanese economy is a neoliberal, “laissez-faire,” free market system characterized by extreme social and economic inequality (Premkumar et al. 2012; Salloukh et al. 2015). In 2013, Lebanon ranked third highest (out of 141 countries worldwide) in terms of economic inequality, and it was estimated that 0.3 percent of the population controlled 50 percent of the nation’s wealth (Credit Suisse 2015). Economic and political conditions have long favored the country’s Christians (Chamie 1980; Labaki 1988). Although many Lebanese citizens have protested the sectarian political system in recent years, the overwhelming majority appear to support the status quo (Yahya 2017).

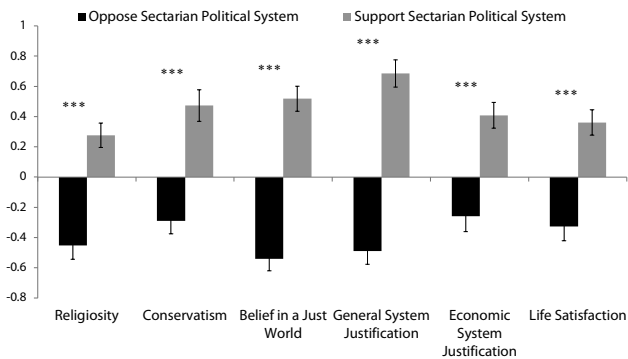
We conducted a nationally representative survey of five hundred Lebanese adults to investigate social and psychological factors that help to explain resistance and acquiescence to the societal status quo. We observed, first of all, that individuals who supported (versus opposed) the sectarian political system in Lebanon were more religious and more politically conservative. This was true of Muslim as well as Christian

respondents. Supporters (versus opponents) of the sectarian system also scored higher on an instrument used to measure the “belief in a just world” (translated from the German original by Dalbert et al. 1987), which includes items such as “Justice always prevails over injustice” and “People get what they deserve” (see Figures 1a and 1b).

**Figure 1a:** Social and psychological differences between supporters and opponents of the sectarian political system in Lebanon (Christian respondents only,  $N = 205$ )



**Figure 1b:** Social and psychological differences between supporters and opponents of the sectarian political system in Lebanon (Muslim respondents only,  $N = 295$ )



*Note.* Numerical entries are mean Z-scores for supporters and opponents of the sectarian system. Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences between these two groups based on independent samples' *t*-tests.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

Supporters of the system, regardless of whether they were Muslim or Christian, also scored higher on measures of (a) general system justification (translated from the English original by Kay and Jost 2003), including items such as “Society is set up so that people usually get what they deserve” and “Most policies serve the greater good”; and (b) economic system justification (translated from Jost and Thompson 2000), including items such as “If people work hard, they almost always get what they want” and “Social class differences reflect differences in the natural order of things.”

The findings of this study revealed that—in accordance with system justification theory—individuals who approved of the system of religious sectarianism were more likely to support and justify Lebanese society in general and the neoliberal capitalist economic system in particular. These results suggest that religious, social, and economic forces in Lebanon were experienced as ideologically congruent and perhaps mutually reinforcing—rather than as being in tension or conflict. Likewise, individuals who opposed the sectarian political system were more likely than others to criticize or challenge the social and economic institutions in the country. Consistent with the notion that system-justifying belief systems serve the palliative function of increasing one’s satisfaction with the status quo (Jost and Hunyady 2002) and that challenging the status quo is associated with personal dissatisfaction, we observed that supporters of the sectarian system reported higher levels of life satisfaction than did their counterparts who opposed it.

## **Support versus Opposition to the National Party in New Zealand**

In New Zealand, the Māori, the indigenous peoples who constitute 15 percent of the national population (SNZ 2013), have been historically disenfranchised by the majority group who are of European descent (Sibley and Osborne 2016). Nevertheless, results from a nationally representative public opinion survey conducted in 2009 suggested that Māori respondents “legitimized ethnic-group relations at least as much as the group that benefits from the ethnic-group hierarchy” (Sengupta et al. 2015: 335). In other words, although ethnic minorities in New Zealand (i.e., Māori, Asians, and Pacific Islanders) were not especially strong supporters of the political system overall, they judged ethnic relations in society to be extremely fair—despite the persistence of significant ethnic disparities in income, education, employment, and health.

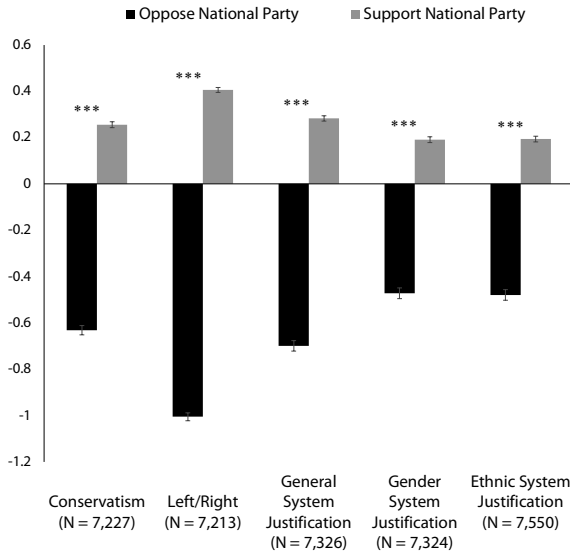
Additional analyses of survey data from 2013 show that, when choosing between the two major parties in New Zealand, 46 percent of Māori intended to vote for the conservative (center-right) incumbent National Party in the 2014 general election, whereas 54 percent intended to vote for the liberal (center-left) opposition party (Labour). Furthermore, the Māori Party, which splintered from Labour in 2004 with an explicit platform of advancing the rights of New Zealand's indigenous peoples, has been in a coalition with the National Party for the past three consecutive election cycles (i.e., from 2008 to 2017), enabling the center-right National Party to form a minority government.

To investigate the role of system justification in support of (versus opposition to) the conservative ruling party in New Zealand, we analyzed data from the 2013 wave of the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study (NZAVS). The NZAVS includes a nationally representative sample of 9,315 New Zealanders who planned to vote for one of the two major political parties in the 2013 general election. Supporters of the status quo—those who intended to vote for the National Party—were significantly more conservative than those who intended to vote for the Labour Party. This was true of minority respondents (Māori, Asians, and Pacific Islanders) as well as New Zealand Europeans.

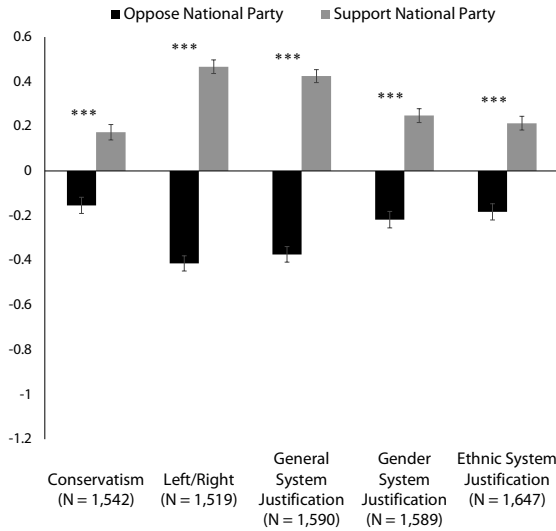
More tellingly, perhaps, supporters (versus opponents) of the National Party scored significantly higher on measures of general system justification and gender system justification, as well as on ethnic system justification (i.e., support for a social system that disadvantages ethnic minorities in New Zealand). Once again, this pattern held for minority respondents and for New Zealand Europeans (see Figures 2a and 2b).

With respect to the palliative function of system justification, Jessica Harding and Chris Sibley analyzed data from an earlier wave of the NZAVS and found that system justification was associated with higher concurrent life satisfaction, but for people who had experienced societal-level harms it was associated with lower satisfaction one year later. The authors concluded that system justification acted “as a buffer against the negative effects of generalized and abstracted experiences of active harm on life satisfaction in the short-term” (2013: 414), but that these effects were relatively short-lived. Such results are consistent with the notion that rationalization of the status quo confers immediate hedonic benefits but delayed social and psychological costs, especially for members of disadvantaged groups (Jost and Thompson 2000; see also Godfrey et al. 2017).

**Figure 2a:** Social and psychological differences between supporters and opponents of the National Party in New Zealand (European respondents only).



**Figure 2b:** Social and psychological differences between supporters and opponents of the National Party in New Zealand (minority respondents only).



Note. Numerical entries are mean Z-scores for supporters and opponents of the National Party. Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences between these two groups based on independent samples' *t*-tests.

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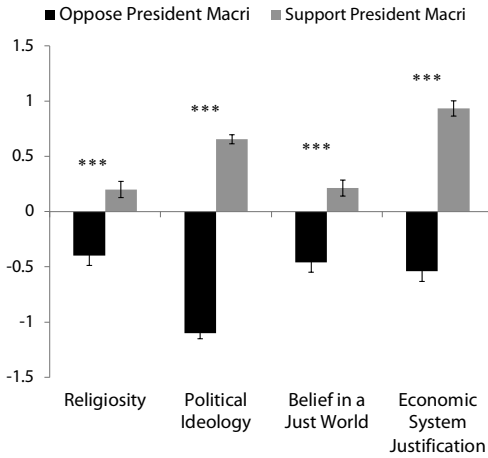


## **Support for versus Opposition to President Macri in Argentina**

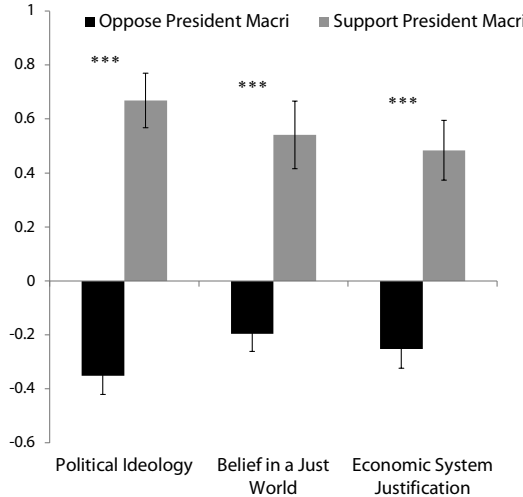
In the aftermath of a severe economic crisis that hit Argentina in the early twenty-first century (Cooney 2007; Prange 2015), political leaders have embraced a new wave of neoliberalism and a redoubled commitment to “free market” principles. Since 2015, the president of the country has been Mauricio Macri, a center-right politician who has worked in business and engineering, and he has sought to accelerate the pace of neoliberal reforms, including the removal of price controls and the shrinking of public expenditures. Opposition on the center left comes from former President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who governed the country for eight years. At the end of her term, 29 percent of Argentinians lived below the poverty line (ODSA 2016), and there was a 26.9 percent annual inflation rate (INDEC 2016).

To investigate the role of system justification in Argentinian politics, we administered questionnaires to two convenience samples in 2016, one year after Macri’s election. In a sample of 328 Argentinian adults from Buenos Aires, we observed that supporters of Macri identified themselves as more religious and more politically conservative, in comparison with those who opposed the president (Figure 3a). Although we did not measure religiosity in a sample of 373 university students, we observed that supporters of Macri were more conservative in this sample as well (Figure 3b). In both samples, Macri supporters scored significantly higher than opponents on the “belief in a just world” and “economic system justification” measures.

**Figure 3a:** Social and psychological differences between supporters and opponents of President Mauricio Macri in Argentina (Adults in Buenos Aires,  $N = 328$ ).



**Figure 3b:** Social and psychological differences between supporters and opponents of President Mauricio Macri in Argentina (University of Buenos Aires students,  $N = 373$ ).



Note. Numerical entries are mean Z-scores for supporters and opponents of President Macri. Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences between these two groups based on independent samples'  $t$ -tests.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

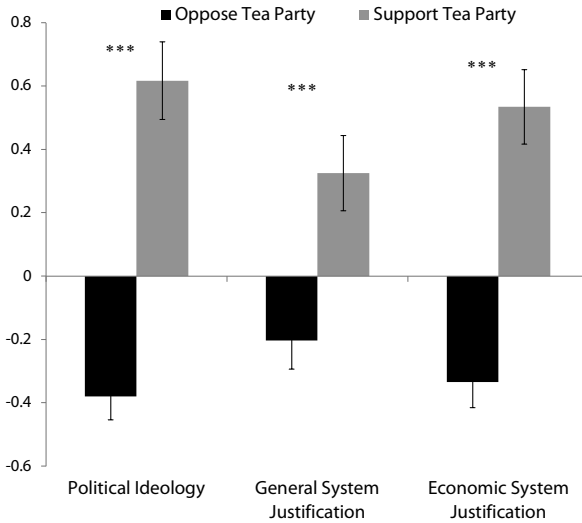
## Support versus Opposition to the Status Quo in the United States

Even before the election of President Donald Trump, which has ushered in a new era of right-wing leadership on social and economic issues (Coates 2017), the United States had begun to reckon with increasing inequality under capitalism. The leftist Occupy Wall Street movement, which peaked in 2011, challenged the economic status quo by calling for an end to policies favoring the richest 1 percent at the expense of the other 99 percent. On the right, the Tea Party movement pushed for increased tax cuts, decreased government spending, and conservative social policies. Although both movements exhibited elements of political insurgency, it is relatively clear from the perspective of system justification theory that Occupy Wall Street posed a more fundamental challenge to the social, economic, and political establishment than did the Tea Party movement, which sought to “restore America’s founding principles of fiscal responsibility, constitutionally limited government, and free markets” (TPPCF 2018).

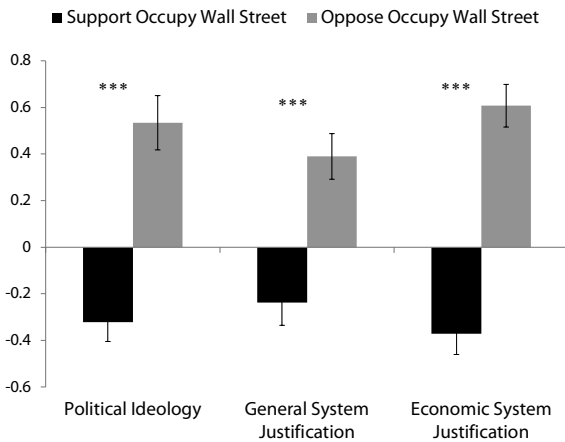
To investigate the role of individual differences in system justification (and its underlying psychological needs) in explaining support versus opposition to the status quo in the United States, Erin Hennes and colleagues (2012) conducted an online survey with 182 adults. Results, which are illustrated in Figures 4a and 4b, revealed that supporters of the Tea Party and opponents of Occupy Wall Street were more politically conservative and scored higher on both general and economic forms of system justification, in comparison with opponents of the Tea Party and supporters of Occupy Wall Street. In terms of underlying epistemic, existential, and relational needs, supporters of the Tea Party and opponents of Occupy Wall Street scored lower on “need for cognition” (or enjoyment of thinking) but higher on “death anxiety” and the “desire to share reality with like-minded others,” in comparison with opponents of the Tea Party and supporters of Occupy Wall Street (see Figures 5a and 5b).

These results from the United States, especially when taken in conjunction with the results from Lebanon, New Zealand, and Argentina, demonstrate that there are psychological as well as political differences between those who support the status quo and those who seek to challenge it. Those who embrace right-wing movements and seek to preserve hierarchical and traditional social, economic, and political arrangements are, in general, “high system-justifiers,” and they exhibit

**Figure 4a:** Social and psychological differences between supporters and opponents of the Tea Party movement.



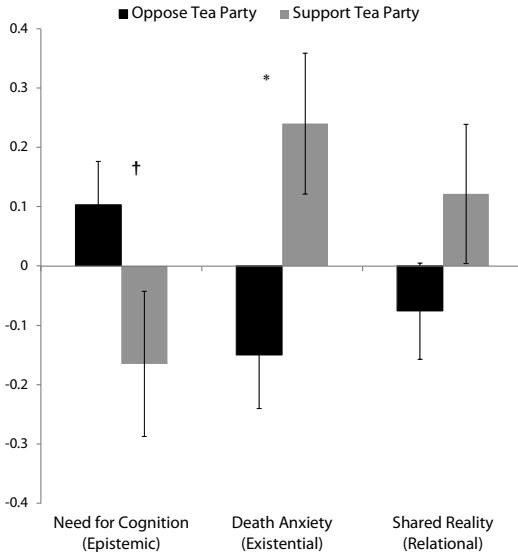
**Figure 4b:** Social and psychological differences between supporters and opponents of the Occupy Wall Street movement.



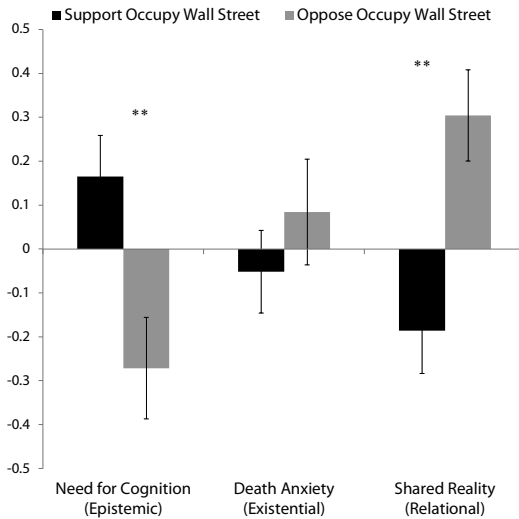
*Note.* Numerical entries are mean Z-scores for supporters and opponents of the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements (Total  $N = 182$ ). Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences between these two groups based on independent samples'  $t$ -tests.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Figure 5a:** Psychological differences between supporters and opponents of the Tea Party movement.



**Figure 5b:** Psychological differences between supporters and opponents of the Occupy Wall Street movement.



*Note.* Numerical entries are mean Z-scores for supporters and opponents of the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements (Total  $N = 182$ ). Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences between these two groups based on independent samples'  $t$ -tests.  
 $\dagger p < .10$ ,  $* p < .05$ ,  $** p < .01$

relatively high epistemic, existential, and relational needs to achieve certainty, security, and conformity. By contrast, those who gravitate toward left-wing movements that challenge traditional arrangements and push for egalitarian forms of social, economic, and political change tend to be “low system-justifiers,” and they are more tolerant of uncertainty, threat, and social discord (see Jost, Becker, et al. 2017).

## **Conclusion**

The decision about whether to participate in social protest or, on a more abstract level, to resist and oppose aspects of the societal status quo is not an especially easy one. From the perspective of rational choice theories in social science, people weigh a number of considerations when deciding whether to join a protest movement, such as the value of potential gains if the protest succeeds, the potential costs of participation, the probabilities that these gains and costs will be realized, and a determination about whether one’s own participation will affect these probabilities (e.g., Kuran 1991; Olson 1965; Opp 1989). For the most part, social psychologists agree that there are rational decisions about risk and reward that enter into the decision about whether to protest (van Zomeren et al. 2012). But there are other factors as well, such as strong identification with one or more social groups that would benefit from a change to the status quo, perceptions of injustice and feelings of anger or moral outrage, and a sense of collective efficacy and the expectation that the movement will succeed (Gurr 1970; McGarty et al. 2014; Tausch et al. 2011; van Zomeren et al. 2008).

To all of these antecedents of collective action, we would add a few more. From the perspective of system justification theory, it is important to recognize that the decision about whether to participate in protest is an inherently ideological decision, insofar as it involves, among other things, a critical appraisal of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the existing regime (see also Jost, Becker, et al. 2017). In the diverse sociopolitical contexts of Lebanon, New Zealand, Argentina, and the United States, we have seen that political conservatism and religiosity play significant roles when it comes to people’s support versus opposition to the dominant social and economic order. Presumably, this comes as little surprise to sociologists and political scientists. Of greater novelty, perhaps, is the fact that psychological characteristics such as the belief in a just world and system justification—as well as underlying epistemic, existential, and relational needs to reduce uncertainty, threat, and social

discord—are also consistently linked to acquiescence versus resistance to the societal status quo in these various contexts.

The typical “high system-justifier,” we have seen, is low on the desire for ruminative thought and high on the need for order, certainty, and closure. They are highly attentive to potential threats to life and limb and to achieving consensus with like-minded others. Subscribing to the legitimacy of the neoliberal, capitalist order on which they depend may provide a subjective sense of certainty, safety, and social belongingness. The “low system-justifier,” by contrast, is more willing to tolerate uncertainty, ambiguity, insecurity, conflict, and disagreement. They are more concerned with bringing about a more egalitarian alternative to the status quo than with maintaining social stability, for better or worse. The political struggle, in other words, is also, in many ways, a psychological struggle.

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