SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ EDITRICE

Work published in open access form
and licensed under Creative Commons
Attribution – NonCommercial
ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

© Author(s)
E-ISSN 2724-2943
ISSN 2723-973X

Psychology Hub (2026)
XLIII, 2.1 (Special Issue), 57-66

Article info

Submitted: 14 April 2026
Accepted: 21 July 2026
DOI: 10.13133/2724-2943/19356

Freedom or constraint? The precarity of freedom and why and when liberals embrace the tendency to devise and abide by constraining social rules

Antonio Pierro[1], Valentina Rizzoli[1]*, Flavia Albarello[1], and Arie W. Kruglanski[2]

[1] *Department of Social and Developmental Psychology, Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy*

[2] *University of Maryland, Maryland, USA*

Abstract

Across three studies (total N = 568), this research examined whether politically left-wing individuals with a need for cognitive closure (NCC, i.e., the desire for stable and certain knowledge) or under conditions of threat-related uncertainty can resemble right-wing individuals in their support for the strength of social norms and sanctioning for deviance from norms within societies (i.e., the desire for cultural tightness). In the first two studies, in which the NCC was either measured (Study 1) or experimentally induced (Study 2), we found that left-wing participants with high chronic or acute NCC supported strict social norms pertaining to the maintenance of groups. In the third study, in which threat-related uncertainty was measured via the perceived socio-ecological threats, we found that left-wing participants under conditions of high (vs. low) threat-related uncertainty supported higher levels of cultural tightness. Across the three studies, no difference was found for right-wing participants between high and low NCC or between high and low threat-related uncertainty conditions. This is consistent with the conservative shift hypothesis that argues that left-wing individuals can shift toward more conservative positions under conditions of high need for closure or when they perceive uncertainty in their social environments.

Keywords: Political orientation; need for cognitive closure; threat-related uncertainty; desire for cultural tightness; conservative shift

*Corresponding author.
Valentina Rizzoli, Department of Social and Developmental Psychology,
Sapienza University of Rome,
Via dei Marsi 78, 00185
Rome, Italy
E-mail: valentina.rizzoli@uniroma1.it
(V. Rizzoli)

Introduction

Taking up the call for papers for the special issue on "Dialogues on democracy in transition…" celebrating the centenary of Eraldo De Grada's birth, the founder of the Roman School of Social Psychology, this paper aims to participate in this dialogue in the hope of contributing, from a social-psychological perspective, to understanding the current historical moment, characterized by relevant and unexpected signs of democratic crisis and the rise of authoritarianism, which, taken together, constitute a source of global concern.

This democratic crisis, described by political scientists (see for example, Castaldo & Memoli, 2023; Diamond, 2008) through a multitude of labels (i.e., backsliding, rollback, decline, autocratization, democratic recession, erosion of democratic qualities, etc.), and observed in recent decades in various countries, including European ones, calls into question a heterogeneous set of phenomena and themes that are difficult to summarize, including, to name a few, disillusionment with the effectiveness of democracy and the breaking of their promises, including the reduction of economic and social inequalities, distrust in governments, the rise of populist movements and leaders, financial and geopolitical crises, political polarization, etc.

Through a social-psychological analysis of the deterioration of democracy and the rise of authoritarianism, among the themes highlighted by Bar-Tal and Magal (2021) characteristically identifiable with authoritarianism, and with the challenge to the principles of liberal democracy, there are the following: *Anti-democratic structure theme* (for example, disempowering institutions that serve as guardians of democracy); *Anti-democratic values theme* (limiting freedom of expression); *Anti-pluralistic theme* (delegitimizing opposition); *Discriminatory theme* (discrimination of minorities, opposing immigration); *Threatening themes* (focusing on external threats and enemies) (for more details, see Bar-Tal & Magal, 2021).

Multiple reasons can be invoked for the emergence of such issues aimed at eroding the qualities of democracy. In an attempt to illuminate the forces that play a significant role in the development of authoritarian instances, and adopting a socio-psychological perspective, Bar-Tal and Magal emphasize the interrelated role of needs (for example, the epistemic need to avoid uncertainty), values (particular values with the emphasis on maintaining security, tradition, order, authority), and contextual factors (related, for example, to the experienced threats of terrorism, economic crisis, and threats from waves of immigrants and ethnic minorities, and most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic). A similar perspective, aiming to integrate micro-level motivational dynamics with macro-level social and cultural processes underlying the emergence of extremism phenomena, is taken by Moskalenko and Kruglanski in this special issue. As noted in the call for this special issue, Eraldo De Grada himself (1972), in his effort to interpret the social-psychological dynamics underlying authoritarianism, always avoided reductionist psychologizing distortions, aware of a continuous interchange between micro- and macro-level processes. He also recommends considering, among contextual factors, the social support given to authoritarian demands. Regarding this last point, several political scientists (Castaldo & Memoli, 2023) emphasize the role of political support, also in terms of citizens' psychological orientation toward political actors/institutions, in assessing the risk of democratic system collapse.

In accordance with the interactionist perspective highlighted by Bar-Tal and Magal (2021), Moskalenko and Kruglanski (this special issue), and in line with the teachings of De Grada (1972), this paper will examine motivational, cultural, and contextual factors hypothesized to underlie the support of anti-democratic demands. In order to narrow the topic of this paper, it will consider the role played by both contextual factors connected to various ecological concerns (i.e., conditions of threat-related uncertainty), the need for cognitive closure (i.e., the desire for stable and certain knowledge, Kruglanski, 2004) in supporting the desired strength of social norms and sanctioning deviance from norms within societies (i.e., the desire for cultural tightness; Gelfand, 2018). In an effort to narrow down the topic of this contribution, and echoing Fromm's book *Escape from Freedom* (1941), the main question of this contribution is whether also politically left-wing individuals with high need for cognitive closure or under conditions of threat-related uncertainty can be similar to the right-wing in embracing the tendency to devise and abide by constraining social rules (i.e., desire/support for cultural tightness). In his book, Fromm explores humanity's shifting relationship with freedom and how many people seek relief by renouncing it. He describes how authoritarianism can represent an escape mechanism for such individuals, with particular attention to the psychosocial conditions that favored its rise. De Grada himself (2006), recalling the works of Suedfeld and Tetlock (2001), underlines the possibility, raised by these authors, of an affinity between the political left and the right and that this affinity should be sought not in *what* people think but in *how* people think: right and left could be similar in their closed-mindedness (cf. for similar theses of an alleged authoritarianism of the left as well as the right, it is supported, at least on a theoretical level, by Shils, 1954, and by Rokeach, 1960). Furthermore, as suggested by Rokeach, conditions of threat can activate defensive needs in *anyone*, as an individual or as a member of a group, leading to a closed-mindedness, even if contingent and transitory (cf. for a more detailed discussion on these issues, De Grada, 2006). More recently, within a motivated cognition perspective, the thesis of a non-specific need for cognitive closure, a non-directional and content-free motive, also activated by contingent situational factors, has been supported, also on an empirical level, by Kruglanski (2004; see also De Grada et al., 1999, Kruglanski et al., 2006; Roets et al., 2015). Finally, it should be emphasized that recent empirical evidence supports the possibility that even politically left-wing individuals characterized by a high need for cognitive closure and/or in conditions of threat-related uncertainty embrace conservative instances (e.g., binding moral foundations; Graham et al., 2011), typically embraced by political right-wing (Baldner et al., 2018; 2025).

On this basis, this paper hypothesizes a conservative shift (i.e., a desire for more stringent norms) on the part of politically left-wing individuals with a need for cognitive closure or under conditions of threat-related uncertainty. In the next paragraphs, we will introduce and discuss the key concepts and describe our research hypotheses.

Freedom vs. Constraint: The Cultural Looseness - Tightness dimension.

In the debate on the attributes of democracy, it's hard to find political or social scientists who would deny that freedom is the key attribute. After all, from the beginning, the theory and research on authoritarianism have been closely related to the concept of freedom (see Adorno et al., 1950; Fromm, 1941; Reich, 1946). Furthermore, the constellation of personality characteristics underlying the profiles of an "authoritarian personality" vs a "democratic personality" can be traced back to the priority given to aspects related to obedience and submission to authority, the need for order and security, and rigid adherence to conventional values, on the one hand, and freedom, on the other, including both to be free from external orders, constraints, and restrictions ("freedom from") and to realize one's own goals ("freedom to") (Fromm, 1941). Generally, the experience and desire for freedom is associated with personal and societal well-being (Verme, 2009). However, as several authors point out, the priority given to order, respect for rules and regulations, and security and stability can also lead to psychological and societal benefits (cf. Gelfand, 2018). Should societies therefore strive for freedom or order? This question can also be addressed through the cultural dimensions highlighted by Cultural Tightness-Looseness Theory (CTL; Gelfand, 2018), the dimensions at the core of the proposed contribution.

Human social coordination is facilitated by shared norms: The extent to which individuals endorse norms, regulate their behavior by norms, and sanction deviants vary across cultures. Gelfand coined this phenomenon tightness-looseness of culture (Gelfand et al., 2006), a concept that has roots in multiple disciplines, including anthropology (e.g., Pelto, 1968).

Cultural Tightness-Looseness reflects "the strength of social norms, or how clear and pervasive norms are within societies, and the strength of sanctioning, or how much tolerance there is for deviance from norms within societies" (Gelfand et al., 2006, p. 1226). Thus, tight cultures have stronger social norms and greater sanctioning of deviant behavior, whereas loose cultures have weaker social norms and little sanctioning of deviant behavior (Gelfand et al., 2011).

Desire for Cultural Tightness, Threat-Related Uncertainty and Need for Cognitive Closure

Differences in tightness–looseness often arise from differences in ecological and historical conditions: Tight countries historically experienced more ecological threats (i.e., resource scarcity, higher disease prevalence, territorial invasions and conflicts, high population density, environmental threats) compared to loose countries (Gelfand et al., 2011; Harrington & Gelfand, 2014). For cultures that face many threats, tight social norms are adaptive as they promote the coordination necessary for survival (Gelfand, 2018; Harrington & Gelfand, 2014).

Notably, beyond cultural and societal variation, the experience of situational threat (i.e., concern with COVID-19 threat, war, etc.) can activate, albeit temporarily and transiently, an individual-level *desire for cultural tightness* (DCT): The degree to which individuals desire that their country be tight can vary from person to person regardless of country-level tightness. In other words, the desire for cultural tightness is not the same as living in a tight society (Jackson et al., 2019) because a person may endorse norms that are different from those prevalent in the society in which they live. This individual-level differential desire for own society to be tight might indeed increase depending on situational uncertainty/threat, that might elicit this individual motivation when facing wars, economic crises, pandemics, ecological disasters, etc. (Mula et al., 2022). In this vein, it has been shown that the relevance of a threat increases the desire for tight social norms even for participants from loose cultures (Jackson et al., 2019; see also Gelfand et al., 2017; Mula et al., 2022). Similarly, it is noteworthy to point out that even the non-specific need to reduce uncertainty (i.e., need for cognitive closure; NCC), whether chronic or instigated by situational factors (i.e., contingent ecological threats), can trigger a desire for stringent norms, that is, the desire for cultural tightness, because stringent and constraining social rules are certainty providers (see for empirical evidence, Albarello et al., 2023; Contu et al., 2024).

Finally, and importantly for the present contribution, some groups, including politically oriented groups, can prioritize restraining social rules (tight norms) over more freedom and loose norms while others prioritize freedom over constraint. For example, there is empirical evidence that political right-wing (vs. left-wing) individuals prefer/support higher levels of cultural tightness (vs. looseness) (Albarello et al., 2023; Contu et al., 2024). Furthermore, societal-level cultural tightness is associated with right-wing authoritarianism (Chen et al., 2021). This makes sense because groups orient themselves in the direction that fits with their attitudes, values, and ideologies. However, as anticipated above, recent empirical evidence supports the possibility that even politically left-wing individuals characterized by a high NCC and/or in conditions of threat-related uncertainty embrace conservative instances, for example binding moral foundations (which emphasize loyalty, authority, and purity), often linked to desire for cultural tightness (Di Santo et al., 2022), and typically embraced by political right-wing (Baldner et al., 2018, 2025). On this basis, in the next paragraphs, we will describe our specific research hypotheses.

The Present Research

Aims, Objectives, and Hypotheses

Our hypotheses are formally stated as follows:

H1: Right-wing participants will support higher levels of cultural tightness (studies 1-3)

H2a (moderation hypothesis): The relationship between political orientation (PO), and support for cultural tightness (SCT), will be moderated by NCC, so that left-wing participants will also support higher levels of cultural tightness when they are characterized by a *chronic* (Study 1) or *acute* (Study 2) NCC.

H2b (moderation hypothesis): The relationship between PO and SCT will be moderated by threat-related uncertainty (TRU), so that also left-wing participants will support higher levels of cultural tightness when they perceive uncertainty in their social environments (Study 3).

These hypotheses were tested in three studies with Italian participants. Specifically, the NCC was assessed via self-report in Study 1 and was experimentally induced in Study 2. In Study 3 TRU was operationalized via self-report different socio-ecological concerns. Across all studies the SCT was examined via different DCT self-report measures. In all studies relationships between variables of interest were controlled for socially desirable responding.

In all studies participants were recruited online on a voluntary basis, completing the research questionnaire through Google Forms. Once participants gave their informed consent, they were requested to indicate their demographic information (i.e., age, gender, educational level, occupations, current citizenship). Subsequently, participants filled out a questionnaire aimed to collect the research measures of interest. All the items were administered in Italian. In the "measures" section of each study we provide examples of those items translated into English. The last part of the questionnaire thanked and carefully debriefed participants. Across all studies, participation criteria were to be at least 18 years old and to be an Italian citizen.

For each study we conducted an a priori power analysis in order to determine the appropriate sample sizes. Power analysis for a multiple regression model (N = 4 predictors) indicated that at least 125 participants were required to detect a low to medium effect size (f^2=0.10) with sufficient power (.80) at .05 alpha level (G*Power; Faul et al., 2007).

If our research hypotheses are supported, then we would have evidence that the left-wing individuals who desire epistemic certainty (high NCC) or who perceive uncertainty in their social environments can act and think like right-wing.

Study 1

Method

Participants

After excluding one participant who declared not to be an Italian citizen, the final sample consisted of 240 Italian adults (67.5% female; M_{age} = 28.81; SD_{age} = 9.89; range from 18 up to 69 years). In our sample, 45.8% of participants were students, 47.9% workers, and 6.3% reported other occupational statuses. Moreover, 2.9% attended the middle school, 43.8% the high school, and 53.3% were university graduates.

Measures

Chronic NCC. Participants responded to the Revised Need for Closure Scale (Rev NfCS; Pierro & Kruglanski, 2005). This is a brief 14-item self-report instrument designed to assess stable individual differences in the need for cognitive closure (e.g., "Any solution to a problem is better than remaining in a state of uncertainty"). Participants responded to these items on 6-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (S*trongly disagree*) to 6 (S*trongly agree*). A composite need for cognitive closure score was computed by averaging responses to each item (*M* = 3.38; *SD* = 0.65). Previous research (Pierro & Kruglanski, 2005) has demonstrated that the revised version of NfCS has nomological validity and satisfactory reliability. In the present sample, reliability of the Rev NfCS was satisfactory as well (α = .74).

Desire for Cultural Tightness. DCT was measured by asking participants if the country they currently live in should have *loose* vs *tight* characteristics (Mula et al., 2021; Baldner et al., 2022). Specifically, they responded to the following five questions on a scale anchored from 1 to 9, where high scores indicated high desire for cultural tightness: My country should ……. 1 = "Have flexible social norms" versus 9 = "Have rigid social norms"; 1 = "Treat people who don't conform to norms kindly" versus 9 = "Treat people who don't conform to norms harshly"; 1 = "Have fewer rules" versus 9 = "Have more rules"; 1 = "To be permissive" versus 9 = "To be restrictive"; 1 = "Be tolerant of those who violate the rules" versus 9 = "Be intransigent with those who violate the rules". A composite DCT score was computed by averaging responses to each item (*M* = 5.54; *SD* = 1.44). High scores indicated a high DCT (Cronbach's α = .79).

Political Orientation [PO]. Participants' PO was measured via a single item (Koleva et al., 2012). Responses ranged from 1 (*extremely left*) to 7 (*extremely right*) (*M* = 3.33; *SD* = 1.39).

Control Variables. Age, gender, education, and social desirability were included as control variables. To control for socially desirable responding, we used the following single item: "I have never hurt another person's feelings". Participants responded to this item on 6-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) (*M* = 2.47; *SD* = 1.34).

Results

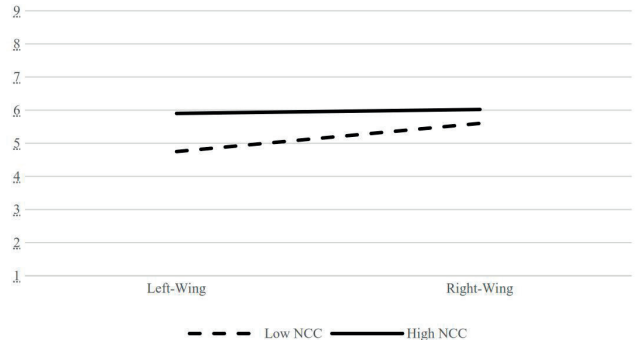
Zero-order correlations show that DCT was significantly and positively associated with both PO and NCC (*r* = .185; *p* <.005; and *r* = .315; *p* <.001; respectively): Individuals who endorse more conservative political ideology and scored higher on NCC were more likely to support strict social norms (i.e., cultural tightness). NCC was also positively, even if only near significance, related with PO (*r* = .121; *p* =.062).

We then tested the moderating role of chronic NCC on the relationship between PO and DCT. Social desirability[1] was included in the model as covariate. The analysis was performed using SPSS PROCESS macro (Model 1; Hayes, 2022). Ninety-five percent CIs were employed and 5000 bootstrapping resamples were run.

The results obtained from the analysis show that, controlling for social desirability (*B* = .096, *SE* = .065, *t* = 1.479, *p* = .140, *95% CI:* [-.032; .224]), there were simple effects of both PO (*B* = .174, *SE* = .064, *t* = 2.740, *p* < .01, *95% CI:* [.049; 0.299]) and NCC (*B* = .604, *SE* = .136, *t* = 4.448, *p* < .001, *95% CI:* [.336; .871]) on the DCT: Right-wing participants and individuals with high NCC had higher scores on the DCT. More importantly for the advanced hypotheses, there was a significant and negative effect of the PO × Chronic NCC interaction on the DCT (*B* = -.199, *SE* = .096, *t* = - 2.078, *p* < .05, *95% CI:* [-.388, -.010]). Breaking down these results further, an analysis of the conditional effects of PO on DCT revealed that the effect

was significant only at low NCC levels (B = .303, SE = .095, t = 3.196, p < .005, *95% CI:* [.116; .490]), whereas this effect became non-significant at high NCC levels (B = .044, SE = .083, t = .538, p = .591, *95% CI:* [-.118; .207]). This indicates that there was a relatively large difference in the DCT at low NCC; this difference was smaller and non-significant at high NCC. As can be observed in Figure 1, left-wing participants with a chronic NCC scored similarly on the DCT as right-wing participants. This supports our *H2a* moderation hypothesis.

Fig. 1. Desire/Support for Cultural Tightness as a Function of Political Orientation (-1 SD= left-wing; +1 SD= right-wing) and Chronic NCC (Study 1)



Study 2

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 140 Italian university students (74.3% female; M_{age} = 22.66; SD_{age} = 2.12; range from 18 up to 29 years).

Measures

Acute NCC. Participants were randomly assigned to either the high (n = 70) or low (n = 70) NCC conditions. Participants were shown three prompts, adapted from items from the original NCC scale (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994), designed to induce either a high or low NCC, depending on their condition. Participants were asked to briefly write about each of the prompts.

In the high NCC condition, participants were prompted with "Think back to a time in which you felt uncomfortable because you didn't understand the reason why an event occurred in your life"; "Think back to a time in which you quickly became impatient and irritated when you did not find a solution to a problem immediately"; and "Think back to a time in which you felt irritated when one person disagreed with what everyone else in a group believed".

In the low NCC condition, participants were instead prompted with "Think back to a time in which, even after you made up your mind about something, you were eager to consider a different opinion"; "Think back to a time in which, when thinking about a problem, you considered as many different options on the issues as possible"; and "Think back to a time in which you disliked the routine aspects of your work or studies".

Desire for Cultural Tightness. Since the results of the previous first study were obtained with the data by self-report measures, they may have been biased for the specific measure. In order to address this potential limitation, in the present second study we used a different self-report measure of DCT. Specifically, we used the DCT scale developed by Jackson et al. (2019) and previously also used in the Italian context (Mula et al., 2021; Di Santo et al., 2022). Participants were asked to endorse an ending to nine incomplete statements concerning their desired country tightness on a 9-point scale (e.g., "My country is currently. . ." 1= *Not Permissive Enough* – 9=*Too Permissive* or "Social norms in my country are. . ." 1=*Too rigid* – 9= *Too flexible*). A composite DCT score was computed by averaging responses to each item (M = 6.23; SD = 0.94). The prevalence of high-anchored responses indicated higher DCT. The reliability of the scale was deemed satisfactory (Cronbach's α = .80).

Notably, in a pilot study of 105 participants (59% female; M_{age} = 22.65; SD_{age} = 3.04; range from 19 up to 38 years), recruited via Prolific, the measure used in the present study (α = .82) was significantly and highly correlated with the measure used in Study 1 (α = .81), r = .672, p < .001. Both measures were also significantly correlated with PO (r = .251, p < .01, the measure in the present study, and r = .249, p < .01, the measure in Study 1, respectively).

Political Orientation. Participants' PO was measured via the same single item as in Study 1. Responses ranged from 1 (*extremely left*) to 7 (*extremely right*) (M = 3.76; SD = 1.28).

Control Variables. Age, gender, and social desirability were included as control variables. To control for socially desirable responding, we used the same single item as in Study 1 (M = 2.46; SD = 1.28).

Results

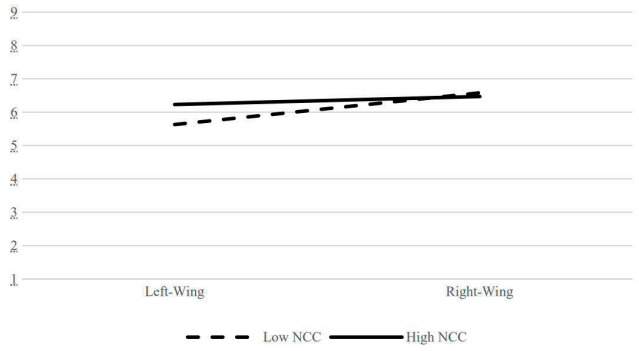
Zero-order correlations show that PO was significantly and positively associated with DCT (r = .297; p <.001), thus confirming study 1 results. NCC was also positively, although not significantly, related to DCT (r = .138; p = .103).

We then tested the moderating role of acute NCC on the relationship between PO and DCT. Social desirability was included in the model as a covariate. The analysis was performed using SPSS PROCESS macro (Model 1; Hayes, 2022). Ninety-five percent CIs were employed and 5000 bootstrapping resamples were run.

The results obtained from the analysis show that, controlling for social desirability (B = .023, SE = .059, t = .387, p = .699, *95% CI:* [-.095; .141]), there was a simple effect of PO on the DCT (B = .231, SE = .059, t = 3.938, p < .001, *95% CI:* [.115; .347]): Right-wing participants had higher scores on the DCT. No simple effect was found for NCC (B = .247, SE = .150, t = 1.645, p = .102, *95% CI:* [-.050; .544]). More importantly for the advanced hypotheses, there was a significant and negative effect of the PO × Acute NCC interaction on the DCT (B = -.279, SE = .117, t = - 2.390, p < .05, *95% CI:* [- .510; -.048]). Echoing the findings of study 1, an analysis of the conditional effects of PO on DCT revealed that the effect was significant only for participants in the Low NCC condition (B = .371, SE

= .086, t = 4.312, p < .001, *95% CI:* [.201; .541]), whereas this effect becomes non-significant in the high NCC condition (B = .092, SE = .079, t = 1.151, p = .252, *95% CI:* [-.066; .249]). As can be observed in Figure 2, there was a relatively large difference in the DCT at low NCC; this difference was smaller and non-significant at high NCC. Again, echoing study 1 results and supporting our *H2a* moderation hypothesis, left-wing participants in the High NCC condition scored similarly on the DCT as right-wing participants.

Fig. 2. Desire/Support for Cultural Tightness as a Function of Political Orientation (-1SD= left-wing; +1SD= right-wing) and Acute NCC (Study 2)



Study 3

Method

Participants

After excluding one participant who declared not to be an Italian citizen, the final sample consisted of 188 Italian adults (59% female; M_{age} = 33.37; SD_{age} = 12.02; range from 18 up to 70 years). In this sample, 34.6% of participants were students, 54.3% workers, and 11.2% reported other. Moreover, the 4.3% attended the middle school, the 50% the high school, 45.7% were university graduates.

Measures

Threat-related Uncertainty. TRU was assessed with a measure of perceived socio-ecological threat previously used in the Italian context (Di Santo et al., 2022). Specifically, participants were asked to rate their concern about seven different ecological threats, that could undermine social functioning (i.e., economic crisis, international conflicts, terrorism, immigration-related phenomena, political instability, coronavirus, natural disasters), on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all)* to 7 (*totally*). We averaged ratings into a "perceived socio-ecological threat" composite score (M = 4.99; SD = 1.11; Cronbach's α = .81).

Desire for Cultural Tightness. DCT was measured via the same five questions used in Study 1 (M = 6.47; SD = 1.57; Cronbach's α = .89).

Political Orientation. Participants' PO was measured via the same single item as in studies 1 and 2. Responses ranged from 1 (*extremely left*) to 7 (*extremely right*) (M = 3.30; SD = 1.58).

Control Variables. Age, gender, and social desirability were included as control variables. To control for socially desirable responding, we used the same single item as in previous two studies (M = 3.09; SD = 1.45).

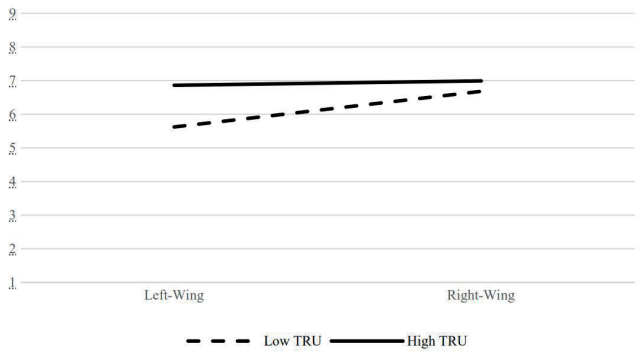
Results

Zero-order correlations show that DCT was significantly and positively associated with both PO and perceived socio-ecological threat (r = .250; p <.001; and r = .304; p <.001; respectively): Individuals who endorse more conservative political ideology and scored higher on perceived socio-ecological threat were more likely to support strict social norms (i.e., cultural tightness). Perceived socio-ecological threat was also positively related with political orientation (r = .282; p <.001).

We then tested the moderating role of perceived socio-ecological threat on the relationship between PO and DCT. Social desirability was included in the model as covariate. The analysis was performed using SPSS PROCESS macro (Model 1; Hayes, 2022). Ninety-five percent CIs were employed and 5000 bootstrapping resamples were run.

The results obtained from the analysis show that, controlling for social desirability (B = .069, SE = .076, t = .908, p = .365, *95% CI:* [-.081; .220]), there were simple effects of both PO (B = .189, SE = .072, t = 2.618, p < .01, *95% CI:* [.047; .331]) and perceived socio-ecological threat (B = .350, SE = .103, t = 3.410, p = .005, *95% CI:* [.147; .552]) on DCT: Right-wing participants and individuals high in perceived socio-ecological threat had higher scores on DCT. More importantly for the advanced hypotheses, there was a significant and negative effect of the PO × Perceived socio-ecological threat interaction on DCT (B = -.133, SE = .066, t = -2.012, p < .05, *95% CI:* [-.263; -.003]). Breaking down these results further, an analysis of the conditional effects of PO on DCT revealed that the effect was significant only at low perceived socio-ecological threat levels (B = .336, SE = .109, t = 3.090, p < .005, *95% CI:* [.121; .550]), whereas this effect becomes non-significant at high perceived socio-ecological threat levels (B = .042, SE = .096, t = .434, p = .665, *95% CI:* [-.148; .232]). This indicates that there was a relatively large difference in DCT at low perceived socio-ecological threat; this difference was smaller and non-

Fig. 3. Desire/Support for Cultural Tightness as a Function of Political Orientation (-1SD= left-wing; +1SD= right-wing) and Threat-Related Uncertainty, TRU (Study 3)



significant at high perceived socio-ecological threat. As can be observed in Figure 3, left-wing participants under high threat-related uncertainty scored similarly to right-wing participants on DCT. This supports our *H2b* moderation hypothesis.

General Discussion

The aim of this research was to examine whether politically left-wing individuals with a NCC or under conditions of threat-related uncertainty can be similar to the right-wing in supporting the strength of social norms and sanctioning deviance from norms within societies (i.e., individual DCT).

First of all, the results obtained across three main studies and a pilot study show a moderate and positive relationship between PO and DCT, with correlations ranging between r = .19 and r = .30, thus confirming previous studies (Albarello et al., 2023; Contu et al., 2024) and our *H1* Hypothesis: Right-wing participants had higher scores on the DCT.

However, across the different studies, the difference between left-wing and right-wing participants in supporting strict social norms (i.e., DCT) becomes smaller and non-significant at high (vs. low) NCC (Studies 1 and 2) or under conditions of high (vs. low) threat-related uncertainty, TRU (Study 3): Left-wing participants characterized by a *chronic* or *acute* NCC or when they perceive uncertainty in their social environments scored similarly on the DCT as right-wing participants, thus confirming our *H2a* and *H2b* moderation hypotheses. It should be noted that the perceived socio-ecological threat measure used in Study 3 included different sources of societal concern, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, international conflicts, and economic crisis. At the time of data collection, these threats may have differed in their relative salience, while still representing broadly relevant sources of societal concern. More generally, the specific threats contributing most strongly to participants' sense of uncertainty may vary across historical and geopolitical contexts. However, our interpretation does not rely on any single threat domain, but rather on the broader idea that perceived socio-ecological threats can activate a generalized preference for tighter norms and stronger sanctioning, thereby increasing individuals' DCT. Relatedly, future research addressing the role of socio-ecological threat should operationalise such concept in varying ways, according to the situation at stake.

Taking the results of all studies together, politically left-wing participants characterized by high NCC or under high threat-related uncertainty were, similarly to right-wing participants, more likely to desire tighter norms. This conservative shift is also supported by recent empirical evidence showing that even politically left-wing individuals characterized by a high need for cognitive closure and/or in conditions of threat-related uncertainty embrace conservative instances expressing the concern for groups and their cohesion, emphasizing the importance of group loyalty, respect for authority, and social purity (i.e., binding moral foundations), typically embraced by political right-wing (Baldner et al., 2018; 2025).

It is also notable that, across all studies of the present research, and consistent with results of previous studies, no difference was found for right-wing participants between high and low NCC or between high and low threat-related uncertainty conditions. Therefore, the shift seems to be particularly pronounced, under certain conditions, for left-wing, rather than for right-wing. Indeed, political right-wing might be assumed to already endorse conservative instances, thus are less likely to adjust their attitudes in response to contextual factors and to display change in their attitudes and ideologies. On the contrary, left-wing individuals, in particular conditions and those characterized by a chronic need for stability and to reduce uncertainty (NCC), can endorse conservative instances (i.e., tight cultural norms and binding moral foundations) that are more akin to right-wing ideologies.

Some limitations should be acknowledged. First, the samples were not nationally representative and differed in their sociodemographic composition, with Study 2 relying on university students. Therefore, future research should test whether the present findings generalize to broader and more heterogeneous populations. Second, all three studies were conducted in Italy. Although this national context is theoretically relevant to the aims of the present research, future studies should examine whether the observed pattern generalizes to other cultural contexts, particularly given the central role of tightness–looseness theory. Importantly, the present studies assessed individuals' DCT, but did not include societal-level tightness as a contextual variable. Future cross-cultural studies could therefore integrate individual-level measures of DCT with contextual indicators of cultural tightness–looseness, testing whether the effects of threat-related uncertainty and NCC on DCT are shaped by the broader normative environment.

The present findings also have societal implications for understanding public responses to crises. Under conditions of uncertainty and perceived socio-ecological threat, preferences for stronger norms and sanctioning may become less ideologically distinctive, as left-wing individuals can come to resemble right-wing individuals in their DCT. This suggests that crisis contexts may broaden receptiveness to normative constraint across the political spectrum. For democratic societies, the relevant issue is not the desire for order per se, which can support coordination in response to collective threats, but the conditions under which such desire may become associated with greater acceptance of restrictive responses. Future research should therefore examine when DCT supports social coordination and when, instead, it may contribute to attitudes less compatible with democratic openness and pluralistic debate. This is indeed of utmost importance in terms of societal consequences, since it has also been shown that situational uncertainty and the related increased epistemic closed mindedness and DCT might have cascade effects in terms of reduced inclusiveness and increased prejudicial attitudes towards others (cf. Albarello et al., 2023; Jackson et al., 2019), which are usually more typical of the right-wing political spectrum, but might then be endorsed also by left-wing individuals (cf. Baldner et al., 2025). In conclusion, the present research results, consistent with previous research findings, demonstrate how societal uncertainty and epistemic motivations point to the precarity of freedom and to the

fragility of democratic societies, highlighting the conditions and mechanisms that can lead to embracing anti-democratic instances reaching detrimental effects to even a larger societal spectrum involving also widespread reduction of calls for equality and inclusivity of others (e.g., migrants, threatening minorities, etc.; cf. Albarello et al., 2017, 2018).

Note

1 Preliminarily, in the present study, as well as in the subsequent studies, we included in the model also gender, age, and education as further covariates. No significant effects of these covariates were found for all the studies. Furthermore, running analyses both with and without control variables, the pattern of results remained unchanged, supporting that these covariates did not alter the associations between the main variables in all the studies. It was therefore decided to ignore these demographic variables in subsequent analyses.

Ethical Approval
The research was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Ethics Committee of Sapienza University of Rome (CERT_18D3B4B89A8)

Data Availability Statement
Data are available upon request to the corresponding author.

Funding
This research was financed by the European Union—Next Generation EU—Project of Relevant National Interest (PRIN 2022 PNRR): Protocol. No. P2022TSR4H

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Author Contributions
All authors contributed to the conceptualization of the research. Antonio Pierro led the conduct of the research, including methodology and data analysis, and drafted the original manuscript. Valentina Rizzoli, Flavia Albarello, and Arie W. Kruglanski contributed to reviewing and editing the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Supplementary material
Not applicable.

Declaration about the use of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process
During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used AI solely for language editing and to improve the clarity and readability of the text.

Acknowledgments
The authors have no acknowledgments to declare.

References

Adorno, T. W., Frenkel-Brunswik, E., Levinson, D. J., & Sanford, R. N. (1950). *The authoritarian personality*. Harper & Brothers.

Albarello, F., Foroni, F., Hewstone, M., & Rubini, M. (2017). Generalisation of Roma to Romanians: Evidence of the outgroup projection effect. *Psicologia sociale, Social Psychology Theory & Research, 12*(2), 239–249. https://www.rivisteweb.it/doi/10.1482/87249

Albarello, F., & Rubini, M. (2018). Linguistic discrimination towards Roma: Can intergroup threat enhance bias? *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 37,* 350–364. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X17725880

Albarello, F., Mula, S., Contu, F., Baldner, C., Kruglanski, A. W., & Pierro, A. (2023). Addressing the effect of concern with COVID-19 threat on prejudice towards immigrants: The sequential mediating role of need for cognitive closure and desire for cultural tightness. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *93*, 1–9, Article 101755. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2023.101755

Baldner, C., Pierro, A., Chernikova, M., & Kruglanski, A. W. (2018). When and why do liberals and conservatives think alike? *Social Psychology, 49*(6), 360–368. https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-9335/a000354

Baldner, C., Di Santo, D., Viola, M., & Pierro, A. (2022). Perceived COVID-19 threat and reactions to noncompliant health-protective behaviors: The mediating role of desired cultural tightness and the moderating role of age. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(4), Article 2364. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19042364

Baldner, C., Albarello, F., & Pierro, A. (2025). When the Political Right "Feels Right", or How the Need for Cognitive Closure and Threat-Related Uncertainty Leads Liberals to the Conservative Shift. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, *35*(6), Article e70189. https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.70189

Bar-Tal, D., & Magal, T. (2021). Socio-psychological analysis of the deterioration of democracy and the rise of authoritarianism: The role of needs, values, and context. In J. P. Forgas, W. D. Crano, & K. Fiedler (Eds.), *The psychology of populism: The tribal challenge to liberal democracy* (pp. 42–61). New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003057680-4

Castaldo, A., & Memoli, V. (2023). Political support and democratic backsliding trends: The strange case of Central and Eastern European countries. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2023.2206115

Chen, H., Wang, X., Zang, H., & Guinote, A. (2021). Being a tough person in a tight world: Cultural tightness leads to a desire for muscularity. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 96,* Article 104183. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2021.104183

Contu, F., Ellenberg, M., Kruglanski, A. W., Pantaleo, G., & Pierro, A. (2024). Need for cognitive closure and desire for cultural tightness mediate the effect of concern about ecological threats on the need for strong leadership. *Current Psychology*, *43*, 11458–11469. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-05260-2

De Grada, E. (1972). *Introduzione alla psicologia sociale*. Bulzoni Editore.

De Grada, E. (2006). Potere e personalità: l'esempio de La personalità autoritaria. In A. Pierro (Ed.), *Prospettive psicologico-sociali sul potere*. Franco Angeli.

De Grada, E., Kruglanski, A. W., Mannetti, L., & Pierro, A. (1999). Motivated cognition and group interaction: Need for closure affects the contents and processes of collective negotiations. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 35(4), 346–365. https://doi.org/10.1006/jesp.1999.1376

Di Santo, D., Gelfand, M. J., Baldner, C., & Pierro, A. (2022). The moral foundations of desired cultural tightness. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, 1–12, Article 739579. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.739579

Diamond, L. (2008). "The Democratic Rollback. The Resurgence of the Predatory State." *Foreign Affairs* 87(2), 36–48. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20032579

Faul, F., Erdfelder, E., Lang, A. G., & Buchner, A. (2007). G*Power 3: a flexible statistical power analysis program for the social, behavioral, and biomedical sciences. *Behavior research methods*, *39*(2), 175–191. https://doi.org/10.3758/bf03193146

Fromm, E. (1941). *Escape from freedom*. Farrar & Rinehart.

Gelfand, M. J. (2018). Rule Makers, rule breakers: Tight and loose cultures and the secret signals that direct our lives. Scribner Book Company.

Gelfand, M. J., Harrington, J. R., & Jackson, J. C. (2017). The strength of social norms across human groups. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 12*(5), 800–809. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691617708631

Gelfand, M. J., Nishii, L. H., & Raver, J. L. (2006). On the nature and importance of cultural tightness-looseness. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 91*(6), 1225–1244. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.91.6.1225

Gelfand, M. J., Raver, J. L., Nishii, L., Leslie, L. M., Lun, J., Lim, B. C., Duan, L., Almaliach, A., Ang, S., Arnadottir, J., Aycan, Z., Boehnke, K., Boski, P., Cabecinhas, R., Chan, D., Chhokar, J., D'Amato, A., Ferrer, M., Fischlmayr, I. C., & Yamaguchi, S. (2011). Differences between tight and loose cultures: A 33-nation study. *Science, 332*(6033), 1100–1104. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1197754

Graham, J., Nosek, B. A., Haidt, J., Iyer, R., Koleva, S., & Ditto, P. H. (2011). Mapping the moral domain. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 101*(2), 366–385. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021847

Harrington, J. R., & Gelfand, M. J. (2014). Tightness-looseness across the 50 United States. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, *111*(22), 7990–7995. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1317937111

Hayes, A. F. (2022). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach* (3rd ed.). New York: The Guilford Press.

Jackson, J. C., van Egmond, M., Choi, V. K., Ember, C. R., Halberstadt, J., Balanovic, J., Basker, I. N., Boehnke, K., Buki, N., Fischer, R., Fulop, M., Fulmer, A., Homan, A. C., van Kleef, G. A., Kreemers, L., Schei, V., Szabo, E., Ward, C., & Gelfand, M. J. (2019). Ecological and cultural factors underlying the global distribution of prejudice. *PLoS One, 14*(9), Article e0221953. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0221953

Koleva, S. P., Graham, J., Iyer, R., Ditto, P. H., & Haidt, J. (2012). Tracing the threads: How five moral concerns (especially Purity) help explain culture war attitudes. *Journal of Research in Personality, 46*(2), 184–194. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2012.01.006

Kruglanski, A. W. (2004). *The psychology of closed mindedness.* New York: Psychology Press.

Kruglanski, A. W., Pierro, A., Mannetti, L., & De Grada, E. (2006). Groups as epistemic providers: Need for closure and the unfolding of group-centrism. *Psychological Review, 113*(1), 84–100. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.113.1.84

Moskalenko, S., & Kruglanski, A. W. (2026). When extreme goes mainstream: extremism and democratic involution. *Psychology Hub*. 43(2 Special Issue), https://doi.org/10.13133/2724-2943/19349

Mula, S., Di Santo, D., Gelfand, M. J., Cabras, C., & Pierro, A. (2021). The mediational role of desire for cultural tightness on concern with COVID-19 and perceived self-control. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*, Article 713952. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.713952

Mula, S., Di Santo, D., Resta, E., Bakhtiari, F., Baldner, C., Molinario, E., Pierro, A., Gelfand, M. J., Denison, E., ... & Leander, N. P. (2022). Concern with COVID-19 pandemic threat and attitudes towards immigrants: The mediating effect of the desire for tightness. *Current Research in Ecological and Social Psychology*, *3*, Article 100028. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cresp.2021.100028

Pelto, P. J. (1968). The differences between "tight" and "loose" societies. *Trans-action, 5*, 37–40. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03180447

Pierro, A., & Kruglanski, A. W. (2005). *Revised need for cognitive closure scale* [Unpublished manuscript]. Department of Social and Developmental Psychology, Sapienza University of Rome.

Reich, W. (1946). *The mass psychology of Fascism.* New York: Orgone Institute Press.

Roets, A., Kruglanski, A. W., Kossowska, M., Pierro, A., & Hong, Y. Y. (2015). The motivated gatekeeper of our minds: New directions in need for closure theory and research. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, *52*, 221–283. https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.Aesp.2015.01.001

Rokeach, M. (1960). *The open and closed mind: Investigations into the nature of belief systems and personality systems*. Basic Books.

Shils, E. A. (1954). Authoritarianism: Right and Left. In N. Christie & M. Jahoda (Eds.), *Studies in the scope and method of "The authoritarian personality"* (pp. 24–49). Free Press.

Suedfeld, P., & Tetlock, P. E. (2001). Individual differences in information processing. In A. Tesser & N. Schwarz (Eds.), *Blackwell handbook of social psychology: Intraindividual processes* (pp. 284–304). Blackwell Publishers.

Verme, P. (2009). Happiness, freedom and control. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization, 71*(2), 146–161. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2009.04.008

Webster, D. M., & Kruglanski, A. W. (1994). Individual differences in need for cognitive closure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 67*(6), 1049–1062. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.67.6.1049