Article

Conservatives Are More Reluctant to Give and Receive Apologies Than Liberals

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Abstract

This article examines the proposition that conservatives will be less willing than liberals to apologize and less likely to forgive after receiving an apology. In Study 1, we found evidence for both relationships in a nine-nation survey. In Study 2, participants wrote an open-ended response to a victim of a hypothetical transgression they had committed. More conservative participants were less likely to include apologetic elements in their response. We also tested two underlying mechanisms for the associations: social dominance orientation (SDO) and entity beliefs about human nature. SDO emerged as a stronger and more consistent mediator than entity beliefs. Apologies are theorized to be a rhetorical vehicle for removing power inequities in relationships post-transgression. Consistent with this theorizing, it was those who are relatively high in commitment to equality (i.e., those high in liberal ideology and low in SDO) who are most likely to provide and reward apologies.

Keywords

apology, political ideology, conservatism, reconciliation, social dominance orientation

During the 2016 race for Presidency of the United States, the Democrat nominee (Hillary Clinton) apologized 5 times in 8 months: for using her private e-mail server while secretary of state (September 2015), for praising Nancy Reagan's record on promoting HIV awareness (March 2016), for supporting her husband's 1994 crime bill (April 2016), for using the phrase "off the reservation" (April 2016), and for saying that she'd put the coal industry "out of business" (May 2016). This contrasts with the Republican nominee who, when pressed on when he had last apologized, said "It was too many years ago to remember. I have one of the great memories of all time, but it was too long ago" (Donald Trump; August 2015).

Other Republicans elevated the reluctance to be apologetic to the status of a moral virtue or rallying cry. Henry Kissinger—Secretary of State for successive Republican administrations—once said, "You are you and that is the beginning and the end—no apologies, no regrets." In a similar vein, Ronald Reagan wrote, "I hope that when you're my age, you'll be able to say as I have been able to say: We lived in freedom, we lived lives that were a statement, not an apology." The book Mitt Romney released in the lead-up to the 2012 election was titled *No Apology*.

We presented these examples merely to lend a human face to a broader research question: Do different political ideologies predict willingness to deliver apologies (and willingness to accept apologies when they are received)? The question is consequential because the presence of an apology is profoundly

important for the forgiveness process. In a meta-analysis of 175 studies on interpersonal forgiveness (Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010), people were much more likely to forgive when the transgressor had apologized. Moreover, the effect size ($r = .40$) was comparable with other variables that are highly proximal to forgiveness, such as harm severity ($r = -.26$), trait forgiveness ($r = .34$), and whether the transgression was intentional ($r = .50$). In short, apologies matter: They help heal relationships that have been threatened by a breach of trust. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that proclivity to apologize—an individual difference variable—is positively associated with a

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