



Leaning Right or Left: The Role of Communal Narcissism in Political Orientation and Activism

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Introduction

Nonclinical narcissism has long been of interest to researchers, primarily because of its pervasive association with negative social outcomes (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Kernis & Sun, 1994; Mead et al., 2018; Pauletti et al., 2012).

Yet, much of this research assumes that narcissistic motives are one-dimensional, focusing only on reinforcing the self through agentic means.

Gebauer et al. (2012) challenged this assertion by suggesting that some narcissists achieve their grandiosity in the self by engaging in communal (rather than agentic) behaviors. Indeed, that study demonstrated that communal narcissists over-estimated (but valued) their own communal behaviors.

Given the communal nature of certain political beliefs (e.g., concern for social justice on the American political left), it stands to reason that communal narcissists would openly identify with one party over the other.

Hypotheses

Therefore, we hypothesized that communal narcissism would be positively associated with self-identified liberal ideology.

We also investigated whether communal narcissists act on those beliefs by measuring self-reported political activism.

Given that communal narcissism is typically researched concurrently with agentic narcissism (e.g., Gebauer et al., 2012) and self-esteem (Zemotjel-Piotrowska et al., 2017), we also explored the role of these variables.

Methods

$N = 43$ undergraduate students from a university in the southeastern United States

Participants identified their political orientation on a scale of 1 to 7 (1 indicated "very liberal") and their political activism (number of events in the last year).

All participants completed the following questionnaires:

- NPI-13 (agentic narcissism; Gentile et al., 2013),
- CNI (communal narcissism; Gebauer et al., 2012),
- RSES (self-esteem; Rosenberg, 1965).

Hierarchical linear regression assessed the hypothesis that **communal narcissism** would be associated with **self-identified liberal ideology**.

- Step 1: self-esteem and agentic narcissism (controls)
- Step 2: communal narcissism

Results

Table 1.
Regression analyses predicting political attributes from communal narcissism, agentic narcissism, and self-esteem

Predictor	Political Attribute			
	Political Orientation		Political Activism	
	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β
Step 1	.04		.02	
Agentic Narcissism		.21		.12
Self-Esteem		.01		-.08
Step 2	.11*		.00	
Agentic Narcissism		.17		.12
Self-Esteem		-.07		-.09
Communal Narcissism		.34*		.01
Total R^2	.15†		.02	

Note: Political orientation was measured on a scale of 1 (very liberal) to 7 (very conservative); political activism was measured as number of political events in the last year. * $p < .05$. † $p < .10$

Results (cont.)

Contrary to the hypothesis, communal narcissism predicted stronger conservative ideology ($\beta = .34, p = .03$). Neither agentic narcissism nor self-esteem predicted political orientation.

As an exploratory analysis, we used the same model to predict political activism. Notably, communal narcissism did not predict activism, nor did agentic narcissism or self-esteem.

Discussion

While there is no simple explanation for this pattern, it may be that certain conservative principles (e.g., limits to abortion, religious freedom) tap into a communal orientation toward protecting those who are perceived as vulnerable.

What is more notable though, is that while those scoring high in communal narcissism appear to be motivated to identify with a specific political group, they are not equally motivated to participate in the political process.

This result resonates with Gebauer et al. (2012), who demonstrated that communal orientation does not necessarily translate into communal action.

The results further underscore the distinction between agentic narcissism, communal narcissism, and self-esteem, and highlight the role of self-focused motivations in the political conversations dominating the nation.