

**The Interplay of Empathy and Individualism in**

**Support for Social Welfare Policies**

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## Abstract

Public support for government welfare programs is grounded in two potentially conflicting factors: a belief in individualism which undermines support for welfare assistance, and the capacity for empathy which potentially enhances support. However, empathy is an expensive psychological commodity subject to pervasive up- and down-regulation. This study examines the degree to which a belief in individualism affects the expression of compassionate support for a person in need among those with the capacity for empathy. In two online survey experiments, empathic ability powerfully *increases* support for a welfare recipient and social welfare policies when it does not conflict with individualism. But, empathic ability *decreases* compassion and support for government welfare among strong individualists. Evidence that individualists down-regulate empathy for someone in need of government assistance is consistent with the conservative view that welfare promotes dependency and undermines individual agency. In contrast, charitable assistance is not associated with long-term dependency and we find that empathy is up-regulated by strong individualists to generate charitable support for the same individual to whom they denied government assistance. The up- and down-regulation of empathy in response to someone in need of government welfare helps illuminate the sharp divisions over social welfare policy among the American public.

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In the U.S. and Western Europe, support for social welfare programs varies with the nature of the program and its targeted beneficiaries (Goren 2003; Lawrence et al 2013; Schneider and Ingram 1993; van Oorschot 2006). Programs that provide benefits to the elderly are popular, as seen in widespread support for Social Security and Medicare programs in the U.S., whereas American programs targeted for single mothers or the unemployed in Western Europe receive far less public support (Gilens 1995; Huddy, Jones, and Chard 2001; Larsen 2008; Petersen et al 2011; van Oorschot 2006). Judgments about social welfare recipients' deservingness is one of the main explanations for this checkered pattern of support (Aaroe and Petersen 2014; Petersen 2012; van Oorschot 2006). The public regards young children and those with severe illnesses as deserving because they are typically not held accountable for their situation. In contrast, there is far greater disagreement over the deservingness of able-bodied poor or unemployed working-age adults. The belief in individualism — that people can and should get ahead on their own (Feldman and Zaller 1992; Gilens 1995) — sets a high bar for judging an able-bodied adult as deserving of government assistance. Indeed, government assistance has been equated by some with dependency and the erosion of individual agency (Brewer and Stonecash 2015; McClosky and Zaller 1984; Weber, Baehr, and Wells 2002; Weiss 1969).

Individualism is not the only explanation, however, for support or opposition to the provision of government social welfare benefits. News media coverage of a social welfare program often features empathy-arousing stories about a needy individual or family (Iyengar 1991). Consider the widely disseminated image of the Syrian child who drowned while fleeing with his family to Europe in 2015. This image aroused world-wide consternation and

temporarily shifted the European conversation about refugees from their geographic movement and legal status to a more compassionate consideration of the difficulties and inhumane treatment they faced entering Europe. According to de Waal (2008; p 282) empathy “... allows one to quickly and automatically relate to the emotional states of others.” A drowned child, an out-of-work father of young children, a homeless vet, or a family struggling with a natural disaster can tug at the heart strings to promote support for government assistance regardless of a person’s belief in individualism (Gross 2008).

The effect of individualism on support for government assistance has been well documented but the effect of empathy has received far less research attention. There is some evidence that individuals who score highly on scales tapping humanitarianism and the principle of care are more likely to support government social welfare policies (Feldman and Steenbergen 2001; Newman et al 2014; Wilhelm and Bekkers 2010). Humanitarianism is not just an expression of liberal ideology or a view held by those who are not strong individualists. Feldman and Steenbergen (2001) report that humanitarianism is only modestly correlated with individualism ( $r=.12$ ) and other political factors that shape social welfare policy preferences such as partisanship ( $r=.21$ ), and ideological self-placement ( $r=-.14$ ). This suggests that both individualism and empathy may play distinct, and potentially conflicting, roles in shaping support for government social welfare policies (Feldman and Steenbergen 2001).

We explore the interplay of empathy and individualism in the current study to underscore the complexity of empathy as a political force. Prior evidence demonstrates that empathy is an expensive commodity subject to routine up- and down-regulation (Preston and de Waal 2002; Zaki 2014). Government welfare assistance is typically opposed by American

individualists because they believe it erodes self-reliance and creates dependency. In two online survey experiments, we find that individualists who are high in empathic ability down-regulate empathy to oppose government welfare assistance. In contrast, those high in empathic ability but who are less individualistic up-regulate empathy into support for government assistance. Individualism does not, however, lead those high in empathic ability to down-regulate empathy when a needy person requires charitable assistance. Many conservatives favor charitable assistance because they believe it does not generate long-term recipient dependency. Consistent with this, we find that individualists up-regulate empathy and support charitable assistance for the same individual to whom they deny government assistance.

#### Empathic Ability and its Regulation

People vary in how affected they are by highly emotive stories about people in need. Importantly, to be affected by such stories, one must possess the capacity for perspective taking – the cognitive recognition of another's emotional state that occurs rapidly, and perhaps, automatically (de Waal 2008), which we refer to as *empathic ability*. But empathic ability does not automatically translate into empathy and compassion. Individuals high in empathic ability simply possess the potential to react with compassion to someone in need. On balance, there is a modest positive association between empathic ability and the affective expression of compassion, sympathy, or *empathic concern* (Davis 1980; Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright 2004), and both empathic ability and concern predict who is most likely to share another's emotional

state, help a person in need, and support humanitarian values (Batson et al 2002; Feldman and Steenbergen 2001; Laurent & Hodges 2009).<sup>1</sup> However, the association is far from perfect.

One explanation for this weak association is that human empathy is subject to powerful regulation, even when empathic responses occur automatically. There are numerous factors that affect the up- and down-regulation of empathy including the number of people who require help, whether the affected person is a member of one's ingroup, one's level of concern for members of disadvantaged outgroups, personal distress, and the anticipated pain or other negative states associated with empathy (Cameron and Payne 2011; Decety 2011; Sirin et al 2017). We focus in this study on a belief in individualism to assess what happens when empathy and individualism conflict. As noted, the effects of individualism on opposition to government social welfare programs has been well documented. But the effects of empathy and its complex interplay with individualism have not. There are several ways in which they might jointly impact social welfare preferences.

First, empathy and individualism could have independent, additive effects on support for social welfare assistance – individualism could lower support, and empathic ability boost it, potentially cancelling each other. Second, individualism could prevail over empathy when they are in conflict because political beliefs are immediately relevant to support for government programs and maintained through a process of motivated reasoning (Taber and Lodge 2006). If so, strong individualists *regardless of their capacity to empathize* could simply reject empathy-

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<sup>1</sup> Feeling upset about the plight of another is also often included in measures of empathy but is less likely than empathic ability or concern to generate compassionate assistance.

arousing information and argue that someone in need of government assistance was undeserving.

A third possibility, and one we explore in detail in this research, is that empathic ability and individualism interact. Empathy is subject to powerful regulation and empathic responses, such as support for individuals in need, are far from certain even among those high in empathic ability (Zaki 2014). While some components of empathic ability, such as perspective taking, may be automatic (de Waal 2008), humans need to control their empathic responses to prevent emotional contagion and avoid violation of social norms (Preston and de Waal 2002). One common form of empathy regulation, referred to as up-regulation, involves its transformation into sympathy and compassion (Batson 1998; Eisenberg 2000; Goetz, Keltner, and Simon-Thomas 2010).<sup>2</sup> Down-regulation constitutes another form of empathy regulation in which empathy is suppressed by reappraising the situation in ways that are less conducive to feelings of compassion.

But empathy is difficult to regulate, and often results in excessive down-regulation, marked by decreased sympathy, physical avoidance, and reappraisal of an individual in need. Research on reactions to large-scale humanitarian crises underscore the difficulties entailed in the down-regulation of empathy (Slovic 2007; Small et al 2007). Cameron and Payne (2011) refer to this as the ‘collapse of compassion.’ Paradoxically, this collapse of compassion tends to be most marked among those with the *greatest empathic ability* who may need to steel themselves against its high personal toll. Cameron and Payne (2011) find, for example, that

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<sup>2</sup> Sympathy involves feelings of concern for another whereas compassion involves the desire to diminish another’s suffering (Goetz et al 2010).

respondents exposed to images and information about several needy children felt less compassion and were less upset than those exposed to images and information about a single needy child. Moreover, the collapse of compassion was most pronounced among those most skilled at emotional regulation and those instructed to dampen their emotional response.

Lebowitz and Dovidio (2015) further underscore the negative effects of empathy suppression on compassion. In their research, subjects read about a high school student who suffered from mental illness. One third were assigned to a suppression condition in which they were instructed to “control your emotions by not expressing them,” while the other subjects were assigned to either a control or a positive reappraisal condition. Subjects in the suppression condition reported significantly less concern for the person than those in the control condition. Moreover, empathy suppression led to a desire for greater social distance from the ill person, largely mediated by lower levels of empathic concern. A second study replicated these results and found that those instructed to suppress empathy were less likely to provide assistance.

Finally, Cameron, Harris, and Payne (2016) extended this line of research to examine the link between empathy, the anticipated cost of compassion, and its down-regulation. They presented subjects with vignettes about a homeless person who was either a drug addict or suffering from an uncontrollable illness. Those high in empathic ability believed that helping the homeless addict would be more emotionally taxing than helping the ill homeless person, and this led them to dehumanize the addict. Thus, those highest in empathic ability are most likely to dehumanize a needy individual to avoid the potential cost of compassion. In a second study, the researchers told respondents that watching a video of the homeless person would either be emotionally exhausting or inspiring and found greater dehumanization of the addict in the



emotional exhaustion condition. These findings confirm Zaki's (2014) view that the high costs of expressed empathy are a major motive for its suppression.

The difficulties involved in regulating the expression of empathy bring us back to the origins of social welfare policy support. To the extent that government programs are paired with examples of needy, deserving individuals, they should arouse compassion among those with high empathic abilities. But attitudes toward these programs are also likely affected by individualism. What happens when empathy and individualism values conflict? Research on the up- and down-regulation of empathy suggest that the concordance of empathic ability and values should lead to compassion. However, someone high in both empathic ability and individualism who is exposed to a person in need of government assistance is likely to suppress empathy to avoid violating their values, paradoxically fostering victim vilification.

One glimpse of this process is evident in research by Gubler and colleagues (2015; Gubler 2013). Gubler (2013) found that Israelis with the most negative attitudes towards Arabs felt the most discomfort when exposed to a humanitarian, pro-Palestinian message from an Arab-Israeli. In a second study, Gubler and colleagues (2015) randomly assigned voters, activists, and elected officials in Utah to a video humanizing illegal immigrants. The humanizing message backfired and decreased compassion among those with anti-immigrant views (when compared to anti-immigrant individuals in the control condition), intensifying their support for anti-immigrant policies. Both studies provide suggestive evidence that the suppression of empathy results in markedly reduced compassion.

## Individualism and Compassionate Conservatism

We focus on individualism as a factor that powerfully shapes support for government welfare programs and motivates empathy regulation (Feldman 1988; Petersen et al 2011). One of the central tenets of individualism is that people get ahead in life through their own agency without reliance on others. In American conservatism, this is accompanied by the fear that government assistance will create dependency and stifle personal enterprise (McClosky and Zaller 1984). Recent polling by the Pew Research Center (2014) finds that over twice as many Republicans (65%) than Democrats (26%) think that government aid to the poor “does more harm than good by making people too dependent on government” (Shorthouse and Kirkby 2014).<sup>3</sup>

Individualists do not, however, equate charitable assistance with dependency for several reasons: charitable aid is provided voluntarily, perceived as being short term, limited in scope, and delivered at a community level where accountability and deservingness can be ensured. There is evidence linking such beliefs to political conservatism. First, conservatives are averse to compulsory taxation and regard taxing the rich to help the poor as unfair because they believe such assistance should be voluntary (Bartels 2008; Verba and Orren 1985). This is also consistent with evidence that conservatives are more likely than liberals to voluntarily donate to charity (Brooks 2006; Brooks and Lewis 2001; Kuypers et al. 2003). Indeed, previous

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<sup>3</sup> Similar findings exist in the United Kingdom. A recent YouGov and TUC survey found that an overwhelming majority of conservatives (86%) believe that the welfare system in the UK has created a culture of dependency, “whereby many people, and often whole families, get used to living off state benefits” (Shorthouse and Kirkby 2014).

research has found that conservatives are willing to ‘give to government’ voluntarily, and for some issues in equal rates to liberals (Li et al. 2011).

Second, charitable assistance is controlled by local entities embedded within a specific community and conservatives argue that this local control ensures accountability and better matches someone in need to a specific form of assistance (Schansberg 1993; see also Olasky 2000). In his book *Compassionate Conservatism*, conservative thinker Marvin Olasky (2000) highlights the ways in which charitable organizations can distinguish between different types of poverty and enforce requirements for the receipt of aid. Conservatives believe aid should be directed to those willing to improve themselves in moral and spiritual terms to become future pillars of their community (Olasky 2000). In this way, views of recipient deservingness are less relevant to conservative support of charitable assistance because it is not seen by them as a collective benefit but rather something provided voluntarily by individuals and organizations.

### Hypotheses

We hypothesize that empathic ability and individualism interact to shape support for assistance to a needy, deserving person. First, non-individualists<sup>4</sup> high in empathic ability will up-regulate empathy into support of government assistance whereas individualists high in empathic ability will down-regulate empathy and oppose government social welfare assistance because it conflicts with their values. Second, both non-individualists and individualists high in empathic ability will up-regulate empathy to support charitable assistance because it does not

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<sup>4</sup> We refer to those who score low on our measure of individualism as non-individualists. While, in the US context, it is likely that few people completely reject the idea that hard work contributes to success, people low on our measure do believe that hard work, by itself, does not guarantee success in life.

conflict with individualism. Third, individualists high in empathic ability will express less concern and compassion for someone in need of government than charitable assistance as evidence of the down-regulation of empathy whereas those low in individualism and high in empathic ability will express concern for the person in both conditions as evidence of empathy up-regulation.

## **Data and Methods**

### Measurement of Empathic Ability

We measure empathic ability behaviorally as the accuracy with which someone can read facial emotional expressions, a highly heritable attribute (Melchers et al 2016). We avoid the use of self-report scales which involve questions about one's habitual behavior because they are subject to strong social desirability pressures (Lawrence et al 2004). For instance, self-report measures of empathy elicit far larger differences between women and men than facial emotion recognition tests, suggesting that women may be especially likely to view themselves as empathetic regardless of their underlying capacity for empathy (Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright 2004; Eisenberg and Lennon 1983; Vellante et al 2013). Items in the Davis (1980) Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) which ask someone if they have "tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate" or are "pretty soft-hearted" make clear their gendered nature.

Behavioral measures of empathic ability are far less subject to social desirability concerns. One of the most important tests of *empathic ability*, "Reading the Mind in the Eyes" (MIE), was developed by Baron-Cohen and colleagues (2001) to differentiate those with and

without Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD).<sup>5</sup> Individuals with ASD have difficulty on the test and score poorly. The test measures an individual's ability to correctly label an emotion expressed by someone else. Respondents are shown a picture of a pair of eyes, and then asked to choose the emotion being conveyed by the person, selecting from one of four emotion words in a multiple-choice format. The measure has been used among normal populations to study empathy and cooperation and is uncontaminated by social desirability (Baker et al 2014; Vellante et al 2013; Woolley et al 2010). It is modestly correlated with self-report measures of empathy, pro-social orientations, lower levels of spitefulness, and lower social dominance orientation (Declerck and Bogaert 2008; Besel & Yuille 2010; Ewing et al 2016; Lawrence et al 2004; Sherman et al 2015; Vellante et al 2013). There is also a small but growing body of work in political science assessing the effects of MIE on political attitudes. For example, Loewen and colleagues (2017) observe a stronger preference for a political candidate employing empathic language among those high in MIE.

The MIE does not measure a desire to help, feel what another is feeling, or take someone else's perspective, but it does identify differences in the ability to identify another person's emotions, a precursor to empathetic concern. As other researchers have noted, it is difficult to react with empathy to someone if you cannot decipher what they are feeling (de Waal 2008). We employ the MIE to gauge individual differences in susceptibility to an empathy appeal. When confronted with someone in need of government assistance, a person high in

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<sup>5</sup> Baron-Cohen and colleagues (2001) refer to MIE as a theory of mind test which assesses how well a person can put themselves into the mind of another. MIE has also been referred to as social intelligence and overlaps with empathy. We refer to MIE as a test of empathic ability because it provides a foundation for the development of empathetic responses.

MIE should be more affected than other by that appeal. This does not mean that those high in MIE will respond empathetically but rather that they should be more affected by an empathy appeal. In the following studies we use MIE scores to estimate variance in empathic ability and susceptibility to an empathy appeal among those high and low in individualism to determine when empathy is up- and down-regulated in a political context.

#### Study 1: Amazon Mechanical Turk Sample

Participants were recruited through MTurk and were paid \$1.00 for completing a survey that took between 15 and 20 minutes. To improve the demographic diversity of the MTurk sample, a pre-stratification filter was employed to establish quotas based on ideology, age, education, race, income, and gender. The sample thus exhibits substantial demographic and political variation (see Table A1). 511 respondents completed the survey. We dropped anyone who finished in less than 11 minutes (N=97) for a sample size of 414, and focused analyses on the half sample that received the same materials as those in Study 2 (N=205).<sup>6</sup> The study was conducted over several weeks in early 2014.

#### Study 2: YouGov National Sample

400 non-Hispanic, non-Asian whites were recruited from the YouGov online panel. We relied on a white sample to match respondents to the race of the person in need to avoid ingroup/outgroup effects. In the MTurk sample, there were insufficient non-white respondents to assess ingroup/outgroup effects, though our findings remain (but with smaller effect sizes)

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<sup>6</sup> Study 1 included another experimental condition that is not analyzed in this paper but to which we return in the conclusion. The average time to complete the survey was 17 minutes and we dropped individuals who were roughly 1 s.d. below this value. This was far less of a problem in the YouGov study and we included everyone because fewer than 4% completed in less than 1 sd below the mean (21 minutes, s.d.=10).

when we restrict the sample to whites only. YouGov respondents reflect greater diversity than the MTurk sample. They are older, less Democratic, and more politically moderate (a group largely filtered out of the MTurk sample) (Table A1). The study was in the field during October 2014.

### Measuring Empathic Ability: Reading the Mind in the Eyes

Respondents completed 18 items from the MIE.<sup>7</sup> Two sample MIE items are presented in Figure 1. The correct answer for the first (female) set of eyes is “desire,” and “uneasy” is the correct answer for the second (male) set of eyes. All 18 items are listed in Table A2. The test produced very similar distributions in the two studies as shown in kernel density plots (Figure 2). In both samples the range of correct answers was 4 to 18 and the distributions were skewed, as is typical for the MIE. The mean was 13.3 (md = 14) in Study 1 and 13.0 (md = 13) in Study 2, comparable to results observed in other studies (Vellante et al 2013). MIE scores were rescaled (to vary from 0 to 1) and squared to bring them somewhat closer to a normal distribution (the long lower tail of each distribution remains to some extent).<sup>8</sup> The means of the squared scores are .57 (md = .60) in Study 1 and .56 (md = .58) in Study 2. The two studies demonstrate substantial variation in empathic ability in normal populations. Some people are exceptionally good at this task whereas others barely identify half of the appropriate emotions.

[Figures 1 & 2 here]

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<sup>7</sup> The 18-item MIE items are drawn from the original 36-item scale (Baron Cohen et al 2001). Items in the original scale displayed either a positive, negative, or neutral emotion. We chose six items from each emotional valence category to obtain items that ranged in difficulty (based on percent accuracy). Eight of the eyes were from female faces.

<sup>8</sup> All results hold when using the raw MIE scores.

### Experimental Conditions

To assess the effects of empathy on attitudes toward those in need, respondents in each study read a description of a white male who had lost his job after the 2008-9 recession but was otherwise highly deserving. The full text, which was accompanied by a photo of a dejected-looking man in his late 30s named Mark Sperling, his wife, and two boys, noted that Sperling was a civil engineer who had lost his job in 2011, had taken occasional part-time work, been actively looking for work, updated his skills, and his wife had taken a job to make ends meet. This description was preceded by a short introduction that referred to him as someone in need of either government or charitable assistance (see Table A3 for full wording).

### Measuring Individualism

Study 1 contained six individualism items in agree/disagree format that tapped the importance of hard work as a condition for success. Study 2 included four of the same items. Respondents in both studies were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following four statements: “Even if people try hard they often cannot reach their goals”; “Any person who is willing to work hard has a good chance of succeeding”; “Even if people are ambitious they often cannot succeed;” and “If people work hard they almost always get what they want.” In addition, respondents in Study 1 were also asked the following: “Most people who don't get ahead should not blame the system; they only have themselves to blame;” and “Hard work offers little guarantee of success.”

The items created reliable scales in both studies (alpha = .86 in Study 1 and .77 in Study 2). The scale distribution was relatively symmetric, and scores were distributed across the entire range of the scale (recoded 0 to 1, Study 1 mean = 0.53 and Study 2 mean = 0.50) in both



studies (Figure A1). Scale properties are shown in Table A4 and correlates of MIE and individualism in Table A5. The individualism and MIE scores were relatively unrelated ( $r=-.14$  in Study 1,  $r=-.03$  in Study 2).<sup>9</sup>

### Analysis

To test our hypotheses, we estimate models that include the squared MIE scale, individualism, and their interaction and, where appropriate, the interaction with experimental condition. Most of the dependent variables are categorical and those models were estimated as ordered probits. In addition, we estimated models that included controls for gender, age, education, race/ethnicity (Study 1 only), and ideological self-identification. In no case did the joint effects of empathy and individualism change significantly with these additional statistical controls (Tables A7-A12).

## **Results**

### Responses to a Needy Individual

We begin by analyzing the joint effects of empathic ability (MIE) and individualism on expressions of compassion for Mark Sperling in the government condition, designed to heighten the conflict between empathic ability and individualism. After reading about him, respondents were asked “How much do you care about what happens to Mark Sperling?” In Figure 3 we plot the predicted probability that respondents cared “a great deal” or “quite a bit” about Sperling ranging across the 10<sup>th</sup> to 99<sup>th</sup> percentile of MIE scores for those who most strongly reject and most strongly support individualism. This relationship is plotted separately

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<sup>9</sup> Table A6 also shows the correlation between each item in the individualism scale and the key dependent variable in the government condition in Study 1 to make clear that each scale item works equally well.

for each study, based on ordered probit estimates in Table A7. We exclude those below the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile on the MIE because they are very far from the mean and, in these samples, close to abnormal psychologically. The predicated probabilities are plotted with 90% confidence intervals given the small sample sizes and three-way interactions. The predicted probabilities are shown for those who scored highest and lowest on the individualism measure. There are observations at the extreme ends of the measure in both samples. In addition, the nonlinear marginal effect plot of MIE can be seen across the full range of individualism in Figures A2 and A3.

[Figure 3 here]

The estimates are very similar across the studies. Among those lowest in individualism, greater empathic ability increases concern about Sperling across the MIE scale. Those low in empathic ability express modest concern about Sperling whereas those high in MIE say that they care a great deal or quite a bit about him. In both studies, increasing levels of empathic ability among those who reject individualism generates substantially greater sympathy and compassion for Sperling.

In contrast, the relationship between MIE and sympathy toward Sperling is sharply negative for those who embrace individualism. The greater their empathic ability, the *less* they say they care about him. If highly empathic individualists simply ignored their feelings of empathy there would be no relationship between empathic ability and concern. Instead, the negative relationship indicates a marked reduction in compassion for Sperling as empathic ability increases among those who endorse individualism. It appears that individualists high in empathic ability suppress compassion for Sperling, an example of empathy down-regulation,

and overshoot as they do so.

Reduced compassion for Sperling among strong individualists high in empathic ability also results in opposition to his receipt of government assistance. Respondents in the government condition were asked “How strongly do you support or oppose extending government unemployment benefits for people like Mark Sperling who have been unemployed for a long period of time?” Figure 4 depicts the predicted probability of supporting (strongly or very strongly) an extension of unemployment benefits across the range of MIE separately for those who reject and endorse individualism based on estimates in Table A8.<sup>10</sup>

The relationship between empathic ability and support for unemployment insurance closely parallels that depicted for caring.<sup>11</sup> Among those who reject individualism, there is only lukewarm support for the provision of government benefits among those low in empathic ability and much greater support among those high in MIE. Just the opposite trend is seen for those high in individualism. At low levels of empathic ability, there is modest support for the extension of unemployment benefits, but this support disappears completely as empathic ability increases. The divergent effects of empathic ability on support for government unemployment benefits among those low and high in individualism are clear in Figure 4. Indeed, individualism is not especially helpful in predicting support for unemployment benefits among those low in empathic ability but is powerfully predictive among those high in empathic ability.

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<sup>10</sup> Nonlinear marginal effects plots for these two relationships are shown in Figures A6 and A7 to demonstrate the effects of MIE at all levels of individualism.

<sup>11</sup> A similar pattern was discerned when examining responses to the item: "How underserving or deserving is Mark Sperling of assistance from the government?"

[Figure 4 here]

The government condition was designed to maximize conflict between empathic ability and individualism whereas the charities condition was designed to eliminate (or at least reduce) such conflict. By framing assistance in terms of charity and private giving we should have removed the conflict between empathy and individualism.

Figure 5 depicts the predicted probabilities of caring a great deal or quite a bit about Sperling in the charity condition as a function of empathic ability among those high and low in individualism. These values are generated from ordered probit estimates in Table A7.<sup>12</sup> In sharp contrast to the government condition, there is now a strong *positive* relationship between MIE scores and expressions of caring for Sperling among those high in individualism. Indeed, individualism has little effect on support for charitable assistance among those high in empathic ability. This finding lends validity to the MIE scale as a measure of empathic ability and gives credence to the conclusion that the negative relationship between MIE and caring, and MIE and support for government assistance, among those high in individualism in the government condition reflects the down-regulation of empathy. Once an unemployed individual is described as someone in need of *non-governmental* assistance, empathic ability predicts expressions of sympathy among individualists as it did for non-individualists in the government condition.

[Figure 5 here]

There is one unexpected result shown in Figure 5: the negative relationship between MIE and expressions of caring among non-individualists in both studies. Among non-

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<sup>12</sup> Nonlinear marginal effects plots for these two relationships are shown in Figures A4 and A5 to demonstrate the effects of MIE at all levels of individualism.

individualists, respondents high in empathic ability are less sympathetic toward Sperling than those low in empathic ability when he requires charitable assistance. This finding is interesting but does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance (as seen in Figure 5 and Table A7). It is possible that those who reject individualism experience conflict between compassion for Sperling and their political values which prioritize government over charitable assistance. But the finding is weak, and this interpretation requires further research attention.

In the charity condition, respondents were asked “How undeserving or deserving is Mark Sperling of assistance from charitable organizations?” Figure 6 shows the predicted probability of support (“extremely” or “very deserving”) for charitable assistance to Sperling among those high and low in individualism (see Table A9).<sup>13</sup> As with caring, there is a positive relationship between empathic ability and charitable assistance for Sperling among those high in individualism.<sup>14</sup> Thus, individualists high in empathic ability oppose government but support charitable assistance, reinforcing the conclusion that empathic ability drives compassion among individualists once the conflict between empathy and individualism is removed. Estimates in Figure 6 also partly replicate the negative relationship between empathic ability and compassion among those low in individualism. Support for charitable assistance declines as empathic ability increases in Study 2 among non-individualists. This trend is not replicated in Study 1. Overall, individualists high in empathic ability are far more willing to provide charitable

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<sup>13</sup> Nonlinear marginal effects plots for these two relationships are shown in Figures A8 and A9 to demonstrate the effects of MIE at all levels of individualism.

<sup>14</sup> Some of the parameter estimates in Table A9, while substantively large, appear small relative to their standard errors. As we discuss in the notes to Table A9, the critical marginal effects in Figure 6 are significant in both studies with a one-tailed test. And, if we combine the data from the two studies, the parameter estimates are very similar to those reported in Table A9 and statistically significant because of much smaller standard errors.

assistance to Sperling than their less empathic, but politically like-minded counterparts.

[Figure 6 here]

We have presented evidence that empathic ability increases compassion for Mark Sperling among individualists when he needs charitable assistance but suppresses compassion and support when he needs government assistance. Do individualists high in empathic ability also denigrate Sperling in the government condition to down-regulate empathy? We analyze evaluations of Sperling on three traits assessed in Study 2. Respondents rated Sperling as competent or incompetent, intelligent or unintelligent, and talented or untalented (on 6-point balanced scales). This is a difficult test because Sperling was intentionally described as deserving. Not surprisingly, few respondents viewed him very negatively although there was variation in how positively he was assessed. Responses to the three questions were very highly correlated and combined into a single measure that ranges from 0 to 1.<sup>15</sup> The combined trait scale was regressed onto MIE, individualism, and their interaction. The regression estimates are provided in Table A10 and include a large three-way interaction between condition, MIE, and individualism. Figure 7 depicts predicted values on the trait scale for those highest and lowest in individualism across the range of MIE.

The effects of empathic ability on assessment of Sperling's traits depend on whether a respondent was in the government or charities condition. Among those high in individualism, empathic ability has a negative effect on ratings of Sperling in the government condition but a positive effect in the charity conditions, consistent with the findings of earlier analyses. In other

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<sup>15</sup> The mean inter-item correlation for the three traits is .65. Coefficient alpha for the scale is .84.

words, individualists distanced themselves from Sperling and viewed him less positively when he needed government rather than charitable assistance. Just the opposite is seen for non-individualists. As with caring and government assistance, empathic ability boosts positive assessments of Sperling in the government condition and leads to slightly more negative assessments of him in the charities condition, although the marginal effect of empathic ability is not statistically distinguishable from zero in the latter case.

[Figure 7 here]

### Broader Effects of Empathy and Individualism

To this point we have focused on the effects of empathic ability on compassion and deservingness for a single individual in need. But can the effects of empathic ability extend to social welfare policy judgments more generally? Among non-individualists, exposure over time to those in need should generate increased sympathy and a desire to provide government assistance. We therefore expect support for government social welfare policies to increase with greater empathic ability among people low in individualism. But repeated exposure to people in need of government assistance should have a different effect among individualists. To resolve the conflict between empathic ability and individualism they may distance themselves from those in need, suppress compassion, and oppose government assistance. Over time these processes of up- and down-regulation of empathy should become habitual, molding attitudes towards government social welfare programs.

To test this prediction, we analyze the effects of empathic ability and individualism on general political orientations and social welfare policy attitudes. Respondents in both studies were asked: “Which is more important: Insuring that each individual has as much opportunity

as possible, even if that means some people enjoy far more success than others OR insuring greater equality of income, even if that limits individual opportunities.” The predicted probability of choosing equality over individual opportunity is a function of both empathic ability and individualism as shown in Figure 8 (based on the estimates in Table A11). Not surprisingly, individualism decreases the probability of choosing equality over individual opportunity. But empathic ability decreases support for equality among individualists whereas it additionally boosts support among non-individualists. Individualists highest in empathic ability are the least willing to trade opportunity for greater income equality.

[Figure 8 here]

The divergent effects of empathic ability on support for government social policy among those high and low in individualism can also be seen on questions concerning assistance to seniors, a group seen as generally deserving. In Study 1 respondents were asked “The U.S. government recently changed the way Social Security benefits are calculated so that the annual cost of living raises are smaller than in the past. How strongly do you support or oppose this change?” And in Study 2 respondents were asked “How strongly do you support or oppose the U.S. government paying for all of the cost of prescription drugs for senior citizens who are living on very little income?” Figure 9 depicts the predicted probability of support for government assistance to seniors as a function of MIE and individualism (based on the estimates in Table A12).

[Figure 9 here]

Once again, empathic ability increases support for government assistance among non-individualists but reduces it for individualists. In both studies, those low in individualism and



high in empathic ability express strong support for policies benefitting seniors. Empathic ability has the opposite effect among individualists who exhibit greater support for cuts to social security benefits in Study 1 and decreased support for prescription drug benefits for seniors in Study 2. Even in a situation where deservingness considerations should dominate policy preferences for needy senior citizens, empathic ability drives a backlash against government assistance when empathy and individualistic values clash.

### Robustness

We considered several alternative explanations for these findings. The trends shown in Figures 3-9 look superficially like the common interaction between political sophistication and predispositions such as individualism on policy preferences. It is possible that MIE measures reading comprehension, cognitive ability, or survey attentiveness rather than empathic ability. We do not find any evidence for this, however. First, there is no significant correlation between MIE and political knowledge ( $r = .07$  in Study 1 and  $r = .00$  in Study 2), education ( $r = -0.01$  in Study 1 and  $r = 0.01$  in Study 2), or time to complete the study ( $r = -0.05$  in Study 1 and  $r = 0.00$  in Study 2).<sup>16</sup> Second, we included a measure of political knowledge and its interaction with individualism in all models (Tables A13 & A14). The interaction term was significant in some cases, as predicted by Zaller (1992). But this had no effect on the interaction between MIE and individualism. All models were re-specified to include an interaction between education and individualism (Tables A15 & A16), and then time spent to complete the survey and individualism (Tables A17 & A18). In no instance were these interaction terms significant;

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<sup>16</sup> We also found no correlation between time spent reading the treatment and MIE in Study 1 ( $r = 0.01$ ).

controlling for them did not decrease the significant joint effects of empathic ability and individualism.

It is also possible that individualists high in empathic ability have other unmeasured attributes that might account for the trends observed in our analyses. For example, the negative effects of empathic ability on support for benefits to the elderly may reflect an ability to read others' emotional states combined with a willful disregard for their welfare that typifies a classic Machiavellian. Study 2 included a six-item measure of Machiavellianism (Christie and Geis 1970) which was negatively correlated with empathic ability ( $r = -.17, p < .05$ ) indicating that Machiavellians are *less* adept at reading the emotional states of others consistent with past research (Lyons, Caldwell, and Shultz 2010). Even among those high in individualism, increasing empathic ability is associated with significantly lower levels of Machiavellianism. In addition, we examined the possibility that variation in empathic ability among those low in individualism is related to religiosity. Once again, we find little correlation between religiosity and empathic ability ( $r = -.13$ ).

### **Conclusions**

In this study, empathic ability, as measured by the Mind in the Eyes test, had strong positive effects on support for government assistance to the needy and aroused increased support for social welfare programs among non-individualists. Importantly, increasing empathic ability among those low in individualism was strongly associated with greater compassion and deservingness for an individual who had fallen on hard times. When compassion does not conflict with political principles, our findings suggest that empathic ability leads to the up-regulation of empathy into compassion.

Within political psychology, personality traits are typically expected to have similar directional effects on political variables. But our research underscores that in the extreme, a common trait can have widely divergent effects on political outcomes depending on political context. In this study, we show that empathic ability generates compassion when it does not conflict with a belief in individualism but can lead to victim vilification when empathic ability and individualism conflict. We manipulate context in this study by varying government or charity as the source of assistance. But we also find a chronic opposition to egalitarianism and assistance to seniors among individualists higher in empathic ability suggesting a stable context in the US in which individualism and empathy are habitually in conflict. Taken together, our results imply that empathic appeals may exacerbate the conflict over government welfare assistance pushing individualists toward greater opposition and non-individualists toward greater support.

It is important to emphasize that our results are not caused by straightforward ideological reasoning. People high in individualism may believe that government programs cause harm to individual recipients and oppose programs out of concern for the affected individuals. But we have shown that highly empathic individualists not only oppose government assistance to needy individuals, they also feel *less compassion* for them, and view them more negatively than those with the same political views but lower empathic abilities. This contradicts the argument that empathic individualists oppose government assistance out of a heightened concern about the harm caused by such assistance. Instead, these findings are consistent with the effects of the down-regulation of empathy.

This brings us back to the normative implications of political principles and empathy as competing bases of support for social welfare assistance. The parochial nature of empathy and its greater arousal in response to one rather than many victims make it a questionable basis for the provision of assistance (Decety and Cowell 2015). It is normatively problematic if one vivid instance of a person in need generates greater compassion than a broad-scale humanitarian disaster. In an additional set of conditions in Study 1, we found that the addition of a seriously ill child in the Sperling family resulted in substantially higher levels of compassion and support for assistance of all kinds for people high and low in individualism.<sup>17</sup> This type of appeal is often made by charities to potential donors although it is less common within discussions of government social welfare policy. In this study which focused on support for government welfare assistance (omitting the ill-child condition), empathy does not replace principles but rather exacerbates principled differences in a powerful teaming up of heart and mind. This may not be the rational ideal advocated by some normative theorists, but it does help to explain the considerable emotional heat surrounding discussions of social welfare policy in the United States.

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<sup>17</sup> Specifically, we added the following to the Sperling story: “Mark’s 6-year-old son, Justin, has just been diagnosed with a life-threatening form of cancer and will need expensive medical care to have a chance of recovering. Without a full-time job Mark is worried that he will not be able to pay his son’s medical bills.” Further analysis is required to know whether the boost in reported compassion that we see in these conditions is a result of empathy or social desirability.

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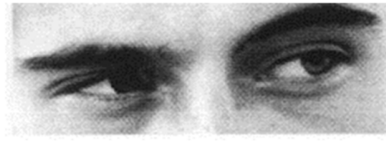
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**Figure 1: Sample Items from the Mind-in-the-Eyes Test**

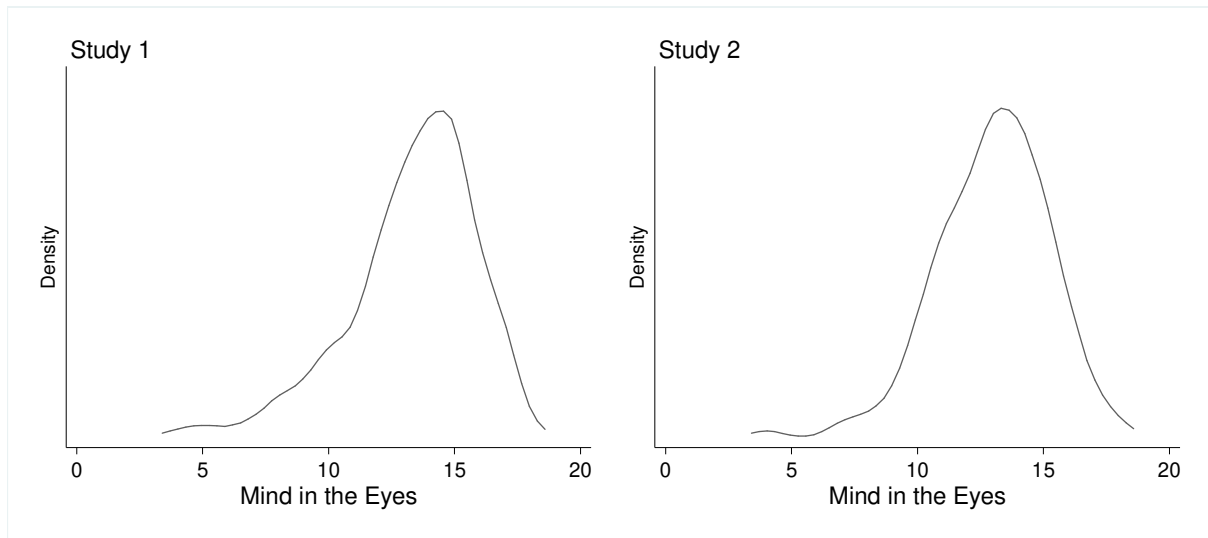


1. joking
2. flustered
3. desire
4. convinced

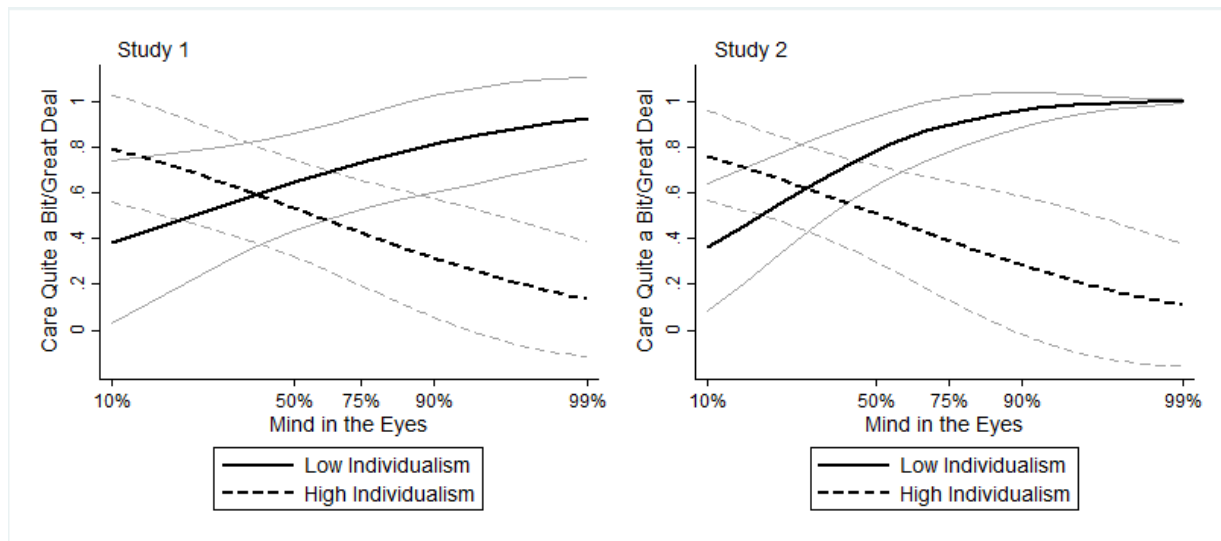


1. apologetic
2. friendly
3. uneasy
4. dispirited

**Figure 2: Distributions of Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (Kernel Density Plots)**

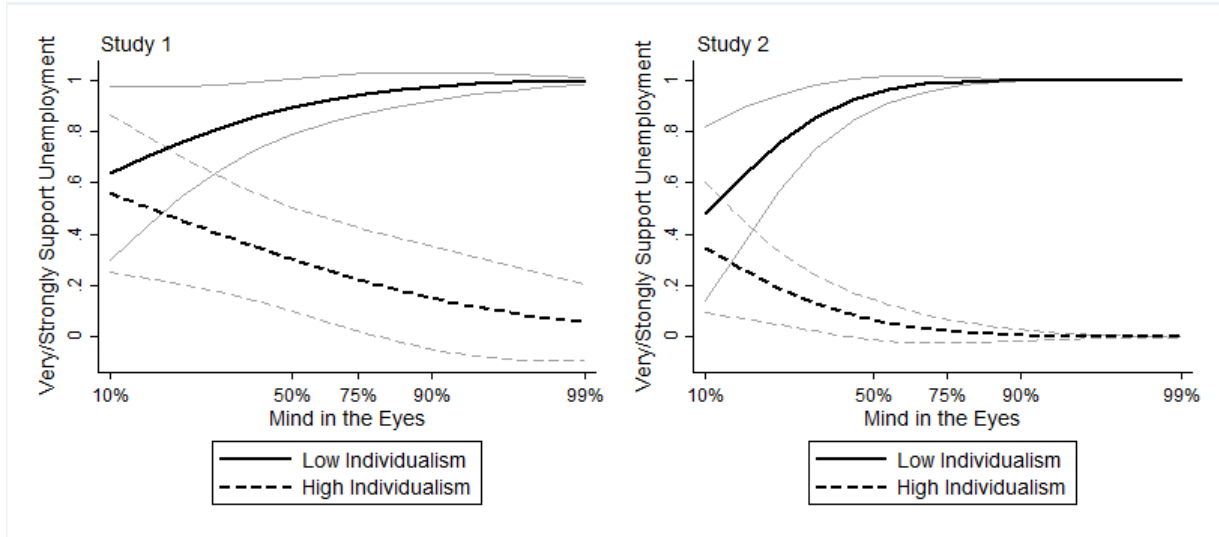


**Figure 3: Predicted Probabilities for “Care about Sperling”, Government Condition**



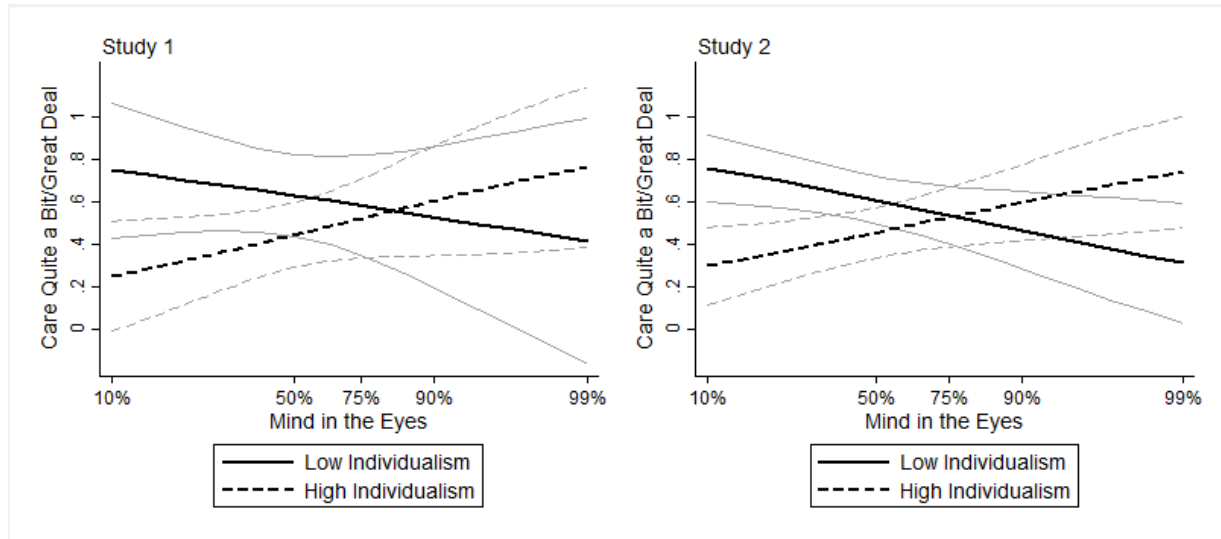
Note: Based upon the ordered probit estimates in Table A7, plotted lines represent the predicted probability that respondents care “a great deal” or “quite a bit” about Sperling ranging across the 10<sup>th</sup> to 99<sup>th</sup> percentile of MIE scores for those at the lowest and highest values on the individualism scale in the government assistance condition. Error bands are 90% confidence intervals.

**Figure 4: Predicted Probabilities of Supporting Unemployment Insurance, Government Condition**



*Note:* Based upon the ordered probit estimates in Table A8, plotted lines represent the predicted probability of supporting (strongly or very strongly) an extension of unemployment benefits ranging across the 10<sup>th</sup> to 99<sup>th</sup> percentile of MIE scores for those at the lowest and highest values on the individualism scale in the government assistance condition. Error bands are 90% confidence intervals.

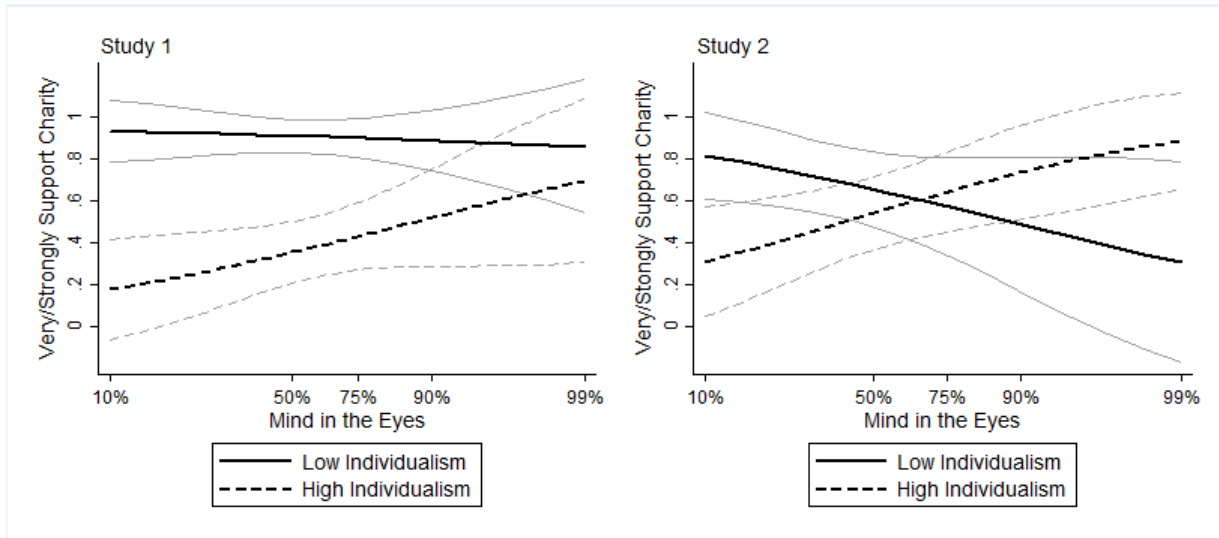
**Figure 5: Predicted Probabilities for “Care about Sperling”, Charities Condition**



*Note:* Based upon the ordered probit estimates in Table A7, plotted lines represent the predicted probability that respondents care “a great deal” or “quite a bit” about Sperling ranging across the 10<sup>th</sup> to 99<sup>th</sup> percentile of MIE scores for those at the lowest and highest values on the individualism scale in the charitable assistance condition. Error bands are 90% confidence intervals.

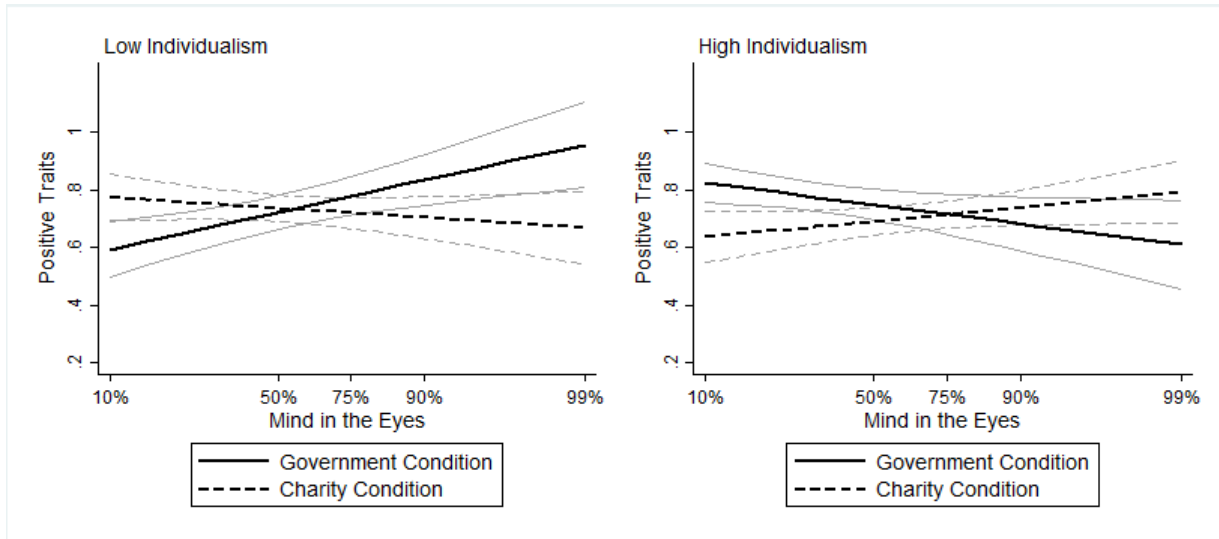


**Figure 6: Predicted Probabilities of Supporting Charitable Assistance, Charities Condition**



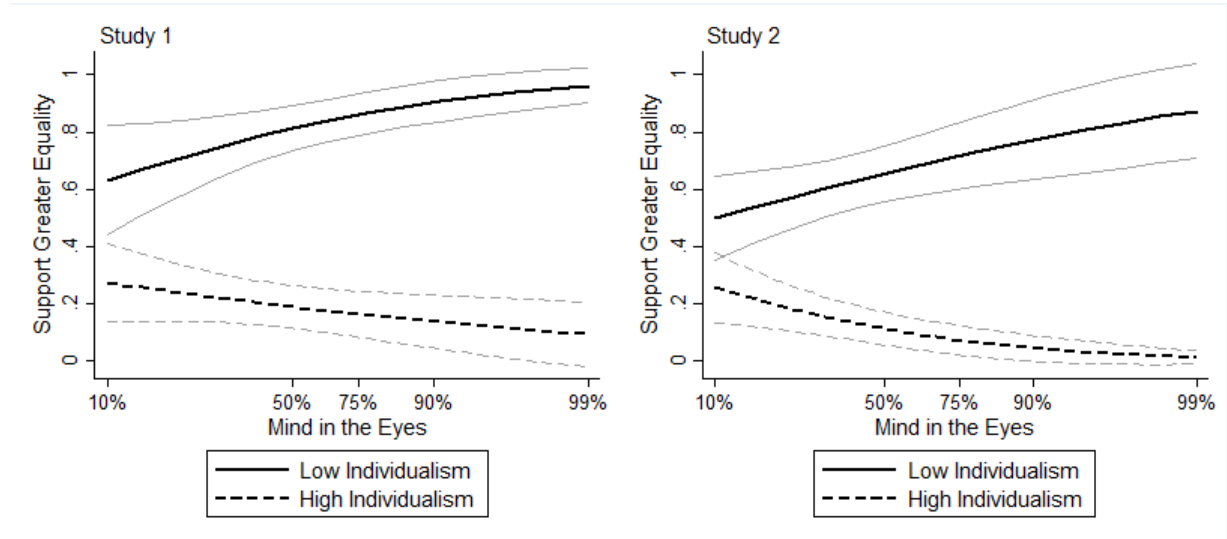
*Note:* Based upon the ordered probit estimates in Table A9, plotted lines represent the predicted probability of support (“extremely” or “very deserving”) for charitable assistance to Sperling ranging across the 10<sup>th</sup> to 99<sup>th</sup> percentile of MIE scores for those at the lowest and highest values on the individualism scale in the charitable assistance condition. Error bands are 90% confidence intervals.

**Figure 7: Predicted Values of Traits, Study 2: Government and Charity Conditions**



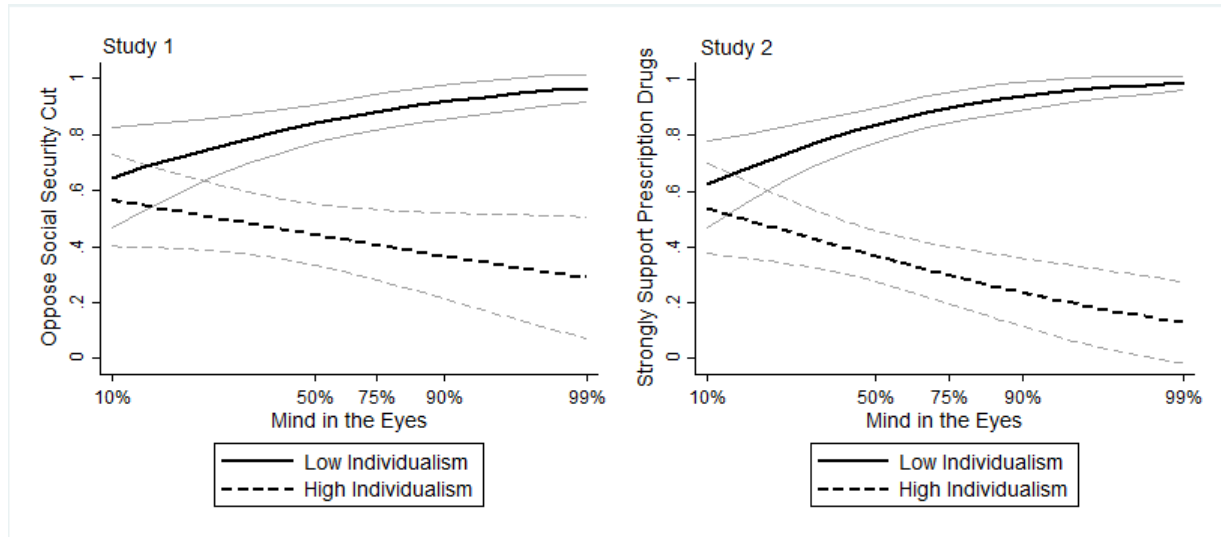
*Note:* Based upon OLS regression estimates in Table A10, plotted lines represent the predicted values on the trait score ranging across the 10<sup>th</sup> to 99<sup>th</sup> percentile of MIE scores for those at the lowest and highest values on the individualism scale in both the government and charitable assistance conditions in Study 2. Error bands are 90% confidence intervals.

**Figure 8: Predicted Probabilities of Choosing Equality over Opportunity**



*Note:* Based upon the ordered probit estimates in Table A11, plotted lines represent the predicted probability of choosing equality over individual opportunity ranging across the 10<sup>th</sup> to 99<sup>th</sup> percentile of MIE scores for those at the lowest and highest values on the individualism scale aggregated across both conditions. Error bands are 90% confidence intervals.

**Figure 9: Predicted Probabilities Support for Assistance to the Elderly**



*Note:* Based upon the ordered probit estimates in Table A12, plotted lines represent the predicted probability of support for government assistance to seniors ranging across the 10<sup>th</sup> to 99<sup>th</sup> percentile of MIE scores for those at the lowest and highest values on the individualism scale aggregated across both conditions. Error bands are 90% confidence intervals.