IDEOLOGICAL CONSISTENCY AND POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN SLOVAKIA[1]

MARTIN KANOVSKÝ and NINA KOCIČOVÁ

Abstract: This article concerns the proposal and testing of a Slovak version of the Ideological Consistency Scale, which is a 10-item scale originally developed by the Pew Research Centre (2017). Its psychometric properties are investigated on a Slovak sample (N = 101). Its fit to the Rasch model with conditional maximum likelihood is tested. The Slovak version of the scale is shown to be a reliable and useful instrument for measuring ideological attitudes. The ideological attitudes of the Slovak respondents are compared with those of the American sample. The results show that the political polarization in Slovakia is not strong: few Slovak respondents could be identified as being either consistently conservative or consistently liberal, and the majority exhibited mixed attitudes, tending slightly to display liberal opinions.

Key words: ideological consistency; political polarization; Rasch model; psychometrics.

Introduction

Recently there have many attempts to explain the growing political polarization in many political systems across the world (Valdesolo & Graham, 2016; Feinberg & Willer, 2015). Ideological divisions have increased, making it very difficult for polarized political groups to agree or even compromise. For example, in the United States conservatives have a tendency to view mainstream news media with suspicion and to prefer sources that agree with their views, while liberals are inclined to trust the news media, particularly those they perceive as endorsing their positions (Diercks & Landreville, 2017; Hindman & Yan, 2015).

Since 1994, the Pew Research Centre (Pew Research Centre, 2014; Pew Research Centre, 2017) has collected data on ideological consistency and political polarization in the United States. Its 10-item Ideological Consistency Scale (see Table 1 for the original version, and Appendix 1 for the Slovak version) is used to measure ideological attitudes on economic and political issues. Despite systematic research and large datasets, this scale is practically unknown and has rarely been used in social psychology and political science.

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The majority of studies on ideology analysed by Koleva & Rip (2009) measured ideology on a unidimensional scale that positions liberalism and conservatism at each end. Conservatives tend to support traditional values, view innovation or change with caution, and emphasize respect for authority. Liberals tend to be more open to social and political change and support social equality. However, in Europe, liberals tend to promote the free market and economic *laissez-faire* (which are associated with conservatives in the United States), while support for social equality and redistribution is ascribed to socialists rather than to liberals.

Aspelund, Lindeman, and Verkasalo (2013) investigated the relationship between left–right orientation and political conservativism in 13 formerly communist Central and Eastern European countries and in 15 Western European countries. They used the European Social Survey Round 3 (2006, 2008). They measured two potential aspects of conservatism—acceptance of inequality and resistance to change. Both indicated a positive relationship with right-wing views in Western countries, but positive, negative, and non-existent relationships in the former communist countries. Their results indicated that conservatism can be related to left-wing or right-wing beliefs depending on the cultural, political, and economic situation of the society in question.

Caprara and Vecchione (2015) investigated which values are common to those on the right and the left in 15 countries, including Slovakia. They showed that substantial commonalities exist among respondents that are seen as being partisan in terms of their views on the social order and government. The basic political values underlying the traditional ideologies not only appeared less distant from each other than in the past, but often converged.

Jou (2013) showed that in Western Europe, the right-left divide is primarily shaped by economic issues, whereas in Eastern and Central Europe, respondents' views differ according to their attitudes to past and present political regimes.

The researchers noted above pointed out pointed out that historical, cultural, and social environment is important in explaining ideological attitudes and political preferences. Therefore our hypothesis is that ideological consistency in Slovakia and in the United States will differ substantially in form. If true, we must be careful when using seemingly universal concepts (liberal/conservative, right/left) since they may have different meanings across various cultural environments.

The goal of this article is to investigate the psychometric properties of the Ideological Consistency Scale using a Slovak sample, and to compare the ideological attitudes of Slovak respondents with those of respondents in the United States. This scale does not measure ideological divides, but rather ideological consistency. It is not an alternative to instruments measuring the structure of political attitudes and values: the results do not indicate the content of political opinions, but rather the degree of ideological coherence. The advantage of this scale is that it is simple and easy to administer and interpret. Its discriminant/convergent validity should be assessed, but that is beyond the scope of this article, as is its prospective predictive validity as far as more complex political values and attitudes are concerned.

Participants and methods

The Slovak sample consisted of 101 respondents (mean age 34.9, SD 17.3). The data were collected in Trnava, Slovakia, in July and August 2015 by the second author. The statements were presented in written form, and the respondents were contacted face to face and asked to choose between them. The results for the American sample (N = 10 014) were taken from the Pew Research Centre Report (2014). The American data were collected in 2014. The psychometric properties of the Slovak sample were analysed using the statistical program R (R Core Team, 2016), version 3.4.0, package eRm (Mair & Hatzinger, 2007a; Mair & Hatzinger, 2007b).

Psychometric properties of the Slovak version

All the responses were coded either as 0 ("liberal response") or 1 ("conservative answer"). The US and Slovak responses are shown in percentages in Table 1.

The response format was dichotomic, so we tested for fit with the Rasch model in package "eRm" with conditional maximal likelihood (Mair & Hatzinger, 2007b). In item response theory (IRT) modelling, it is important to test the assumptions in the IRT model to avoid obtaining confusing results. IRT Rasch models require unidimensionality (all the items measure a single construct) and local independence (responses to one item depend on latent ability alone and not on responses to any other item). To test for these, we used nonparametric tests as proposed by Ponocny (2001), Koller and Hatzinger (2013). These tests use random binary matrices generated using a Monte Carlo Markov Chain algorithm (Verhelst, 2008). To avoid selection bias, we used two tests to assess unidimensionality and two tests to assess local independence. The number of matrices sampled was 500. The first unidimensionality test checks for multidimensionality based on correlations of person raw scores for the subscales (method T_{md}), and it gave a correlation of 0.15 (p = 0.458). The second unidimensionality test checks for multidimensionality within model deviating subscales via the decreased dispersion of subscale person rawscores (method T_{2m}), p = 0.660. Both tests yielded nonsignificant results, so we can conclude that a null hypothesis of unidimensionality cannot be rejected. The first local independence test checks for local dependence within model deviating subscales via increased dispersion of subscale person rawscores (method T_2), p = 0.428. The second local independence test calculates the sum of absolute deviations between the observed inter-item correlations and the expected correlations (method T_{11}), p = 0.258. Again, both tests yielded nonsignificant results; therefore, we can conclude that a null hypothesis of local independence cannot be rejected.

We then fitted the Rasch model and tested its fit with our data. We used four goodness-of-fit tests for Rasch models proposed by Mair, Reise & Bentler, 2008. The results are presented in Table 2.

All the tests indicated an acceptable fit of the model with data. The effect sizes were relatively high: Pearson R^2 = 0.49, sum-of-squares R^2 = 0.49 and McFadden R^2 = 0.71. Model accuracy was 0.830, sensitivity was 0.826 and specificity was 0.833. The area under ROC was 0.90.

**Table 1.** Responses in Slovak and American Samples in percentages

Questions		Slovakia	USA
Q 01	Government is almost always wasteful and inefficient	88%	56%
	Government often does a better job than people give it credit for	12%	40%
Q 02	Government regulation of business usually does more harm than good	67%	47%
	Government regulation of business is necessary to protect the public interest	33%	47%
Q 03	Poor people today have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything in return	25%	41%
	Poor people have hard lives because government benefits don't go far enough to help them live decently	75%	47%
Q 04	The government today can't afford to do much more to help the needy	32%	51%
	The government should do more to help needy, even if it means going deeper into debt	68%	43%
Q 05*	Blacks who can't get ahead in this country are mostly responsible for their own condition	78%	63%
	Racial discrimination is the main reason why many black people can't get ahead these days	22%	27%
Q 06	Immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing and health care	74%	35%
	Immigrants today strengthen our country because of their hard work and talents	26%	57%
Q 07	The best way to ensure peace is through military strength	1%	30%
	Good diplomacy is the best way to ensure peace	99%	62%
Q 08	Most corporations make a fair and reasonable amount of profit	66%	39%
	Business corporations make too much profit	34%	56%
Q 09	Stricter environmental laws and regulations cost too many jobs and hurt the economy	10%	39%
	Stricter environmental laws and regulations are worth the cost	90%	56%
Q 10	Homosexuality should be discouraged by society	14%	31%
	Homosexuality should be accepted by society	86%	62%

*in Q 05, the term "black" was replaced with "Roma" in the Slovak version
Note: some of the American respondents gave the response "don't know/refused", therefore the totals may not add up to 100%

Table 2. Goodness of fit tests for Rasch model of Ideological Consistency Scale

Test	value	df	p-value
Collapsed Deviance	63.335	80	0.914
Hosmer-Lemeshow	12.262	8	0.140
Rost Deviance	203.753	1014	1.000
Casewise Deviance	812.302	993	1.000
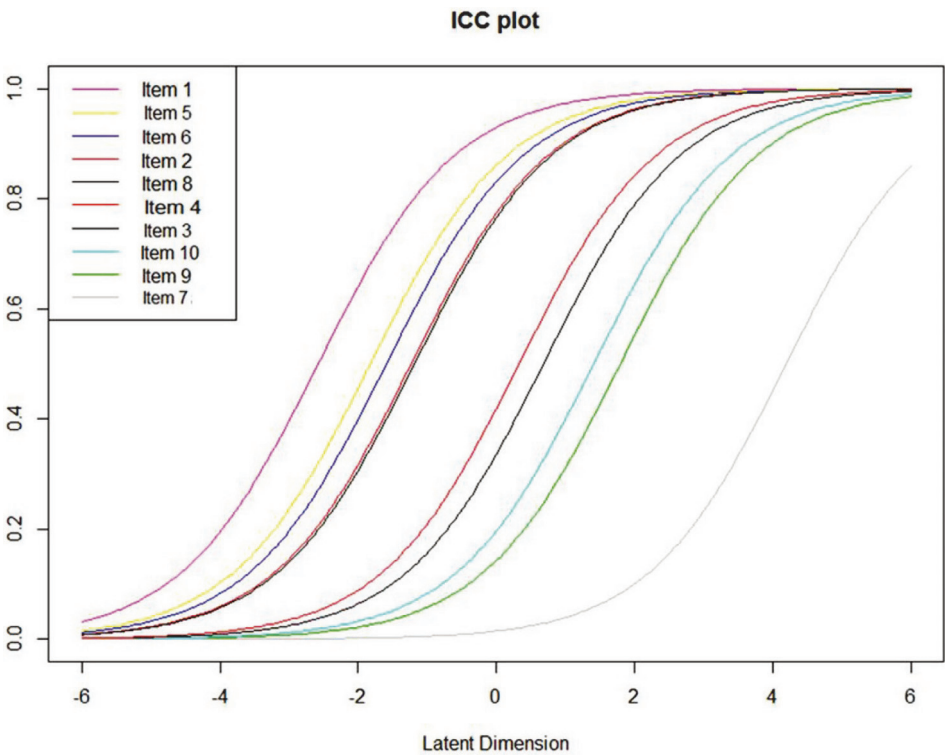
Figure 1. Item characteristic curves of items of Ideological Consistency Scale

We also inspected the item characteristic curves of items (Figure 1). Questions 1, 5, 6, 2, and 8 on government regulations and tolerance towards immigrants and members of a racial minority attracted more conservative responses in Slovakia, whereas questions 4, 3, 10, 9, and 7 on government assistance for the needy, environmental protection, tolerance towards homosexuals and peaceful international politics attracted more liberal responses in

the Slovak sample. Only 1 respondent took a conservative position on item 7 (diplomacy vs. military strength), meaning this has very low discriminative power and is of little use in Slovakia.

We can safely conclude that the model has an excellent fit with data and that the Slovak version of Ideological Consistency Scale is a reliable instrument to measure ideological attitudes. We can therefore use the total score to check ideological consistency.

Results

If we compare the attitudes of the Slovak and American respondents, we can observe some interesting differences. First of all, the Slovak respondents seem to be more conservative on government regulations and the economy: their answers to questions 1, 2, and 8 are clearly more conservative on average than those of the Americans. However, a closer look suggests a more nuanced perspective: although the Slovak respondents seemed to be more conservative on the government in power when the research was conducted the government in general, they strongly approved of and desired government action to provide help for individuals and the environment (questions 3, 4, and 9): their responses were clearly more liberal than the American ones. Their economic conservativism was not consistent. There is another possible explanation for this inconsistency: the Slovak respondents understood the questions on government to be about the incumbent government rather than government policy in general.

As far as the questions on homosexuals, immigrants, and race (questions 5, 6, 10) are concerned, Slovak and American respondents are tolerant towards homosexuals and racial groups, but Slovak respondents are less tolerant of immigrants. We note that the data were collected in 2015—before the immigrant crisis in Europe. Most Slovaks have little social contact with immigrants.

This comparative analysis of the responses to the questions does not address the problem of ideological consistency: we have to analyse the patterns of responses among individuals, not the responses to each question. Following the method used by the Pew Research Centre (2014, Appendix A), we gave each "liberal" response a score of -1 and each "conservative"

Table 3. Ideological Consistency among Slovak and American respondents

Ideological consistency	Slovakia 2015	USA 2014
Consistently conservative	0%	9%
Mostly conservative	7%	18%
Mixed	69%	39%
Mostly liberal	22%	22%
Consistently liberal	2%	12%
Mean	-0.9	-0.6
Median	0	0

response a score of 1. The scores ranged from -10 (liberal responses to all 10 questions) to 10 (conservative responses to all 10 questions) across the scale. For analytical purposes, the respondents were allocated to one of five categories used throughout: consistently conservative (7 to 10), mostly conservative (3 to 6), mixed (-2 to 2), mostly liberal (-6 to -3), and consistently liberal (-10 to -7).

We can see that the political polarization is far weaker in Slovakia: only 2% of respondents are consistently conservative or liberal (22% in the USA). Furthermore, 69% of respondents in Slovakia have a mixed view (39% in the USA). And finally, only 7% of Slovak respondents are mostly conservative (and 0% consistently conservative), in comparison to 18% and 9% of American respondents.

Discussion

As we can see, the Slovak respondents are not as ideologically consistent as the American respondents. For example, the Slovak respondents are not keen on government regulations on businesses, but favour government action to assist individuals and protect the environment. This can be explained historically and culturally: the welfare state is still an important reference point for Slovak respondents owing to their experiences of the socialist regime, but they fail to understand that the welfare state is impossible to maintain without income redistribution and regulation of business. The situation regarding tolerance is similar: there is no consistent liberal/conservative pattern in the Slovak responses—even respondents who are very tolerant to homosexuals display a strong intolerance of immigrants. Therefore we cannot assume that a liberal attitude to some groups implies the same to other groups. Again, this has a historical explanation: Slovak society has extremely low level of immigration, so we cannot expect similar response patterns. On the other hand, racial issues have never been as politically and ideologically driven as in the United States (despite latent and overtly racist attitudes to Roma).

Many scholars (Aspelund, Lindeman, & Verkasalo, 2013; Caprara & Vecchione, 2015; Jou, 2013) have emphasized that historical, cultural, and social circumstances are crucial in explaining ideological attitudes and political preferences. Therefore we must be careful about and critical of using seemingly universal concepts (liberal/conservative, right/left) since they can have very different meanings across different cultures. This is not to stress the banal point that concepts have different meanings depending on the historical and cultural background, but rather that their analytical use should be critically assessed to avoid misinterpretations.

Limitations of the study

The main limitation of this study is that unlike the American sample, the Slovak sample is not representative of the Slovak population. Therefore we cannot safely generalize our conclusions to the whole Slovak population. Our research is more of a pilot study and should encourage further investigation. The second limitation is that we lack any longitudinal data: the Pew Research Centre has been collecting data on political polarization since 1994, so it can investigate changes in ideological attitude. There is no systematic and longitudinal

database in Slovakia that would allow us to examine any trends and tendencies more closely. Another serious limitation is that we have very little information on the respondents' social networks, so we cannot properly explain their attitudes. For example, it is known that cultural values and sense of community have an impact on ideological attitudes (Halamová, 2016; Michaud, Carlisle, & Smith, 2009; Halamová, 2001). We need more detailed research on the sources of political and ideological opinion so that we can both collect and explain them. Real and virtual communities are become increasingly important in shaping ideological attitudes and the extent to which these are becoming increasing isolated is strengthening political polarizations.

Conclusions

Our Slovak version of the Ideological Consistency Scale originally developed by the Pew Research Center (2017) is a reliable and useful instrument for measuring ideological attitudes. This type of instrument is required, especially for long-term research on the dynamics of political attitudes in Slovakia and for discerning important trends and tendencies. We assume that the political polarization will increase rather than disappear, and we need reliable instruments to measure it. This pilot project leads us to conclude that the political polarization in Slovakia is not strong: very few Slovak respondents could be identified as consistently conservative or consistently liberal and the majority had mixed attitudes and a slight tendency to be more liberal in opinion.

Furthermore, we must be careful about and critical of using seemingly universal concepts (liberal/conservative, right/left). Their analytical use should be critically assessed to avoid misinterpretations, and they should always be placed within the historical and cultural context. We would be unwise to claim that the Slovak respondents are less ideologically consistent than the American respondents; rather, it is that the nature of their ideological consistency is culturally different.

APPENDIX

Slovak version of the Ideological Consistency Scale

Q 01
Vláda je skoro vždy márnotratná a neefektívna
Vláda si často počína lepšie, než ju ľudia uznávajú

Q 02
Vládna kontrola podnikania obyčajne spôsobuje viac škody než úžitku
Vládna kontrola podnikania je nevyhnutná pri ochrane verejného záujmu

Q 03
Chudobní ľudia to majú dnes ľahké, pretože môžu dostať od vlády dávky bez vlastného úsilia
Chudobní ľudia to majú ťažké, pretože dávky od vlády im nestačia na slušné živobytie

Q 04
Vláda si dnes veľmi nemôže dovoliť pomáhať tým, čo to potrebujú
Vláda by mala viac pomáhať občanom, ktorí to potrebujú, aj keby to malo znamenať zvýšenie štátneho dlhu

Q 05
Rómovia, ktoré nemôžu uspieť v tejto krajine, sú väčšinou sami zodpovední za svoju situáciu
Rasová diskriminácia je dnes hlavným dôvodom, prečo Rómovia nemôžu byť úspešní

Q 06
Imigranti sú dnes pre našu krajinu príťažou, pretože zaberajú naše pracovné miesta, bývanie a zdravotnú starostlivosť
Imigranti dnes posilňujú našu krajinu svojou ťažkou prácou a talentom

Q 07
Najlepšia možnosť, ako zabezpečiť mier, je pomocou vojenskej sily
Dobrá diplomacia je najlepší spôsob, ako zabezpečiť mier

Q 08
Väčšina firiem má férovú a primeranú mieru svojho zisku
Firmy majú príliš veľké zisky

Q 09
Prísnejšie zákony a smernice na ochranu životného prostredia uberajú vela pracovných miest a poškodzujú ekonomiku
Prísnejšie zákona a smernice na ochranu životného prostredia sú hodné nákladov

Q 10
Homosexualita by mala byť spoločnosťou odsúdená
Homosexualita by mala byť spočnosťou akceptovaná

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Institute of Social Anthropology, Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences,
Comenius University in Bratislava, Mlynske luhy 4, 821 05 Bratislava, Slovakia
Email: martin.kanovsky@gmail.com