

# Who are the “far-right” in Korea?<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

This article aims to find out what kind of people/individuals have far-right political orientation in Korea. Unlike Europe, where many radical right-wing parties successfully mobilized supporters and earned official political representation via elections, the far-right wing in Korea is not represented via a particular political party, which is on the edge of the ideological spectrum. Radical right parties exist in Korea but have failed to transfer their support to a meaningful number of votes because the mainstream conservative party, the People Power Party, absorbs radical right votes in elections.

Identifying who support the radical right parties and their ideas has been difficult as Korean far-right parties only exist in a form of social movement and civil society, not within formal legislative politics. Therefore, the word “far-right” has been used to indicate many different groups: 1) the online community, called “Ilbe (Daily Best),” that openly expresses their aversion to people with different ideas, mostly who are associated to left-wing politics and feminism; 2) conservative evangelical Christians who condemn homosexuality, and immigrants and refugees from Muslim countries; 3) and the participants of ultra-nationalistic anti-government street protests, whose main targets are the left-leaning government, president, and most importantly, North Korea.

The main agenda and the demographic characteristics of these three groups show that far-right groups in Korea are similar to yet different from their comrades in Western democratic countries. Demand-side explanations for far-right politics have focused on “who” support radical right parties and politicians based on research on European cases that delve into a rise in radical right populist parties and politicians. Economic deprivation and cultural backlash against post-modern changes have been studied as the major factors influencing the rising popularity of radical right populist parties. People with low job security (manufacturing jobs, in many cases), negative attitude toward immigrants, ethnocentric beliefs, and limited education are more likely to support radical right populist parties, according to the demand-side theories. Mudde (2007) contends that supporters’ strong nationalism is the core idea that binds the radical right in Western democracies.

What then are the major “demands” of far-right groups and, most importantly, who are the people who make such “demands”? To what extent are the Korean far-right supporters similar

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<sup>1</sup> This is a preliminary draft. Please do not circulate.

and different from European far-right supporters? What is unique about far-right demand in Korea? By answering these questions, this article aims to provide a comprehensive survey of far-right politics in Korea, focusing on the demand side of it.

Previous research on Korean far-right politics is based on the field survey of anti-government (Taegukgi) rally participants (Chang 2018; Lee 2017; Yang 2020). However, as this field survey involved only rally participants, previous works based on this survey cannot delineate who identify themselves as far-right in Korea and what their demands are in general. To overcome these limitations, in this study I use the self-ideology question to decide who belong to the “far-right” and test in what aspects people who placed themselves in the extreme side of the ideological spectrum are different from other respondents. The data that I use in this research is from the voter survey of the 21st Korean General Election conducted in April 2020. The results of the preliminary analysis indicate that Korean far-right supporters have distinctive demands from European far-right supporters.

Clearly identifying the far-right agenda and supporters is important for two reasons: 1) the line between the right and the far-right is rather ambiguous in Korea where far-right groups are visible but far-right parties are not as visible. The European far-right also have many layers and are not entirely homogeneous. However, most far-right supporters stand the same ground, and previous research on the demand side of far-right politics have focused on finding that common ground. 2) It is necessary to test the generalizability of the demand-side explanations with non-Western cases. To what extent country-specific factors affect individual leaning toward the far-right ideology can be answered with the Korean case.

The remainder of this article consists of three sections followed by the discussion. The first section introduces existing literature on the far-right support base in Western democracies. Next, I focus on the Korean context by explaining the development of far-right political parties and discussing the supporters of the three far-right groups. Then, in the sections that follow, I present the empirical findings. Finally, I summarize the main findings and outline their implications.

### **Demand-side explanation of radical right support**

The results of recent major elections in Western Europe and in the US attest to the increasing popularity of radical right populist parties in the region and the dissatisfaction of the public with mainstream parties. A chain of recent European elections, such as the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum in June 2016, the US presidential election in November 2016, the French presidential and legislative election in April and June 2017, the German federal election in September 2017, and the Italian general election in March 2018, changed the political landscape of West European countries. Mainstream right-wing and left-wing parties lost their

seats and statuses while the formerly marginalized radical right-wing populist and populist politicians won more votes than ever before.

Existing scholarly research on radical right politics, therefore, focuses on explaining why these “old democratic countries” have experienced a rise in far-right politics that have long been placed on the fringe of the political arena since the end of World War II. The most common classification used to categorize the various causes of the rise of right-wing populist parties is demand-side versus supply-side explanations.<sup>2</sup> While supply-side theories explain various external and internal conditions that influence parties’ electoral performances, demand-side theories focus on why certain voters cast their ballots for radical right parties. Scholars distinguish the three different levels of demand-side explanations: the macro level focuses on the national context that influences voters’ choice for right-wing populist parties. The meso level focuses on the local and regional contexts. The micro level focuses on the attitudes of individuals (Eatwell 2003).

Macro-level explanations interpret the rise of right-wing populist parties as a reaction to modernization and globalization that resulted in the degradation of traditional values, cultural and ethnic diversity, and the decrease in manufacturing industry and jobs. Since right-wing populist parties appeal to “people who do not feel at home in a modernizing society” (Rydgren 2007, 247), the group of people who are the so-called “modernization losers” (Bell 2002; Betz 1994; Kriesi 1999; Minkenberg 2003) tends to vote for right-wing populist parties. Studies that test the modernization theory show contrasting results. For example, several studies have shown that there is no significant relationship between unemployment rate and the success of right-wing populist parties (Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Knigge 1998; Swank and Betz 2003). However, Golder (2003) found a positive interaction effect: high unemployment rates are positively related to right-wing populist votes only in countries with a large presence of foreign populations.

The other major concern of voters of right-wing populist parties is immigration for either economic reasons (e.g., job competition and welfare tourism) or cultural reasons (e.g., religious practices and national identity). Scholars have tested the impact of different types of immigration variables on right-wing populist votes, and many found a positive relation. Independent variables are, for example, number of new immigrants (e.g. Swank and Betz 2003), rising levels of immigration (Knigge 1998), and the number of non-Western residents in a country (Lubbers, Gijsberts, and Scheepers 2002). Norris (2005), on the contrary, tested the anti-immigration theory but did not find a significant relationship between the “national share of the vote cast for radical right parties and a wide range of indicators of ethnic diversity, whether measured objectively by estimated official rates of refugees and asylum seekers, the proportion of nonnationals and noncitizens living in a country, or subjectively by public opinion toward immigration” (Norris 2005, 185).

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<sup>2</sup> Roger Eatwell used these market-place terms of demand and supply side for the first time in his 2003 work.

Meso-level explanations include the impacts of family, neighborhood, school education, and local atmosphere on right-wing populist voting. Relatively few studies have focused on the meso-level explanations despite its importance (Mudde 2007, 217). Education level is the variable that has been tested the most primarily because most surveys require respondents to indicate years in school. The influence of the family's political ideology has been tested (e.g., Klandermans and Mayer 2006) but it fails to explain the rise or fall of right-wing populist votes.

Micro-level explanations focus primarily on the individual's political ideology and attitudes toward immigrants. In the political ideology theory, individuals who identify themselves as having extreme right political ideology are more likely to vote for the right-wing populist parties (Betz 1994; Falter and Schumann 1988). In the anti-immigration theory, electorates of right-wing populist parties tend to stand out in terms of nativist attitudes toward immigrants, refugees, and ethnic minorities (Betz 1994; Van Der Brug, Fennema, and Tillie 2000; Mayer 1999). Moreover, scholars have paid attention to the gender gap in populist radical right voting; in general, radical right parties have more male supporters than female supporters (cite).

In sum, "unprivileged, white male" voters who feel abandoned both economically and culturally are most likely to generate the demand for radical right politics. In general, they are male workers with limited education and employed in the manufacturing sector where there is high competition with immigrant workers and with manufacturers abroad, resulting in a decrease in the total number of jobs. Is this profile of a radical right supporter generalizable to non-European countries? It can be applicable to a non-European case as demand-side explanations focus on shared circumstances in almost all developed countries, such as globalization, the rise of postmodern values, and the increasing number of immigrants from different cultural backgrounds. On the contrary, it is also necessary to examine country-specific issues that can potentially contribute to demand for far-right politics.

## **Demand for far-right politics in Korea**

### *Development of far-right politics*

The political opportunity structures (POS) of South Korea do not provide a fertile soil for radical parties to receive massive electoral support (Table 1). The mixed electoral system has strengthened the two mainstream parties and suppressed the possibility of a strong third party. Furthermore, support for the two mainstream parties is based on long-established regionalism: each of them has had a strong tie with the country's east and west regions, the right-wing party, the People's Power Party, in the Youngnam province and the left-wing party, the Democratic Party of Korea, in the Honam province. In addition, the political party law that regulates a

disbandment of parties that fail to reach the 2% threshold in general elections has worked on new fringe parties' disadvantages.<sup>3</sup>

*Table 1 POS for the far-right parties in Korea*

<b>Political Opportunity Structure</b>	<b>South Korea</b>
Institutional settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mixed electoral system (majority vote+PR)</li> <li>- Small parties without a seat are the subject of disbandment</li> </ul>
Party system & convergence of mainstream parties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Two-block multi-party system</li> <li>- Ossified regional division: support for the two mainstream parties have been based on regionalism</li> </ul>
Cultural/historical context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Korean War and North Korea (Concerns about ideological overturn)</li> <li>- Extensive experience of authoritarian governance</li> <li>- (ethnically) Homogeneous society</li> </ul>

Consequently, Korean radical right politicians have not been very distinguishable or visible for a long time. Rather, they have chosen to exist under the big tent of right-wing mainstream parties. However, the critical moment for Korean radical right politics arrived when ex-president, Park Geun-hye, was impeached in 2017. During the process of impeachment, many conservative politicians defected from the mainstream right-wing party (at that time Saenuri Party), and continued to meet and part yet again. Amidst this confusion and the big electoral failure of mainstream right-wing parties, fringe radical right parties were founded or rebranded from the old one. However, none of these parties received meaningful vote shares.

1) Our Republican Party (ORP, 2017) was created as “Korean Patriotic Party” on August 30, 2017, but changed its name on demand from ex-president, Park Geun-hye.

2) Pro-Park Party (PPP, 2020) separated from the ORP ahead of the 2020 general election.

3) Christian Liberal Unification Party (CLUP, 2016). Radical right-wing parties that are supported by ultra-conservative evangelical churches have existed since 2004, but the CLUP attracted national attention for the first time as a religious party with its outward anti-government voice.

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<sup>3</sup> The Political Party Law (article 44) regulated the cancellation of a party that fails to earn a seat or more than 2% of the votes in the general election. This clause ceased to have effect when the Constitutional Court ruled that the regulation was unconstitutional in 2014. However, no new bill has been discussed in the National Assembly to alternate the current regulation on party cancellation.

Table 2 Electoral performances of the Korean radical right parties

Party name	Year of establishment	2016 general election	2017 presidential election	2020 general election
Our Republican Party	2017	-	0.13	0.74
Pro-Park Party	2020	-	-	0.51
Christian Liberal Unification Party	2016	2.63	-	1.83

### Three groups

Korean far-right parties have failed to gather support in elections. However, the poor electoral performance of these parties does not necessarily mean no voice for far-right politics. The demand for radical right politics has been more visible outside partisan politics in Korea. The three different far-right groups have been the subject of scholarly and journalistic researches (Table 3).

Table 3 Three far-right groups in Korea

	1) Ilbe	2) Christian Right	3) Taegukgi Rallies
<b>Participants' demographics</b>	Male Young adults	Protestant	Old generation
<b>Main agenda</b>	Anti-feminism Anti-Jeolla Anti-immigration Pro-Japan	Anti-Muslim Anti-homosexuality Pro-US	Nationalism National security Pro-US Nostalgia for authoritarian regime
<b>Shared agenda</b>	Anti-left Anti-North Korea		
<b>Level of Political organization</b>	Low	High (political parties exist)	Middle (closely linked to political parties)

These three groups are very different in terms of their members' demographic backgrounds. Members of the second and third group overlap each other to some extent but the first group is quite distinctive. First, the Ilbe (Daily Best) is an online space that allows free membership. This group is mostly male-dominated and their members are relatively young compared to the other two group members (Jun 2018). This group itself has never tried to organize its online community into a political party. Rather, it remains as an online venue where many far-right

ideas including hate speech and defamatory content are created and shared. This group has been primarily studied by communication and gender scholars who focus on users' verbal aggression (Lee, Kwak, and Cho 2015) or strategic misogynistic expressions (Um 2016) that are widely used within the community.

The second group can be compared to the American Christian Right. The most important common identity that ties members of this group together is conservative evangelical identity. Many major churches support this movement financially and help mass mobilization by encouraging their church members to join the street protest and to donate to the movement. Christian right has tried to pull conservative Christians together in order to establish a conservative Christian party but, it has never passed the threshold in national assembly elections. The effect of religious beliefs on political choice in Korea has been tested by political scientists: Jang and Ha (2011) confirm that Protestant voters are more likely to support the Lee Myung Bak government because of their preference for the Protestant president, not because of their political ideology. Kim (2017) argues that Buddhists have been stable supporters of conservative parties while protestants and Catholics changed their voting choices.

The last group is made of the participants of the Taegukgi Rally, the counter protest for candlelight protest that ousted president Park Geun-hye. This group is similar to European far-right parties in that their core issue is nationalism. However, the profile of their supporters is different from that of European far-right sympathizers; they are not particularly from the low-income and low-educated population. Based on the field survey of the Taegukgi Rally, scholars conclude that the only demographic feature that is widely shared in this group is the age; almost 80% of the street protest participants were over 50 years. Of the respondents, 56.3% said they graduated college or graduate school and 54.8% said their household income is over 4 million won per month. Any specific regional concentration other than capital area was not found (Lee 2017; Chang 2018)

These three groups are different from each other in many aspects such as target group, agenda, members' demographic background, and the level of political organizing power. However, what they have in common is criticism against left-wing politics and hostility toward the North Korean state. After the Korean War (1950-1953), Korea built and institutionalized anti-communism and the anti-North Korea system under authoritarian leaders, which struck down hard on the conservative ideology of ordinary Koreans. On the contrary, those belonging to anti-authoritarian and progressive groups have opposed anti-communism and have instead wanted peaceful relations between North and South Korea (Lee 2020; Snyder 2003). So, is the Korean far-right simply represented by the anti-North Korea ideology? Do Korean far-right groups have the common demands for far-right politics that are shared among far-right party supporters in Western democratic countries, such as economic deprivation and hostility toward immigrants? To identify the commonality that is shared by Korean far-right supporters, this article uses both

demand-side theories generated from the European cases and the unique demand features of Korean far-right groups.

*Table 4 Far-right demands in Europe and Korea*

	Far-right demand in Europe	Far-right demand in Korea
Demographic characteristics	Working class Male Low education	Evangelical Christian Generation (old/young) YOUNGnam province
Issues	Anti-immigration Populist (anti-government)	Anti-feminism Anti-North Korea Pro-US Nostalgia for authoritarian regime

## Data

To define the demographic characteristics and issues of the Korean far-right, this study employed the post-election voter survey of the 21st Korean general election. The survey was conducted by the Korean Social Science Data Center (KSDC) and the Korean Association of Election Studies (KAES). The data contains online interviews with a national sample of 1,200 citizens during April 2020 considering topics such as electoral participation and general socio-political issues.

To measure which individuals have a far-right orientation, I use the question “in political matters, people talk of ‘the left’ and ‘the right.’ How would you place your views on this scale (0–10), generally speaking?” There is an accuracy problem in using self-placement questions to measure individuals’ ideological orientation. The self-ideology question is used despite this limitation as it is the only way to draw the line between the right-wing voters and far-right voters when no far-right party achieved meaningful electoral results.

When the dividing line is set to 9 on a 0–10 scale, the 5% of respondents who checked 9 or 10 are categorized into the “far-right” while 9.8% of the respondents are categorized into the same group when the dividing line is set to 8 (Table 5). I dichotomize the responses into 9 and 10 (far-right) and the rest.



Table 5 Frequency table: Self-placement on the ideological spectrum

	빈도	퍼센트	올바른 퍼센트	누적 퍼센트
유효함 0) 진보	54	4.5	4.5	4.5
1) ①	39	3.3	3.3	7.8
2) ②	111	9.3	9.3	17.0
3) ③	148	12.3	12.3	29.3
4) ④	126	10.5	10.5	39.8
5) ⑤	400	33.3	33.3	73.2
6) ⑥	108	9.0	9.0	82.2
7) ⑦	96	8.0	8.0	90.2
8) ⑧	58	4.8	4.8	95.0
9) ⑨	29	2.4	2.4	97.4
10) 보수	31	2.6	2.6	100.0
총계	1200	100.0	100.0	

From the demand-side literature and the survey on far-right groups in Korea, this study identified eight independent variables that are the demographic features of far-right groups (regionalism, gender, age, job security, employment sector, social class, education, and religion), and seven independent variables that are related to the issues of far-right groups (immigration, anti-government, anti-North Korea, pro-US, democracy versus authoritarianism, gender equality, and partisanship).

To test the effect of regionalism on self-ideology confirmation, I include Youngnam as the regional dummy. The gender is coded into the two groups: 1 (male) and 2 (female). To test the effect of generation, I divide three age groups: young (below 30 years), middle aged (30s and 40s), and over 50. Job security is measured by the question that asks if the respondent is employed in a permanent (regular) position or not. I include the white-collar worker dummy to test the effect of the employment sector. The original questionnaire contains questions that ask respondents' socio-economic class and education. The answers vary from upper class (1) to lower class (5). Educational level is measured with the 1 (kindergarten) to 9 (doctoral degree) scale. To see the effects of conservative Christian beliefs, I added the Protestant dummy.

To see if attitudes toward immigrants has any impact on peoples' preference for the far-right ideology, answers to two questions are combined: "Our own culture is ruined by the influx of immigrants; immigrants increase the crime rate." Respondents rated the degree of agreement with these statements from fully agree (1) to fully disagree (5). The value of the immigration variable therefore varies from 2 to 10. The anti-establishment attitude (populist) is measured with the question asking the level of agreement on the following statement: "Most politicians do not care what citizens think." It uses the same scale, that is, 1 (full agreement) to 5 (full disagreement). To measure the attitude toward North Korea the level of agreement with the following statement is used: "Aid to North Korea should be continued regardless of the political

climate.” Likewise, to measure the attitude toward the United States, respondents rated their agreement with the statement, “the South Korea-United States alliance should be strengthened.” The survey asked respondents to rate their agreement on a 10-point scale, with 0 indicating total disagreement and 10 indicating total agreement. To test the effect of affinity to an authoritarian regime, I use the question that asks whether democracy is better than dictatorship. Respondents could choose between 1 (“Democracy is always better than any other regime type”), 2 (“I don’t care if the regime type is democracy or dictatorship”), and 3 (“Dictatorship can be better than democracy depending on circumstances”). To see the effect of the anti-gender equality discourse, I include the gender quota dummy which is coded as 1 (opposition to the gender quota for women candidate nomination in elections) and 0 (support for the same gender quota). In addition, I include the conservative partisanship dummy to see the effect of partisanship. Respondents who said they cast their proportional ballot to right-wing parties including the mainstream fringe parties are the reference group (1). Finally, I used logit statistical modelling because individual respondents’ self-placement in the “far-right” is a binary variable.

## Result & Discussion

*Table 6 Logistic regression of self-placement in far-right*

Variables	Coefficients
Youngnam	-0.53847
Sex	-0.03078
Age under 30	-0.14565
Age 30–40	0.07608
Age above 50	0.35625
<b>Employment status</b>	<b>0.89671*</b>
<b>White collar</b>	<b>-1.37904**</b>
Socio-economic class	-0.14882
Education	0.16822
<b>Protestant</b>	<b>1.00062**</b>
Immigration attitude	-0.14602
Anti-politicians	0.08863
<b>North Korea attitude</b>	<b>-0.19823**</b>
<b>US attitude</b>	<b>0.30734 **</b>
Democracy	0.19417
Gender quota	-0.29369
<b>Conservative vote</b>	<b>1.37810 **</b>
Observations	1200

Significance level: \* $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ . Standard errors are not reported.

Several notable patterns stood out from the data in Table 6. First, demand-side explanations for far-right votes is not very relevant to delineate the characteristics of the far-right in Korea. Demographically, the socio-economic class and education are not significant. Gender and age do not make a significant difference in explaining individuals' far-right political orientations either. As regards issues, attitudes toward immigrants and anti-political stance turns out to be insignificant.

Second, the level of job security and employment sector matters for individuals' orientation toward the far-right ideology. The result shows that people with a permanent position (employment status) are more likely to be inclined to the far-right ideology. Interestingly, employment in the white-collar sector influences negatively on people's self-placement in the far-right. When people are employed with high job security, they are more likely to support far-right ideas. However, employment in managerial and in-office sectors creates the opposite effect. These somewhat contrasting results call for further examination using a model with interaction terms with employment variables.

Third, some variables that are closely linked to the Korean far-right groups have a significant effect in explaining individuals' far-right orientation. The Protestant religion makes a positive impact on individuals' choice of the far-right ideology. This is linked to the second far-right group (Christian Right). Attitude toward North Korea, a common issue that is shared by all three far-right groups, turns out to have significant effects on respondents' far-right ideologies: positive stance on continuing aid to North Korea is negatively related to far-right orientation. On the contrary, people who think the South Korea–US Alliance should be strengthened and people who voted to conservative parties in the 21st general election are more likely to identify their political ideology as far-right. However, regionalism (residing in the Yeungnam province) does not have a significant effect on individuals' identification with the far-right political ideology.

The result of the analysis provides a profile of Korean far-right supporters: Protestants, hostile attitude to North Korea, strong belief in the Korea–US alliance, voting record of supporting conservative parties, and employed at permanent positions but not in the white-collar sector. Therefore, it seems that Korean far-right supporters are different from European far-right voters and have different demands as well. General demographic factors that are used to define “modernization losers” in Western democracies such as age, sex, socio-economic class, and education level do not have a significant impact on individuals' choice of the far-right ideology in Korea. Koreans with the far-right ideology are expected to have a different idea compared to the European far-right with regard to immigration, the typical far-right issues that are owned by populist parties in Europe. Negative views on immigration is shared inside the Ilbe community and also by Christian Right, especially among those who oppose the influx of Muslim immigrants. However, immigration is not significant in explaining Korean far-right groups in this model, primarily because immigration is not a major social issue yet in Korea. Discussions

about multiculturalism had occasional momentum, but it has not become one of the nationally debated issues as the number of immigrants and refugees is low and their visibility is also low in Korea compared to that of Western democratic countries.

This study confirms the importance of Korean-specific issues in explaining individuals' far-right orientation. The core issue that unites the Korean far-right is their demand for the government to take a firm line with the North Korean government and to strengthen alliance with the United States. Both are national security issues. Therefore, this can be linked to strong nationalism that is shared by far-right supporters in Europe. If Europeans called for exit from the European Union and Americans urged protectionism (against China) in trade policies to fulfill their nationalistic demands, Korean far-right's nationalistic demand have a strong focus on national defense. In that perspective, providing aid to North Korea and achieving self-defense ability to become independent from the United States are not good policies.

The findings of this study contribute to the expansion of the far-right literature on non-European cases. Previous works on radical right supporters are geographically focused on Western European countries and now the focus has begun to expand to the non-traditional cases that have been recently experiencing a rise in radical right populism. These cases are generally new democratic countries and their far-right groups have country-specific demands apart from what the general demand theories suggest. For instance, in Hungary and Poland, the nostalgia for strong law and order is a key demand factor of far-right supporters (cite), while in Japan, historical revisionism is the major issue that unifies the otherwise very different far-right politicians and social groups (Higuchi 2018). The profile of the Korean far-right also confirms the fact that far-right demand is revealed within a country-specific context.

In sum, this research shows that the Korean far-right has its own demands, that is distinct from the demand of European far-right voters. However, it has not done so without limitations. Methodologically, the line that is used to dichotomize the political ideology into the far-right and the rest is obscure. The dividing line can be 8, 9, or 10. However, the terminology itself is quite ambiguous to use. Many scholars use various terms (radical right, far-right, extreme right, and so on) interchangeably to indicate the same group or party. Furthermore, the problem of using logistic regression with this skewed dependent variable (rare event) that is dichotomized ex post should be solved with further analysis with a different set of data that has similar measurement of self-ideology but bigger number of observations.

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