

Not at the dinner table: Utilizing Trait and Ability Emotional Intelligence scores to understand Political Opinion

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Recent polls have shown that 70% of Americans are angered by the current political landscape. Given the emotional nature of this problem, emotional intelligence (EI) is relevant to addressing this issue. EI is the ability to perceive, regulate, understand, and use emotions to solve problems. Thus, individuals with high EI scores may be pivotal in creating positive political discourse. Data were drawn from an ongoing study where 149 healthy adults completed EI scales to determine their EI skills and completed surveys to measure their political identity and bias. This study explored correlations among the EI and participants' political identities. Results revealed liberals were shown to have higher Ability EI scores, as opposed to Trait EI scores, while conservatives scored higher in Trait EI scores versus Ability EI. By broadening our understanding of how political preferences relate to EI, our hope is to foster calmer and more constructive communication across American society. Now more than ever, research into the ways Republicans and Democrats emotionally assess social issues is necessary to begin to heal our fractured nation.

Key words - Emotional Intelligence, Politics, Polarization, Democrats, Republicans, Trait EI, Ability EI

INTRODUCTION

Right now, the American people's trust in their own government is at a historic low. In 2019, it was reported that only 17% of Americans trust the government to do what is right, "just about always" (3%) or "most of the time" (14%) [1]. This lack of trust is one reason why 77% of Americans are dissatisfied with the state of politics in their country [2].

The discussion of the presence of emotion in politics has become more popular in recent years [3]. A German sociologist once observed that action in a political community is 'determined by highly robust motives of fear and hope' [4], establishing the emotional base of voting. It has been shown that individual emotional states are affected not only by personal events, but also societal activities, like political events [5]. Concepts similar to that of EI, such as affective intelligence, have been examined in their relationship to current politics [6]. Affective intelligence is a theory based around the different emotional systems that make up decision making strategies. Because of the

similarities between affective intelligence theory and EI, this study looked at how political identification could be related to social and emotional skills.

Emotional Intelligence (EI) and wide-ranging success go hand in hand. In an international study of 515 senior executives it was found that EI was a better predictor for success than a high IQ or relevant previous experience [7]. The EI constituent, relationship management, has been suggested to play a vital role in conflict management [8]. Therefore, enhancement of this intelligence construct could be associated with improvements in both personal and social situations. Studies look at the two EI constructs individually to specify which construct of EI is the most useful in different social situations. In addition to the benefits of EI improvement on personal social situations, looking at the political effects of emotionally-fueled decision making like voting can help dissipate polarization in the current political climate.

The goal of this study is to explore the relationship between EI and political perspective. By examining the connection between political identity and the Ability and Trait EI scores, the impact emotions have on important political decisions could be revealed. These political decisions are the building blocks of society, and to have a better understanding of one's own political ideas is beneficial on a personal, social, and societal level.

I. Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) is a construct that affects social and mental health. EI is correlated to job performance, mental health, leadership skills and overall demeanor [9]; [10]. By contrast, impaired EI has been connected to hopelessness, depression and suicidal ideation [11]; [12].

II. Constructs of EI

There are two main constructs of EI; Trait and Ability. While these two constructs evaluate the same underlying emotional skills, they differ in the method of assessment.

Ability EI is a term used to describe the emotional capabilities of EI and is measured through *performance tasks*. The Mayer Salovey Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test

(MSCEIT) can be used to measure Ability EI through performance tasks. This is in contrast to the way in which Trait EI is measured.

Trait EI evaluates the personal perceptions of individuals' EI abilities and is measured through self-report tests. In other words, when people believe they have high EI, they experience these positive occurrences. While Trait EI assesses the self-perception of emotional capabilities, Ability EI assesses solely these emotional skills.

III. Emotions and Political Behavior

In the past, emotions were neglected in the exploration of political behavior because they were considered difficult to conceptualize [13]. Sociologists preferred to study politics separately and apart from emotion [14], focusing on the relationship between cognitive abilities and political preferences [15]. As emotional abilities' influence over politics gained more recognition, one dominating theory arose, the "approach/avoidance" perspective, viewing emotional reactions to political information as either pleasant and rewarding or unpleasant and harmful [16]. The argument was that these affective reactions guided citizens in their voting patterns. It has been shown that affective displays of oration and presence influence votes on the politician's end of a situation [17]. Specifically, identifying the facial expressions of candidates was shown to strongly affect the opinion of the voter on the candidate [18]. This employing of the EI skill of perception through viewing facial expressions to perceive emotions connects EI abilities to political perception. To have consistency in political preference discussion in this paper, it is understood that partisan sorting has gradually made the Republican and Democratic parties into the parties of conservatives and liberals, respectively [19].

This study will seek to explore how the two theoretical models of EI relate to political preferences. These explorations are of value to the general population because the results influence not only the individual, but their community and country. It is important that people have a better understanding of their own political views through emotional awareness to make better decisions when voting. In the current politically charged climate, EI presents itself as an answer to the idea that the country has become deaf to opposing views. An exploration into the relationship between the different theoretical models of EI and political identity is therefore relevant.

OBJECTIVES

1. To evaluate the relationship between both Trait and Ability EI, and political identity.

HYPOTHESIS

H₀: Extreme political views will not correlate with a bias in the self-perception of EI abilities.

H₁: Political identity will have a significant correlation to both Ability and Trait EI.

METHODS

I. Subjects

A total of 149 healthy participants (age range 18-45 years) were recruited from the general community in Tucson, AZ, as part of a larger study underway by Dr. Killgore. Participants were screened for current Axis I psychopathology, including current affective, anxiety, and psychotic disorders. All participants demonstrated an English reading proficiency at the 8th grade level or higher, underwent a three-hour assessment battery, followed by a computer-generated random assignment to either the active EI Training or Placebo Control Training Program and then returned for a follow-up assessment immediately upon completion of the program. The participants were then separated into two different administration schedules: Distributed Training (n = 230; i.e., participants were given three weeks to complete the modules, with at least two days between each module), Compressed Training (n = 230; i.e., participants completed all training within a one week period with one module per day).

The participants, in addition to completing EI training, completed surveys about their education, job status, income, gender, age, political identity, relationship status, stress levels, resilience, depression, sleep quality, trauma, grit, mindfulness, and emotional intelligence.

II. Scales

This study utilized multiple EI scales when looking for a relationship with political identity. For assessing Ability EI, the Mayer Salovey Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT) was used. The MSCEIT scale evaluates four defined branches of EI through a performance evaluation. The four branches are the ability to: accurately perceive emotion, use emotions to facilitate thought, understand emotion, and regulate emotion [20].

Scales that evaluated Trait EI comprised the Self Rated Emotional Intelligence Scale (SREIS) and the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue). The SREIS is a survey that evaluates the same subscales as the MSCEIT but through a self-report method [21]. The TEIQue is structured into four distinct and interrelated dimensions: emotionality, self-control, sociability, and well-being [22].

The Awareness of Social Inference Test (TASIT) was also included for its unique distribution method of

audiovisual nature. TASIT is a clinical assessment of social perception [23].

These surveys were completed on the University of Arizona premises. The data was received via email and analysis was completed through PSPP, a software application for the analysis of sampled data. The data used was quantitative. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) analyses were completed with political identity, measured on a 5-point scale from “Strongly Democrat to Strongly Republican” as the common independent variable through each. Frequency and descriptive analyses were completed along with bar graphs, histograms and numerical results.

RESULTS

I. Trait EI

A one-way ANOVA test (Figure 1) for the relationship between the SREIS scores and political identity, was found to have no significance with the p-value of ($p=0.123$). The data show that participants who held the most extreme political views did not have the highest self-reported EI scores. The highest trait EI scores, 69.73, were for the most moderate participants, those who do not lean Democrat or Republican. Surprisingly however, the next highest scores are from strongly Democrat and Republican participants, with 68.31 and 68.00, respectively.

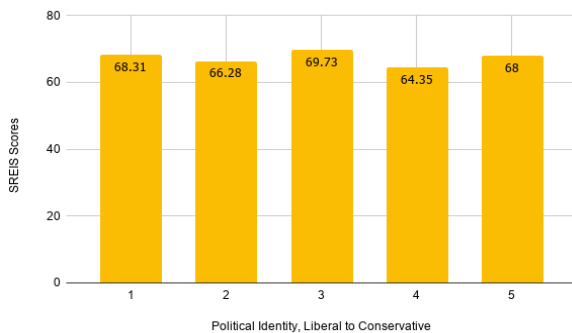


Figure 1. SREIS Total scores by political identity.

A series of one-way ANOVA tests were used to examine the relationship between political identity and the Trait EI surveys administered. The total sum of scores for the audiovisual TASIT were tested to see their relationship to political identity scores (Table 1). A one-way ANOVA was run for Political Identity and TEI test (Table 1). No significance was found in these results ($p=0.166$). Scores on the TASIT and TEI did not differ across Political Identity ($p=0.291$, $p=0.166$).

Table 1. Trait EI scales by political identity.	
Test	P value
TASIT total scores by political identity	$p=0.291$
TEI scores by political identity.	$p=0.166$

II. Ability EI

ANOVA tests on the MSCEIT SS total scores were used to determine whether Ability EI was different across the spectrum of political identity. A one-way ANOVA was run for political identity and the SS total scores of the MSCEIT test, evaluating the relationship between the Ability EI test and political identity (Table 2). No significance was found for these results ($p=0.407$). Scores on the MSCEIT did not differ across Political Identity ($p=0.407$).

Table 2. Ability EI scales by political identity.	
Test	P value
SS MSCEIT scores by political identity	$p=0.407$
Univariate analysis of SREIS scores and political identity with sex as the variable.	$p=0.526$, $p=0.247$, $p=0.702$, $p=0.927$

It was also of interest to examine whether outcomes might differ by sex. Therefore, a univariate analysis with SREIS as the dependent variable while sex and political identity were the fixed factors (Table 2) was used to see if the variable sex was obscuring significant findings. The test showed there to be no significant main effect or interaction present ($p=0.526$, $p=0.247$, $p=0.702$, $p=0.927$).

DISCUSSION

The study explored the relationship between the two different theoretical models of EI and political preferences. The results found that participants who labeled themselves more conservative on the political identity self-report scale in general had higher Trait EI scores than Ability EI. The opposite was found for those who place themselves on the liberal end of the spectrum, with liberals generally scoring higher on Ability EI compared to Trait EI. This finding supports the idea that there is a difference in EI skills across the political spectrum.

Because of the reported different connections between the two EI constructs and political identities, different types of EI improvement will affect conservatives and liberals differently. Luckily, EI capabilities are not fixed

and can be improved through one-on-one sessions, instructional guides, and online training programs [24].

For Ability EI improvement effects, research points to better leadership and relationships. The scores produced by the performance tasks have predicted leadership capabilities in small group settings [25]. People with higher Ability EI report more positive relationships, even after controlling for personality and IQ [26].

Trait EI has been shown to help predict abilities of transformational leadership, less subjective stress and performance in managers [27]. Higher Trait EI has been correlated to better physical, mental and psychosomatic health, less burnout, and reduced symptoms of psychopathy in mental health nurses [28]; [29].

The study revealed that there is no significant relationship between political identity and EI. With each test examining the relationship between political identity and EI resulting in no significance found, it can be concluded that neither Ability nor Trait EI have a strong correlation to political identity. By looking at the results of the test examining the relationship between the SREIS scores and the self-reported political identity, the analysis suggests that there is no significant difference in SREIS scores across the different political groups. The data fails to reject the null hypothesis, that there is no significant relationship between EI and political identity.

The results of this study are corroborated by recent work in this field. A 2019 study measuring for Ability EI found that those with lower emotional abilities are more likely to be found at the conservative end of the political spectrum, while those who displayed higher emotional abilities are more likely to be found on the left end [30]. This supports the finding that those who identify themselves as conservative have lower Ability EI than Trait EI.

Future research should attempt to use a more extensive political identity scale. The scale from which political identity was evaluated for this study is a five-point scale for ease of identification. Such a complex concept is not easy to minimize into five points when creating the scale. Because of this inherent issue, it is hard to place that much weight on the answer of a single question. Personal political opinions are also equally complex and could benefit from a more thorough identification tool [31].

There is also the issue of the self-report method of determining political identity. Participants could write an answer that is untrue, on purpose or not [32]. This does not detract from the effectiveness of the other self-report tests measuring EI, since those are examining specifically the self-evaluation of those skills [33]. With political identity, this created error variance in the reporting of responses and affects the results. One way to remedy this would be with a much larger sample, with a number in the thousands. Another would be to use surveys inquiring about opinions on specific political issues with the responses revealing political leanings more accurately than conventional political identity polling.

On the other hand, when looking at the adjusted for demographics four branch scores from the MSCEIT, a different pattern emerges for Facilitating and Using emotions to enhance thought. This pattern suggests that extreme Democrats and Republicans relate differently to this factor. From these results, it is implied that extreme Democrats tend to be better skilled to use their emotions to facilitate their thoughts than moderate one's, but for Republicans, the opposite is revealed. In general, subjects with extreme views were shown to be worse at using their emotions to facilitate thought than moderate ones.

Future research should continue to look at how voting patterns are changing across the board and what means for changing emotional patterns of voters. One study that was published in 2019 has found that those on the extreme end of the political spectrum for both liberals and conservatives have more in common with each other than with moderate thinkers in their own parties [34]. This is supported by the results from the SREIS scores, with extreme liberals and conservatives both scoring the second and third highest scores for the scale.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between politics and emotion. Specifically, the connections between Ability and Trait EI and political identity. The results showed that while there is not a significant correlation between the two theoretical models of EI and political identity, trends revealed how those who lean towards the left tend to excel in managing and utilizing emotions, within the Ability EI scales, while those who lean right score higher on self-report scales, measuring Trait EI.

As the next political cycle rolls in, research needs to continue to be done into the deep emotional split within America. This should be explored through comparison of the social and emotional skills of the two most prominent political ideologies in the country, Democrat and Republican. EI is usually seen in individual and immediate social constructs and situations, for example dealing with a personal issue or a friend's feelings; however, when EI is considered in the context of political decisions, like voting or protesting, it can be seen to potentially impact society on a larger scale. With that kind of impact, it becomes necessary to dedicate more research into learning about the emotional correlates of political identities.

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