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Revisiting the Disgust–Conservatism Link: A Meta-Analysis of Unpublished Evidence

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Research Article

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Abstract

Prior evidence generally supports the idea that disgust is an important psychological contributor to political conservatism. However, evidence for a disgust–conservatism link is mixed and may depend on how both disgust and conservatism are operationalized. Moreover, publication bias and the broader file-drawer problem are known challenges for many findings in social psychology, including potentially the disgust–conservatism link. To clarify when disgust relates to conservatism while stress-testing this canonical finding, I meta-analyzed more than 70 previously unpublished correlations from 14 archival datasets comprising over 3,200 participants. Using random-effects meta-analysis, I found no reliable average association between disgust and overall or economic conservatism, but replicated a small positive association with social conservatism. A mixed-effects meta-analysis further suggested that relationship between disgust and overall and social (but not economic) conservatism was limited to disgust toward contamination. Overall, these previously unpublished estimates were broadly consistent in direction with prior published findings, providing some reassurance against strong publication bias effects. However, the small magnitude of these relationships suggests caution when weighing disgust as a practically important contributor to real-world, justice-relevant political attitudes and outcomes.

Keywords: disgust sensitivity, conservatism, social conservatism, behavioral immune system, political ideology, meta-analysis, publication bias

Revisiting the Disgust–Conservatism Link: A Meta-Analysis of Unpublished Evidence

President Donald Trump, current leader of American conservatism is, in his own words, "a germaphobe" (Guarino, 2017). His expressions of disgust — ranging from asking people to leave the room when coughing to insisting on only drinking from straws in bathrooms (Sinclair, 2017) to finding it too disgusting to even use the word "bathroom" (Hurst, 2016) — led the magazine Politico to deem his first term, "The Purell Presidency" (Lippman, 2019). Colorful though these anecdotes may be, experts and public interest organizations alike have raised concerns about the consequences of Trump's presidential agenda for justice. As a recent report from the V-Dem Institute of Sweden's University of Gothenburg puts it, "the speed with which American democracy is currently being dismantled is unprecedented in modern history" (Nord et al., 2026).

How much does disgust matter to all of this? While anecdotes of President Trump's disgust-proneness reveal only so much, some scholars argue that his success can be at least partially explained by the disgust-proneness of his conservative supporters (Richardson, 2017). Beyond just supporting Trump, disgust may drive attitudes and policy stances toward issue areas commonly championed by conservative lawmakers, some examples including immigration (Aarøe et al., 2017), abortion (Inbar et al., 2009; Merlici et al., 2025) and transgender rights (Coneo et al., 2023; Vanaman & Chapman, 2020).

Beyond these specific disgust-policy associations, there is an extensive literature that theorizes what might be called — to avoid committing to any one theory — a *disgust-conservatism link*. Indeed, evidence does show that self-reported disgust sensitivity predicts general conservative orientation (Inbar et al., 2009; Terrizzi et al., 2013). Across these theories, the general idea is that disgust is an evolved, behaviorally-functional emotion that helps explain

the origins of conservative worldviews (Thornhill et al., 2009), or at least why people self-select into them (Xu et al., 2020; e.g., Xu & Plaks, 2025). Because disgust is an evolutionary mechanism, people are not aware that disgust influences their worldview; "we all suffer from instinct blindness" (Cosmides and Tooby, 1997, p. 2). Over time, however, disgust's influence within individuals trickles upward to influence norms, policy, and even institutional behaviors (Klatetzki, 2016; Patrick & Lieberman, 2020).

For one broad family of theories, this link is fundamentally about disease. Disgust alerts us to pathogens and sources of infection, in turn motivating humans to construct social rituals and regulations that mitigate them (Graham et al., 2013). In other words, at some point in our evolutionary past we developed a *behavioral immune system,* where disgust helped us guard against sources of disease both physical and social (e.g., experiencing outgroups as sources of disease; Terrizzi et al., 2013).

A competing view from the *three-domain model of disgust* (Tybur et al., 2009) argues instead that conservatism reflects a conservative mating strategy. More specifically, conservatism functions to promote a monogamous mating style which, when coupled with high parental investment, promotes one form of reproductive success. In other words, disgust toward non-conservative sexual behaviors (in the reproductive sense) manifests as socially conservative ideology. By this view, disgust toward pathogens only links to disgust insofar as pathogens from sex threaten reproductive success (Tybur et al., 2015), or not at all (Tybur et al., 2010). The disgust-conservatism link is thus ultimately about sex.

These theoretical debates highlight at least two important questions for the disgust-conservatism link. The first is, which dimensions of disgust predict conservatism? Key evidence favoring the behavioral immune system account often use one conceptualization of disgust —

and its accompanying measurements approaches — while key evidence refuting it uses another (Inbar et al., 2009; Tybur et al., 2010). Such evidence may therefore confound disgust-conservatism links with measurement artifacts (Elad-Strenger et al., 2020). While at least one meta-analytic review examined many measures of disgust, it was published over a dozen years ago (Terrizzi et al., 2013). Accordingly, the present work seeks to provide an updated assessment of the disgust-conservatism link that can speak both to disgust's general association with conservatism as well as the extent to which this relationship depends on how disgust is measured.

The second question is how well does the disgust-conservatism link withstand the file drawer phenomenon? This "file drawer" problem (Rosenthal, 1979), otherwise known as *publication bias* (Franco et al., 2014), happens when null or unexplored relationships are "filed away" and not published. If true for the disgust-conservatism link, the published literature would inflate how strong the link actually is. This concern is not new to social psychology (Collaboration, 2015); even canonical findings, like that whites show general anti-black biases in judgment, can be thrown into uncertainty once the file drawer is opened (Zigerell, 2018). Indeed, as Terrizzi et al. (2013) showed, the disgust-conservatism link itself shows some evidence of bias among published studies supporting the link. In contrast, the present work asks how this link holds up when approached from the other direction: through the analysis of *un*published data.

The objective of the present research was to provide an updated reassessment of the disgust-conservatism link by taking advantage of archival data. More specifically, there were two specific goals. One was assess the general association between disgust and conservatism irrespective of how disgust is measured. This atheoretical approach treats different measures of disgust as conceptually exchangeable, in turn informing the broad question, "if all we know is

that someone is disgusted, how conservative should we expect them to be?" Because the disgust-conservatism link may depend on how disgust was measured, the second goal was to assess the extent to which individual associations between different measures of disgust and conservatism might vary. Underlying both of these goals was a third goal of assessing the robustness of any disgust-conservatism link to the file drawer problem. I addressed these goals by meta-analyzing over 70 unpublished correlations between conservatism and nine measures of disgust sensitivity drawn from 14 archival datasets comprising more than 3,200 participants.

Method

Data Acquisition, Measures, and Participants

Data were 70 unpublished correlations between 9 measures of disgust sensitivity, 3 measures of conservatism — overall, social, and economic — from across 14 datasets. Datasets one through seven were collected as part of ordinary lab research at Brooklyn College or Queens College for studies that were either never published or for which analyses between disgust and conservatism were not included in the eventual publication[1]. Datasets eight through fourteen were pulled from the Open Science Framework as part of an unpublished commentary response to Landy and Piazza (2019), who also did not publish correlations between disgust and conservatism. Details describing these datasets are in Table 1.

[1] Except for Dataset 6, whose three Three-Domain Disgust Scale correlations with conservatism were reported in (Vanaman & Chapman, 2020). They were reported for transparency but were not relevant to that study's aims and therefore are included here because they may be overlooked in a literature search conservatism.

Table 1

Characteristics of Study Datasets and Participants

Dataset:	***1***	***2***	***3***	***4***	***5***	***6***	***7***	***8***	***9***	***10***	***11***	***12***	***13***	***14***	***Over-all***
Variable															
Sampled From	Brooklyn College Partici-pant Pool	Amazon Mechan-ical Turk	Amazon Mechan-ical Turk	Amazon Mechan-ical Turk	Brooklyn College Partici-pant Pool	Qualtrics Panel Service	Queens College Partici-pant Pool	Amazon Mechan-ical Turk	Amazon Mechan-ical Turk	Amazon Mechan-ical Turk	Amazon Mechan-ical Turk	Amazon Mechan-ical Turk	Amazon Mechan-ical Turk	Amazon Mechan-ical Turk	-
Year Collected	2021	2017	2017	2021	2018	2019	2019/ 2022	2016	2016	2016	2016	2016	2016	2016	-
N	190	186	183	249	108	575	257	213	211	325	265	331	213	264	3,570
	N (%)	*N (%)*	*N (%)*	*N (%)*	*N (%)*	*N (%)*	*N (%)*	*N (%)*	*N (%)*	*N (%)*	*N (%)*	*N (%)*	*N (%)*	*N (%)*	*N (%)*
Non-Missing Cases	146 (76.8)	186 (100.0)	182 (99.5)	182 (73.1)	105 (97.2)	573 (99.7)	158 (61.5)	201 (94.4)	200 (94.8)	304 (93.5)	250 (94.3)	309 (93.4)	200 (93.9)	250 (94.7)	3,246 (90.92)
Gender															
Female	94 (51.4)	78 (41.9)	90 (49.2)	127 (55.5)	76 (70.4)	286 (49.7)	143 (56.1)	84 (39.4)	90 (42.7)	142 (43.7)	127 (48.1)	124 (37.5)	82 (38.5)	114 (43.2)	1,657 (46.8)
Male	46 (25.1)	107 (57.5)	92 (50.3)	52 (22.7)	30 (27.8)	283 (49.2)	110 (43.1)	117 (54.9)	110 (52.1)	162 (49.8)	123 (46.6)	185 (55.9)	118 (55.4)	136 (51.5)	1,671 (47.2)
A Gender Identity Not Listed	7 (3.8)	1 (0.5)	1 (0.5)	3 (1.3)	0 (0.0)	6 (1.0)	2 (0.8)	Not collected	Not collected	Not collected	Not collected	Not collected	Not collected	Not collected	20 (0.6)
Missing or Not Collected	36 (19.7)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	47 (20.5)	2 (1.9)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	12 (5.6)	11 (5.2)	21 (6.5)	14 (5.3)	22 (6.6)	13 (6.1)	14 (5.3)	192 (5.4)
Race															

Dataset:	***1***	***2***	***3***	***4***	***5***	***6***	***7***	***8***	***9***	***10***	***11***	***12***	***13***	***14***	***Over-all***
Asian	53 (29.0)	20 (10.8)	11 (6.0)	55 (24.0)	34 (31.5)	68 (11.8)	77 (30.2)	16 (7.5)	18 (8.5)	20 (6.2)	11 (4.2)	21 (6.3)	18 (8.5)	13 (4.9)	435 (12.3)
Black or African American	21 (11.5)	17 (9.1)	20 (10.9)	42 (18.3)	11 (10.2)	80 (13.9)	36 (14.1)	8 (3.8)	13 (6.2)	27 (8.3)	34 (12.9)	16 (4.8)	12 (5.6)	17 (6.4)	354 (10.0)
Native American, Alaskan Native, or Pacific Islander	3 (1.6)	2 (1.1)	1 (0.5)	1 (0.4)	2 (1.9)	8 (1.4)	3 (1.2)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.3)	1 (0.5)	0 (0.0)	22 (0.6)
White	57 (31.1)	137 (73.7)	146 (79.8)	64 (27.9)	42 (38.9)	405 (70.4)	42 (16.5)	164 (77.0)	155 (73.5)	234 (72.0)	192 (72.7)	251 (75.8)	152 (71.4)	202 (76.5)	2243 (63.4)
More Than One Race or A Racial Identity Not Listed	12 (6.6)	10 (5.4)	4 (2.2)	18 (7.9)	12 (11.1)	0 (0.0)	26 (10.2)	4 (1.9)	6 (2.8)	6 (1.8)	3 (1.1)	4 (1.2)	3 (1.4)	4 (1.5)	112 (3.2)
Missing	37 (20.2)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.5)	49 (21.4)	7 (6.5)	14 (2.4)	71 (27.8)	21 (9.9)	19 (9.0)	38 (11.7)	24 (9.1)	38 (11.5)	27 (12.7)	28 (10.6)	374 (10.6)
Ethnicity															
Hispanic or Latino	29 (15.8)	20 (10.8)	14 (7.7)	33 (14.4)	20 (18.5)	87 (15.1)	Not collected	9 (4.2)	8 (3.8)	17 (5.2)	10 (3.8)	14 (4.2)	14 (6.6)	14 (5.3)	289 (8.2)
Not Hispanic or Latino	118 (64.5)	163 (87.6)	169 (92.3)	149 (65.1)	85 (78.7)	488 (84.9)	Not collected	Not collected	Not collected	Not collected	Not collected	Not collected	Not collected	Not collected	1,172 (33.1)
Missing or Not Collected	36 (19.7)	3 (1.6)	0 (0.0)	47 (20.5)	3 (2.8)	0 (0.0)	Not collected	204 (95.8)	203 (96.2)	308 (94.8)	254 (96.2)	317 (95.8)	199 (93.4)	250 (94.7)	2,079 (58.7)
Education															
Some High School	1 (0.5)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.5)	2 (0.9)	1 (0.9)	16 (2.8)	2 (0.8)	1 (0.5)	1 (0.5)	4 (1.2)	2 (0.8)	4 (1.2)	2 (0.9)	1 (0.4)	38 (1.1)
Completed High School	24 (13.1)	31 (16.7)	19 (10.4)	48 (21.0)	26 (24.1)	122 (21.2)	120 (47.1)	35 (16.4)	26 (12.3)	41 (12.6)	33 (12.5)	43 (13.0)	26 (12.2)	27 (10.2)	621 (17.5)
Some College	98 (53.6)	44 (23.7)	45 (24.6)	108 (47.2)	61 (56.5)	130 (22.6)	100 (39.2)	53 (24.9)	56 (26.5)	79 (24.3)	54 (20.5)	89 (26.9)	59 (27.7)	71 (26.9)	1,047 (29.6)

Dataset:	***1***	***2***	***3***	***4***	***5***	***6***	***7***	***8***	***9***	***10***	***11***	***12***	***13***	***14***	***Over-all***
Completed Associate's Degree	19 (10.4)	24 (12.9)	23 (12.6)	19 (8.3)	11 (10.2)	66 (11.5)	25 (9.8)	32 (15.0)	25 (11.8)	44 (13.5)	35 (13.3)	41 (12.4)	15 (7.0)	42 (15.9)	421 (11.9)
Completed Bachelor's Degree	3 (1.6)	64 (34.4)	72 (39.3)	5 (2.2)	6 (5.6)	167 (29.0)	8 (3.1)	61 (28.6)	74 (35.1)	108 (33.2)	103 (39.0)	109 (32.9)	78 (36.6)	94 (35.6)	952 (26.9)
At Least Some Graduate School	2 (1.1)	23 (12.4)	23 (12.6)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.9)	74 (12.9)	0 (0.0)	19 (8.9)	18 (8.5)	28 (8.6)	23 (8.7)	23 (6.9)	20 (9.4)	15 (5.7)	269 (7.6)
Missing	36 (19.7)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	47 (20.5)	2 (1.9)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	12 (5.6)	11 (5.2)	21 (6.5)	14 (5.3)	22 (6.6)	13 (6.1)	14 (5.3)	192 (5.4)
	M (SD)	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*
Age	20.6 (4.3)	35.2 (10.3)	35.8 (10.8)	20.2 (3.9)	19.8 (3.1)	45.0 (16.5)	20.6 (3.7)	34.8 (11.3)	36.8 (11.1)	33.7 (11.0)	34.0 (9.8)	33.4 (11.9)	32.0 (9.7)	33.8 (9.7)	33.2 (13.4)

Conservatism measures asked participants to place themselves on 7-point Likert scales, which I judged similar enough across studies to safely analyze as a single outcome (full prompts and response options are in Table 2). While bi-polar measures of conservatism have their shortcomings (see Limitations section), I judged them appropriate for the research question given their frequent use in the research literature (thus enabling comparability) and because, despite their simplicity, they capture a surprising amount of real-world information about people (Carney et al., 2008; but see Limitations). One exception was Dataset 7, where participants chose from *Liberal, Conservative,* or *Other*. I re-coded these to *Liberal* = 0, *Conservative* = 1, and dropped participants with *Other* since this category is outside the scope of the present research. Although dichotomous outcome variables can attenuate correlations, there were only two, and I expected them to have minimal influence on the overall analyses.

Table 2

Conservatism Measure Formats in Each Dataset

Dataset	Conservatism Dimension	Prompt	Response Options
1	Social	When it comes to social issues, I typically consider myself…	1 = Very Liberal, 7 = Very Conservative
2, 3, 4, 5	Overall	When it comes to politics, I am generally...	1 = Very Liberal, 7 = Very Conservative
6, 7	Social	When it comes to social issues, do you consider yourself to be…	1 = Strongly Conservative, 7 = Strongly Liberal (reverse-scored)
8	Overall	When it comes to overall political issues, do you	1 = Very Liberal, 7 = Very Conservative

		consider yourself to be…	
8	Economic	Which response best captures your political beliefs surrounding economic issues?	1. Liberal 2. Conservative, 3. Other
8	Social	Which response best captures your political beliefs surrounding social issues?	1. Liberal 2. Conservative, 3. Other
9, 10, 11, 12	Overall	How would you describe your overall political orientation? I am…	1 = Very Liberal, 7 = Very Conservative
9, 11, 12	Economic	How would you describe your political orientation on economic issues? I am…	1 = Very Liberal, 7 = Very Conservative
9, 11, 12	Social	How would you describe your political orientation on social issues? I am…	1 = Very Liberal, 7 = Very Conservative
13, 14	Overall	How would you describe your overall political beliefs? I am…	1 = Very Liberal, 7 = Very Conservative

Trait disgust sensitivity was captured with two previously validated self-report scales: The Disgust Scale-Revised (Olatunji et al., 2007) and the The Three-Domain Disgust Scale (Tybur et al., 2009). The Disgust Scale-Revised measures three proposed dimensions of disgust: core ("If I see someone vomit, it makes me sick to my stomach"), contamination ("I never let any part of my body touch the toilet seat in a public washroom"), and animal reminder ("it would bother me to be in a science class, and to see a human hand preserved in a jar"). The Three-

Domain Disgust Scale proposes a different set of three dimensions of disgust: pathogen ("stepping on dog poop"), sexual ("performing oral sex"), and moral ("intentionally lying during a business transaction"). Each subscale was scored by arithmetic mean.

Other measures captured state disgust toward specific stimuli (henceforth *Evoked State Disgust*). "Words" measures asked participants to rate how much they agreed that disgust words represent their feelings toward disgust-evoking stimuli. "Faces" measures did the same, but ratings were made toward photographs of faces depicting disgust taken from the Montreal Set of Facial Displays of Emotion (Beaupré et al., 2000). Lastly, for "Forced Choice Faces", participants chose between one of two juxtaposed sets of disgust and anger faces (also from the Montreal set), with the resulting score indicating preference for anger over disgust[2]. Words measures were scored by taking the arithmetic means of each participant's responses, while Faces and Forced Choice Faces were scored either by retaining the raw response (if there was only one rating) or by taking the arithmetic mean (if participants gave ratings)[3]. Table A1 of Appendix A shows details about the stimuli participants responded to for these measures. I judged these measures to be similar enough across studies to merit treating them as exchangeable versions of the same operationalizations of evoked state disgust.

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[2] Emotions researchers often do this to disentangle anger from disgust since they are both conceptually and psychometrically highly correlated (i.e., they co-occur both theoretically and in actual practice of measuring them).

[3] For Forced Choice Faces, Anger was coded as 0 and Disgust as 1. For dataset 4, participants provided four forced choices; for this dataset, the arithmetic mean was taken such that scores above 0.50 represented a bias toward disgust.

Table 1 shows all participant characteristics for each dataset, along with aggregated characteristics and information about the datasets themselves (e.g., where participants were recruited). Note that Dataset 6 was collected using quota sampling and is nationally representative to the general United States population in gender, race, ethnicity, and geography. Figure A1 of Appendix A shows the distribution of age by dataset.

Results

All visualizations were created using *ggplot2*, *ggridges*, and *patchwork R* packages(Pedersen, 2025; R Core Team, 2026; Wickham, 2016; Wilke, 2025), and all correlations and meta-analyses were carried out using the *correlation, metafor*, and *emmeans* packages, respectively (Makowski et al., 2022; Viechtbauer, 2010).

Preliminary Analyses

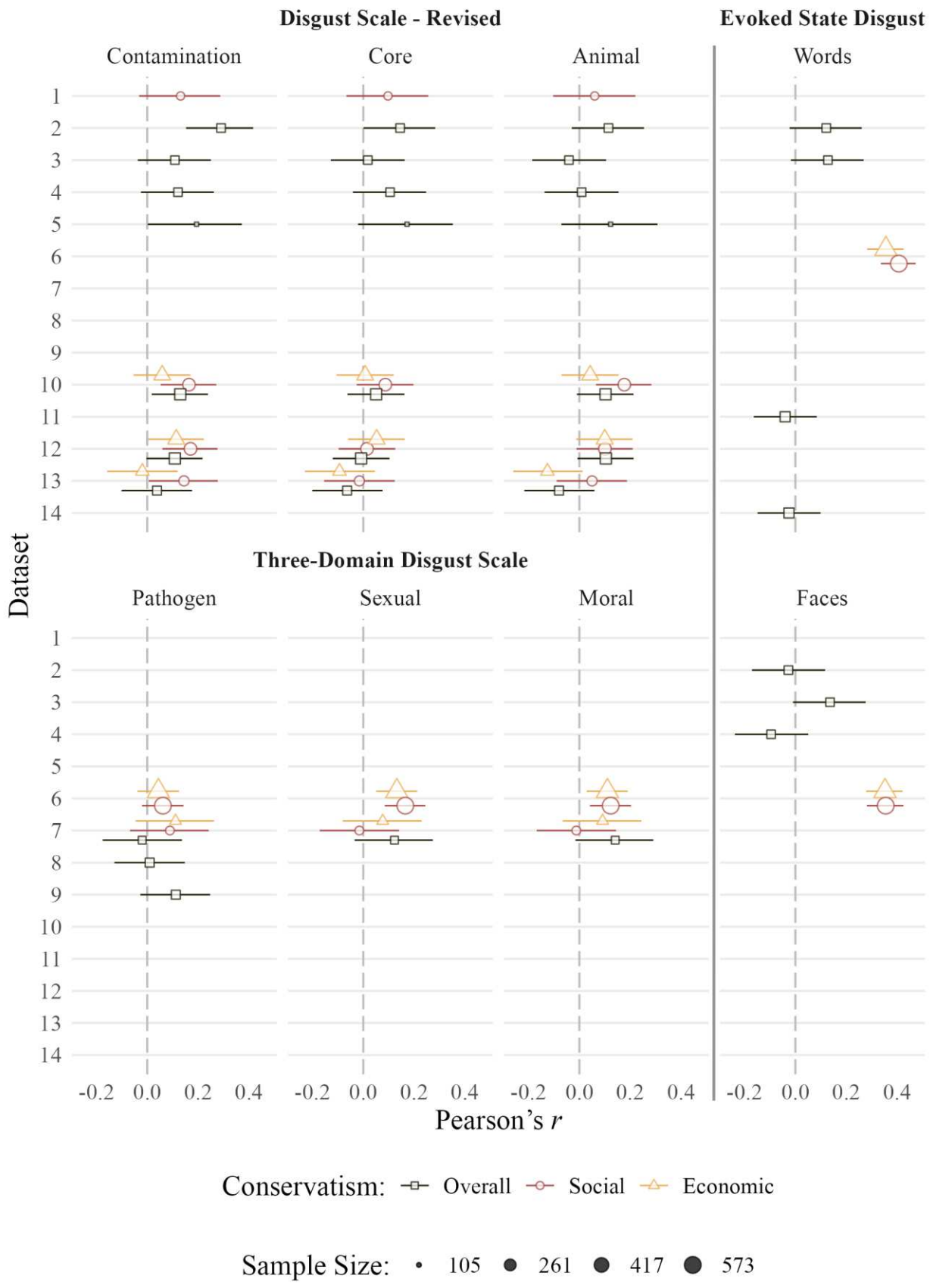
Distributions of disgust and conservatism scores suggested no prohibitive floor or ceiling effects, and are shown Figure A2 and Figure A3 of Appendix A. I then calculated Pearson's *r* correlations between each disgust measure and each dimension of conservatism which, for brevity, are displayed in Figure 1 while *r*s and confidence intervals are available in Table A2 of Appendix A. At the level of individual datasets, the correlations are noisy, with most close to zero. Notable exceptions are the Contamination correlation with Overall conservatism in Dataset 2, and the Words and Faces correlations with Social and Economic conservatism in Dataset 6.

If the null hypothesis of no correlation between disgust measure and conservatism were true — and assuming a 5% alpha level and treating conservatism dimensions as families — we would expect a 5% family-wise error rate within overall, social, and economic conservatism. Across datasets, only 3.0% of holm-adjusted *p*-values for correlations with overall conservatism were statistically significant, along with 15.0% and 11.8% for social and economic conservatism,

respectively. Moreover, if the null were true, we would expect an average of 50 percent of correlations to be negative; however, across measures and datasets, 72.7%, 85.0%, and 82.4% percent of correlations were positive for overall, social, and economic conservatism, respectively, which is consistent with the existence of a weak but reliable relationship between disgust and conservatism.

Figure 1

Raw Pearson's r Correlations (With 95% Confidence Intervals) Between Each Disgust And Conservatism Stratified By Dataset and Sizes Scaled By Sample Size


Disgust Scale - Revised
Evoked State Disgust
Contamination
Core
Animal
Words
Three-Domain Disgust Scale
Pathogen
Sexual
Moral
Faces
Dataset
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
-0.2
0.0
0.2
0.4
Pearson's r
Conservatism:
Overall
Social
Economic
Sample Size:
105
261
417
573

Meta-Analysis of Correlations

To strengthen statistical inferences about the average relationship between these disgust measures and conservatism, I synthesized the correlations across measures and datasets using random-effects meta-analysis[4]. All Pearson's *r* coefficients and their variances were Fisher *z*-transformed, yielding 70 correlations and variances in total across the 14 datasets. I included a random intercept for dataset to account for the fact that correlations may vary across datasets due to idiosyncratic differences in study procedure. I also included a random intercept for disgust measure to account for likely systematic differences between disgust measures relate to conservatism. The final model was:

$$z_{ijk} = \mu + u_k + v_j + \varepsilon_{ijk}$$

where i, j, and k index observed Fisher's z-transformed correlations, disgust measures, and datasets, respectively, with z_{ijk} denoting each observed correlation for a given measure within a given dataset. μ is the overall average correlation between disgust and conservatism. u_k is a dataset-level random intercept capturing between-study heterogeneity in the average association, and v_j is a measure-level random intercept capturing systematic differences in effect sizes due to how disgust is operationalized. Lastly, ε_{ijk} represents sampling variability associated with each observed correlation. This model thus estimates the overall disgust–conservatism association while accounting for heterogeneity across datasets, disgust measure,

[4] I also considered a mixed-effects model fit to the raw responses of all datasets, but none could be estimated reliably given the structure of the data.

and sampling variability[5]. I fit this model once each for overall, social, and economic conservatism measures; test statistics and variances can be found in Table 3. Note that this model does not consider theoretical disagreements about which operationalizations of disgust are valid; instead, for the purpose of assessing high-level associations, it models disgust measures as if they were all operationalizations of the same underlying construct of disgust sensitivity (see Meta-Analysis with Moderators).

[5] I also considered a dataset-by-measure interaction given it seemed possible that within-study differences between correlations from specific measure-conservatism pairings (e.g., Animal vs Words) could be bigger or smaller between datasets, due for example to idiosyncratic differences in study procedure (e.g., order of measure administration). Its variance component was estimated as zero, so I excluded it from the model.

Table 3

Test and Variances Statistics From Random and Mixed Effects Meta Analyses

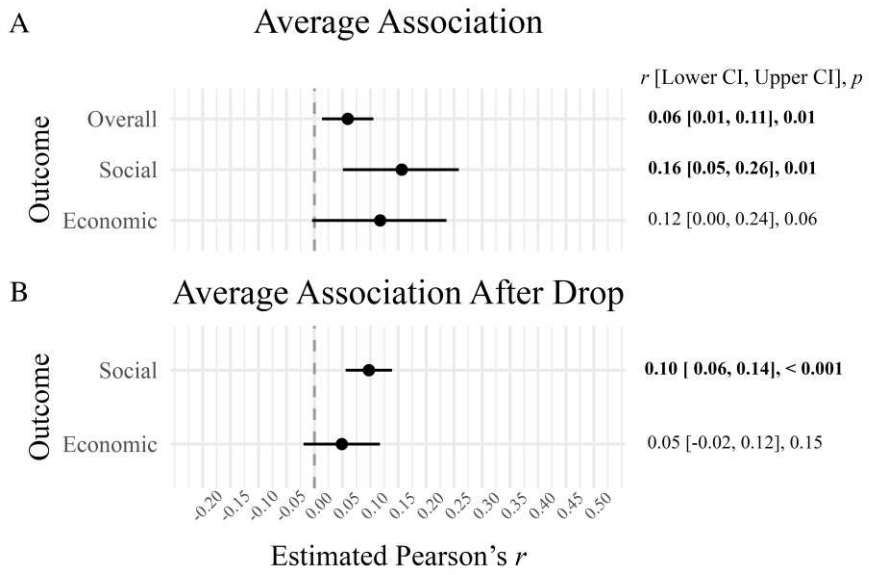
		Tests of Heterogeneity			Random Effect Variances		Tests of Moderation			
Model	Outcome	Cochran's *Q*	*df*	*p*	$\sigma_{dataset}$	$\sigma_{measure}$	*F*	df_1	df_2	*p*
Average Association	Overall	48.08	32	0.03	0.04	0.04	-	-	-	-
	Social	103.81	19	< 0.001	0.04	0.13	-	-	-	-
	Economic	108.29	16	< 0.001	0.07	0.13	-	-	-	-
Average Association After Dropping Dataset 6 Words and Faces	Social	18.65	17	0.08	0.02	0.03	-	-	-	-
	Economic	20.34	14	0.35	0.06	0.00	-	-	-	-
Disgust Measure as Moderator[a]	Overall	35.45	-	0.12	0.05	-	1.89	7	25	0.11
	Social	11.02	-	0.53	0.03	-	1.55	5	12	0.25
	Economic	12.07	-	0.21	0.06	-	0.91	5	9	0.51

Note. [a] indicates where mixed-effects (rather than random-effects) meta-analytic model was used.

Panel A of Figure 2 shows the resulting meta-analytic correlations, which are back-transformed from Fisher's *z* into Pearson's *r*s. Disgust showed trivial associations with overall and economic conservatism; social conservatism showed a larger relationship. However, the Words and Faces measures from Dataset 6 were in response to a prompt about transgender bathroom bills — which is a strongly partisan social issue with robust conservative support (PBS NewsHour, 2023) — thereby undermining their discriminant validity from the conservatism measures.

Figure 2

Model-Estimated Associations Between Disgust and Each Conservatism Dimension, Both With Dataset 6 Words and Faces (Panel A) and Without (Panel B)



Note. Model-estimated Fisher's *z* correlations are back-transformed to Pearson's *r*, along with their 95% confidence intervals and *p*-values. Panel B has no Overall level because there were no overall ratings in Dataset 6, meaning no new estimation was done for that level after the drop.

As a robustness check, I re-fit the same random-effects meta-analysis dropping the Words and Faces measures from Dataset 6, the results of which are shown in Figure 2 Panel B. The correlation for social conservatism remained statistically significant, though its strength fell

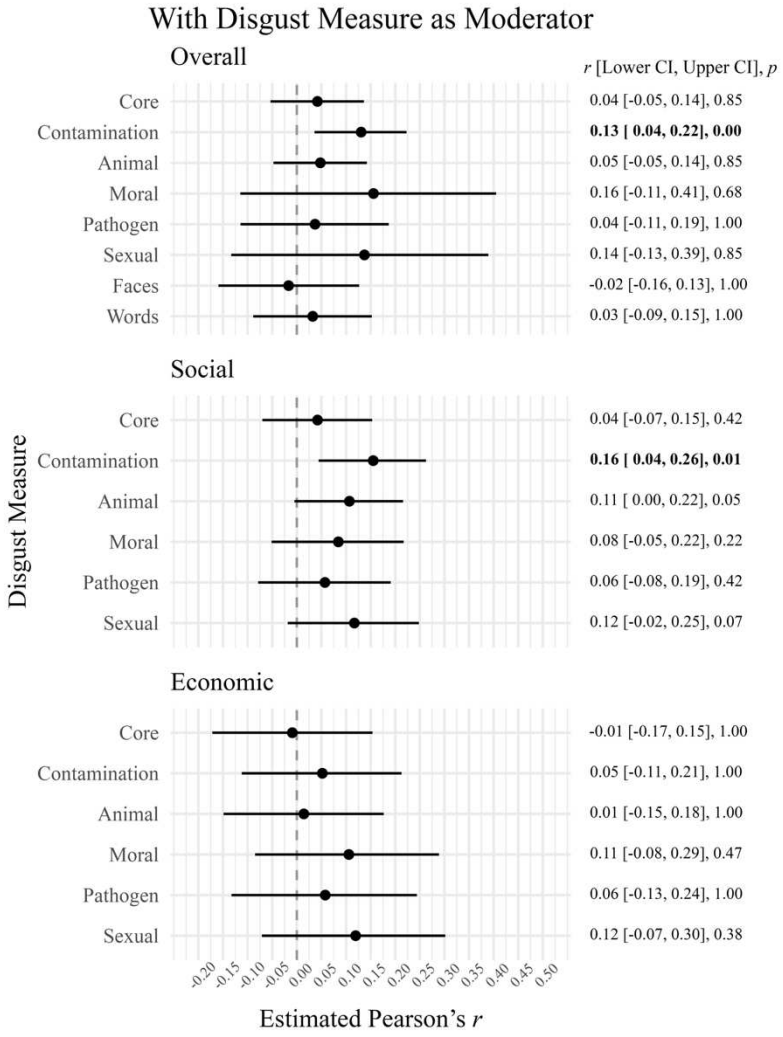
by about 40%. Economic conservatism was already small, and fell by more than 50%. Test statistics and variances are in Table 3.

Meta-Analysis with Moderators

While the previous research question treats different operationalizations of disgust as exchangeable measures of the same underlying construct (albeit with unique measurement characteristics), disgust and conservatism researchers alike may be interested in how individual operationalizations of disgust relate to conservatism. To assess this, I fit a mixed-effects meta-analysis with disgust measure as a fixed-effect moderator, again separately for overall, social, and economic conservatism (see Table 3 for test statistics and variances). I then computed estimated marginal means for each measure and back-transformed them to Pearson's *r*, yielding the model-estimated correlation between each measure of disgust and conservatism after accounting for between-dataset variability in correlations. As Figure 3 shows, only contamination disgust was statistically significant for overall and social conservatism, while none were statistically significant for economic conservatism.

Figure 3

Model-Estimated Associations Between Each Disgust Measure and Conservatism Dimension



Note. Correlations are back-transformed from Fisher's *z* to Pearson's *r*, along with their 95 confidence intervals and *p*-values (holm-adjusted within conservatism dimension).

Forced Choice Face and Sensitivity Analyses

The Forced Choice Faces measure is technically a measure of relative bias toward disgust over anger, which I judged conceptually dissimilar enough from other disgust measures to merit a separate analysis. The correlations between Forced Choice Faces and overall conservatism (the only matched conservatism outcome) were trivially small for in all three datasets containing this measure, namely Dataset 1 (r = -0.03, 95% CI [-0.17, 0.12], p = 0.72), Dataset 2 (r = 0.07, 95% CI [-0.08, 0.21], p = 0.35), and Dataset 3 (r = -0.04, 95% CI [-0.19, 0.10], p = 0.57).

Lastly, I conducted leave-one-out analyses to assess how sensitive model-estimated correlations were to individual datasets and disgust measures. Correlations held steady across dataset omissions with the most deviance occurring in Dataset 6 for social and economic conservatism. This is predictable given the content overlap between Words and Faces measures and conservatism in that dataset. With that said, the effect of dropping *all* Words and Faces measures was considerably smaller and in line with the comparably trivial changes in correlations after leaving out individual measures. Visualizations of the leave-one-out analyses are in Panels A (by dataset) and B (by disgust measure) of Figure B1 in Appendix B.

Discussion

This work meta-analyzed 14 datasets and found weak evidence for a reliable link between disgust and conservatism. After accounting for heterogeneity across datasets and disgust measures, there was no reliable average relationship between disgust and overall or economic conservatism. There was, however, a small correlation with social conservatism. This pattern is not unexpected: economic issues lack obvious disgust elicitors, and the overall measure of conservatism mixes economic and social conservatism together. Social conservatism, on the other hand, captures stances on issues that contain many stimuli that could be at least symbolically disgusting — for example, the perception that outgroups (e.g., immigrants) bring

novel pathogens, that same-sex relationships jeopardize successful sexual reproduction, or that social deviants function as moral contagions that infect and erode our social fabric.

With that said, the relationship was small. If this estimate were taken as our best guess of the true relationship, disgust would account for only about 2.5% of its variance with social conservatism — and only about 1% after dropping two psychometrically biased measurements. As such, if our question were, "how much should I be able to accurately guess about someone's social conservatism, given I know they are disgusted?", the reasonable answer is, "not very much".

However, a theorist of disgust or conservatism may object, and quite reasonably so, that some ways of measuring disgust are more theoretically valid than others, making it misleading to treat them as conceptually exchangeable. I assessed this with a second analysis that meta-analyzed individual measures of disgust, and found that only the contamination dimension of the Disgust Scale-Revised reliably related to overall and social conservatism (but no economic conservatism). And again, the relationship was small. With that said, estimated marginal correlations were within the confidence intervals reported in Terrizzi et al. (2013)'s meta-analysis.

In considering other substantive features of the data beyond statistical significance — a phrase some argue should be banned altogether (Wasserstein et al., 2019) — it seems remarkable that so many correlations were in the predicted direction, even if many were trivially small. A world where disgust does not relate to conservatism would produce a sampling distribution where the mean correlation is zero with equally as many negative as positive correlations; that pattern simply does not fit these data well. Noisy as they are, I suggest that these data do support

the existence of a very small, but real, relationship with conservatism, especially social conservatism, and especially when measured as fear of contamination.

From an open science perspective, it is hard to judge whether the disgust-conservatism link could be said to *definitively* pass the file drawer test. The relationships found here are, again, largely too noisy to draw inferences from on their own, and so at first glance would seem to represent evidence of a file drawer problem. But in contextualizing with what has been previously published, the relationships documented here are only a bit smaller than usual, and with comparably wide margins of errors. If this study confirmed anything that was already known about the disgust-conservatism link, it is that the business of correlating self-report measures of disgust with simple bipolar measures of conservatism is noisy business indeed, and that consensus should continue to be formed slowly.

In that light, the outlook on the pragmatic relevance of disgust to justice, is, from my view, wanting of clarity. It is one thing that disgust can, assuming the best-case scenario, explain only a very small amount of conservatism. It is another that this small disgust relationship must also compete with many other scientifically-supported explanations of conservatism, for example that conservatives perceive more harm than liberals and the left (Schein & Gray, 2015); that they have a wider breadth of moral concern (Graham et al., 2009); that they hold principled stances and values that are well-intentioned yet conflict with egalitarian goals (Sniderman et al., 1991; Sniderman & Piazza, 1993; P. E. Tetlock et al., 2000; P. Tetlock & Mitchell, 2008); or even that conservatism is mostly or even wholly reducible to undesirable (from a justice perspective) traits like racism (R. C. Smith, 2010), social dominance orientation (Sidanius et al., 1996), self-serving justification of unjust status quos (J. Jost & Hunyady, 2003); or even straight-ahead anti-social personality traits like narcissism (Federico & Zavala, 2018; Lazić, 2025) or malevolence

(Neumann & Ngo, 2025; but see also Bartolo & Powell, 2024). While attempts have been made to incorporate disgust as a part of a larger integrated framework that takes competing explanations into account (Xu & Plaks, 2025), this work suggests that caution must be exercised in weighing disgust alone as a pragmatically meaningful explanation for real-world justice-relevant outcomes.

Still, disgust should not be ruled out either, since disgust may involve non-linear psychological or sociological processes. As has been shown in other domains, even trivial initial biases can compound over time into surprisingly strong outcomes with tangible consequences (Hardy III et al., 2022; Perc, 2014). It is possible that tiny initial biases toward disgust in the general population could contribute to self-reinforcing cycles of disgust-driven politics. For example, a small initial increase in disgust discourse caused by a disgust-relevant policy change could amplify felt disgust among voters, in turn biasing them toward disgust-relevant policy, in turn bringing more disgust into public discourse, and so on until disgust comes to dominate public discourse.

Such possibilities, while to my knowledge untested, keep the door open for the need to study disgust's influence on political ideology. Still, disentangling disgust from the numerous other explanations for our current political atmosphere will be challenging, and in the mean time, it is best to be careful about when and where to take disgust to be upstream of justice-threatening policy.

Limitations and Future Directions

The main limitation of this work is that it was correlational, while most theories tying disgust to conservatism are causal. With that said, correlational research is often noisy, especially when it relies on correlating self-report measures; stronger relationships could still be observed

by experimentally inducing disgust, or harnessing emerging advances in non-experimental causal inference methods. Although the evidence here is weak, it does not claim to be the final word on whether disgust could cause conservatism.

Another limitation is that this work is largely atheoretical. Even if some ways of measuring disgust do reliably relate to conservatism, they are difficult to interpret if the theory motivating those measures turns out to be incorrect. With that, the current work cannot support the theoretical inference that conservatism is about disease threat just because the disgust-conservatism link was strongest for contamination disgust.

Another major limitation is that the present work operationalized "conservatism" as a score along a single (or set of) bipolar Likert-style measures of political orientation, be it in overall terms or with respect specifically to social or economic political issues. Despite their simplicity, such measures capture a lot about a person (Carney et al., 2008). Still, they conceal important qualitative differences between meaningfully different ideological tendencies. For example, fascism — which is radical and seeks to transform society — often competes with conservatism (Paxton, 1998), which is pro-status quo (Jost et al., 2003; Jost et al., 2009; J. Jost & Hunyady, 2003). At the same time, fascists would likely place themselves at the far end of a liberal-conservative scale simply to distance themselves from liberals, whom they strongly dislike (Payne, 1980). Leftists have been shown to do something similar; they identify as "liberal" on such scales despite opposing the label (Flores-Robles et al., 2025). Moreover, the very meaning of "conservative" varies between times, geographies, and even liberal and conservative respondents (Lewis, 2021; Zuell & Scholz, 2019). Future research can overcome each of these weaknesses simply by using measures of conservatism with specific content that

leaves less room for interpretation. Behavioral work that replicates and expands on real-world conservative behavior, like voting, would also address such problems.

Although this study used nine different measures of disgust, including both trait sensitivity and evoked state disgust, all disgust measures were self-report. Such measures, even when carefully validated, will inevitably drag many other constructs along with them. Anger, for example, is notoriously strongly correlated with disgust (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011; Nabi, 2002). With that, the current work cannot speak to other ways of operationalizing disgust, for example through facial muscle activation (Vrana, 1993), galvanic skin response (K. B. Smith et al., 2011), or behavioral tasks (Rozin et al., 1999).

While theories of disgust hope to explain cross-cultural relationships between disgust and political arrangements (Thornhill & Fincher, 2014), the current samples are limited to American participants and conceptually limited to an American political context. Participants in this research also came largely from online samples, limiting their generalizability to the broader American public. With that said, the largest dataset included was nationally representative, and three more came predominately from students at Brooklyn College and Queens College, two of the most racially, religiously, and ethnically diverse campuses in the United States (College Factual, 2026; Pietras, 2024). With that said, inferences are, as with much research in psychology, limited to American online survey-takers and college students. Moreover, these datasets came predominately from three labs, two of which overlapped in personnel. As such, this research does not entirely overcome the file drawer because it is not a random sample of all unpublished studies. Lastly, the sample size was modest, consisting of only 14 datasets (or studies, in meta-analysis terms). With that said, heterogeneity by dataset and disgust measure were at most moderate, and the confidence intervals, while wide, were not unusually wide

relative to prior findings. Still, caution should be exercised making strong inferences from these samples.

Conclusion

When a president expresses disgust — whether toward germs, immigrants, or political rivals — how much do we actually learn about why he pursues the policies he does? After synthesizing unpublished correlations across 14 datasets, the answer appears to be: not very much, at least not in the straightforward sense that theories proposing a disgust-conservatism link would hope. Disgust shows a small and selective relationship with social conservatism, but little evidence of a general relationship with conservatism overall or conservatism toward economic issues. These findings do not rule out a role for disgust in politics, nor do they rule out the possibility that disgust may operate through complex social, cultural, or historical processes. More humbly, they suggest that disgust is at best one small piece of a much larger psychological and sociological puzzle. This leaves the relevance of disgust to conservatism — and to the justice-salient policy controversies of our time — suggestive but ultimately unclear. Ultimately, justice researchers will have to draw from across descriptive, theoretical, and critical perspectives to derive a reliable big-picture perspective of disgust's purported causal role in our politics, its psychological underpinnings, and its implications for justice.

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Appendix A: Dataset Details, Variable Distributions, and Statistics Raw Disgust-Conservatism Correlations

Table A1

Stimuli, Prompts, and Response Options for Words and Faces Measures

		Prompt		
Dataset	Stimulus	Faces	Words	Forced Choice Faces
2	Fake news article describing "Barry" being caught driving while using cocaine or sexually harassing a waitress.	How strongly do you feel this emotion;wards Barry?" [1 = not at all; 5 = extremely]	How [disgusted/repulsed]sickened] are you with Barry? [1 = not at all; 5 = extremely]	Which set of faces best expresses how you feel;wards Barry? [Anger or Disgust]
3	"John" kills another person in a car accident while speeding home:; hide drugs from police, hide present from family, or be on time for dinner.	How strongly do you feel this emotion;wards John?" [1 = not at all; 5 = extremely]	How strongly do you feel each of the following emotions;ward John? Repulsed, disgusted, sickened [1 = not at all; 5 = extremely]	Which set of faces best expresses your feelings;ward John? [Anger or Disgust]
4	Participants read about "John", "Keven", and "Eric" doing either a harm or purity violation: John punched roommate OR searched for discarded women's underwear; Kevin did a hit-and-run OR	How strongly do you feel this emotion;wards [John/Kevin/Eric]? [1= not at all; 7 = extremely]	-	Which set of faces best expresses your feelings;ward [John/Kevin/Eric]? [Anger or Disgust]

	grew human steak from arm cells and ate it; Eric attacked Sarah's brother OR rinced his mouth with Sarah's urine.			
6	Imagine that someone who was born into a [female/male] body, but feels that they are a [woman/man], uses the [women's/men's] bathroom.	I would feel same way as these people are feeling. [1 = strongly disagree; 6 = strongly agree]	I would feel [disgusted/repulsed/sickened]. [1 = strongly disagree; 6 = strongly agree]	-
11, 14	IAPS images (Bradley, Margaret, & Lang, 2007; image codes 1271; 9140; 9290; 9300) depicting insects, decay, garbage, and bodily waste	-	How grossed out does this make you feel? [(1 = not at all; 9 = extremely]	-

Figure A1

Ridgeline Plots Showing Age Distributions Of Each Dataset

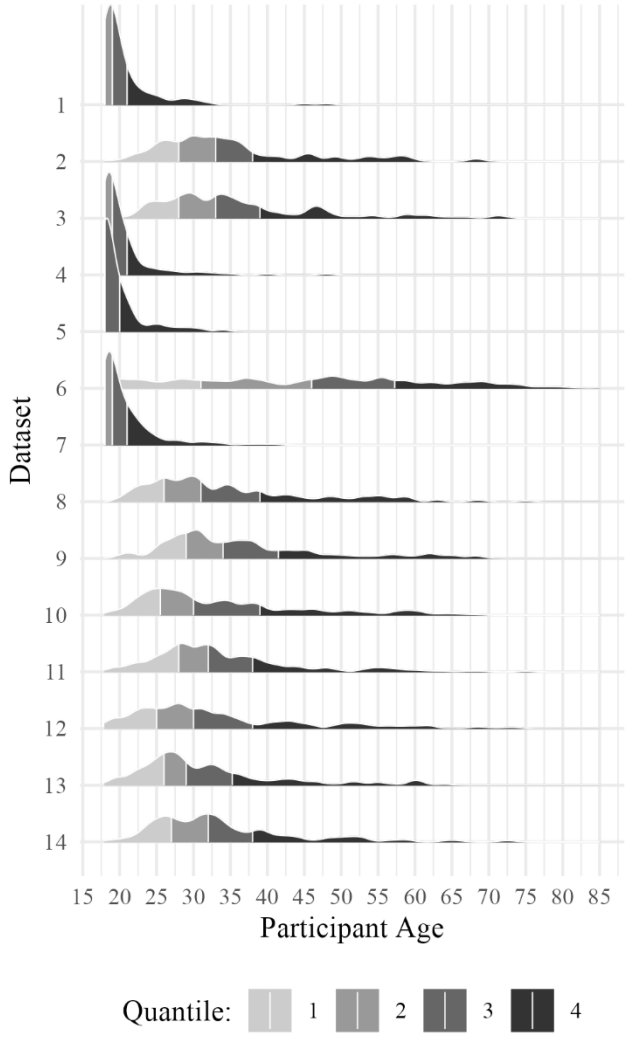


Figure A2

Ridgeline Plots Showing Distribution Of Disgust Scores In Each Dataset

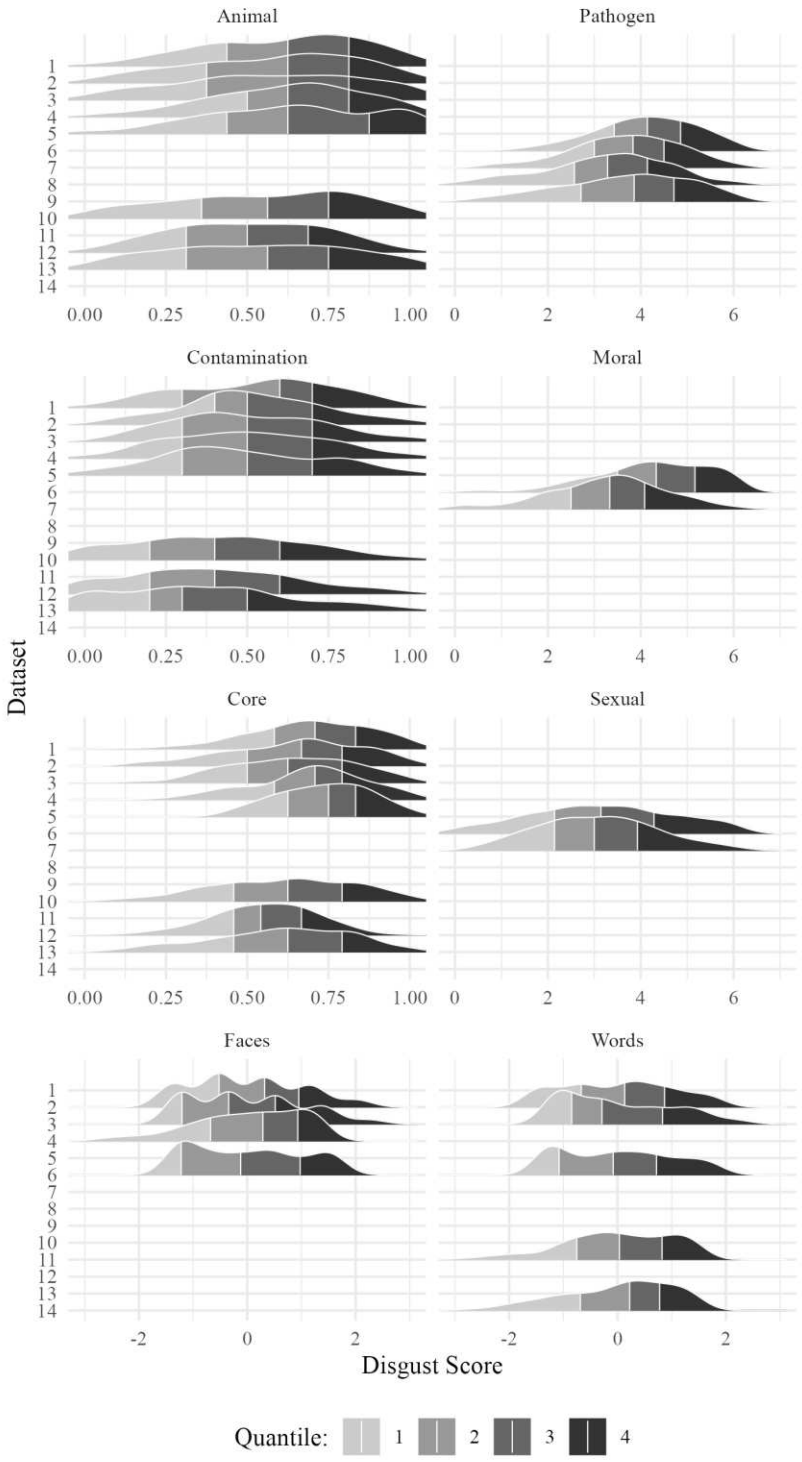
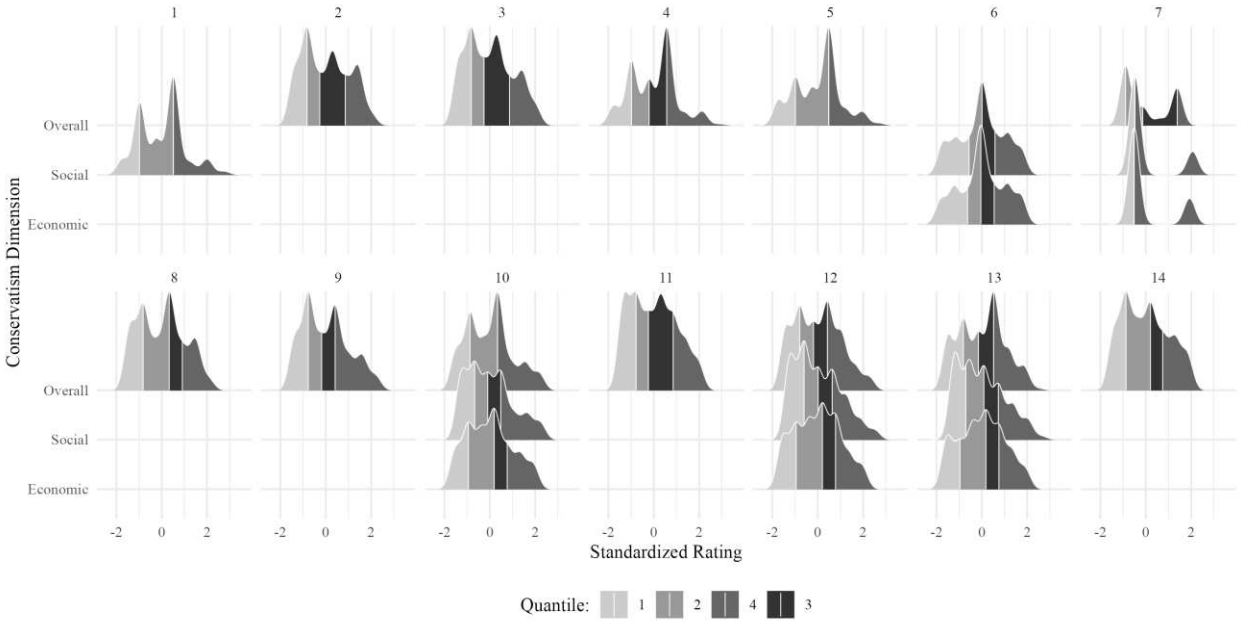


Figure A3

Ridgeline Plots Showing Distribution Of Conservatism Scores In Each Dataset



Note. All conservatism scores were standardized by mean-centering and scaling to standard deviation units. This allowed all measures to be compared on the same scale across datasets.

Table A2

Correlations Between Each Disgust Measure and Each Dimension of Conservatism for Each Dataset

Dataset	Disgust Measure	Conservatism	*r*	*CI (LB)*	*CI (UB)*
1	Animal	Social	0.06	-0.10	0.22
	Core	Social	0.10	-0.07	0.26
	Contamination	Social	0.13	-0.03	0.29
2	Animal	Overall	0.11	-0.03	0.25
	Core	Overall	0.14	0.00	0.28
	Contamination	Overall	0.29	0.15	0.42
	Words	Overall	0.12	-0.02	0.26
	Faces	Overall	-0.03	-0.17	0.12
3	Animal	Overall	-0.04	-0.19	0.11
	Core	Overall	0.02	-0.13	0.16
	Contamination	Overall	0.11	-0.04	0.25
	Words	Overall	0.13	-0.02	0.27
	Faces	Overall	0.14	-0.01	0.28
4	Animal	Overall	0.01	-0.14	0.15
	Core	Overall	0.11	-0.04	0.25
	Contamination	Overall	0.12	-0.03	0.26
	Faces	Overall	-0.10	-0.24	0.05
5	Animal	Overall	0.12	-0.07	0.31
	Core	Overall	0.17	-0.02	0.35
	Contamination	Overall	0.19	0.00	0.37
6	Words	Economic	0.36	0.28	0.43

	Words	Social	0.41	0.34	0.47
	Faces	Economic	0.35	0.28	0.42
	Faces	Social	0.36	0.28	0.42
	Moral	Economic	0.11	0.03	0.19
	Moral	Social	0.12	0.04	0.20
	Sexual	Economic	0.13	0.05	0.21
	Sexual	Social	0.17	0.08	0.24
	Pathogen	Economic	0.04	-0.04	0.13
	Pathogen	Social	0.06	-0.02	0.14
7	Moral	Economic	0.09	-0.07	0.24
	Moral	Social	-0.01	-0.17	0.14
	Moral	Overall	0.14	-0.02	0.29
	Sexual	Economic	0.08	-0.08	0.23
	Sexual	Social	-0.02	-0.17	0.14
	Sexual	Overall	0.12	-0.03	0.27
	Pathogen	Economic	0.11	-0.05	0.26
	Pathogen	Social	0.09	-0.07	0.24
	Pathogen	Overall	-0.02	-0.18	0.14
8	Pathogen	Overall	0.01	-0.13	0.15
9	Pathogen	Overall	0.11	-0.03	0.25
10	Animal	Social	0.18	0.07	0.28
	Animal	Economic	0.04	-0.07	0.15
	Animal	Overall	0.10	-0.01	0.21
	Core	Social	0.09	-0.03	0.20
	Core	Economic	0.01	-0.11	0.12
	Core	Overall	0.05	-0.06	0.16

	Contamination	Social	0.16	0.05	0.27
	Contamination	Economic	0.06	-0.05	0.17
	Contamination	Overall	0.13	0.02	0.24
11	Words	Overall	-0.04	-0.16	0.08
12	Animal	Social	0.10	-0.01	0.21
	Animal	Economic	0.10	-0.01	0.21
	Animal	Overall	0.10	-0.01	0.21
	Core	Social	0.01	-0.10	0.13
	Core	Economic	0.05	-0.06	0.16
	Core	Overall	-0.01	-0.12	0.10
	Contamination	Social	0.17	0.06	0.28
	Contamination	Economic	0.11	0.00	0.22
	Contamination	Overall	0.11	0.00	0.22
13	Animal	Social	0.05	-0.09	0.19
	Animal	Economic	-0.13	-0.26	0.01
	Animal	Overall	-0.08	-0.22	0.06
	Core	Social	-0.02	-0.15	0.12
	Core	Economic	-0.09	-0.23	0.05
	Core	Overall	-0.06	-0.20	0.08
	Contamination	Social	0.14	0.01	0.28
	Contamination	Economic	-0.02	-0.16	0.12
	Contamination	Overall	0.04	-0.10	0.18
14	Words	Overall	-0.03	-0.15	0.10

Note. *r* = Pearson's correlation coefficient, CI = confidence interval, LB = lower bound, UB = upper bound. All intervals have 95% confidence level.

Appendix B: Leave-One-Out Sensitivity Checks for Meta Analysis

Figure B1

Leave-One-Out Analysis By Dataset (Panel A) And Disgust Measure (Panel B)

