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The Relationship between Intelligence and Ideological Views

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Abstract

Literature on the association between political views and intelligence has largely focused on the linear relationship between the two variables, with nonlinear relationships between them being rarely examined. The National Longitudinal Study of Youth (1979), a cohort of about 10,000 youth born between 1957 and 1963 who were administered the ASVAB in 1981, were used as a source of data. IQ and support for the Republican Party were related within Whites (r = .13, $p < .001$), Hispanics (r = .12, $p < .001$), and Blacks (r = -.073, $p < .001$). Within Blacks, IQ and support for the Republican Party were curvilinearly associated. Support for the Republican Party was highest among highly intelligent and unintelligent Blacks (F = 18, $p < .001$). IQ and conservative gender attitudes negatively correlated within all races, but this relationship did not hold in individuals with an IQ above 115, even within the large White subsample (r = -.005, p = .85, n = 1060).

Keywords: IQ, Tradition, Feminism, Politics, Ideology

1 Introduction

Extensive research has been done on the relationship between political views and intelligence. To summarise, cognitive ability has been linked with right-wing economic attitudes (Jedinger & Burger, 2021), but socially liberal (leftist, progressive) beliefs (Carl, 2014). Historically, White Republicans have been more intelligent than Democrats, but this relationship began to reverse around the early 80s and flipped around 2010 (Khan, 2020) according to statistical analysis from the General Social Survey (GSS). If ideology is considered instead of party affiliation, liberals seem to consistently outscore conservatives (Kanazawa, 2010; Kemmelmeier, 2008). While this was not the main objective of the study, Meisenberg (2010) found that the endorsement of conservative gender roles and intelligence were negatively related (β = -0.27, $p < .001$) within the NLSY79 dataset. Other studies have also replicated that intelligence is positively related to liberal gender attitudes and other socially liberal beliefs (Deary et al., 2008a).

Research about the relationship between specific cognitive abilities and political attitudes suggests that verbal ability is a stronger predictor of political beliefs than other abilities. Kemmelmeier (2008) found that verbal ability was a stronger predictor of political beliefs than mathematical ability. When verbal ability is controlled for, other cognitive abilities do not predict political views (Heaven et al., 2011; Ludeke et al., 2017). However, given that verbal and nonverbal ability are highly correlated due to the common influence of the g factor on both, it is difficult to test this hypothesis without a very large dataset.

Beyond linear associations, it has been hypothesized that political beliefs could potentially be non-monotonically related with intelligence (Solon, 2014, 2015). Unfortunately, very little academic research has been conducted to determine whether the effect of cognitive ability on political views is linear or monotonic. Noah Carl (2015) researched this question using the Wordsum test and found that most relationships were linear, though this was difficult to determine given that Wordsum (a 10-item vocabulary test) has a low ceiling. In addition, Jensen and Kirkegaard (2023) have tested this hypothesis in the NLSY97 dataset and found that belief in individual responsibility and belief in government responsibility were monotonically and positively related to intelligence.

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The relationship between political extremism (absolute value of ideology) and cognitive ability has also been researched in the literature. Lin and Bates (2022) found intelligence predicts lower economic conservatism (r = -.105, $p < .01$) but also higher economic extremism (r = .115, $p < .01$). However, in the longitudinal sample, they found intelligence positively correlated with economic conservatism (r = .125, $p < .001$). Zmigrod et al. (2019) found that cognitive ability and extremism correlate negatively, though their measurement of extremism was based on an individual's willingness to fight and die for groups, which is substantially different from ideological extremism. Other research suggests that supporters of the far-right British National Party (BNP) are less intelligent than other voters (Deary et al., 2008b), but the sample size was very small (n = 27 and n = 62). It is also unclear whether these associations could be due to the fact that intelligence may be associated with a particular style of responding to questions on a Likert scale. Also, if the distribution of the responses to the survey questions violates normality, then the association between intelligence and political beliefs will be biased.

Controversial in the literature has been the influence of demographic covariates on the association between political views and ideology. Carl (2015) found that the association between supporting the Republican Party and the score on the Wordsum test survives controls for covariates such as race and education; Ganzach (2016) was unable to replicate this finding in this dataset and found a null association between party affiliation and score on the Wordsum test, even when applying a very similar methodology. Jensen and Kirkegaard (2023) did not find that the association between IQ and ideological beliefs about government responsibility and personal responsibility substantially changed after controlling for sex, race, education, and income. However, it is still possible that the influence of covariates (or in the case of education and income, mediators) on the relationship between political beliefs and intelligence varies depending on the specific belief and the measurement of political affiliation.

Because there is very little research that tests the influence of specific abilities on ideological beliefs or non-monotonic relationships between cognitive ability and ideology, more needs to be done to determine the veracity of these findings. The purpose of the present study was to examine these variables using a large dataset with sufficient power to estimate non-linear relationships, and the effects of specific cognitive abilities in addition to the general factor of intelligence (g).

2 Data

Individuals were sampled from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (1979), a large dataset of 12,686 individuals born between 1957 and 1964. These include an oversampling of lower class Whites, Hispanics, and youth in the military. The military sample was discontinued after the 1984 survey and the lower class Whites were no longer sampled after 1990. They were administered the ASVAB in 1981, a highly reliable (ω = .94) aptitude test used in the military consisting of 10 cognitive tests. The 50 lowest scorers were excluded out of data quality concerns.

Gender attitudes were measured using 8 questions that were asked in four different years: 1979, 1982, 1987, and 2004. Participants could respond by saying they strongly disagreed, disagreed, agreed, strongly agreed, or had no opinion on the statements they were presented with. The general factor of these questions accounted for 18 % of the variation. Factor scores were subsequently calculated for each individual. Gender attitudes in which missing values were imputed correlated marginally more with IQ (r = -.31) than those in which listwise deletion was implemented (r = -.30), so missing values were filled in to increase the power of the study. The omega reliability of this 32 (4 x 8) item scale derived from different years was 0.85; within survey years, reliabilities were slightly lower (0.74, 0.80, 0.81, and 0.75). The questions are presented in Table 1. This variable was standardised at a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

Political party affiliation was measured in 2008 using three questions. In the first two, individuals revealed which political party they aligned with and how strong this alignment was. Those who did not align with the Republican or Democratic party were then asked if they felt close to one of the parties. Table 2 shows how these questions were used to construct seven categories:

IQ was measured using the ASVAB, a military entrance exam, which was administered to the respondents in 1981 when they were between 16 and 24 years old. 10 subtests were used: General science,

Table 1: List of questions asked to the respondents about their views on gender.

Number	Question
Q1	A woman's place is in the home, not in the office or shop
Q2	A woman who carries out her full family responsibilities doesn't have time for outside employment
Q3	A working wife feels more useful than one who doesn't hold a job (-)
Q4	The employment of wives leads to more juvenile delinquency
Q5	Employment of both parents is necessary to keep up with the high cost of living (-)
Q6	It is much better for everyone concerned if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family
Q7	Men should share the work around the house with women, such as doing dishes, cleaning, and so forth (-)
Q8	Women are much happier if they stay at home and take care of their children

Note: (-) These questions were reverse coded.

Table 2: Description of party affiliation.

Party affiliation	Description
Strong Republican	Identifies as a Republican, claims affiliation is strong
Moderate Republican	Identifies as a Republican, claims affiliation is not very strong
Weak Republican	Does not identify with a party, but closer to the Republican Party
Centrist	Does not identify with a party, identifies equally well with both parties
Weak Democrat	Does not identify with a party, but closer to the Democratic Party
Moderate Democrat	Identifies as a Democrat, claims affiliation is not very strong
Strong Democrat	Identifies as a Democrat, claims affiliation is strong

Word knowledge, Paragraph comprehension, Arithmetic reasoning, Mathematical knowledge, Numerical operations, Coding speed, Mechanical comprehension, Electronic information, and Auto and shop information. The first general factor was extracted from these subtests and factor scores were computed for each individual. The scores were then standardized relative to the White mean, and recoded to a normal distribution where the White mean is 100 and White standard deviation is 15.

3 Results

Political party affiliation and intelligence covaried within all three racial samples, as shown in Figures 1 to 3. Within Whites and Hispanics, the relationship between intelligence and party affiliation was largely linear, but within Blacks, intelligence and party affiliation were related curvilinearly. The most unintelligent and intelligent Blacks were more likely to vote for the Republican Party.

The difference between the linear and non-linear model (using restricted cubic splines) was formally tested by comparing the residual sum of squares of both models to calculate the F statistic. The difference between the two models was negligible in Whites and Hispanics but not in Blacks, as shown in Table 3. Because the relationship between political views and intelligence is strongly nonlinear within Blacks, Blacks were separated into IQ bands to test at which levels of IQ the nonlinear relationship emerged. According to Table 4, this curvilinear relationship passed significance in both the low and high ability groups.

Non-linear interactions were also tested when the variables were reversed, that is, to see if individuals with one particular strength of ideology (e.g. Strong Democrats, weak Republicans) are more intelligent

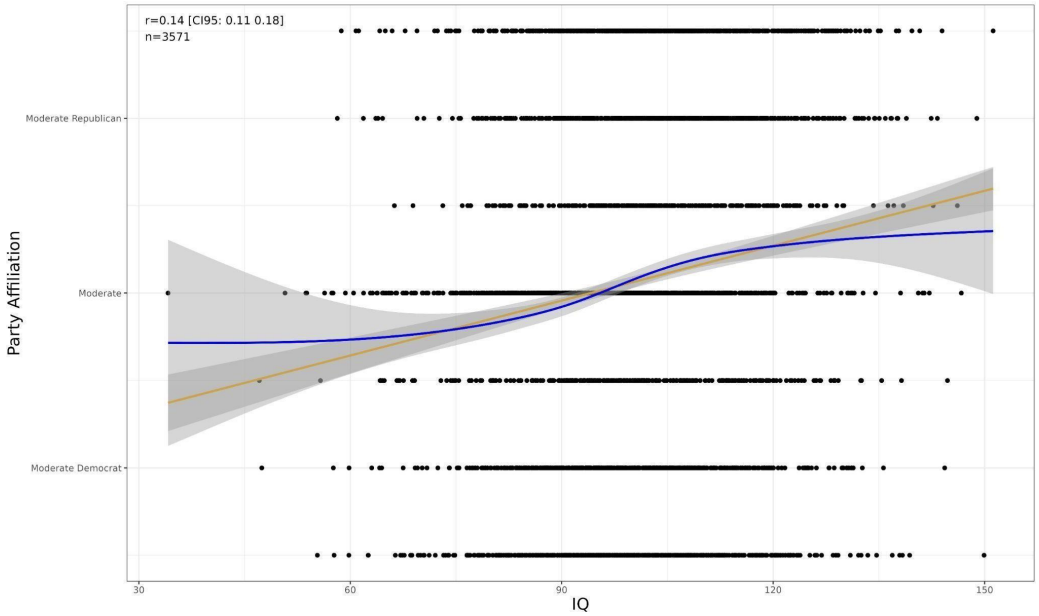

Figure 1: Relationship between intelligence and support for the Republican Party in the White subgroup. Yellow line is the linear relationship, blue line is the non-linear relationship based on smoothed conditional means. 95 % confidence intervals shaded in grey.

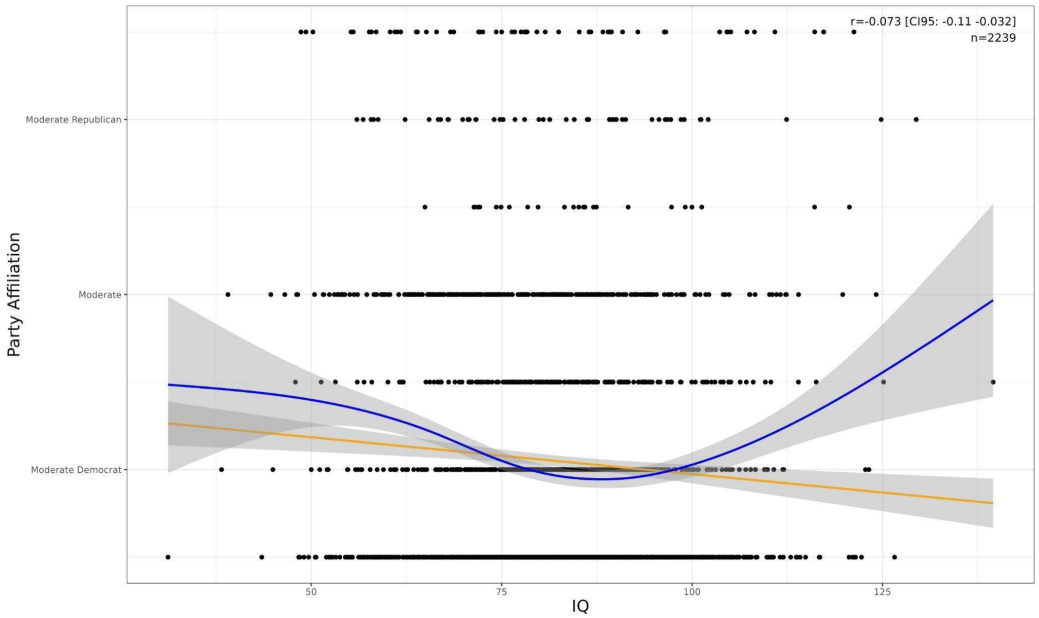

Figure 2: Relationship between intelligence and support for the Republican Party within Blacks. Yellow line is the linear relationship, blue line is the non-linear relationship based on smoothed conditional means. 95 % confidence intervals shaded in grey.

than what you would expect based on the linear relationship. Table 5 shows that the associations these variables have are largely linear, although centrists have lower levels of intelligence.

The same analysis conducted for political party affiliation was also conducted for conservative gender attitudes. Intelligence and conservative gender attitudes were negatively related within all races. The difference in correlation is statistically significant between Whites and Blacks ($z = 7.5$, $p < .001$), as well as between Whites and Hispanics ($z = 4.8$, $p < .001$). This correlation is no longer statistically significant once the sample is restricted to individuals with an IQ above 115 within Whites (r = -.005, $p = .85$), Blacks ($r = .010$, $p = .96$), and Hispanics (r = -.042, $p = .73$). This method was not powerful within Hispanics

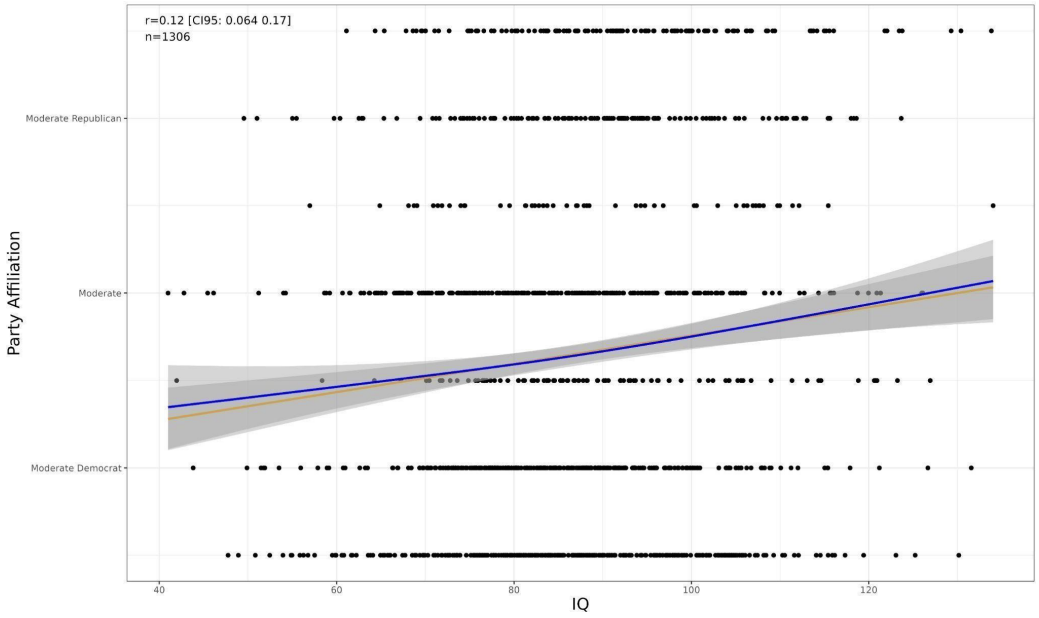

Figure 3: Relationship between intelligence and support for the Republican Party within Hispanics. Yellow line is the linear relationship, blue line is the non-linear relationship based on smoothed conditional means. 95 % confidence intervals shaded in grey.

Table 3: Comparison between linear and nonlinear models in three different groups. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Race	R of non-linear model	R of linear model	F-stat.
White	0.16	0.14	4.3**
Black	0.17	0.07	18.0***
Hispanic	0.13	0.12	1.1

Table 4: Support for the Republican Party by IQ group (standardised) within the Black sample. Reference group is Blacks scoring between 80 and 100. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

IQ group	N	Support for Republican Party	Test-statistic
Far above average (IQ >115)	31	0.04	3.1**
Above average (115 >IQ >100)	232	-0.58	1.6
Below average (100 >IQ >80)	1487	-0.68	Baseline
Far below average (80 >IQ)	1269	-0.52	5.0***

and Blacks due to the low sample sizes for these groups (n = 70 and n = 31 respectively), but it was highly powerful within Whites (n = 1060). The relationship between IQ and conservative gender attitudes within each race is displayed in Figures 4 to 6.

The difference between the linear and non-linear model (using restricted cubic splines) was formally tested by comparing the residual sum of squares of both models to calculate the F statistic. Table 6 shows that the non-linear models were slightly better than the linear ones within every single race.

Besides the relationship between IQ and conservative gender attitudes, races also differ in their average gender attitudes. Hispanics hold more conservative views about gender than Whites (d = 0.29, $p < .001$), and Blacks hold slightly more liberal views about gender than Whites (d = -0.05, $p = .028$). Table 7 shows that after controlling for intelligence, Blacks are more liberal than Whites and Hispanics are about as liberal as Whites.

Table 5: Average IQ by race and party affiliation. Sample sizes in parentheses.

Party affiliation	White	Black	Hispanic
Strong Republican	104.0 (679)	80.9 (57)	93.1 (140)
Moderate Republican	104.2 (624)	82.7 (53)	89.8 (154)
Weak Republican	104.1 (298)	85.8 (25)	90.2 (56)
Centrist	96.4 (733)	77.9 (357)	84.3 (305)
Weak Democrat	99.7 (285)	83.7 (198)	89.6 (96)
Moderate Democrat	99.1 (541)	82.4 (393)	85.7 (318)
Strong Democrat	99.4 (551)	82.8 (1234)	86.5 (341)

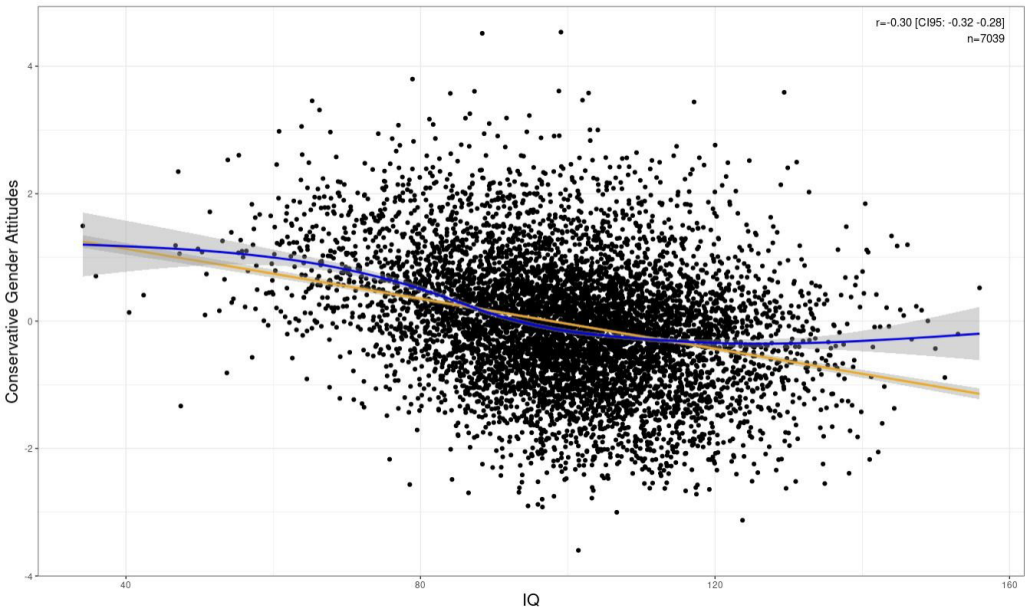

Figure 4: Relationship between IQ and conservative gender attitudes in Whites. Yellow line is the linear relationship, blue line is the non-linear relationship based on smoothed conditional means. 95 % confidence intervals shaded in grey.

Table 6: Comparison of fit between linear and non-linear models within all three race/ethnicity groups. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Race/ethnicity	R of non-linear model	R of linear model	F
White	0.32	0.30	41.8***
Black	0.45	0.44	14.9***
Hispanic	0.44	0.41	42.9***

Table 8 shows the average IQ by race and gender values divided into 5 categories: very traditional (2 SD above the mean of the total sample, traditional (between 0.5 and 2 SD above the mean), moderate (between 0.5 SD below and 0.5 SD above the mean), liberal (between 0.5 and 2 SD below the mean), and very liberal (2 SD below the mean). Within every single racial group, IQ increased monotonically and linearly with more liberal gender attitudes.

Given that women have less traditional gender attitudes than men (d = -0.57, $p < .001$), it would be appropriate to test if the relationship between intelligence and conservative gender attitudes holds within both women and men. The results of the regression analysis in Table 9 suggest that the relationship is stronger within women, but this may be a statistical artefact as the correlation between IQ and gender

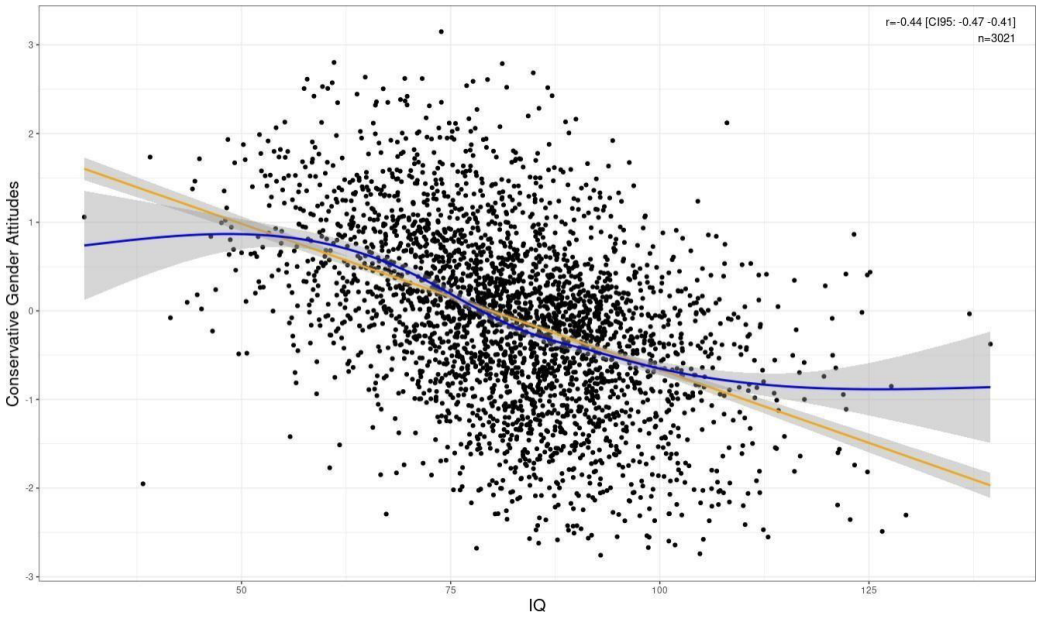

Figure 5: Relationship between IQ and conservative gender attitudes in Blacks. Yellow line is the linear relationship, blue line is the non-linear relationship based on smoothed conditional means. 95 % confidence intervals shaded in grey.

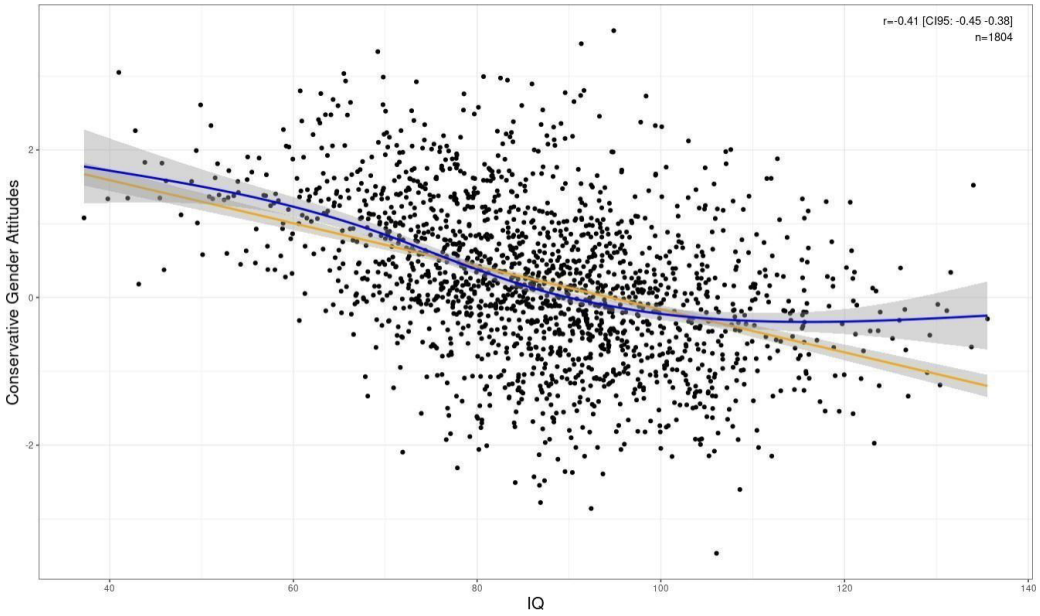

Figure 6: Relationship between IQ and conservative gender attitudes in Hispanics. Yellow line is the linear relationship, blue line is the non-linear relationship based on smoothed conditional means. 95 % confidence intervals shaded in grey.

attitudes is roughly the same in both sexes (r = -.37 in men, r = -.35 in women), as shown in Figures 7 and 8.

4 Discussion

This study was able to replicate that Americans with liberal gender attitudes (r = -.32, $p < .001$) and those supporting the Republican Party (r = .14, $p < .001$) were more intelligent. Within Blacks, IQ and support for the Republican Party were curvilinearly associated: Support for the Republican Party was higher among the most and least intelligent Blacks than those closer to the average. This effect could potentially be due to Blacks with low intelligence not recognizing the racial coding of American parties in the mainstream

Table 7: Regression model predicting conservative gender attitudes. t-statistic in parentheses. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. IQ is fit to the White mean and standard deviation, but in standardised units (mean = -.43, SD = 1.1).

Parameter	Estimate
IQ	-0.29 (26.5)***
Black	-0.62 (21.2)***
Hispanic	-0.12 (3.7)*
IQ x Black	-0.20 (9.0)***
IQ x Hispanic	-0.14 (5.7)***

Table 8: Average IQ by gender attitudes and race. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Gender attitudes	White	Black	Hispanic
Very traditional	91.8 (210)	72.5 (58)	76.5 (108)
Traditional	93.6 (1774)	74.3 (774)	80.4 (662)
Moderate	100.8 (3254)	82.8 (1328)	89.2 (781)
Liberal	104.3 (2092)	87.9 (915)	95.2 (423)
Very liberal	107.7 (180)	94.7 (99)	92.8 (28)

Table 9: Regression model predicting conservative gender attitudes. t-statistic in parentheses. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. IQ is fitted to the White mean and standard deviation, but in standardised units (mean = -.43, SD = 1.1).

Parameter	Estimate
IQ	-0.28 (29.2)***
Female	-0.66 (37.3)***
IQ x Female	-0.08 (5.3)***

media and therefore being more likely to vote Republican, while highly intelligent Blacks might be more integrated into White culture and therefore more likely to vote Republican. While the curvilinear hypothesis has been discussed frequently on social media, it has not been hypothesised to apply for this particular relationship. Centrists tended to be less intelligent than both Democrats and Republicans within Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics. It is possible that this is because people who are not very bright avoid having strong opinions because they find political theory or ideas confusing, know little about politics, or are not interested in politics.

Intelligence and traditional gender attitudes negatively correlated within all races. However, they were uncorrelated in individuals with an IQ above 115, even within the large White subsample (r = -.005, p = .85, n = 1060) of individuals with an IQ of above 115. It is possible that this is because gender-egalitarian ideas are more cognitively complex, and so they tend to be endorsed more by intelligent people, but past the level of intelligence which is necessary to understand both strands of thinking, intelligence is no longer a factor in adoption of traditional gender attitudes. While Hispanics held more conservative attitudes about gender than Whites (d = 0.29, $p < .001$), this was no longer true after intelligence was controlled for. Blacks were marginally more liberal than Whites (d = -0.05, p = .028), but much more liberal after controlling for intelligence (d = -0.62, $p < .001$).

There are various reasons why traditional gender attitudes and intelligence could be negatively associated. Given that IQ and political beliefs are associated at the genetic level (Edwards et al., 2024), and that this relationship survives controls (Carl, 2014), causality from IQ to political views appears likely. One explanation for this causal link could be the Savannah hypothesis (Kanazawa, 2010), which is that

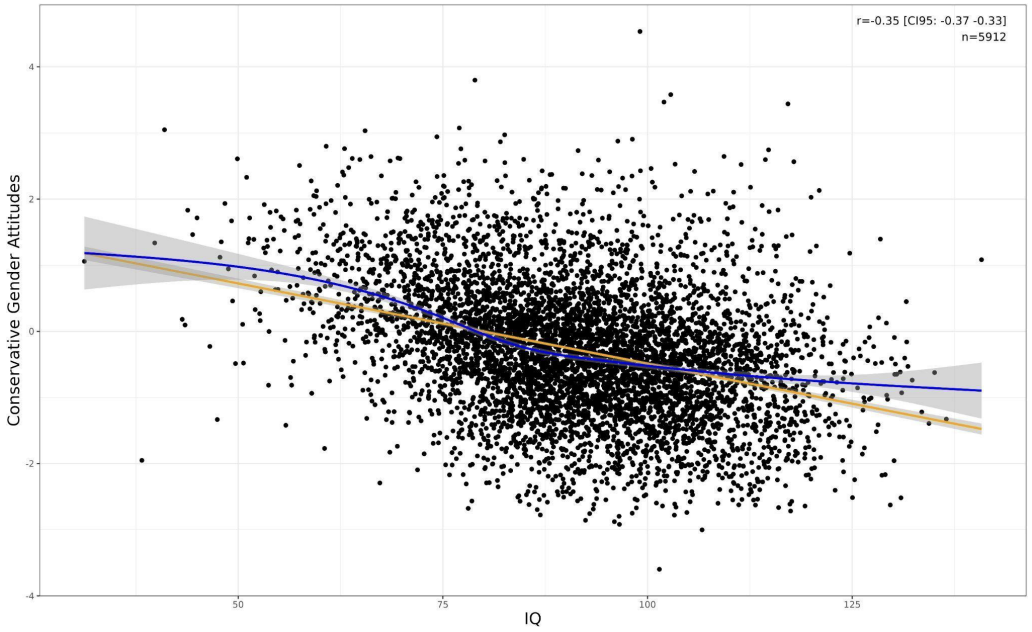

Figure 7: Relationship between intelligence and conservative gender attitudes within women. Yellow line is the linear relationship, blue line is the non-linear relationship based on smoothed conditional means.

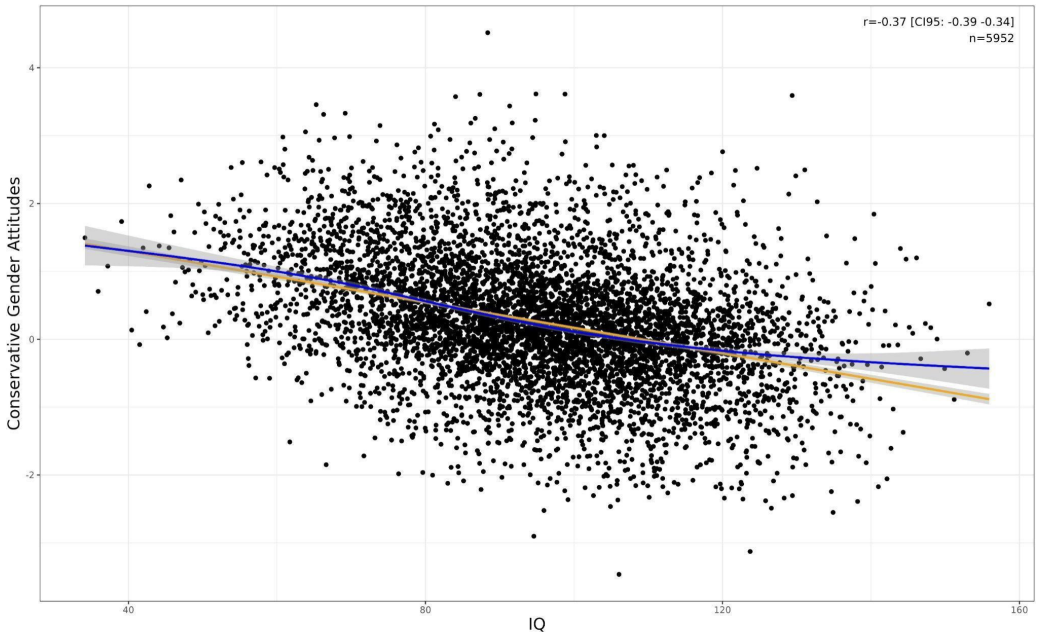

Figure 8: Relationship between intelligence and conservative gender attitudes within men. Yellow line is the linear relationship, black line is the non-linear relationship based on smoothed conditional means.

intelligent people are more likely to believe in novel ideas that are not consistent with the way humans behaved in the past and the behaviours to which they are innately predisposed. Alternatively, perhaps it could be a group-level effect where unintelligent groups are more likely to have gender-segregated behaviour, while more intelligent groups behave in more modern ways, where both men and women attend schools and work. Conventionally, in hunter-gatherer societies, women gathered while men hunted (Bliege Bird & Bird, 2008; Héran et al., 1987). In contrast, men and women work at about the same rates in industrialized societies, although their rate of representation differs by industry. A different hypothesis could be that liberal gender attitudes are a mind virus, that is, a belief that spreads easily but is not necessarily true or functional.

Declaration of interest

None

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Appendix

Table A1: Traditional gender attitudes: Average IQ by response to the question within Whites, 1979.

Response	Question	Average IQ
Strongly disagree	Woman's place is in the home.	103.0
Disagree		100.9
Agree		95.9
Strongly agree		89.8
Not sure/refused		96.6
Strongly disagree	Wife with family has no time for other employment.	102.8
Disagree		101.5
Agree		96.0
Strongly agree		92.4
Not sure/refused		97.1
Strongly disagree	Working wife feels more useful.	103.1
Disagree		100.4
Agree		99.4
Strongly agree		100.2
Not sure/refused		100.9
Strongly disagree	Employment of wives leads to juvenile delinquency	102.9
Disagree		100.5
Agree		97.9
Strongly agree		94.7
Not sure/refused		92.3
Strongly disagree	Inflation necessitates employment of both parents.	102.0
Disagree		103.2
Agree		99.2

Continued on next page

Response	Question	Average IQ
Strongly agree		96.1
Not sure/refused		96.8
Strongly disagree	Traditional husband/wife roles best.	104.2
Disagree		102.3
Agree		97.1
Strongly agree		93.0
Not sure/refused		94.4
Strongly disagree	Men should share housework.	93.9
Disagree		95.4
Agree		100.9
Strongly agree		101.6
Not sure/refused		96.4
Strongly disagree	Women are happier in traditional roles.	103.7
Disagree		102.1
Agree		94.5
Strongly agree		89.3
Not sure/refused		102.2

Table A2: Multiple regression analysis where conservative gender attitudes are the dependent variable. Income is estimated from self-reports from 1979, 1982, 1987, 2004, and 2008; education is assessed with a 1-6 discrete variable (no high school, high school, associate, bachelor, master, PhD/professional). All estimates are standardised, with the exception of the racial variables. Standard error in parenthesis.

Parameter	Estimate
Income	0.029 (0.022)
IQ	-0.29 (0.026)***
Black	-0.45 (0.054)***
Hispanic	-0.051 (0.06)
Degree	-0.17 (0.21)***

Table A3: Multiple regression analysis where support for the Republican Party is the dependent variable. Income is estimated from self-reports from 1979, 1982, 1987, 2004, and 2008; education is assessed with a 1-6 discrete variable (no high school, high school, associate, bachelor, master, PhD/professional). All estimates are standardised, with the exception of the racial variables.

Parameter	Estimate
Income	0.080 (0.19)***
IQ	0.13 (0.024)***
Black	-0.84 (0.049)***
Hispanic	-0.34 (0.055)***
Degree	0.0057 (0.020)