



## A 12-item scale of social conservatism

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**Summary**—Application of a shortened, revised version of Wilson & Patterson's catchphrase method of testing conservative versus liberal values produces a 12-item scale with good internal reliability and a three-factor structure matching that of longer tests. The short scale correlates significantly with other measures of political attitudes and behaviour.

### INTRODUCTION

As argued elsewhere (Henningham, 1995), conservatism scales are unlike other measures of attitudes in that they need a "use by" date. The community's evolving values, as well as changes in fashion and in acceptable behaviour, render scales measuring conservatism-liberalism products of their day and age. This is obvious by considering some of the items in the original "catchphrase" scale of Wilson and Patterson (1968)—jazz, casual living, computer music, beatniks, chaperones and pyjama parties are all unsuitable terms today. Although later revised (Wilson, 1975), many items which are strangely discordant with the late 1990s include women judges, apartheid, co-education and birth control. Even in Kirton's (1978) shortened alternative form of the original 50-item scale, many of the dated items remained, and the original items have continued to be cited in the 1990s (e.g. Truett *et al.*, 1992; Melville & Cornish, 1993).

The wording of items aside, it is doubtful whether a scale as long as 50 items is necessary to tap conservative values, and in field situations where many variables are under examination, reliable shorter scales are always welcome. Kirton (1978) demonstrated acceptable reliability with a 30-item version of Wilson and Patterson's scale. More recently, Collins and Hayes (1993) have proposed a 16-item scale, although their approach differs from that of other scales in the Wilson and Patterson tradition in that a five-point response option (strongly agree to strongly disagree) was offered to respondents.

In the following application of a conservatism scale to an Australian population sample (maintaining the traditional "yes-no" response pattern), a 27-item scale was tested, subsequently reduced to a 12-item scale.

### METHOD

A 27-item scale was devised based on the original scale of Wilson & Patterson, but with modifications suggested by Collins & Hayes (1993), and in particular by Professor Nick Martin of the Queensland Institute for Medical Research (personal communication), plus some original items relevant to current Australian issues. Each item consisted of a single word or short phrase, to which respondents were asked to give a "yes" or "no" response. The scale was balanced, with 13 items embodying attitudes or views considered conservative, while 14 items were liberal. However, the scale did not quite follow the Wilson & Patterson pattern of alternative items being conservative and liberal. The key to the items (shown in Table 1 in the order in which they were asked) is: C-L-C-C-L-C-L-C-L-L-C-C-L-C-L-L-C-C-L-C-C-L-L-L-C-L-L (where "C" indicates a conservative item and "L" a liberal item).

Some of the items used warrant brief explanation. The item "caning young criminals" echoed controversy over such use of corporal punishment in Singapore, and seemed more appropriate than the caning of schoolchildren. "Australia as a republic" reflects a current issue in Australia which has had reverberations in other Commonwealth countries and in Britain itself. "Mabo" refers to a controversial Australian High Court judgment granting native title to Aborigines: the issue is very familiar by this label in Australia, but elsewhere a form of words such as "native land rights" would be appropriate. "Women priests" was seen as a more contemporary item than the original "women judges".

The scale was put to a random sample of 262 Australian adults who were interviewed by telephone as part of a study of media attitudes. Those in the sample proportionately represented Australia's five mainland state capital cities.

Three points were assigned to each "yes" response, 1 point to a "no" response, and two points to an indeterminate response. After calculation of frequencies and other item-based descriptive statistics, items in the scale were recoded in a conservative direction—i.e., scores on liberal items were reversed.

### RESULTS

The 27-item scale functioned satisfactorily as a measure of liberalism versus conservatism, with an alpha reliability of 0.81: validity of the scale was supported with its significant correlation with respondents' declared political leaning (on a five-point scale from very left to very right) ( $r = 0.26$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), while higher conservatism scores were significantly associated with lower levels of education ( $r = -0.36$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), lower socio-economic status ( $r = -0.17$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ) and with being older ( $r = 0.3$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ).

As in other factor analyses of the scale (e.g. Feather, 1975), a wide range of factors emerged—seven factors had eigenvalues greater than 1—although there was support for the concept of a general factor of conservatism: all but seven of the items

Table 1. Loadings on first unrotated factor in 27-item social conservatism scale, and percentage "yes" responses to each item

	Factor Loadings (unrotated)	Percent "yes"
Death penalty	0.37	60.3
Multiculturalism	0.33	78.2
Stiffer jail terms	0.44	79.8
Patriotism	0.27	76.7
Voluntary euthanasia	0.40	70.6
Nuclear power	-0.01	23.7
Working mothers	0.40	80.2
Bible truth	0.48	40.8
Gay rights	0.61	57.3
Conservationists	0.14	84.4
Sabbath observance	0.28	51.9
Royalty	0.58	45.8
Test-tube babies	0.19	55.7
Pre-marital virginity	0.55	29.0
Asian immigration	0.33	50.8
Decriminalised marijuana	0.60	35.9
Church authority	0.44	20.2
Defence spending	0.24	67.9
Legalised abortion	0.64	71.4
Caning young criminals	0.31	44.3
Private schools	0.18	83.2
Condom vending machines	0.57	82.8
Legalised prostitution	0.57	64.9
Australia as a republic	0.63	48.9
Castrating sex offenders	0.22	50.0
Mabo [= Aboriginal land rights]	0.47	43.5
Women priests	0.51	74.5

loaded at higher than 0.3 on the first unrotated factor, while only four loaded at below 0.2. The first factor explained 18.7% of the variance.

The factors emerging were similar to those described by Wilson (1985), Kirton (1978) and Feather (1975), and included the elements of traditional morality (primarily sexual), punitiveness, ethnocentrism, nationalism and religion, plus factors on which only one or two items had major loadings.

By eliminating items which had a poor item-total correlation with the scale (less than 0.2), as well as those which had weak loadings on the first five factors, or which were too "Australian" in focus to be of more general comparative value, a scale of 12 items was established. This scale had a reliability of 0.74, not much less than that of the 27-item scale. The scale (scored in a conservative direction) had a mean of 22.1, median of 21, mode of 20 and standard deviation of 5 ( $n = 262$ ).

The shortened scale's correlation with political leaning was 0.22 ( $P < 0.001$ ), supporting its validity as a reflection of ideology. It significantly distinguished Labor and conservative voters (Labor mean 18.96, s.d. 4.6; Liberal Party [= conservative] mean 22.7, s.d. 5;  $t = 5.2$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). Those who were more conservative as measured by the scale tended to be older ( $r = 0.21$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), less well educated ( $r = -0.31$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), of lower socioeconomic status ( $r = -0.17$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ) and more religious ( $r = 0.34$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). The social conservatism scale correlated significantly with an eight-item measure of economic conservatism (Henningham, 1995) ( $r = 0.41$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ).

A strong general factor was evident: on the first, unrotated factor, items loaded at values between 0.23 and 0.73, and 27.5% of the variance was explained. This reflected Wilson's (1985, p. 35) original finding.

Varimax rotation yielded three factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 (Table 2). The first factor, loaded most heavily on legalised abortion, legalised prostitution, condom vending machines, voluntary euthanasia, pre-marital virginity, church authority and bible truth, with a high loading also on gay rights, can be described as a traditional morality factor, involving the elements of sexual freedom, religion and right to life. The second, which includes multiculturalism and Asian immigration, has an ethnocentric element, but the inclusion also of a high loading on gay rights indicates a broader dimension, indicating intolerance of minorities in general. The third factor indicates punitiveness (death penalty, stiffer jail terms); the inclusion of a strong loading on bible truth in this factor perhaps indicates a punitive element associated with religious fundamentalism.

The factors obtained are similar to those identified by Wilson (1985) as primary factors, or content clusters—religion-puritanism, anti-hedonism, militarism-punitiveness and ethnocentrism-intolerance. Others have identified similar factors (Feather, 1975; Kirton, 1978; Truett *et al.*, 1992; Collins and Hayes, 1993).

Significant intercorrelations occurred between the sub-scales comprising items representing each factor: morality was related to intolerance ( $r = 0.3$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) and to punitiveness ( $r = 0.16$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ), while intolerance was related to punitiveness ( $r = 0.26$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ).

#### DISCUSSION

It has been demonstrated that a simplified, modernised 12-item scale can provide a reliable and valid measure of social conservatism. The scale retains the multi-factorial structure identified in earlier applications of Wilson & Patterson's "catchphrase" approach, as well as providing evidence of a strong general dimension of conservatism versus liberalism. Its brevity makes it useful for field research (and in particular telephone interviews), while the items have relevance at an international level, and especially in western societies.

Table 2. Factor scores on 12-item social conservatism scale (varimax rotation)

	I Conventional morality	II Intolerance	III Punitiveness
Death penalty	-0.06	0.31	0.71
Multiculturalism	0.09	0.73	-0.06
Stiffer jail terms	0.12	0.05	0.76
Voluntary euthanasia	0.61	0.1	-0.23
Bible truth	0.45	-0.2	0.45
Gay rights	0.46	0.55	0.11
Pre-marital virginity	0.59	0.02	0.2
Asian immigration	-0.03	0.71	0.24
Church authority	0.57	-0.17	0.18
Legalised abortion	0.78	0.06	0.04
Condom vending machines	0.64	0.22	0.00
Legalised prostitution	0.71	0.19	0.06
% of variance explained	27.5	13.1	10.2

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