

Utopianism and Politics: Are There Right-Wing Utopians?

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Supplementary Materials: Materials [see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#)]



Abstract

Utopianism – the tendency to engage in thought about an ideal form of society – has been shown to motivate social change and collective action. Yet, we know little about where on the political spectrum utopianism is most prevalent. Here we analysed seven datasets collected in the USA and Australia between 2015 and 2023, to examine the relationship between political orientation and utopian thinking. Results showed that in the United States, utopian thinking was somewhat higher at the liberal and conservative ends of the spectrum and lower in the centre. In Australia, utopian thinking was higher on the left of politics, but a relationship similar to that in the USA appeared to be emerging over time. Our results are inconsistent with the prevalent notion that utopianism is only a left/liberal inclination. We also show evidence for changes in the utopianism-political orientation relationship over time and in response to changes in the political status quo. These findings can inform us as to where on the political spectrum motivation for societal change may come from depending upon the prevailing political landscape, how utopian visions may be implicated in the polarization or extremization of opinion, and challenges that may be faced by those advocating social change.

Keywords

utopia, utopianism, political orientation, social change

Non-Technical Summary

Background

Recent research has shown that thinking about an ideal society – utopianism – is associated with an increase in motivation for social change. We would therefore expect social change movements to reflect the beliefs and values of the kinds of people who are more likely to engage in utopianism. In popular culture and in the theoretical literature, utopianism has been identified with the left or liberal side of politics (sometimes in a pejorative fashion), implying that those on the left would be more likely to imagine alternative ideal forms and society and drive social movements to achieve those ideals (such that those movements will reflect left/liberal values). However, there is no existing evidence that that is indeed the case.

Why was this study done?

This study was done to understand the relationship between political orientation and utopianism in two countries: the United States and Australia. Understanding where on the political spectrum people are more likely to envision an alternative, ideal version of society can tell us about the kinds of social change movements we are likely to observe in contemporary societies.



What did the researchers do and find?

We analysed seven existing datasets collected in the United States and Australia over the past eight years. In both countries, moderate levels of utopianism were observed across the political spectrum. In addition, in the United States utopianism was somewhat higher at the liberal and conservative ends of the spectrum and lower in the centre. In Australia, utopianism was associated more with the left of politics, however, there in more recent datasets, it resembled the curved relationship observed in the United States.

What do these findings mean?

These findings question the assumption that those on the left/liberal end of politics dream of utopian societies, and those on the right/conservative end seek to preserve the status quo. Our findings show that people on both sides of politics engage in utopian thinking, and therefore we are likely to observe movements to change society to be more consistent with those utopian visions from both ends of the political spectrum. These findings suggest that there will be differences over time and between countries in the relationship between utopianism and political orientation. They also suggest challenges for those who are advocating for social change, who may face opposition from both those seeking to maintain the status quo, as well as those driving social change from the opposite side of the political spectrum.

“Radical liberals want to make America a better place, but their utopian social engineering leads, ironically, to greater human suffering.”

Taken from a blurb for David Horowitz’s (2012) *Radicals: Portraits of a Destructive Passion*

“The Greens’ proposed utopia may provide Australians with good teeth, free childcare and uni[versity] but winters will be cold and dark, as billionaire miners, among others, pay the price.”

Steve Price, on Herald Sun Twitter, August 5, 2022

Utopian thinking – the act of imagining an ideal or best possible form of society – has recently emerged as a topic of social psychological research. Existing evidence suggests that engaging in this kind of thinking can elicit motivation for social change and collective action (Badaan et al., 2022; Fernando et al., 2018), and that this motivational function may vary depending upon the content of the utopian vision in question (Fernando et al., 2020). People have also been shown to vary in their propensity to engage in utopian thinking, or *utopianism*, and this predicts both motivation for social change and more escapist thinking (Fernando et al., 2018). Indeed, theorists have suggested utopianism plays a significant role in political processes (e.g., Goodwin & Taylor, 1983). As yet, however, very little is known about how politics may relate to utopianism. As exemplified in the opening quotes, utopianism is often used as a pejorative label for progressive politics – utopianism is stereotypically *seen to be* a left-wing phenomenon. But is it true? Can conservatives be utopian? Here, using data from the United States and Australia we examine how political orientation relates to utopian thinking.

The Social Psychology of Utopian Thinking

We conceptualise utopianism to be the tendency to engage in the act of imagining an ideal form of society (see Fernando et al., 2018) and measure it in terms of both self-reported frequency of engagement in thinking about an ideal society and a positive attitude towards doing so. Conceptually, an ideal society implies that it is different from, and in some sense better, than the society as it currently is, i.e., the status quo. Utopian theorists (e.g., Davis, 1983; Levitas, 1990) have noted that imagining a better society may prompt a rejection of the status quo and an orientation towards social change. This notion has been supported by research showing a negative relationship between utopianism and satisfaction with one’s existing society, as well as a positive relationship between utopianism and social change motivation (Fernando et al., 2018). It follows that, in general, utopianism will trend in the direction away from the status quo.

However, the direction in which utopianism would drive people depends on how they perceive the status quo to be *vis a vis* their ideal society. Those on the left of politics may regard the status quo as too right-leaning and try to change their society in the direction of a left-wing utopia; however, right-wing utopians may find the same status quo

too left-leaning and try to change their society in the direction of a right-wing utopia. Therefore, utopianism, as we define it here, is theoretically agnostic as to the *content* of that utopian vision.

Our research question here is whether utopianism – an orientation to change the status quo in the direction of an ideal society – is *empirically* associated with the political left or right. Understanding the relationship between utopianism and political orientation has the potential to inform us about both constructs. First, we can gain an understanding of the kinds of utopian visions that are likely to be pursued within a given society. If, for example, people on the left of politics engage more in utopian thinking, more left-leaning social movements are likely to catalyse action for change given the observed relationship between utopian thinking and motivation for change (Fernando et al., 2018). Second, we can gain an understanding of the nature of the contemporary political spectrum. For example, if utopianism is equally prevalent across the political spectrum, this would run counter to the viewpoint (reviewed below) that implies those on the right are inclined to support the status quo, rather than to envisage change (see Jost, 2019).

While we can reasonably expect political orientation to be associated with the *content* of utopian visions, there are also strong theoretical and empirical considerations to support the notion that political orientation will be associated with *utopianism*, or the extent to which people will engage in thought about an ideal society at a given time. There are, however, several possibilities as to the nature of this relationship, based on different strands of research and theory on utopianism. Here, we examine three major alternative (although not necessarily mutually exclusive) hypotheses: 1) that utopianism will be more prevalent among liberals/left-wingers, 2) that utopianism will be equally prevalent across the political spectrum, and 3) that utopianism will be higher at either extreme, and lower in the middle, of the political spectrum.

Utopianism on the Left

One hypothesis is that utopianism should be more prevalent on the liberal/left end of the political spectrum. This hypothesis is supported by two lines of reasoning. First is the notion expressed by utopian scholars that by imagining a society which is better than that which pertains at present, utopias represent an implicit or explicit rejection of the status quo (see Davis, 1983). If we follow the traditional characterisation of political conservatives as those who resist social change and seek to preserve present societal arrangements, then they can reasonably be seen to be maintaining the status quo and therefore not engaging in utopian thinking in this way. This distinction has been previously articulated in terms of ‘ideology’ and ‘utopianism’, such that ideologies seek to maintain the status quo and utopias seek change (Mannheim, 1929/1961; see also Kashima & Fernando, 2020).

Consistent with this line of reasoning is social psychological research on political orientation and social change suggesting that those on the conservative/right end of the political spectrum are more likely to hold attitudes that support existing societal arrangements. Research suggests that liberals are more likely to entertain the idea of social change (Jost et al., 2003; Sterling et al., 2019), and a large body of literature has demonstrated a correlation between conservative political orientation and system justification (i.e., the tendency to defend and support the existing social system) (see Jost, 2019). Since Fernando et al. (2018) showed both utopianism and experimentally induced utopian thinking to predict lower system justification, we can reasonably hypothesise that conservatives will be less likely to engage in utopian thinking. Further supporting this notion are findings that conservative attitudes predict participation in collective action to support the prevailing social system and to address perceived moral breakdown in society (Choma et al., 2020). Similarly, system justification is associated with system supporting collective action, but negatively related to system challenging action (Osborne et al., 2019). Thus, conservative actions for social change may be characterised as ‘ideological’ rather than ‘utopian’.

To be clear, this hypothesis is not a claim that those on the right of politics are *never* utopian or experience no desire for social change, but merely that these inclinations are more prevalent on the left (i.e., we would observe higher levels of utopianism on the left than the right). Indeed, Jost (2021), in describing the relationship between political orientation and desire for change, has made a very similar clarification – that it would be absurd to propose that those on the left are always in favour of change, and that those on the right are always opposed. The nature of a given change and its intended destination are clearly important factors in who (along the political spectrum) is likely to support it.

The notion of utopianism as broadly liberal has been incorporated into recent research on the psychology of utopian thinking. Badaan et al. (2022) used a manipulation of utopian thinking which described a society characterised by

several broadly left-aligned traits such as greenness/biodiversity and ‘diversity in people’. Similarly, Basso and Krpan’s (2022) transformative utopian impulse for planetary health entailed elements of social justice, ethical consumption and environmental sustainability usually associated with political left. Thus, when these forms of utopianism are found to be correlated negatively with typically conservative attitudes such as system justification and social dominance orientation, it is not always clear whether it is utopianism per se that is lower among conservatives, or whether utopianism has been conceptualised in such a way that it is more appealing to liberals.

Utopianism as Universal

The second hypothesis is that utopian thinking is equally prevalent across the political spectrum. This hypothesis is primarily driven by theorising on the nature of utopian thinking and utopian visions, but also receives some support from research on motivation for social change. Some utopian theorists have characterised utopias as, essentially, any desirable alternative versions of society (see Levitas, 1990; Sargent, 1994). This view has been accompanied by a critique of Mannheim’s aforementioned distinction between utopia and ideology (see Levitas, 1990) based on the difficulty of identifying the extent to which a view of an alternative version of society can be said to support the status quo. Indeed, Mannheim, in his typology of utopias included the ‘conservative’ utopia which emerged as a response to the liberal utopia and served to protect the dominant class (by re-enacting the past and preserving tradition). If an alternative ideal version of society is being envisioned, and represents a transformation of the existing order, it is not clear why that vision should not be considered utopian, even if that change is somewhat status quo supporting (e.g., consolidating more wealth and power in the hands of the powerful) or reflects a desire to return to earlier ways of living. Under such a characterisation, there is no reason why utopianism should only occur on the left of politics.

Sargent (1994) has gone as far as to suggest that utopianism is a ‘universal human phenomenon’, based on the notion that all people will experience dissatisfaction with their way of living and dream of social change which overcomes this. Although those on the left and right may have very different ideals for society, they may be similar in their desire to seek and to imagine alternative societal arrangements. A historical example supporting this case has been noted by Sargent (1982) who observed that many prominent utopian visions (e.g., depictions of a Golden Age or the Noble Savage) are essentially conservative in that they seek to return to some (imagined) earlier form of society.

A similar, modern utopian mentality has been described by Zygmunt Bauman as ‘retrotopia’ (Bauman, 2017). So called retrotopians express their dissatisfaction or disillusionment with the notion of ‘progress’ via a nostalgic longing for a revival of a lost or abandoned golden age. For example, this retrotopian impulse has been identified as being embodied in the Brexit movement in the United Kingdom – a revival of Britain’s perceived former greatness (Beaumont, 2017). This retrotopian mentality is strongly reminiscent of collective nostalgia (a yearning for an ingroup’s past), which has been shown to be correlated with conservative political orientation (see Lammers, 2023, for a review). Like retrotopianism, collective nostalgia in the UK has been shown to predict a desire to leave the European Union (Loughnane et al., 2024). Thus, although the nature of the desired change may differ across the political spectrum, the desire for (or consideration of) societal change to approach an ideal form of society may be universal.

The universalism of utopian thinking is also consistent with research findings which suggest a more complex relationship between political conservatism and defence of the status quo (e.g., system justification). Given the observed negative association between utopianism and system justification (Fernando et al., 2018), we have reasoned that we would likely observe greater utopianism where system justification is typically low (i.e., among the left/liberals). However, while those on the right of politics do tend to exhibit greater levels of system justification than those on the left, this is not a perfect correlation. System justifying attitudes are distributed across the political spectrum and can show complex relationships with support for political parties or candidates (see e.g., Azevedo et al., 2017).

This potential universalism is also in line with findings that conservatives showed no more fear of societal change than liberals (Proch et al., 2019), as well as research and theory supporting a distinction between progressive social change (as pursued by liberals) and reactionary social change (as pursued by conservatives) (see Becker, 2020). Reactionary social change is characterised by a desire to return to the past but is equally unconcerned with supporting the existing system or system stability. Indeed, it has been proposed that any political action can be described along two dimensions: 1) who its intended beneficiaries are and 2) whether its goal is to change or maintain the status quo (Thomas & Osborne, 2022). Under this view, action to change or support the status quo can come from the left or right.

Thus, we may expect people across the political spectrum to engage in utopian thinking; it is just the particular ideal societies envisioned that are different. In fact, given the prominent role of nostalgia in appeals made by right-wing populist political parties and candidates (Lammers & Baldwin, 2020), a desirable (real or imagined) past society may facilitate utopianism on the right by providing a clearer utopian vision to aspire to.

Utopianism at the Extremes

The third hypothesis is that utopianism will be higher at the extreme ends of the left-right political spectrum. This viewpoint draws on the observed negative relationship between utopianism and system justification, and other variables related to utopian thinking. Caricati (2019), and Liekefett and Becker (2022), have both shown evidence of declining system justification at the political extremes in European samples. Since utopianism is associated with lower system justification, we may expect this relationship to be reversed such that utopianism is higher at the extremes of the political spectrum. Similarly, Thorisdottir et al. (2007) showed greater levels of openness to experience at the political extremes in Western European countries, and, indeed, greater openness at the *right* end of the political spectrum in Eastern Europe. Emerging research has shown openness to be positively correlated with utopianism (Nguyen, 2021). It should be noted, however, that other research has shown political liberalism to be associated with openness (see Carney et al., 2008; Gerber et al., 2011), and right-wing authoritarianism to be predicted by low openness (see Duckitt & Sibley, 2010).

An additional consideration in favour of utopianism at the extremes is the characterisation by several thinkers of extreme political views or movements as utopian. For example, A. Dirk Moses (2023) has proposed the notion of ‘permanent security’ – states striving to make themselves invulnerable to threat – as underlying many forms of violence including genocide. This ideal of absolute safety is described as ‘deeply utopian’ (Moses, 2023, p. 26). Similarly, Staub (2001) has noted how organizations such as the Nazis or the Khmer Rouge have been motivated by ideals or visions of how to organize society. Thus, even though these ideals may be extreme, or have been pursued in abhorrent ways, they are nevertheless motivated by some vision for the way society should be and are in that sense utopian.

National and Historical Differences

Engagement in utopian thinking is also likely affected by the prevailing societal conditions in particular countries at particular times. If we consider utopian thinking to be an expression of desire for a different way of being (Levitas, 1990), then it is likely dependent upon what the status quo is at a given time and place. Indeed, previous research has found system justification (i.e., the tendency to justify the status quo) to vary by country in its relationship to political orientation (Vargas-Salfate et al., 2018, see also Jost, 2019). Similarly, Proch et al. (2019) found, among German participants, no general tendency for social change among liberals, but rather that conservatives’ or liberals’ acceptance of social change was driven by their (dis)approval of the status quo on a given issue (see also Becker, 2020). National identification has also been found to mediate the relationship between political orientation and system justification among Spanish participants (Moscato et al., 2021). Although national identification tends to be higher among conservatives, this suggests the possibility that the relationship between political orientation and system justification may change depending upon prevailing political conditions. For example, national identification may decrease among conservatives if a country has had a liberal government for some time. Thus, if defence of the status quo (and its relationship to political orientation) may change by time and place, then we can reasonably hypothesise that desire for a different way of being may be similarly affected.

With specific reference to current research, we hypothesise a difference in the relationship between utopianism and political orientation between the United States and Australia. During the time at which the data for this study were collected, the United States elected a right-wing populist President, Donald Trump. Right-wing populism has been characterised as a reaction against cultural change, including criticism of the prevailing political system and political elites, as well as a nostalgic vision of the nation’s glorious past (Jay et al., 2019; Obradović et al., 2020), and these themes were noticeable in Trump’s campaigning (e.g., ‘make America great again’, ‘drain the swamp’) (Homolar & Scholz, 2019). Given the entailed criticism of the existing political system and the positing of a nostalgic alternative vision of society, it is fair to characterise this kind of political movement as utopian. Indeed, supporters of Donald Trump were shown to

be less satisfied with the general state of society than Hillary Clinton supporters (Azevedo et al., 2017). For this reason, we would expect utopianism in the United States to be associated with the third hypothesis described above: utopianism at the political extremes. That is, greater desire to imagine an alternative ideal society at either end of the political spectrum, and less among those with more centrist political attitudes.

By contrast, there has not been a comparable populist right movement in Australia during this period. The political party most often identified as right-wing populist in Australia, Pauline Hanson's One Nation (see Cover, 2020; Kenny & Bizumic, 2024), receives only a small percentage of the vote (less than 5% at the 2022 Federal election) and currently holds two of the 76 seats in the Senate (and none of the 151 seats in the House of Representatives). Australia has also had an extended period of conservative government (from 2013 to 2022) during much of the period of the present research, suggesting that those on the political right would be more inclined to support the status quo than to imagine societal transformation, and that those on the left would be more dissatisfied with the status quo and potentially dream of an alternative. For this reason, we hypothesise a relationship consistent with the first hypothesis – utopianism on the left – in Australia.

Antiutopianism

In Fernando et al.'s (2018) research, they showed evidence of a negative attitude towards utopian thinking – characterised by the perceived danger or negative consequences of dreaming of an ideal society. Notably, this did not represent the opposite pole of utopianism, with only small to moderate negative correlations between the two constructs (approximately .30), suggesting that utopianism and antiutopianism are somewhat different attitudes and may be endorsed simultaneously. In the literature on utopianism, the antiutopian position is typically identified with 1) the colloquial usage of 'utopian' to mean impractical or unrealistic, and 2) critiques of utopianism (see e.g., Karl Popper) on the grounds that attempts to achieve a utopian society may lead to totalitarianism (see Levitas, 1990).

One perspective on antiutopianism is that it is driven by the political status quo. When the political status quo is consistent with one's political orientation, one may adopt a more antiutopian stance because of the risk of upsetting that desirable state. Thus, for example, when there is a more conservative government, those on the right of politics may express greater antiutopianism as the pursuit of further change may disrupt the prevailing (preferable) political conditions. Thus, in the United States, we may expect a change in antiutopianism over time, consistent with the shift from a more liberal to conservative presidency. In Australia, which had a conservative government for most of the period of study, we may expect more antiutopianism on the right.

However, based on the measures used by Fernando et al. (2018) and the typical nature of the antiutopian position we can hypothesise about an additional or alternative relationship between antiutopianism and political orientation. One possibility is to regard antiutopianism as a fear of utopian change. Given the (small) observed correlation between antiutopianism and system justification (.05 ~ .29 in Fernando et al., 2018), we may expect antiutopianism to be expressed most by those who are not only interested in maintaining the status quo, but also *against* social change, i.e., reactionary (Thomas & Osborne, 2022). Depending on which of the above hypotheses about political orientation and utopianism one takes, antiutopianism may be associated with the conservative side of politics (utopianism on the left), the political centre (utopianism at the extremes), or across the political spectrum (utopianism as universal).

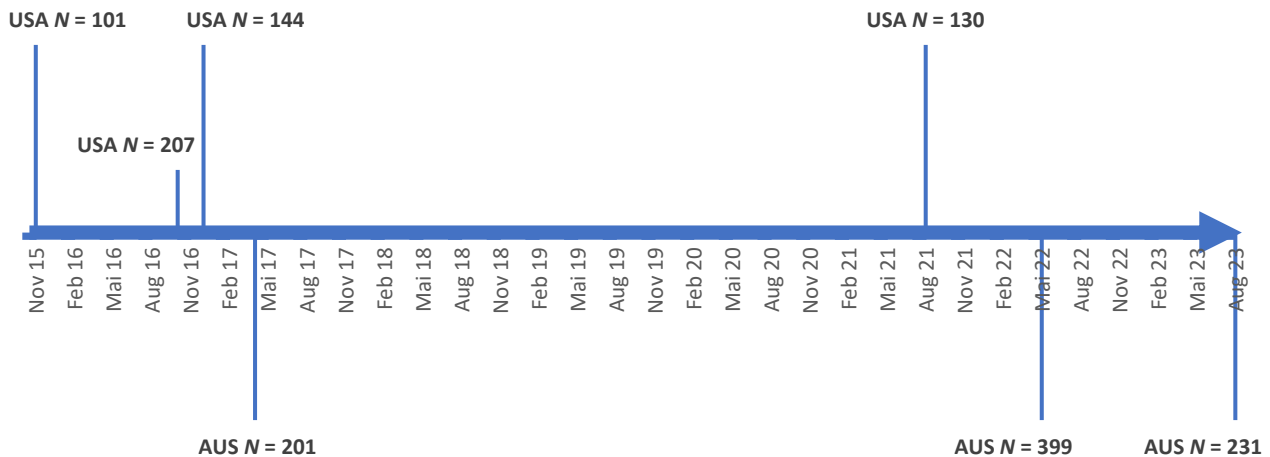
Current Study

To understand the relationship between utopianism and political orientation, we analysed several datasets collected over the past approximately eight years which contained measures of political orientation and utopianism (see Fernando et al., 2018). These were collected with participant samples from the United States and Australia, allowing for a further examination of cross-national differences in the association between political orientation and utopianism. All datasets were collected using online participant recruitment (see Table 1 for sources). Table 1 also contains a breakdown of the demographic characteristics of each sample and the distribution of each sample on the political orientation measure. A timeline of the collection of each of the seven datasets is displayed in Figure 1. All datasets were collected as part of other projects investigating various aspects of utopian thinking and utopianism, but none of the data have previously been analysed using the political orientation variable¹. The datasets collected around November 2016 were collected to

coincide with the Presidential election of that year, and the Australian data collected in May 2022 were collected to coincide with the 2022 Australian Federal election.

Figure 1

Timeline of Data Collection



Method

Participants

As noted above, all participants were residents of either Australia or the United States. A total of 1,413 participants were recruited across seven datasets (see Figure 1), 582 from the United States, and 831 from Australia. Table 1 contains participant age and gender information by dataset, as well as the source for participant recruitment and descriptive statistic for the political orientation variable.

Political orientation was measured using a single, 7-point scale from -3 = very liberal to 3 = very conservative in the American samples, and -3 = very left-wing to 3 = very right-wing in the Australian samples. The difference in scale anchors reflects the way that the political spectrum is typically referred to in those countries.

Utopianism and Antiutopianism were assessed using Fernando et al.'s (2018) 8-item measure (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Four items assessed Utopianism (e.g., 'I often think about what an ideal society might look like') and four items assessed Antiutopianism (e.g., 'Dreaming about an ideal society could be dangerous'). See Supplementary Materials for the complete scales.

The Time at which the data was collected was coded separately for the samples from the United States and from Australia. For the United States, the datasets were coded as -1 (prior to the nomination/election of Donald Trump), 0 (around the 2016 election) and 1 (after the Trump presidency). This coding reflects the possible influence (described above) of the right-wing populist movement in the United States. For Australia, Time was coded as a simple chronological ordering of the datasets (numbered 1 to 3).

1) Data from November 2015 United States dataset has previously been published in Fernando et al. (2018) Functions of utopia: How utopian thinking motivates societal engagement, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 44(5), 779-792. No other datasets have yet been published.

Table 1*Participant Demographics by Dataset*

Variable	USA Nov 15	USA Oct 16	USA Dec 16	AUS Apr 17	USA Aug 21	AUS May 22	AUS Aug 23
Participant Source	mTurk	mTurk	mTurk	Qualtrics	Prolific	Prolific	Prolific
Age <i>M (SD)</i>	34.73 (10.59)	34.63 (9.50)	35.35 (10.00)	37.36 (11.51)	26.22 (8.02)	35.96 (12.86)	33.42 (10.52)
Gender Identity							
Male	53	104	63	97	64	158	107
Female	48	103	81	104	66	237	119
Other						4	5
Political Orientation Count (%)							
-3 (lib/left)	17 (16.8)	32 (15.5)	15 (10.4)	14 (7.0)	6 (4.6)	41 (10.3)	27 (11.7)
-2	30 (29.7)	61 (29.5)	50 (34.7)	28 (13.9)	25 (19.2)	127 (31.8)	66 (28.6)
-1	8 (7.9)	28 (13.5)	14 (9.7)	20 (10.0)	23 (17.7)	80 (20.1)	46 (19.9)
0	23 (22.8)	37 (17.9)	31 (21.5)	83 (41.3)	12 (9.2)	102 (25.6)	62 (26.8)
1	10 (9.9)	16 (7.7)	11 (7.6)	24 (11.9)	9 (6.9)	28 (7.0)	19 (8.2)
2	9 (8.9)	24 (11.6)	18 (12.5)	25 (12.4)	29 (22.3)	18 (4.5)	11 (4.8)
3 (con/right)	4 (4.0)	9 (4.3)	5 (3.5)	7 (3.5)	26 (20.0)	3 (0.8)	0 (0)
Total	101	207	144	201	130	399	231

Results

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS v. 29. The means and standard deviations for all study variables, and correlations between political orientation and utopianism/antiutopianism for each dataset are displayed in Table 2. These data show relatively consistent mean scores on political orientation, utopianism and antiutopianism across the datasets, as well as a consistent small to moderate negative correlation between utopianism and antiutopianism. Reliabilities for the utopianism scale were between $\alpha = .77$ and $\alpha = .87$, and reliabilities for antiutopianism scale were between $\alpha = .73$ and $\alpha = .83$ across the seven datasets. A sensitivity power analysis for a two-tailed bivariate correlation showed that our smallest sample ($N = 101$) was sufficient to detect a correlation of $r = .27$, if $\alpha = .05$ and $1 - \beta = .80$.

Our main analysis was designed to test the three hypotheses described in the introduction, and whether the relationship between political orientation and (anti)utopianism has changed over time. Thus, separately for the United States and for Australia, we regressed utopianism and antiutopianism on political orientation, time, the quadratic term for political orientation, and the interactions between time and political orientation/political orientation, as well as controlling for age and gender (see Table 3). A sensitivity power analysis using G*Power version 3.1.9.7 (Faul et al., 2007) for a regression analysis involving seven predictor variables showed that our samples in both countries were sufficient to detect an R^2 of $\leq .02$ (where $\alpha = .05$, power = .80). Given that the analysis entailed interaction terms (and the required sample size to detect interactions is likely to be larger than for main effects; Gelman, 2018) we conducted an additional power analysis using the InteractionPowerR Shiny App (Baranger et al., 2023). With the smaller of our two samples ($N = 582$), an α -level of 0.05, assuming small correlations between ($r = 0.10$) between the two predictor variables, and between the predictor variables and the DV, the study is estimated to have a power of .80 to detect an interaction effect of .115.

Table 2

Means and Correlations Between Study Variables by Dataset

	Political Orientation	Utopianism	Antiutopianism		Political Orientation	Utopianism	Antiutopianism
USA 2015				Australia 2017			
	-0.78 (1.74)				-0.11 (1.49)		
Utopianism	-.20*	4.47 (1.28)		Utopianism	-.10	4.35 (1.26)	
Antiutopianism	.16	-.28**	2.67 (1.26)	Antiutopianism	-.01	-.23**	3.76 (1.28)
USA 2016a				Australia 2022			
	-0.75 (1.76)				-0.96 (1.34)		
Utopianism	-.14*	4.42 (1.23)		Utopianism	-.33**	4.80 (1.19)	
Antiutopianism	.06	-.32**	2.81 (1.32)	Antiutopianism	.26**	-.51**	2.94 (1.22)
USA 2016b				Australia 2023			
	-0.67 (1.70)				-0.94 (1.34)		
Utopianism	.11	4.63 (1.28)		Utopianism	-.19**	4.08 (1.15)	
Antiutopianism	.00	-.37**	2.50 (1.12)	Antiutopianism	.26**	-.33**	3.10 (1.23)
USA 2021							
	0.42 (2.00)						
Utopianism	.11	4.68 (1.33)					
Antiutopianism	-.08	-.37**	3.31 (1.17)				

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 3

Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Utopianism and Antiutopianism by Country

Variable	United States		Australia	
	Utopianism B (β)	Antiutopianism B (β)	Utopianism B (β)	Antiutopianism B (β)
Age	.004 (.03)	-.03 (-.23)***	-.004 (-.04)	-.12 (-.11)***
Gender	.09 (.04)	-.16 (-.06)	.24 (.10)*	-.13 (-.05)
Political orientation (PO)	-.06 (-.08)	.05 (.07)	-.14 (-.16)*	.11 (.13)*
Time	.11 (.05)	.22 (.11)*	<.001 (<.001)	-.17 (-.10)*
PO ²	.08 (.21)***	-.03 (-.09)	-.03 (-.07)	.01 (.02)
Time x PO	.06 (.05)	-.06 (-.06)	-.06 (-.09)	.09 (.11)*
Time x PO ²	.06 (.05)	.03 (.03)	.05 (.12)*	-.06 (-.14)*
<i>F</i>	4.40***	9.00***	11.83***	13.45***
<i>R</i> ²	.05	.10	.09	.10

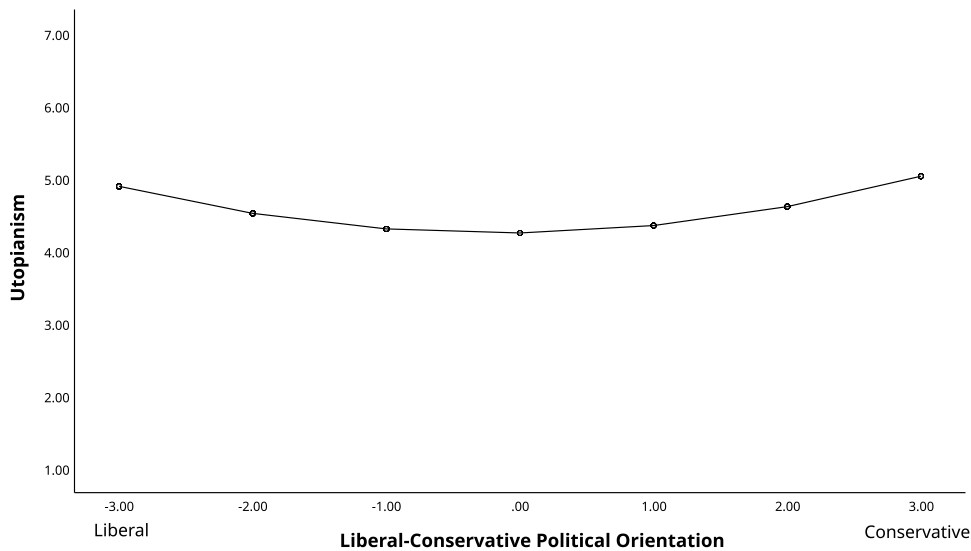
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Support for the first hypothesis (utopianism on the left) would be evidenced by political orientation as a negative predictor of utopianism (since left/liberal was coded as lower on the scale). The second hypothesis (utopianism as universal) would be supported by no relationship between political orientation and utopianism. The third hypothesis (utopianism at the extremes) would be supported by a quadratic relationship between political orientation and utopianism.

These analyses show a difference in the relationship between political orientation and both utopianism and antiutopianism between the United States and Australia. In the United States, we observed a quadratic relationship between political orientation and utopianism in line with the hypothesis of utopianism at the extremes (as shown in Figure 2). Utopianism was somewhat higher at either end of the political spectrum than in the middle.

Figure 2

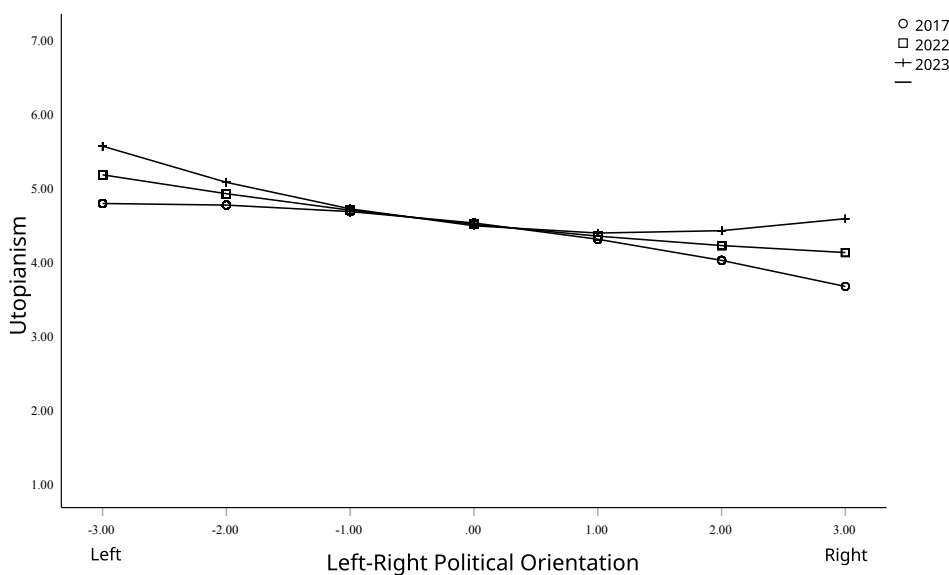
Relationship Between Utopianism and Political Orientation, United States



In Australia, the predictors of utopianism were more complex. First, we observed an effect of gender, such that utopianism was higher among women. There was also a significant association between (left) political orientation and utopianism, as well as an interaction between the quadratic political orientation term and time. As Figure 3 shows, utopianism in Australia was generally higher at the left end of the political spectrum, but there was evidence of some increase in utopianism on the right (similar to that in the United States) at the later time points. Since mean utopianism was typically around the middle of the scale, we thus have some support for all three hypotheses: Hypothesis 1 (utopianism on the left), Hypothesis 2 (utopianism as universal) and Hypothesis 3 (utopianism at the extremes).

Figure 3

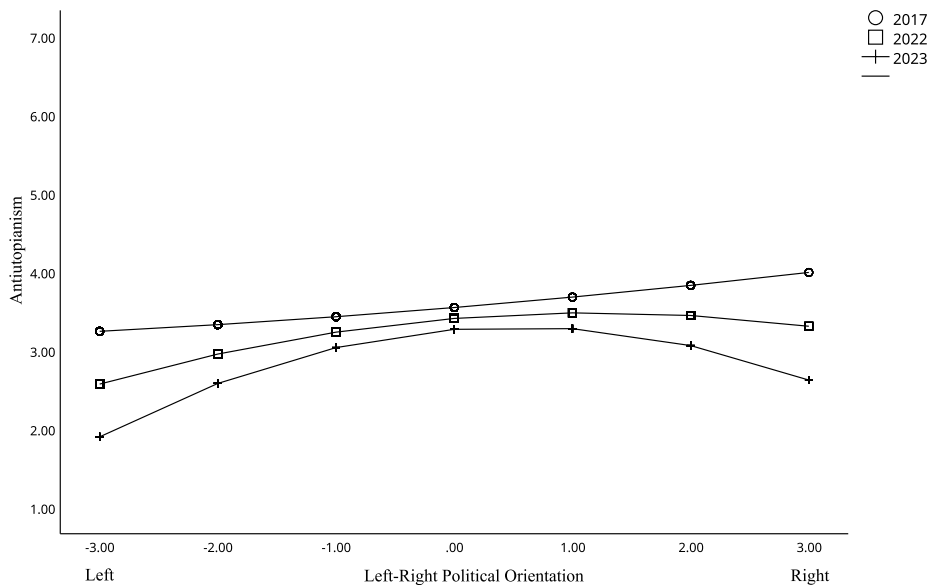
Relationship Between Utopianism and Political Orientation by Timepoint, Australia



Antiutopianism was predicted in both samples by younger age, but otherwise the predictors differed between countries. In the United States, antiutopianism was positively predicted by time (i.e., was more prevalent in later samples) and was unrelated to political orientation. By contrast, in Australia, anti-utopianism was negatively predicted by time (i.e., was more prevalent in earlier samples) and showed roughly the opposite relationship to political orientation to that observed for utopianism. That is, antiutopianism was generally associated with right political orientation, but showed a more curved relationship at later time points such that anti-utopianism was higher in the centre and lower at the extremes (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Relationship Between Antiutopianism and Political Orientation by Timepoint, Australia



Discussion

Emerging social psychological research on the topic of utopian thinking suggests that engaging in thought about an ideal society can increase motivation for social change (see Badaan et al., 2022; Fernando et al., 2018, 2020). Given this potential motivating function, it is important to investigate who among society is most likely to engage in utopian thinking, which may in turn affect the kinds of social change movements we are likely to observe and the kinds of social change messaging that are most likely to be effective. Here we investigated the relationship between political orientation and utopianism across two countries. Our investigation was guided by three alternative hypotheses: 1) utopianism on the left, 2) utopianism as universal and 3) utopianism at the extremes. We also wished to understand the contextual nature of this relationship, and so considered possible changes in that relationship by time and place.

Across the samples from Australia and the United States, our results show some level of support for all three hypotheses, as well as the contextual effects of time and place. In both samples, mean levels of utopianism were at least moderate across the political spectrum, suggesting that utopianism was not strongly rejected, or antiutopianism was not strongly endorsed, by any political orientation. This result is consistent with the thinking of theorists such as Levitas (1990), Sargent (1994) and others who contend that dreams of an alternative society from both the left and right can be considered utopian, although we do not show evidence that utopianism is *equally prevalent* across the political spectrum.

In the United States, we also observed a small quadratic effect such that utopianism was somewhat higher at the left and right extremes of the political spectrum and slightly lower in the political centre. For the United States at least, this suggests a rejection of Hypothesis 1 (utopianism on the left) and is consistent with research showing lower system justification at the political extremes (Caricati, 2019; Thorisdottir et al., 2007). We note, however, that this quadratic effect was small in size, and we did not observe extremely strong endorsement of utopianism at the extremes. Nevertheless, this result is worthy of consideration, especially if we begin from the assumptions guiding Hypothesis 1 that the political left is more likely to seek change and the political right more likely to support the status quo. Our result, showing approximately equal levels of utopianism at either extreme of the political spectrum, may be consistent with our view that the populist movement in the United States (which culminated in the election of Donald Trump as president) represents a trend towards a form of utopianism on the right. This movement appears to be utopian in the sense that it opposes the status quo (i.e., the current political system and elites) and proposes an alternative vision of society, which in this case appeals to the past (e.g., Make America Great Again). One explanation may be related to growing political polarization in the United States, which has seen an increase in ideological (Pew Research Center, 2014) and affective polarization (the proportion of individuals who hold highly negative opinions of the opposing party; Boxell et al., 2024; Iyengar et al., 2019) over recent decades. Greater polarization may be reflected in those on both sides of the political spectrum desiring greater social change to entrench their political ideals and move further from their opposition. In this sense, we may be observing utopianism as a reaction to a strongly negative opinion of the opposing worldview. This echoes Levitas (1990), who argued that the conservative utopia emerged in response to the liberal utopia.

By contrast, in Australia, utopianism was generally associated with left-wing political orientation (Hypothesis 1). There was, however, some evidence that the relationship between political orientation and utopianism may be changing. While utopianism remained higher on the left over time, there was some evidence of an increase in utopianism at the right end of the spectrum in later datasets (although as in the United States, this quadratic effect was small in size and should not be overinterpreted). One explanation for this difference between the United States and Australia is that the kind of political change (i.e., a rise of right-wing populism and growing polarization) that we have observed in the United States (and elsewhere, see Liekefett & Becker, 2022) has not occurred in Australia. Consistent with this, a recent study of affective polarization (Boxell et al., 2024) showed no increase in affective polarization in Australia from 1913 to 2019, unlike that observed in the United States.

The evidence of a slight uptick in utopianism on the right in Australia, suggests that those on the political right may be shifting somewhat from defending the status quo to reimagining an alternative conservative form of Australian society. Although right-wing populist political parties in Australia receive a relatively small percentage of the vote in Australia, a shift towards right-wing populism may have been masked by 1) the difficulty of minor parties winning seats in the Australian electoral system (due to mechanisms like preferential voting) and 2) the appropriation of various populist positions by the more mainstream conservative party in Australia (the Liberal Party; see Moffitt, 2017). An alternative explanation for this trend is that, after a significant period of conservative government, in 2022 Australia elected a (more left-leaning) Labor government. Thus, more right-wing citizens who would previously have supported the status quo, may now have turned to reimagining an ideal, conservative society. This latter explanation raises the possibility that shifts in the relationship between political orientation and utopianism follow social change or changes of government, perhaps predicted by individuals' subjective perceptions of the discrepancy between their ideal society and the political status quo. For example, a more conservative citizen may express greater utopianism (i.e., desire to imagine societal change) during periods where liberal politics is ascendant in their society, but a decline in utopianism after a more conservative shift in the status quo (and therefore a greater preference for the status quo).

Throughout the preceding section we have broadly compared and contrasted the effects observed in the Australian and United States samples; however, we wish to note two important caveats. First, as culturally similar Anglophone countries we have a reasonable expectation that the meaning of the utopianism and antiutopianism measures will be sufficiently similar that a comparison between countries is meaningful. These items have not, to our knowledge, been subject to analysis of cross-cultural validity, so this remains an assumption on our part. Second, our comparison is a descriptive one based on the patterns of results obtained from two separate analyses. That is, we have not conducted a direct statistical comparison (using, for example, an additional interaction term) of the two countries.

Underlying much of our interpretation above is the notion that utopianism implies dissatisfaction with and desire to change the status quo; however, the notion of ‘the status quo’ requires clarification. We suggest that the status quo is in the eyes of the beholder, such that people of different political persuasions may hold differing perceptions of what the status quo is at any given time, and that a negative evaluation of whatever ‘status quo’ people perceive is likely to be associated with greater utopianism. Some may think of the status quo in the short-term, as a snapshot of society as people perceive it currently exists. For example, left-wing utopians experiencing dissatisfaction with the election of a right-leaning government. Alternatively, the status quo may represent a society’s longer-term trend or structure. For example, some right-wing utopians may regard long-term trends towards social liberalisation or the existence of a powerful liberal ‘elite’ as a dissatisfying status quo. These differing notions have, however, not been thoroughly articulated or investigated in extant research, and may shed further light on the interrelationship between utopianism and political orientation.

Antiutopianism

Our findings for antiutopianism underscore the notion that utopianism and antiutopianism should not simply be considered opposite ends of a continuum. We observed only moderate negative correlations between these two constructs across our datasets, and the predictors of antiutopianism were quite different to those of utopianism. In Australia, the relationship between antiutopianism and political orientation was broadly the inverse of that for utopianism, consistent with the hypothesis that antiutopianism may be a reaction against utopian social change, rather than a preference for the status quo. In the United States, however, antiutopianism was unrelated to political orientation.

Second, we observed that antiutopianism was higher among the young, and appeared to increase over time in the United States, but to decrease for Australians. We interpret the latter finding cautiously for two reasons: 1) we did not have representative samples or measurement across even time points, and 2) the effects were relatively small. Nevertheless, we can speculate that changes in the world and society in recent times may have elicited a degree of caution about societal change. The United States experienced a turbulent period in its politics over the time of data collection, including events such as the January 6, 2021 Capitol attack, which may have made citizens aware of the possible negative consequences of enacting dramatic social change. By contrast, Australia’s change of government after nearly a decade may have made social change seem more feasible and desirable over time. We also observed a decline in antiutopianism on the far right of the spectrum in Australia at later time points (post-election). Since a more left-leaning government was elected, this is further evidence of potential shifts in utopianism/antiutopianism to reflect the political status quo. That is, antiutopianism may decrease following political defeat or social change that is inconsistent with one’s political preferences.

Regarding the effect of age, other societal events such as extreme weather events driven by climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic may have affected the extent to which young people believe they can dream of an ideal for their future. In this sense, antiutopianism may be an expression of a lack of faith in social change to achieve a better future.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our present investigation was limited to some degree by the irregularity of data collection which meant that we may not have been able to accurately detect some effects of time on the relationship between utopianism and political orientation. We were also limited by the unrepresentativeness of our samples; for example, several of our samples contained a larger number of those on the left of politics than the right, limiting our capacity to make very strong inferences about the distribution of utopianism across the political spectrum. This also constrained our capacity to make strong inferences about some of the quadratic effects we observed. Some of our samples contained very few participants at the conservative end of the spectrum where the quadratic effect would suggest an upturn in utopianism (or downturn, in the case of antiutopianism). Replicating these effects with samples containing a more representative number of right-leaning participants would lend greater support to the notion of utopianism at the political extremes. More representative samples would also allow us to better understand how utopianism may be distributed by demographic variables such as age. In addition, data collection tied to specific events in societies (e.g., changes of government) would

inform us as to some of the societal level factors which may predict changes in the utopianism-political orientation relationship.

We were also limited here by our collection of data in only very culturally similar, Anglophone nations. Even then, we observed some between-country differences, and we may expect to observe more if we were to extend our investigation across countries and cultures. For example, system justification (typically negatively associated with utopianism) has shown to be associated with liberalism rather than conservatism in France (see Jost, 2019), suggesting that utopianism may be higher on the political right. It would appear from our results (especially in Australia) that the prevailing political conditions in a country may play a role in the relationship between political orientation and utopianism.

Finally, future research may begin to examine political orientation in finer detail. Here we used a very simple (albeit widely-used) left-right self-placement measure of political orientation, however, this kind of measurement has been subject to critique on the basis that it relies heavily on the associations participants have with the terms 'left', 'right', 'conservative' and 'liberal' (see Bauer et al., 2017). The simplicity of a single dimension may also not capture nuances in people's political self-identification. For example, Leftists appear to be emerging as a distinct political identification that is not merely a more extreme form of liberalism and, pertinent to our current investigation, is defined in part by opposition to the status quo and desire for social change (Flores-Robles et al., 2025). A finer-grained approach could be taken by examining utopianism's relationship with constructs previously used to characterise political orientation such as social dominance orientation, right wing authoritarianism and national identification (see Vargas-Salfate et al., 2018, for an example involving system justification).

Another future direction in examining political attitudes is to consider the construct of political *interest*. Those who are more politically interested may be more likely to score highly on measures of utopianism, having a more positive attitude towards thinking about a good society. Evidence suggests that political engagement is higher at the extremes and lower at the centre of the liberal-conservative spectrum (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Pew Research Center, 2021), so (assuming political interest and utopianism are correlated) this would be consistent with higher utopianism at the extremes. We note, however, that we did not only observe higher utopianism at the extremes, but also some evidence for utopianism across the political spectrum, and utopianism on the left of politics (in Australia), so it is unlikely political interest could account entirely for our results.

Implications

The results presented here suggest a complex relationship between utopianism and political orientation, including evidence of variation by country and over time. Thus, the implications of these findings should be interpreted in their national context. In the United States, we observed (1) moderate levels of utopianism across the political spectrum, and (2) somewhat higher utopianism at the political extremes than among moderates, such that an approximately equal level of utopianism was observed at either end of the political spectrum. This result is a clear rejection of the notion that utopianism and the desire for social change would be present only on the left of the political spectrum. Instead, these results suggest that (1) there may be diverse utopian visions across the political spectrum, and in this sense, the political vectors directed towards different utopian visions may be highly fragmented, and (2) those pursuing left-leaning political agendas may not only be resisted by those who favour the status quo, but also by those toward the right-wing end of the spectrum who agitate for change in a highly divergent, potentially opposite, direction. Nevertheless, although those at either end of the political spectrum are likely to have different change goals, they need not inevitably conflict. Left and right utopians may find a common cause, for instance, the eradication of corruption by the political elites.

A further possibility is that relatively high levels of utopianism on either end of the political spectrum may be associated with the extremization of opinion, contributing to greater levels of political polarization. Although this is highly speculative and further research is needed, we provide a perspective to facilitate future research. US political elites are said to be highly divided between the Republicans and Democrats (e.g., Fiorina et al., 2008; Lelkes, 2016), while it is still debated whether the general public are as polarized as they seem (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Lelkes, 2016). However, there is evidence that the public opinions held by those identified as Republicans and Democrats have diverged over the years (e.g., Westfall et al., 2015) and there is a mutual animosity between them (e.g., Iyengar et

al., 2019). It is possible that such extremization of opinions may be associated with utopian visions on both sides of politics. In particular, the rise of right-wing utopianism may have fuelled a further extremization of the right. Arguably, US president Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" is an expression of utopianism, which aspires to restore the Golden Age of the United States. There are also well-known examples of utopian texts of the right such as *The Turner Diaries*, which has inspired the white power movement (Belew, 2018). Such right-wing utopian visions may have provided a backdrop for the January 16 Capitol attack in the United States (Dugan & Fisher, 2023). Whether, in fact, utopianism and utopian visions contribute to greater extremization and polarization of opinion is an area for further research.

In Australia, by contrast, results largely favoured a more traditional reading of the left-right political spectrum, with consistently higher utopianism on the left of politics. However, the observation of a shift toward slightly higher utopianism on the right over time raises questions as to what may be driving such changes. One possibility is the beginning of a shift in the political culture such that Australia may come to more closely resemble the United States, with utopianism distributed more equally across politics. If this interpretation is correct, the trend toward greater utopianism on the right of politics in Australia may be a precursor to greater polarization of the Australian polity. Alternatively, the relationship between utopianism and political orientation is responsive to political events, such as the most recent Australian election. This latter explanation suggests that the kinds of challenges facing political activists may shift with major political events. In this case, an uptick in right-wing utopianism (i.e., an assertion of an alternative, right-wing ideal for society) in response to a political defeat (i.e., the election of a centre-left government). This interpretation would imply a changing environment for those advocating for more left-wing causes, such that the nature of resistance against those campaigns may shift from status quo maintenance to reactionary social change.

Conclusion

We began this paper with the question of whether there could be conservative utopians. Our answer, having examined data from the United States and Australia, is yes. While left-wing political projects are typically labelled 'utopian' (often in a pejorative sense), and utopianism was more prominent on the left in Australia, we have shown evidence of utopianism on the right. Thus, citizens on both sides of the political spectrum may be motivated to realise a version of society that differs from what they regard as the status quo.

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Data Availability: The data reported in this paper can be made available to colleagues upon request to the corresponding author.

Supplementary Materials

The Supplementary Materials contain the full text of the survey items for the utopianism/antiutopianism measure (for access, see Fernando et al., 2025S).

Index of Supplementary Materials

Fernando, J. W., Jacobs, R., Wilson, M., & Kashima, Y. (2025S). *Supplementary materials to "Utopianism and politics: Are there right-wing utopians?"* [Full text of survey items]. PsychOpen GOLD. <https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.16149>

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