



MASTERARBEIT | MASTER'S THESIS

Titel | Title

Lopsided Empathy on the Political Spectrum: The Role of
Biased Beliefs and the Need to Belong in Early Adolescence

verfasst von | submitted by
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angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science (MSc)

Wien | Vienna, 2025

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme code as it appears on the
student record sheet:

UA 066 840

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme as it appears on the student
record sheet:

Masterstudium Psychologie

Betreut von | Supervisor:

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Lopsided Empathy on the Political Spectrum: The Role of Biased Beliefs and the Need to Belong in Early Adolescence

The last decades saw a shift in the political landscape all around the world. With the rise of populism, politicians bent the norms of how much emotion a politician can show in public and how much ridiculousness one can incorporate into their speeches and not lose total credibility among their voters (Lecheler, 2024). Populism is defined as ideology that considers society to be separated into two antagonistic groups: *the pure people* and *the corrupt elite*. According to the populist idea, there is a very distinct line between these two groups and the argument is that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people, not orchestrated by the elite (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). The concept of populism is inherently neither left nor right in the political sense (Gilles, 2023). Right-wing populism extends the dichotomy between the people and the elite with the addition of a third entity: *the outsiders*, referring to people from other countries, illegal immigrants and political refugees but also other minorities like the LGBTQ+ community (Wahl, 2023). Often depicted as dangerous, lazy and uncooperative in political campaigns by right-wing politicians and media, in reality these are marginalized groups struggling to find their place in society (Finley & Esposito, 2020). For example: A systematic review by Blackmore and colleagues from 2020 found high and persistent rates of depression and posttraumatic stress disorder among refugees and asylum seekers. Given the hardships that people underrepresented in today's society have to endure, the logical reaction of other citizens would be empathetic, not hateful, behavior.

The political realm in Europe today is experiencing a significant trend of increasing success of nationalist right-wing parties. Notably, seven countries have far-right parties as part of their government: Croatia, the Czech Republic, Finland, Italy, Hungary, Slovakia and the Netherlands (Green, 2024). Regarding the European Union (EU) and Parliament elections, far-right parties usually support sceptic views regarding the EU, partly because of EU immigration politics (Van Kessel, 2025).

Austria is no exception when it comes to right-wing voting. Results from the Eurobarometer from autumn 2024 showed that only 60 % of the population were satisfied about the way democracy works in Austria (European Commission, 2024). Throughout 2024, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) – the prominent populist right-wing party in the country – benefitted significantly in the EU parliamentary election as well as national parliamentary

and state elections in Styria and Vorarlberg. On all political levels, the FPÖ registered an increase of mandates (Praprotnik, 2025).

Results of election surveys in Austria showed that immigration was the most important issue amongst voters across national and European levels (ISA/Foresight 2024a; ISA/Foresight 2024b). At the same time, big part of the FPÖ agenda is comprised of an anti-immigration stance on the national level as well as a critical position towards EU integration policies on the European level (Praprotnik, 2025). FPÖ-voters are highly skeptical of the concept of multiculturalism and perceive the diversification of society as threatening (Krings, 2024).

Regarding treatment of asylum seekers, lower trait empathy was found to be associated with higher prejudice whilst higher levels of empathy seem to enhance the support of integrative policies (Anderson & Gerace, 2025). Therefore, it is to be determined if empathy levels vary between people with different political backgrounds and what other factors influence the empathic experience.

Empathy

The concept of empathy is very popular among researchers from social and personality psychology, as well as neuroscience, clinical psychology, health professions, ethology and more domains (Hall & Schwartz, 2019). Although, or maybe because of the huge interest in the topic across multiple domains, conceptual and operational definitions vary. As social psychologist Daniel Batson put it: “Psychologists are noted for using terms loosely, but in our use of empathy we have outdone ourselves” (Batson et al., 1987, p. 19). This lack of clarity and coherence ultimately endangers advancement in the field (Hall et al., 2020).

Quesque and colleagues define empathy as “the ability to experience others’ affective states, while maintaining the distinction from one’s own affective state” (2024, p.2). This condensed definition highlights the affective and cognitive component of the empathy concept. Experiencing others’ emotions, understanding and sharing them is called *affective sharing*. This process is partly attributed to the brains Mirror Neuron system (Silani, 2024). According to the Perception-Action Model by Preston and DeWaal (2002), the perception of an object’s state automatically activates representations related to the state of the object in a subject. Unless inhibited, the representation activates the autonomic and somatic responses associated with the perceived object. This phenomenon, by other researchers called *experience sharing* happens outside of awareness, reflexively (Zaki, 2014). In an illustrating

experiment, the observation of disgusted faces and the smelling of disgusting odorants activated the same group of brain structures, the anterior insula and to a lesser extent the anterior cingulate cortex (Wicker et al., 2003). The cognitive component of empathy is described as *Self-Other distinction* and is characterized by knowledge about the origin of the emotion and the consciousness about the process of contagion (Silani, 2024).

Even though some researchers claim *prosocial motivation* in the form of an intention to respond compassionately to another person's distress to be a third component of empathy (Zaki & Ochsner, 2012), it was not deemed a true aspect of empathy in the stricter sense for the current study. Studies found that empathy is strongly linked to prosocial behavior (De Waal, 2008; Vaish et al., 2009). Yet, it is important to distinguish empathy from related phenomena like sympathy or compassion. Lamm and Silani (2014) stress the difference by putting focus on empathy being the process of "copying" an object's emotional state unaffected by the observer, whilst maintaining Self-Other distinction. Within this understanding of empathy, processes like prosocial thoughts and behavior should be considered consequences of empathy.

Affective and Cognitive Empathy

Even though scholars have not fully agreed on a single definition of empathy, the two-dimensionality of an affective and cognitive property of the phenomenon echoes in most of the research (Frick & Kemp, 2021). *Affective empathy* describes the vicarious experience of emotions consistent with those of others (Reniers et al., 2011). This contagious process represents a rudimentary evolutionarily process. It happens automatic, like a reflex (Blair, 2005). Methodically, affective empathy can be measured by using self-reported arousal and emotional contagion, behavioral measures of allocation and attentional orienting as well as measuring psychophysiological autonomic reactivity and neural activity (Blair, 2007; Ciucci et al., 2018; De Wied et al., 2010).

Cognitive empathy on the other hand refers to the processing of information in the mind rather than feeling emotions (Reniers et al., 2011). This understanding of others' psychological states includes perspective-taking and recognizing and identifying others' emotions. It therefore requires complex cognitive functions, such as distinguishing between one's own and another person's mental state and neurocognitive skills to accurately label emotional expressions (Decety & Jackson, 2004).

Following Lamm and Silani's (2014) interpretation of empathy, the occurrence of affective empathy alone is not a sufficient empathic state. They use the term *affective empathy* synonymously with *emotional contagion* and declare it a distinct concept, for which no self-awareness is needed. Affective empathy is understood as an antecedent of empathy but is not regarded as experiencing true empathy. Pure empathy (*feeling with/as*) is therefore more than just emotional contagion through others but without additional feelings originating in the observer in the sense of sympathy or compassion (*feeling for*): it enables feeling as accurately as possible what others are feeling through the combination of affective sharing and the cognitive skill to distinguish emotions and their origin.

Trait and State Empathy

Empathy can be seen as a relatively stable *trait* over time. This also means that some individuals have more and others less capacity to show empathy and therefore differ in their ability to empathize (Cuff et al., 2016; De Kemp et al., 2007). There is evidence pointing towards anatomical and genetic differences, as well as developmental and dispositional factors like education and gender playing a role in how much empathy a person can experience (Banissy et al., 2012; Derntl et al., 2010; Eisenberg & Morris, 2001; Thomas et al., 1997). Research on autistic and psychopathic people found that these groups show deficits in their ability to empathize, further nurturing the notion of differences in trait empathy between certain groups (Cuff et al., 2016; Frick & Kemp, 2021).

On the other hand, researchers found different situational contexts to play an important role in influencing empathy, proposing empathy to be depending on the *state* of the observer and the situational context (Cuff et al., 2016). This will be further concentrated on in the following section.

Empathy therefore seems to be whether a pure trait or state phenomenon but rather a result of the interaction between trait and state influences.

Biased Empathy

As established, empathy is not a universal and independent trait but, as research suggests, should be examined in context. Even though empathy can be triggered automatic at times, situational factors, like the number of observers which perceive a target's suffering or social aspects, like in- or out-group membership, play a huge role in how much empathy the observer is experiencing (Cuff et al., 2016; Zaki, 2014). Empathy can be seen as a personally desirable trait or subject to social desirability. Zaki (2014) proposes a motivational model of

empathy with different motivators and inhibitors regarding empathy. He lists material costs, suffering, and interference with competition as factors discouraging empathy. Affiliation, positive affect and social desirability on the other hand work as encouraging factors.

So, people do not empathize with everybody in the same way. This leads to an uneven distribution of empathy, which could benefit some individuals and groups at the expense of others (Bloom, 2017). The term *biased empathy* therefore describes the fluctuation of empathy depending on the situational context.

This bias is partly explained through one of the most important theories in social psychology: *Social Identity Theory* by Tajfel and Turner (1979). The core idea of this theory is that people often think of themselves and others as group members rather than unique individuals in social situations. As Ellemers and Haslam (2011) summarize, social identity is credited to be the underlying force influencing intergroup behavior. This influence is believed to be so massive that intergroup behavior differs qualitatively from interpersonal behavior in a distinct way. Social Identity Theory further highlights the social context as a key determinant of behavior and self-identity. But it is not only one's own identity that is influenced by group membership. When people are categorized into groups, their individual traits tend to be neglected and instead, group members are perceived in terms of characteristic group features.

Peoples' actions and responses in social contexts can therefore be traced back to subjective beliefs about different groups and the relations between them, influencing behavior to the point where it is vastly depending on perceiving others as part of *us* or *them* (Ellemers & Haslam, 2011). When observing biased empathy, group affiliation is one of the strongest factors affecting the occurrence and intensity of empathy. People tend to treat others from their in-group better and often discriminate against out-group members (Rand et al., 2008). Gutsell and Inzlicht (2012) describe an *empathy gap*: People struggle to recognize out-group members' emotions and show less empathy towards them. In extreme cases, empathy disappears completely, and in-group members even enjoy out-group members' suffering (Cikara & Van Bavel, 2014). Neuroscientists observed that subjects in fMRI studies showed more neural activation in pain circuits when observing painful penetration of the face of ethnic in-group members than of out-group members (Xu et al., 2009). The same activation difference was found watching people from in- and out-groups in emotionally painful and distressing situations (Mathur et al., 2010). Results of a study by Pratto and Glasford (2008) indicated that one is less likely to value the lives of out-group members as much as those of

in-group members. But even trivial group characteristics are sufficient to produce similar effects. In a much-replicated experiment on the phenomenon of in-group favoritism, researchers found that participants divided into two groups either preferring paintings by Paul Klee or by Wassily Kandinsky, subsequently allocated monetary rewards in favor of fellow Klee or Kandinsky fans (Yamagishi & Mifune, 2008).

Political ideology exceeds the individual belief realm and often acts as a common basis for social groups (Hasson et al., 2018). Party affiliation can therefore create a strong in-group feeling. The next paragraph will investigate the increase of dislike towards political out-groups amongst partisans in recent years.

Affective Polarization

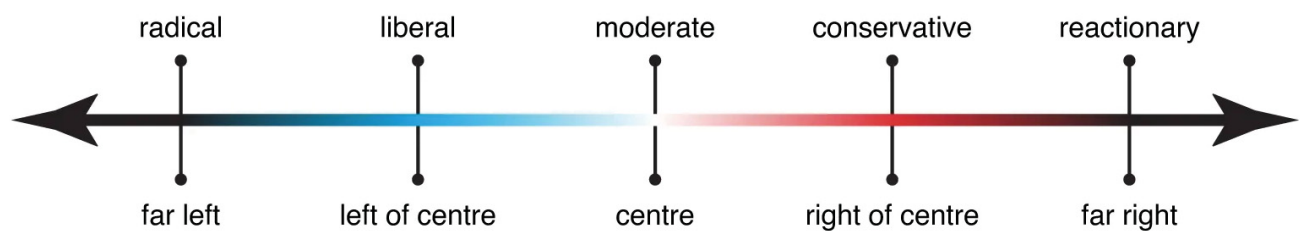
This millennial's political landscape is characterized by a deep division between ideologies, further hardening the border between political groups (Jones, 2013). In the context of political differences, Hasson and colleagues' findings from 2018 suggest that both liberals and conservatives show more empathy towards political in-group members and non-political groups than towards political out-group members. In the United States, studies found an increase of disliking between Republicans and Democrats over the last decades (Iyengar et al., 2019). Conclusively, Americans are becoming less and less open to the idea of having out-party friends or a romantic partner with whom they do not share their vote (Huber & Malhotra, 2017; Iyengar et al., 2012). This phenomenon, the gap in sympathy and affect towards supporters of opposing political parties is called *affective polarization*. Research originated in the US after 15 years of tumultuous political events, with growing animosity between the Republican and Democratic party (Wagner, 2024). This inter-party hostility increased on the individual as well as on the public level (Iyengar et al., 2012). In 2025, affective polarization in the US is even worse than it was in the years before. In the heated climate after the assassination of right-wing activist Charlie Kirk, the president of the United States, Donald Trump, unambiguously stated his feelings towards political opponents at Kirk's memorial service: "I hate my opponents, and I don't want the best for them." (The Guardian, 2025, para. 1).

Still, most of the field focuses on the two-party system of the US but newer research also investigates affective polarization in multi-party systems like the EU, with the increase of work in the field growing almost exponentially (Röllicke, 2023). Figure 1 illustrates the political spectrum: In Europe the terminology of *left* and *right* political camps is commonly

used as dichotomous system when discussing politics, in the US it is *liberal* and *conservative*. Evidence suggests affective polarization to be responsible for many contemporary problems of democratic functioning in Europe and a partial cause for the emerging support of new illiberal parties, ultimately endangering democratic systems at their core (Torcal & Comellas, 2022).

Figure 1

Visualization of the Political Spectrum: Left-Right, Liberal-Conservative



Note. From *Political Spectrum*, by Stephen Eldridge, 2024, Encyclopædia Britannica (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-spectrum>). Copyright 2024 by Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Empathy on the Political Spectrum

The concept of empathy has not only fascinated researchers but also gained rising interest in popular culture and the public domain, often regarding behavior of politicians (Hall et al., 2020). President Trump, for example, was called out by the media during the coronavirus pandemic for displaying a “total failure of empathy in presidential leadership” (Gerson, 2020, para. 1) and his “lack of any heartfelt expression of empathy” (Bunch, 2020, para. 3). A more recent article claims right-wing Christians in America are “waging war on empathy” (Wong, 2025, para. 1) together with Trump and Elon Musk, with the latter stating the following: “The fundamental weakness of western civilization is empathy” (Wong, 2025, para. 4). New York’s Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo on the other hand was portrayed as “empathy in action” (Cillizza, 2020, para. 7) and New Zealand’s Democratic Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s leadership style described as “focused on empathy” (Friedman, 2020, para. 1). Although media outlets like CNN, The Guardian and The Atlantic may be slightly biased towards the left, these examples hint towards conservative politicians like Donald Trump as being seen as unempathetic, while liberal politicians are perceived as more empathetic.

Political ideologies represent socially shared systems of beliefs about the ideal arrangement of society and the appropriative path to achieve this arrangement (Jost et al., 2009). The terminology of categorizing politics into *left* and *right* dates back to the first French National Assembly of 1789 where representatives of the common people were seated left of the presiding officer and the noble attendants to the right (McAdams et al., 2008). The classification into liberal-left and conservative-right still echoes those two seating sections on a value level in today's political landscape: The liberal belief system endorses concern for others' well-being on the societal level and is characterized through self-transcendental values, like benevolence and universalism on the individual level. These values focus on equality and tolerance as well as social welfare. The conservative belief set on the other hand endorses conservation and self-enhancement, emphasizing values like social dominance and power (Hasson et al., 2018). Conservative ideology is motivated to preserve the existing order, prioritizing safety over risk and is therefore wary of change and uncertainty (Floyd, 2017). While different values are linked to different political ideologies, they are also connected to the motivation to feel empathy. Empathy is assumed to promote the attainment of social goals, such as social welfare and equality (Hasson et al., 2018). Further, social hierarchy – an important value in conservative ideology – has been linked to lower empathy (Waytz et al., 2016). As a study by Tamir and her team from 2016 suggests, people who value the welfare of others show stronger motivation to empathize in general than people who put less value on others' welfare and higher value on power.

Multiple studies have explored the relationship between political ideology and empathy. Researchers found a negative correlation between higher levels of empathy and tolerance for political activities by exclusionary groups (Harell et al., 2021). Conclusively, much of the current research strongly suggests that liberals are more empathetic than conservatives (Harell et al., 2021; Hasson et al., 2018; Wagaman & Segal, 2014). Liberalism was also found to be positively correlated to self-reported empathy (Iyer et al., 2012; McCue & Gopoian, 2000). This seems to only make sense: Conservatives are generally seen less social in the public eye than liberals. A study by Farwell and Weiner from 2000 investigated the differences in and stereotypes about generosity towards responsible and nonresponsible persons between the two political camps. Liberal as well as conservative participants stated that they perceive conservatives as somewhat heartless. Both groups also expected liberals to be more helpful than conservatives regardless of the help-seeking person's responsibility.

Beyond expectations and stereotypes, conservatives actually showed less generosity towards responsible persons, while generosity towards nonresponsible persons did not differ between liberals and conservatives. Furthermore, they found that people – regardless of their party affiliation – did not see themselves as representative of their own ideological group but claimed positive characteristics typically attributed to either liberals or conservatives regarding their own character.

Although the majority of research supports the finding that conservatives show less empathy than liberals, the results in the field are not entirely conclusive. In a study by Waytz and his team from 2016, the researchers were not able to reproduce the observed empathetic gap between left and right, while a study by Casey and co-authors (2023) even reported conservatives showing more empathy towards suffering political opponents than liberals. Nail and his team (2009) investigated liberals' and conservatives' behavior when exposed to imminent threat: They found that liberals showed more conservative political and psychological behavior and attitudes under threatening conditions, proposing political conservatism to be a form of motivated social cognition that serves an ego-defensive function against threats and anxiety.

Even though findings are ambiguous, it is clear that political in-group membership inhibits empathy towards members of the political out-group. In times of enhanced affective polarization, a high bias in cross-partisan empathy is very alarming. If empathy towards suffering people is reduced simply because of their opposing political membership, respectful communication with not suffering cross-partisans as well as general attempts to understand the other side are compromised all the more (Casey et al., 2023).

Empathy Beliefs

Besides the influence of group membership, the current study is focused on the personal desirability of empathy. People generally tend to view empathy as a positive character trait (Schuman et al., 2014). The term *empathy beliefs* is used to describe perspectives on and personal attitudes regarding empathy. Holding positive empathy beliefs is positively related to higher empathy levels and prosocial attitudes. Negative empathy beliefs are conclusively linked to lower levels of empathy. Table 1 illustrates examples of positive and negative empathy beliefs (Hasson et al., 2022; Santos et al., 2022; Schumann et al., 2014).

Table 1*Examples of Positive and Negative Empathy Beliefs*

Positive empathy beliefs	Negative empathy beliefs
necessary	unnecessary
meaningful	useless
desirable	undesirable

Note. Adjectives describing the value that people with positive/negative empathy beliefs attach to empathy.

The concept of empathy beliefs is therefore an attempt to explain the underlying encouraging or inhibiting processes that influence if and with which intensity empathy occurs. An example for the differences in perceived importance of empathy as a value is provided by the results of a study conducted by McAdams and his team (2008) in which they examined life-narrative interviews with politically active, devoutly Christian midlife adults. Participants were asked to describe the most important episodes in their life regarding the development of self-identity. Analysis found that liberals tend to highlight autobiographical stories about characters learning to open themselves up to new experiences and developing empathy, while conservatives told stories in which the protagonists learned the value of personal responsibility and self-discipline and stories about authorities enforcing strict rules.

Empathy beliefs can heavily depend on the target of empathy and result in *biased empathy beliefs*, analogous to biased empathy. In the political context, a study by Hasson and co-authors from 2018 investigated empathy-differences between liberals and conservatives in the US, Israel and Germany. The results indicated that liberals want to show more empathy in comparison to conservatives, which ties into the self-image of liberals as being concerned for others' well-being. Nevertheless, both groups wanted to show less empathy towards out-group than towards in-group members or a neutral, nonpolitical group. Another illustrating example of how undesirable partisans perceive the concept of showing empathy towards political opponents comes in the form of a comment of one participant in a study on cross-party empathy: "It's like trying to remain civil to someone who just stabbed you." (Casey et al., 2023, p. 699).

Therefore, results in the research field on empathy could be flawed due to the targets of empathy used. Brandt and colleagues (2014) propose that these targets often stem from minority groups that hold similar worldviews and core values as liberals and oppose

conservative values. In their study, liberals consequently showed less tolerance towards targets with opposing worldviews, like antiabortionists, than conservatives. This further highlights the importance to include the meaning of the target when investigating empathy.

Development of Empathy

As the current study's sample consists of students aged between 8 and 14 years old, it is important to take the development of empathy during childhood and adolescence into consideration.

As McDonald and Messinger (2011) summarize, the affective aspect of empathy develops first. Babies show emotional contagion from the moment they are born, most notably in the form of reflexive crying when they are exposed to the sound of other infants crying. These affective responses to the distress of others are the first hints of empathy in infants. Reflexive crying supports the idea of a fundamental biological predisposition for interest and responsivity towards negative emotions of others. This emotional contagion can be overwhelming for newborn infants and result in self-comforting to reduce their own distress. As the infant develops perspective taking, self-other differentiation and emotional regulation during the second year of life, the empathic concern shifts from the concern for themselves to the capability of concern for others. The quality of prosocial behavior as well as empathic concern increases between the age of 14–24 months and continues throughout the third year of life, when infants start to show a wide range of empathy related behavior such as expressing facial and verbal concern as reaction to others' distress (Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992). Children then develop cognitive empathy during pre-school age (4–5 years old). The development of cognitive empathy is closely linked to the *Theory of Mind* as both emerge within the same developmental period and Theory of Mind arguably serves as foundation for cognitive empathy (Bensalah et al., 2016). Theory of Mind describes the cognitive capacity to attribute a mental state to the self and others (Goldman, 2012). Being able to understand the perspective of others is essential to fully and successfully identify with another's experience. Developmental progress in language capabilities further supports the emergence of cognitive empathy. The cognitive component expands empathic feelings beyond affective sharing and shifts towards an other-focused experience, enabling more precise helping behavior based on the conceptualization of the other's experience rather than the own (McDonald & Messinger, 2011).

Adolescence is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as the “phase of life between childhood and adulthood, from ages 10 to 19” (WHO, 2025, para. 1). In a study by Schwenck and colleagues from 2012 on children aged 7–17, older age groups consistently showed higher cognitive and affective empathy. Another study by Dorris and colleagues (2022), conducted at the Glasgow Science Center and counting over 4500 participants found a significant relation between cognitive empathy and age. In this study, participants under 18 and over 75 exhibited the poorest cognitive empathy skills, with late adolescence and early adulthood marking a critical transitional phase where cognitive empathy matures to the level that it stays for the rest of adult life. This ties into recent advances in the research field of Theory of Mind that not only consider the development of Theory of Mind during infancy and childhood but over the course of the whole lifespan. For example, in a study by Dumontheil and her team from 2010 on participants aged 7–27, performance of Theory of Mind tasks improved even between late adolescence and adulthood.

Development of Political Ideology

Early childhood temperament and proto-political sensitivities and attitudes which children form by the time they enter pre-school are believed to be the first antecedents of political ideology (Fraley et al., 2012; Nasie et al., 2021). Children then develop curiosity and start to collect basic knowledge about politics during the first years of elementary school (Haug, 2017). Around the age of 12, attitudes towards certain cultural issues like economic redistribution or multiculturalism begin to form that later influence which political ideology better fits the self-identity (Rekker et al., 2017).

Adolescence is considered to be a crucial period in a person’s life, representing a formative phase in which psychosocial domains like personality and identity further mature (Meeus et al., 2010). Part of this transitional and character-building phase includes the task of becoming an engaged citizen in the community (Crocetti et al., 2012). Developing a political stance as an adolescent is a central aspect of this process and research suggests that these emerging political views continue to significantly characterize political ideology throughout adult life (Rekker et al., 2015). There are many social factors that can influence young peoples’ political engagement, including one’s family, peer group, education, neighborhood, youth sections of political parties, community and religious organizations and associations, mass media and popular music (Barrett & Pachi, 2019). Further, demographic factors, like gender or the socio-economic status play an important role in helping to either promote or

hinder political youth engagement (Barrett & Pachi, 2019). Research in the field also identified the early caregiving environment as an important predictor for political ideology in late adolescence. Results of a study by Fraley and colleagues (2012) for example suggest that different parenting styles promote different resulting political ideologies in adolescents. They found that children who were subject to an authoritarian parenting style were more likely to develop a conservative political viewpoint, while children whose parents approached an egalitarian parenting style were more likely to develop liberal ideology. This falls in line with findings from personality psychology and political science about the deeper intra-personal differences between people with conservative and liberal ideology: Conservative people tend to be more fearful, rigid, dogmatic and respectful of authority while being less tolerant of ambiguity and less open to experience than liberals (Fraley et al., 2012; Kerry & Murray, 2018). Political ideology therefore slowly develops as part of one's own identity since the early childhood and can be seen as a reflection of fundamental underlying differences in character which are strongly influenced by early experiences like parenting style.

It is to be noted that adolescents, as they are struggling to find their own identity, also tend to explore different worldviews and identities along the way. Being uncertain about self-identity also influences political participation, as younger citizens' voting patterns are more sensitive to temporary ideological trends than those of older citizens (Oscarsson & Persson, 2010). A study by Rekker and colleagues (2019) suggests that teenagers show increasing consistency in their political identification from the age of 13 onwards and found that until 25, the most formative year of adolescents for their political identification is the 18th year of life.

Because the younger generation will eventually decide the political course of the future once they reach voting age, it is important to study how they form a political identity, as youth engagement and satisfaction with democracy among adolescents is in decline (IP-PAD, 2023). In recent times, forms of political engagement shifted from institutional participation like party membership or voting to more unconventional activities like petitions or demonstrations (Loader et al., 2014). This trend towards protest activities is especially prevalent among younger citizens and is theorized to be associated with a higher need to belong amongst young people (Renström et al., 2021).

Need to Belong

Humans have a deep desire for interpersonal attachment. The *need to belong* to some sort of social group is as fundamental to the psychological well-being as hunger or thirst is to

the physical well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The need to belong is defined as the desire for stable, positive and frequent social interactions, which is mainly fulfilled through acceptance from others (Williams & Sommer, 1997). Having a high need to belong therefore means to attribute an important role to others' opinions in relation to oneself (Morrison & Matthes, 2011). It is important to note that it is the perception of insufficient social connections and their quality rather than the frequency of social contacts that can lead to decreased well-being and health problems (Allen & Kern, 2017; Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014). This phenomenon is called loneliness and originates from a feeling of discrepancy between desired and experienced social connectedness and inclusion (Stephoe et al., 2013).

Depriving human beings of their social connections has grave consequences: People who experience social exclusion show reduced sensitivity to pain, dampened emotionality and lower levels of empathy (Baumeister, 2007). A study of Chinese students by Shu-Liang and colleagues (2020) found empathy to be a mediator on the relationship of the need to belong and friendship satisfaction. They suggest empathy is stronger in students with higher need to belong because they want to satisfy their need to belong through further strengthening their relationships with others. Other studies found that students with higher empathy skills reported a higher sense of belonging to their school (Batanova & Loukas, 2014; Veldin & Kozina, 2022). Regarding the negative association between loneliness and collaboration effort in the workplace, the need to belong was identified as having a moderating role (Du et al., 2022).

People with a high need to belong generally aspire to behave in a way that is viewed positively by their own group (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This also applies to political activity, as people with high desire for belongingness are more likely to increase their political engagement when they observe increased political activity by their peers (Bäck et al., 2021). Weak social belonging was found to be associated with increased probability to vote for a populist, especially right-wing party (Langenkamp & Bienstman, 2022). Experiencing loneliness increases feelings of anxiety and perception of vulnerability to threat (Cacioppo et al., 2013). These feelings mimic typical characteristics of modern conservative ideology: Conservatives exhibit higher xenophobia, a lack of tolerance for distress and a preference for authoritarianism (Floyd, 2017). Conclusively, studies found a positive association between loneliness and conservative ideology (Floyd, 2017; Langenkamp & Bienstman, 2022).

As Allen and Kern (2017) summarize, the sense of belonging is an important part of growing up. When children enter the adolescent age, the need to belong becomes an even more fundamental factor of healthy development. Adolescents tend to spend more time with peers and less with their family and parents to fulfill the task of finding their own identity. It is a time of experimentation to find out where the individual fits among their social context of friends, classmates and society at large. Building strong friendships contributes to a young person's well-being and nurtures their sense of belonging. Teenagers in mid-adolescence are an at-risk group for clinical psychological disorders like depression and anxiety. In this critical period, a feeling of disconnectedness from others can result in maladaptive psychosocial adjustment. So, the need to belong – and its fulfillment – is an important factor for healthy development.

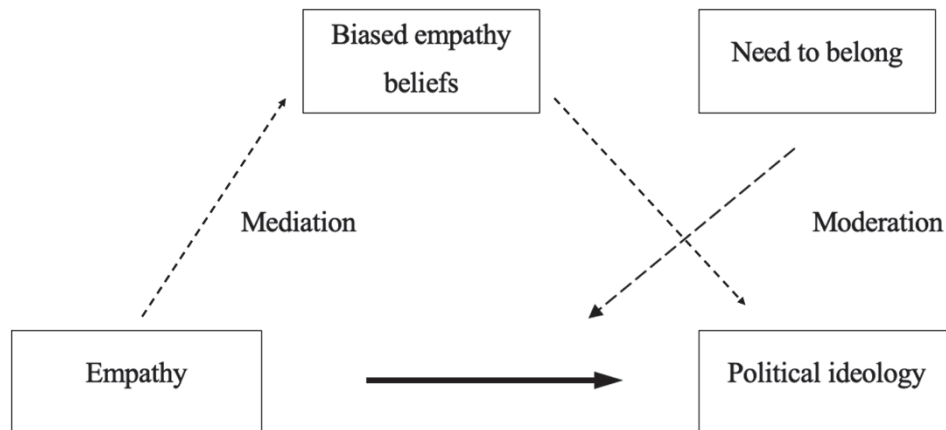
Research Question and Hypotheses

The current study is in line with previous research challenging the idea of fundamental differences between liberals and conservatives. Researchers have questioned the stability of liberals' and conservatives' values and behavior, stressing the importance to further investigate which circumstances and variables induce differences or similarities between the political camps, and why (Hasson et al., 2018; Nail et al., 2009).

Research Question

The study therefore will explore the relationship between empathy and political ideology, empathy beliefs and political ideology as well as the mediating effect of biased empathy beliefs and moderating role of the need to belong. Based on the presented background the following research question (visualized in Figure 2) was derived:

How is empathy related to political ideology and what mediating and moderating influences do biased empathy beliefs and the need to belong respectively have on this relationship?

Figure 2*Hypothetical Model*

Note. For improved comprehensibility, the assumed association between empathy beliefs and political ideology is missing from the figure.

Hypotheses

To answer the research question, the following hypotheses were tested:

*H*₁: Conservative participants score lower on the empathy scale than liberal participants.

*H*₂: Conservatives exhibit lower empathy beliefs than liberals, so they do not think showing empathy is as important as liberals do.

*H*₃: The association between empathy and political ideology is mediated by biased empathy beliefs.

*H*₄: Students who showcase a tendency to conservatism and rank higher on the need to belong scale show higher empathy-scores than those conservative students reporting a lower need to belong.

Method

Sample Acquisition

The sample that was used is part of a larger panel study conducted by the *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Politics of Adolescence & Democracy* (IP-PAD) research group. The overarching research goal of the project is to investigate the development of the political self among adolescent Europeans, specifically of Generation Alpha (born after 2010). The study is constructed in a three-wave longitudinal design. The current data stem

from the first wave and were collected between 4th of November 2024 and 11th of March 2025. It is to be noted that the larger study is still ongoing, and the findings presented in this thesis are preliminary results of a restricted subsample. The presented results and conclusions can therefore differ from the ultimate results of the overarching three-wave study.

Participants

The survey in Vienna counted 534 participants in the first wave, 492 of whom were selected for the current study's final sample. The sample consisted of 286 (58.1 %) female and 193 (39.2 %) male students with two students (0.9 %) not wanting to specify their gender. The mean age was 11.55 years ($SD = 1.10$), ranging from the youngest participants being 8 to the oldest being 14 years old. 60 (87.8 %) of the students were born in Austria, while 43 (12.2 %) were not born in Austria. So far, five Viennese Gymnasiums (secondary school in Austria) have participated in the survey.

Instruments

Political Ideology

To assess students' political ideologies, participants rated their political orientation on a 11-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 = *Left* to 10 = *Right*. To assess the certainty with which the answers on the political ideology scale were given, two items were used ("How sure are you about your last answer?", "How sure are you that the answer you gave to the second-to-last question really reflects your political opinion?"). These items were adapted by IP-PAD doctoral candidate Yufang Liao from an article by Petrocelli and colleagues (2007) on attitude certainty and repurposed to assess certainty about political ideology. Answers were given on a 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 = *Not sure at all* to 5 = *Completely sure*.

Empathy

Empathy levels were assessed with two questionnaires. The first scale that was used was the Single Item Trait Empathy Scale (SITES) by Konrath and her team from 2018. It is a short questionnaire consisting of one item ("To what extent does the following statement describe you: I am an empathic person"). As part of the scale, a definition of empathy is given ("An empathic person understands others' feelings and experiences care and concern for them"). The item was rated using a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 = *Not very true of me* to 5 = *Very true of me*.

The second questionnaire measuring empathy consisted of seven items starting with *How often do you usually make an effort to empathize with...?* (e.g. "people who live outside

of Austria”). The items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *Never* to 5 = *Very often*. The scale was developed by Yufang Liao based on a study by Waytz and colleagues (2016). To determine the reliability of the scale, Cronbach’s alpha was calculated. Internal consistency of the scale was high, $\alpha = .83$.

Empathy Beliefs

Empathy beliefs were measured using a 14-item questionnaire consisting of items starting either with *Making an effort to empathize with... is something important to me* or *Making an effort to empathize with... is something important to most of my schoolmates*. Analogous to the empathy-scale, various groups were reflected in the questions (e.g. “friends”, “people who agree with my political opinions”, “all life on earth”). Answers were given on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *Fully disagree* to 7 = *Fully agree*. This questionnaire was also developed by Yufang Liao based on a study by Waytz and his team (2016). The scale showed good internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha = .84.

Need to Belong

To measure the need to belong of the students, a modified version of the Need to Belong Scale (NTBS) by Leary and colleagues (2013) was used. The original scale contains 10 items regarding the subject’s need to belong, each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Because the scale used in the current study was part of a bigger survey, it was shortened by Nikita Kovalov to contain half of the original scale’s items. Therefore, the modified version only included five items (e.g., “I try hard not to do things that will make other people avoid or reject me.”). Another difference between the original scale and the one used is the exclusion of reversed items in the modified version. Further, to match the answering options of the other questionnaires and to not confuse the students, the 5-point scale was expanded to a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *Fully disagree* to 7 = *Fully agree*. Internal consistency for the need to belong scale that was used in the current study was determined questionable, $\alpha = .64$.

Preparing the Data

Cleaning the Data

An a priori power analysis was conducted for each hypothesis using G*Power Version 3.1.9.6. The results of the G*Power calculations are summarized in Table 2. In total, 534 students started the survey. Only those students were selected for further analysis which completed the survey. This led to a final sample size of $N = 492$.

Table 2*G*Power Analysis for H₁₋₄*

Hypothesis	Statistical test	Effect size	Required sample size
H ₁	ANOVA	$f = .20$	246
H ₂	ANOVA	$f = .20$	246
H ₃	Mediation analysis	$f^2 = .02$	395
H ₄	Moderation analysis	$f^2 = .02$	395

Note. Power $1 - \beta = .80$, $\alpha = .05$.

Building the Scales

Data analysis was completed in IBM SPSS Statistics 30.0.0.0. For further analysis, the political ideology variable was calculated as follows: Participants with scores lower than 5 were coded as *left* (-1), participants who chose exactly 5 on the scale were coded as *center* (0) and those who scored above 5 were coded as *right* (1), thus resulting in three categories of political ideology.

To determine a final empathy score, the first idea was to combine the SITES questionnaire with the 7-item questionnaire. The mean score of the 7-item scale showed a moderate correlation with the SITES questionnaire, Spearman's $r_s = .30$, $p < .001$. In the next step, a reliability analysis with the SITES item and the seven items of the second questionnaire was calculated to assess the internal consistency of a potential 8-item scale, combining the two questionnaires to measure general empathy. Internal consistency was satisfying ($\alpha = .82$) but upon closer examination of individual item statistics, the SITES item provided the lowest corrected item-total correlation ($r = .32$) compared to the items from the 7-item scale, where the corrected item-total correlation ranged from $r = .46$ to $.62$. Considering these results, the slight difference in labeling of the Likert-scales between the two questionnaires (*Very true of me/Very often*) and the SITES item not being of much substance regarding differentiated dimensions of empathy ("To what extent does the following statement describe you: I am an empathic person"), the decision was made to only include the 7-item questionnaire for further analysis. The mean was calculated, resulting in a score ranging from 1 to 5 with higher scores indicating higher levels of general empathy.

To measure the personal empathy beliefs, only items ending with ... *is something important to me* were used (e.g. "Making an effort to empathize with family members is something important to me"). The elimination of items asking the students to estimate their

schoolmates' effort to empathize resulted in a 7-item questionnaire. For further analysis, the mean was calculated to represent increasing levels of general personal empathy beliefs with scores ranging from 1 to 7.

To assess the bias in empathy showcased by the students, the mean of the scores of items asking about empathy towards out-group members were subtracted from the mean of item-scores targeting in-groups. The same was done with the empathy belief items to compute a scale for biased empathy beliefs. Internal consistencies for the new scales measuring empathy towards in- and out-group separately as well as empathy beliefs regarding in- and out-group are summarized in Table 3. For biased empathy the subtraction of the out-group means from the in-group means resulted in scores from -4 to 4. Scores for biased empathy beliefs were calculated in a methodically identical manner, resulting in scores from -6 to 6. For both scales, a score of 0 therefore represents no difference in empathy/empathy belief levels regarding in- and out-group, while positive scores indicate a bias towards in-group favoritism and negative scores a bias towards out-group favoritism.

Table 3

Results of Reliability Analysis for Empathy and Empathy Belief-Subscales

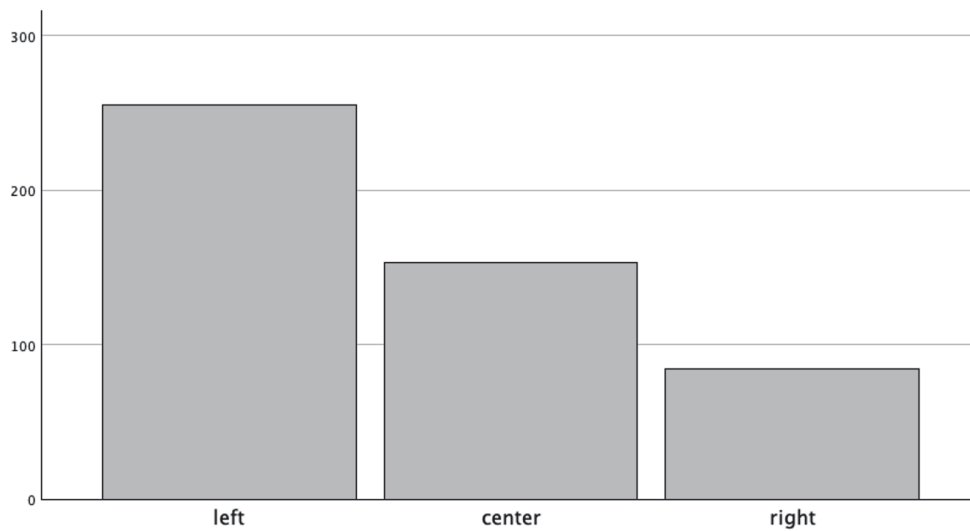
Variable name	Cronbach's alpha
Empathy_ingroup	.75
Empathy_outgroup	.55
EmpathyBelief_ingroup	.76
EmpathyBelief_outgroup	.55

To arrive at a final need to belong score for each participant, the mean was calculated. This resulted in a range of 1-7 with higher scores indicating a stronger need to belong.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The three categories of political ideology were not represented equally in the sample, as distribution was in favor of left ideology (Figure 3). Regarding the certainty of the students' answers about their political ideology, participants showed a mean of 3.27 ($SD = 1.27$) and 3.25 ($SD = 1.17$) regarding the items "How sure are you about your last answer?" and "How sure are you that the answer you gave to the second-to-last question really reflects your political opinion?" respectively.

Figure 3*Distribution of Political Ideology*

Note. $N = 492$; Left: $n = 255$ (51.8 %); Center: $n = 153$ (31.1 %); Right: $n = 84$ (17.1 %).

Regarding general empathy, students showed a mean score of 3.09 ($SD = .78$). Items asking about empathizing with the participants' family ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.14$) and friends ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.13$) received the highest scores. On the other hand, items asking about empathy towards people who agree with one's own political opinions ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.10$) and those with opposing political opinions ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.08$) found the least approval by the students. Measures of central tendency for biased empathy are illustrated in Table 5.

The mean for general empathy beliefs was 4.98 ($SD = 1.04$). Items regarding the students' family ($M = 5.80$, $SD = 1.32$) and friends ($M = 5.65$, $SD = 1.37$) received the highest scores, while items asking about empathy beliefs towards people who live in Austria ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.54$) and those with opposing political opinions ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.51$) found the least approval by the students. Measures of central tendency for biased empathy beliefs are illustrated in Table 5.

The average score on the need to belong scale was 4.75 ($SD = 1.12$).

Table 5*Measures of Central Tendency for Biased Empathy and Biased Empathy Beliefs*

	Biased empathy	Biased empathy beliefs
Mean (<i>SD</i>)	.53 (.76)	.60 (.93)
Median	.50	.50
Mode	.00	.00
Minimum	-2.00	-2.50
Maximum	3.50	3.25
Potential range	-4–4	-6–6

Note. $N = 492$ **Testing the Hypotheses**

To test hypotheses regarding differences between the political groups, Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) were calculated. The three political groups differed in size (see Figure 3) and the Shapiro-Wilk-Test was significant for all analyses except the distribution of need to belong in the center category, indicating not normally distributed data in the other groups. According to the central limit theorem, one can assume normality in larger samples, regardless of the shape of the population the sample stems from (Field, 2012). To test for homogeneity of variance, Levene's Test was used. Given the intact homoscedasticity and the big group sizes ($n > 30$), using ANOVA was determined legitimate (Field, 2013).

H_1 predicted an association between the ordinal-scaled variable empathy and political ideology. As the political ideology variable was computed in a way that resulted in a group-design, a one-way ANOVA was calculated for analyzing whether conservative participants tend to score lower on the empathy-scale than liberal participants. Levels of empathy were measured in the left group ($n = 255$, $M = 3.15$, $SD = .77$), the center group ($n = 153$, $M = 3.02$, $SD = .74$) and the right group ($n = 84$, $M = 3.06$, $SD = .84$). The variable was not normally distributed for left, center and right, as assessed by the Shapiro-Wilk-Test, $p < .05$. Homogeneity of variance was tested with the help of the Levene's Test which showed that equal variances could be assumed ($p = .41$). The level of empathy did not differ statistically significant between the groups, $F(2, 489) = 1.42$, $p = .24$, $\eta^2 = .006$.

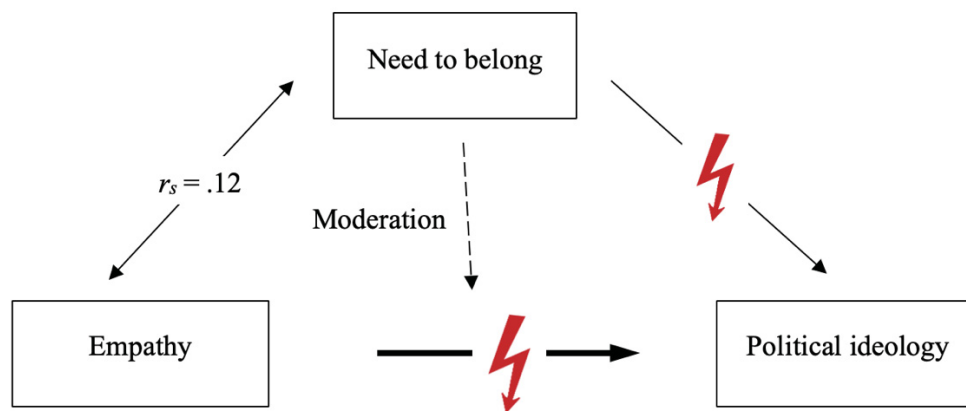
H_2 stated that empathy beliefs differ depending on students' political orientation. It was assumed that right-wing participants exhibit a lower sense of importance to show general empathy than students categorized as left. The hypothesis was also tested by calculating an

ANOVA. Levels of empathy beliefs were measured in the left ($n = 255$, $M = 5.08$, $SD = 1.06$), center ($n = 153$, $M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.04$) and right group ($n = 84$, $M = 4.92$, $SD = .95$). The variable was not normally distributed for left, center and right, as assessed by the Shapiro-Wilk-Test, $p < .05$. Homogeneity of variance was assessed with the help of the Levene's Test which showed that equal variances could be assumed ($p = .23$). Empathy beliefs did not differ statistically significant between the groups, $F(2, 489) = 2.50$, $p = .08$, $\eta^2 = .01$.

H_3 further addressed the potential relation between empathy and political ideology, proposing biased empathy beliefs to be a mediating force in this relation. As there were no significant differences in empathy levels between left, center and right, the mediation analysis was not carried out. Instead, exploratory analyses were conducted. Those results will be reported in the exploratory analyses section.

H_4 described a moderation model to examine whether students who showcase a tendency to conservatism and rank higher on the Need to Belong-Scale show more empathy than those conservative students showing a lower need to belong. In a first step, to test inter-political group differences regarding the need to belong, an ANOVA was conducted. The need to belong was measured in the left group ($n = 255$, $M = 4.82$, $SD = 1.09$), the center group ($n = 153$, $M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.07$) and the right group ($n = 84$, $M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.29$). Need to belong was approximately normally distributed for center, as the Shapiro-Wilk-Test indicated, $p > .05$. For the left and right category, the variable was not normally distributed, $p < .05$. Homoscedasticity was tested with the Levene's Test. Results indicated that homogenous variances could be assumed ($p = .21$). There was no statistically significant difference in the need to belong between the three political sub-groups, $F(2, 489) = 1.15$, $p = .32$, $\eta^2 = .005$.

Next, to test for a correlation between empathy and the need to belong and to evaluate potential issues with multicollinearity, a Spearman's Rho Correlation was calculated. The result indicated a weak but significant correlation between empathy and the need to belong, $r_s = .12$, $p = .007$. The relationship that was suspected to be moderated by the need to belong could not be found in the sample, as there was no significant group difference in empathy levels between the three political groups. Further, the need to belong levels did not differ in the three political sub-groups. Moderation analysis was not conducted due to the necessary conditions not being fulfilled. Figure 4 illustrates the missing connections.

Figure 4*Causal Model of Moderation***Exploratory Analyses**

To revisit H_3 , instead of examining the mediating influence of biased empathy beliefs on the relation between empathy and political ideology, analyses were conducted to explore group differences in biased empathy and biased empathy beliefs depending on political orientation. To investigate if the political group membership acts as a predictor for bias in empathy and empathy beliefs regarding in- and out-group, the following exploratory hypothesis was created:

H_5 : Participants from respective sub-groups of political ideology differ significantly in their biased empathy and biased empathy belief-scores.

Two ANOVAs were conducted to test H_5 . First, biased empathy was measured in the left ($n = 255$, $M = .47$, $SD = .76$), center ($n = 153$, $M = .56$, $SD = .68$) and right group ($n = 84$, $M = .67$, $SD = .88$). The biased empathy variable was not normally distributed for left, center nor right, as assessed by the Shapiro-Wilk-Test, $p < .05$. Homoscedasticity was tested with the Levene's Test. Results indicated that homogenous variances could be assumed ($p = .16$). There was no statistically significant difference in biased empathy between the political groups, $F(2, 489) = 2.42$, $p = .09$, $\eta^2 = .01$.

The second analysis explored biased empathy beliefs, which were assessed in the left ($n = 255$, $M = .61$, $SD = .92$), center ($n = 153$, $M = .60$, $SD = .96$) and right group ($n = 84$, $M = .74$, $SD = .93$). Biased empathy beliefs were approximately normally distributed in the right group, as the Shapiro-Wilk-Test indicated, $p > .05$. For the left and center category, the variable was not normally distributed, $p < .05$. Homogeneity of variance was assessed with

the help of the Levene's Test which showed that equal variances could be assumed ($p = .72$). Biased empathy beliefs did not differ statistically significant between the groups, $F(2, 489) = .55, p = .58, \eta^2 = .003$.

Following H_4 , exploratory analyses were conducted to test, whether the need to belong is associated with biased empathy and biased empathy beliefs. To test for a correlation between need to belong and biased empathy, Spearman's Rho Correlation was calculated. The result indicated that there was no significant correlation between the need to belong and biased empathy, $r_s = .06, p = .20$. The same was tested for the relation between need to belong and biased empathy beliefs. Results revealed no significant correlation between the need to belong and biased empathy beliefs either, $r_s = .09, p = .06$.

An Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was computed to examine, whether the questionnaires for empathy and empathy beliefs measured distinct constructs. EFA with all items from both questionnaires was conducted using Principal Axis Factoring (PFA) for extraction and Oblimin rotation with Kaiser Normalization. The detected Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was .83, representing meritorious suitability of the data for factor analysis. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant, supporting factorability of the correlation matrix, $\chi^2(91) = 2599.9, p < .001$. Only those factors with eigenvalues ≥ 1 were considered, resulting in three extracted factors. The first factor exclusively comprised items from the empathy beliefs questionnaire and explained 35.01 % of variance. The second factor comprised all items of the empathy questionnaire but also included one item from the empathy belief scale ("Making an effort to empathize with people who agree with my political opinions is something important to me"). It explained 15.79 % of variance. The third factor explained 8.74 % of variance and comprised two items from the empathy, regarding friends and family and one from the empathy belief scale, also regarding family. Factor 3 showed a weak and inconsistent loading pattern and was not interpretable in a theoretically funded way. Therefore, the third factor was excluded from the final interpretation, leaving factor 1 and 2, which together accounted for 50.80 % of the total variance.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate the relationship between empathy and political ideology and between empathy beliefs and political ideology. Further, the research goal was to explore the role of biased empathy beliefs, which were assumed to mediate the

relation between empathy and political ideology and the mediating role of the need to belong on the relation between empathy and political ideology.

General Discussion of Results

Regarding the political orientation of the students, group sizes differed among the three political categorizations of left, center and right ($n = 255$, $n = 153$, and $n = 84$). Items testing the participants' certainty about their answers on political ideology delivered results suggesting moderate certainty ($M = 3.27$ ($SD = 1.27$), $M = 3.25$ ($SD = 1.17$)). As over half of the sample was categorized as left, these results fall in line with the general voting pattern of the city: Vienna is known to deliver higher voting results in favor of left-wing parties than all other federal states in Austria (Ennser-Jedenastik, 2025). Further, the distribution of political ideology in the current sample reflects an ongoing trend among young people in Vienna to lean towards the support of liberal and left-wing parties: Over 70 % of voters under 30 voted for a party left of center in the latest elections to the Vienna City Council in 2025 (Anders, 2025; Sager, 2025).

Measurements for empathy and empathy beliefs were assessed with questionnaires developed by Yufang Liao based on a study by Waytz and his colleagues from 2016 and were not used in previous work, therefore leaving the results without direct scores for comparison. Students scored 3.09 ($SD = .78$) on average regarding general empathy. Shu-Liang and colleagues (2020) reported a mean score of 3.46 ($SD = .45$) in their sample of Chinese students, using the Chinese version of the Interpersonal Reactivity Indicator Scale (IRI-C) by Zhang and his team from 2010. Veldin and Kozina (2022) reported a mean score of 3.61 ($SD = .65$) regarding empathic concern among their sample of Slovenian students, measured with the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) by Davis from 1980. All three scales used a 1–5 range. Students in the current study scored 4.98 ($SD = 1.04$) on average regarding general empathy beliefs. Schumann and team (2014) reported a mean score of 5.17 ($SD = 1.01$) regarding motivation to feel empathy among young adults. Both scales used a 1–7 range. As students' mean scores from the two questionnaires cluster slightly above the midpoint of the scales, results hint towards an ordinary level of general empathy and a slightly positive stance on the importance of empathy among participants.

Scores regarding biased empathy and biased empathy beliefs were centered around neutrality, hinting towards a slight in-group favoritism (see Table 5). Most students showed no bias, as the mode for both variables was .00. Across all political sub-groups, empathy and

empathy belief scores were highest for students' family and friends. This complements Waytz and colleagues' (2016) understanding of family being the closest and friends the second closest moral circles in a person's life. Participants across all political sub-groups showed the lowest empathy and empathy belief scores towards people who they do not share their political views with. This falls in line with findings in the research fields of affective polarization and cross-partisan empathy (Hasson et al., 2018; Iyengar et al. 2012; Iyengar et al., 2019) and seems to confirm the concept of an empathy gap between in- and out-groups (Gutsell and Inzlicht, 2012). Empathy towards people who agree with the students' own political views and empathy beliefs towards people who live in Austria were the second lowest scored categories. This is surprising, as both target groups are considered in-groups in the current study design. A possible explanation for low empathy towards people who share the students' political opinions – and a limiting factor altogether – could be the relatively unstable political identification among the students, as they are still in an early development stage regarding political orientation and only showed moderate certainty about their answers regarding political ideology. While the participants in the current study were between 8 and 14 years old, studies found political ideology to mature to a stable level during mid to late adolescence, reporting growing consistency until 23 years of age and the 18th year of life to be the most formative period for the cultivation of a political identity (Rekker et al., 2015; Rekker et al., 2019). Even though almost 90 % of the participating students were born in Austria and research suggests that children begin to have emotions for their nation, identify with the national community and collect knowledge about their own nation starting from the age of five, people who live in Austria were the second lowest rated category on the empathy belief scale (Millei, 2019). As more than half of the participating students were categorized as left, this result falls in line with findings by Waytz and his team (2016) reporting liberals to generally show empathy towards a broader social circle than conservatives. Further, Vienna differs politically from other federal states, as Viennese vote more left-wing than the rest of the country (Ennser-Jedenastik, 2025). Political scientist Eva Zeglovits offered the following theory about the unsuccessful anti-immigration propaganda by right-wing party FPÖ in Vienna: Roughly half of the city's population has an immigrant background, so political messages full of stereotypes about foreigners may fall on deaf ears (Anders, 2025). So, liberals' broader moral circle expending beyond national borders, the city's special – and somewhat alienated – position in Austrian politics and the demographics of Viennese citizens

could inhibit the feeling of connection to the rest of Austria's population and therefore explain the low score of empathy beliefs towards people who live in Austria among the current sample.

Students showed a mean score of 4.75 ($SD = 1.12$) (range 1–7) on the need to belong scale. For comparison: Leary and his team (2013) tested the newly developed NTBS on 15 samples and reported a mean of 3.30 (range 1–5). Shu-Liang and colleagues (2020) reported a mean of 3.52 ($SD = .58$) (range 1–5) on the NTBS, while Veldin and Kozina (2022) reported a mean score of 3.13 ($SD = .53$) (range 1–4) regarding the sense of belonging at school, measured with the PISA-D Student Questionnaire (OECD, 2017). Participants in the current study therefore reached similar scores slightly above the midpoint, showing a moderate to moderately high need to belong.

The computation of the political ideology variable resulted in a group-design. Therefore, analysis was conducted to detect group differences between left, center and right. In contrast to most findings in the field, the presented results suggest neither a significant difference in terms of general empathy levels nor regarding general empathy beliefs between conservative and liberal participants. Therefore, H_1 and H_2 were rejected. Further, the center group did not differ significantly from left and right in both analyses. As a significant relationship between political ideology and empathy was the foundation for testing the mediating role of biased empathy beliefs assumed in H_3 , alternative exploratory analyses were conducted to test for differences in biased empathy and biased empathy beliefs between the ideology groups. Again, no significant group differences regarding biased empathy or biased empathy beliefs were found and H_5 consequently rejected.

Analysis found a weak but significant correlation between empathy and the need to belong, $r_s = .12$, $p = .007$. This correlation mirrors results of Shu-Liang and colleagues' study from 2020, in which they found a moderate correlation between empathy and the need to belong ($r = .42$, $p < .001$), results by Veldin and Kozina from 2022 indicating a weak correlation between empathic concern and school connectedness ($r = .09$, $p < .01$) as well as findings by Batanova and Loukas from 2014 which suggest a weak association between empathic concern and school connectedness ($r = .23$, $p < .01$). The presented results seem to fall in line with the theory that high need to belong increases empathy to strengthen social relationships (Shu-Liang et al., 2020). As a significant relation between political ideology and empathy would have also been the foundation to test the need to belong for its moderating

role in that relationship as proposed in H_4 and results suggest that there were no differences in the need to belong between the three political sub-groups, the planned moderation analysis was not conducted. Instead, exploratory analyses investigated the potential connection between the need to belong and biased empathy as well as biased empathy beliefs. There were also no significant associations between those variables.

Even though not significant, results for the relationship of empathy and political ideology, empathy beliefs and political ideology, biased empathy and political ideology as well as biased empathy beliefs and political ideology were all congruent with the hypotheses. Students who were categorized as left showed the highest average empathy and empathy belief scores amongst the three political sub-groups, falling in line with studies that found liberalism to be positively correlated with self-reported empathy and empathy beliefs (Iyer et al., 2012; Hasson et al., 2018; McAdams et al., 2008; McCue & Gopoian, 2000). Further, students who were categorized as right showed the highest in-group favoritism, as they exhibited the biggest mean differences in biased empathy and biased empathy beliefs among the three groups. These results mirror those of Waytz and colleagues (2016), who found that liberals show empathy towards a broader social circle than conservatives and the notion of conservatives being exclusionary and less open to new experiences (Fraley et al., 2012; Harell et al., 2021; Kerry & Murray, 2018; McAdams et al., 2008).

Further, left-leaning students showed a marginally higher need to belong score than participants categorized as center and right, with the group of right-leaning students showing the lowest average need to belong. The group difference was not significant, but the trend still ties into previous research that found a connection between a weak sense of social belonging and increased probability to vote for right-wing parties (Langenkamp & Bienstman, 2022) and a positive relation between loneliness and conservative ideology (Floyd, 2017). Results could therefore hint at higher loneliness among students who agree with conservative ideology, as feelings of loneliness – which can be partially caused by a low need to belong – overlap with typical characteristics of modern conservative ideology and heighten feelings of anxiety and vulnerability to threat (Cacioppo et al., 2013; Floyd, 2017).

The results therefore support the notion of previous research that persons with left-wing views show more empathy, positive empathy beliefs, less biased empathy and biased empathy beliefs, higher need to belong and that empathy is positively associated with the need to belong (Hasson et al., 2018; Harell et al., 2021; Shu-Liang et al., 2020; Tamir et al.,

2016). Due to non-significant results, further attempts to examine underlying factors such as the hypothetical mediating role of biased empathy beliefs and moderating role of the need to belong on the relationship between empathy and political ideology could not be made.

Further Limitations and Future Research

There are a few limiting factors regarding the study design. From a statistical standpoint, it is important to highlight the uneven group size of students in the three political groups of left, center and right ($n = 255$, $n = 153$, and $n = 84$). ANOVA is robust to unequal group sizes, especially given the large sample size in the present research but the imbalance of the group sizes may reduce statistical power for the smaller group and should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results. Apart from statistical power, a bigger and more diverse sample could strengthen the representativity for the whole nation. Future studies on the topic should acquire samples all throughout Austria and from different levels of schools to better represent the political youth of the whole country.

As social desirability plays a huge role when it comes to empathy, measuring empathy and empathy beliefs via self-report is prone to inaccuracy (Zaki, 2014; Zebarjadi, 2023). This is potentially further reinforced by the different value that liberals and conservatives attach to the virtue of empathy. Self-reported empathy scores might be especially skewed among liberals, as empathy is seen as a typical characteristic of a liberal person (Farwell & Weiner, 2000; Hasson et al., 2018; Waytz et al., 2016). Therefore, liberals' response behavior could be biased, leading to erroneous results.

Since the items from the empathy (e.g. "How often do you usually make an effort to empathize with people who live outside of Austria") and empathy belief scale (e.g. "Making an effort to empathize with people who live outside of Austria is something important to me") were very similar in phrasing, an EFA was calculated to test if the scales measured distinct constructs. After initially extracting three factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, two factors were considered appropriate for interpretation, as the third factor lacked in theoretical coherence and showed an unsystematic loading pattern. Therefore, the two questionnaires were deemed to show conceptual distinctiveness and can be recommended for further use. As the survey at hand measured trait empathy by using a self-report questionnaire, future research could add a measurement of state empathy to control for bias in self-reported empathy and empathy beliefs.

For some items it is certainly debatable, whether the group in question categorizes as in-group or out-group. In the study by Waytz and his team from 2016 that inspired the empathy and empathy belief-scales at hand, the authors were interested in empathy differences across the political spectrum between smaller and larger social circles (family versus friends, the nation versus the world, humans versus nonhumans). This poses a more linear and fluid approach for group categorization in which friends, the world and nonhumans could be interpreted as out-groups. For the items in the current survey and the research question at hand, only the items regarding *people who live outside of Austria* and *people who disagree with my political opinions* were interpreted as measuring empathy towards out-groups, while *family, friends, people who live in Austria* and *people who agree with my political opinions* represented in-groups. *All life on earth* was ultimately not used for either group, as it describes an extreme outer social circle, ergo, out-group in Waytz and colleagues' interpretation, but is not semantically congruent with *people who live outside of Austria* and *people who disagree with my political opinions*. In a holistic sense, *all life on earth* could also be interpreted as in-group, as the students are a part of all life on earth, while *people who live outside of Austria* and *people who disagree with my political opinions* clearly define groups the students are not a part of. The items also function as counterparts to *people who live in Austria* and *people who agree with my political opinions*, further illustrating the dichotomy of in- and out-group membership. Therefore, one weakness of the empathy and empathy belief scales used in the current study lies in the uneven distribution of items regarding in- and out-groups, as there were only two items deemed to represent the out-group. This flaw is reflected in the sub-groups' weak reliability scores (Table 3) and poses a limitation regarding the interpretation of biased empathy and biased empathy beliefs. Future research therefore should embed a balanced number of items for in- and out-groups.

Also, it is to be noted that the need to belong scale used in the current study is an altered version of the original NTBS by Leary and his team from 2013. The questionnaire in the current survey extended the Likert scale from 5 to 7-point to create a universal response pattern for the survey. This was not achieved, as the empathy scale for example was still rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Further, reversed items were cut from the original NTBS. This weakens the quality criteria of the scale by disabling the disruption of non-substantive responding and removing the control of acquiescence (Weijters et al., 2013). The internal consistency for the need to belong scale used in the current study was determined

questionable ($\alpha = .64$), while Leary and colleagues report $\alpha = .81$. Taking all this in consideration, future researchers should use the original NTBS by Leary and colleagues (2013).

The presented findings – even though not significant – hint towards out-group membership being an inhibiting factor regarding empathy and empathy beliefs among the participants and that students are somewhat affectively polarized, as they show less empathy towards political opponents even before cultivating a stable political identity. Therefore, future studies should further investigate the underlying constructs contributing to surface level differences in empathy and empathy beliefs among the political camps.

Implications

The results of the current study hint towards some of the suspected connections between the constructs empathy, empathy beliefs, political ideology and need to belong but did not yield significant results to support its hypotheses. Students in the current sample showed decent levels of empathy and slightly positive empathy beliefs on average. In previous studies, higher empathy levels and holding positive beliefs about empathy were found to promote prosocial behavior (De Waal, 2008; Hasson et al., 2022; Konrath et al., 2018; Vaish et al., 2009). Further, higher levels of empathy are believed to reduce aggression among early adolescents, as is the feeling of belonging to one's school (Batanova & Loukas, 2014). It is therefore important to nurture the development of empathy, positive empathy beliefs and a healthy need to belong among students. Goldstein and Winner (2012) found that arts intervention in the form of acting classes at school may increase growth in empathic skills and enhance Theory of Mind of students. Zaki (2014) lists the following interventions to increase general empathy in a person: perspective-taking exercises, teaching about associations of facial expressions and emotions and Buddhist practices of compassion meditation. He further stresses the importance to also intervene on the level of empathy beliefs, increasing motivation to show empathy by implementing empathy-positive norms while Schuman and colleagues (2014) report that inducing the perspective of empathy being malleable promotes higher empathy in a person. Even though affective polarization is rising, Americans see cross-partisan animosity as a serious problem and want less political division (Santos et al., 2022). As citizens seek more harmony between the political camps, a way to increase out-partisan empathy and decrease affective polarization could be implementing the belief that empathy is a political resource instead of a political weakness (Santos et al., 2022).

Conclusion

In times of enhanced affective polarization, where public figures such as Donald Trump and Elon Musk normalize hate towards political opponents and claim empathy to be the fundamental weakness of modern civilization, research on differences and similarities between citizens with opposing political views, empathy and underlying factors like empathy beliefs and the need to belong is becoming more and more relevant. With authoritarian regimes and populism on the rise and a decline in satisfaction with democratic institutions, it is especially important to shift focus on the next generation of voters to ensure the protection of democracy. The presented study provides groundwork for future research to explore the deeper reasons of superficially observed differences between liberals and conservatives. Further insights into the topic could help to bridge the gap between political camps and increase much needed attempts at civilized cross-partisan discourse. As evidence shows, empathy is not a weakness but rather a powerful and fascinating facet of social life. Focusing on our similarities instead of our differences and shifting the perspective towards seeing empathy as something positive and worthwhile might be just what the world needs right now.

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Appendix A

Abstract (English)

In today's heated political climate across the globe, the evaluation of differences in empathy capacity and the need to belong between liberals and conservatives has gained heightened attention among researchers. As substantial research indicates that liberals are more empathetic than conservatives, new perspectives on the underlying role of empathy beliefs challenge these findings. Further, there is an observed empathy gap between in- and out-groups, visible in the political realm in the form of affective polarization, an increasing phenomenon posing a threat to democracies worldwide. Adolescence is a phase characterized by the need to belong during which empathic skills mature, and adolescents form a political identity. Aim of the present study was to examine whether liberals show higher empathy and empathy belief scores than conservatives, if biased empathy beliefs mediate and if the need to belong moderates the relation between empathy and political ideology. The sample consisted of 492 Austrian students aged 8–14. More than half of the participants were categorized as politically left, while empathy, empathy belief and need to belong scores were moderate to moderately high. Analyses revealed none of the presumed associations to be significant except for a weak correlation between empathy and the need to belong. Even though not significant, most of the results followed the expected pattern of the hypotheses and therefore prompt future research to further investigate the relation between empathy and political ideology and its underlying factors.

Keywords: Affective Polarization, Empathy, Empathy Beliefs, Need to Belong, Adolescence

Appendix B

Abstract (German)

Angesichts der aktuell weltweit angespannten politischen Lage geraten Unterschiede zwischen Liberalen und Konservativen hinsichtlich ihrer Empathiefähigkeit, sowie ihrem Zugehörigkeitsbedürfnis verstärkt in den Fokus der Forschung. Während umfangreiche Forschungsergebnisse darauf hindeuten, dass Liberale empathischer seien als Konservative, fordern neue Erkenntnisse über die zugrunde liegende Rolle der Überzeugungen gegenüber Empathie diese Annahme zunehmend heraus. Des Weiteren besteht eine Diskrepanz an Empathie zwischen der Eigen- und Fremdgruppe, die sich im politischen Kontext als affektive Polarisierung widerspiegelt, welche eine zunehmende Bedrohung für demokratische Systeme weltweit darstellt. Adoleszenz ist eine Lebensphase, die durch das Bedürfnis nach Zugehörigkeit gekennzeichnet ist, während der Heranwachsende empathische Fähigkeiten ausbilden und eine politische Identität formen. Das Ziel der vorliegenden Studie war zu überprüfen, ob Liberale höhere Werte in Bezug auf Empathie und positivere Überzeugungen gegenüber Empathie aufweisen als Konservative und, ob Biases bezüglich der Überzeugungen gegenüber Empathie einen mediiierenden und das Zugehörigkeitsbedürfnis einen moderierenden Effekt auf die Beziehung zwischen Empathie und politischer Ideologie ausüben. Die Stichprobe bestand aus 492 österreichischen Schülern im Alter von 8 bis 14 Jahren. Mehr als die Hälfte der Schüler wurden als politisch links eingestuft, während Werte bezüglich Empathie, Überzeugungen über Empathie und Zugehörigkeitsbedürfnis moderat bis mäßig hoch ausfielen. Analysen ergaben, dass keiner der erwarteten Zusammenhänge signifikant war, mit Ausnahme einer schwachen Korrelation zwischen Empathie und Zugehörigkeitsbedürfnis. Nichtsdestotrotz deutete der Großteil der Ergebnisse in Richtung der vermuteten Zusammenhänge und ist somit als Anregung für zukünftige Forschung zu betrachten, den Zusammenhang zwischen Empathie und politischer Ideologie und dessen zugrundeliegende Ursachen weiter zu untersuchen.

Schlagwörter: Affektive Polarisierung, Empathie, Überzeugungen gegenüber Empathie, Zugehörigkeitsbedürfnis, Adoleszenz

Appendix B

IP-PAD Survey Excerpts of Used Political Ideology, Empathy, Empathy Beliefs and Need to Belong Questionnaires



Codebook IP-PAD Wave 1
Austria

W1_lr	In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on the following scale running from 0 'Left to 10 'Right'?
0	Left
	...
10	Right

W1_ideoclar1_AUT	How sure are you about your answers regarding political ideologies?
W1_ideoclar2_AUT	How sure are you that the political ideologies you just chose are really the ideologies you have?
1	Not sure at all
2	Slightly sure
3	Moderately sure
4	Very sure
5	Completely sure

W1_empathy1_AUT	How often do you usually make an effort to empathize with... your family members?
W1_empathy2_AUT	How often do you usually make an effort to empathize with... your friends?
W1_empathy3_AUT	How often do you usually make an effort to empathize with... people who live in Austria?
W1_empathy4_AUT	How often do you usually make an effort to empathize with... people who live outside of Austria?
W1_empathy5_AUT	How often do you usually make an effort to empathize with... people who agree with my political opinions?
W1_empathy6_AUT	How often do you usually make an effort to empathize with... people who disagree with my political opinions?
W1_empathy7_AUT	How often do you usually make an effort to empathize with... all life on earth?
1	Never
2	Rarely
3	Sometimes
4	Often
5	Very often

<i>Empathy beliefs</i>	Only when “in school” option (3) on the W1_worksit is selected.
W1_ebfamily1_AUT	Making an effort to empathize with family members is something important to me



Codebook IP-PAD Wave 1
Austria

W1_ebfamily2_AUT	Making an effort to empathize with family members is something important to most of my schoolmates
W1_ebfriends1_AUT	Making an effort to empathize with friends is something important to me
W1_ebfriends2_AUT	Making an effort to empathize with friends is something important to most of my schoolmates
W1_ebnation1_AUT	Making an effort to empathize with people who live in Austria is something important to me
W1_ebnation2_AUT	Making an effort to empathize with people who live in Austria is something important to most of my schoolmates
W1_ebworldwide1_AUT	Making an effort to empathize with people who live outside of Austria is something important to me
W1_ebworldwide2_AUT	Making an effort to empathize with people who live outside of Austria is something important to most of my schoolmates
W1_ebingroup1_AUT	Making an effort to empathize with people who agree with my political opinions is something important to me
W1_ebingroup2_AUT	Making an effort to empathize with people who agree with my political opinions is something important to most of my schoolmates
W1_eboutgroup1_AUT	Making an effort to empathize with people who disagree with my political opinions is something important to me
W1_eboutgroup2_AUT	Making an effort to empathize with people who disagree with my political opinions is something important to most of my schoolmates
W1_eballlife1_AUT	Making an effort to empathize with all life on earth is something important to me
W1_eballlife2_AUT	Making an effort to empathize with all life on earth is something important to most of my schoolmates
1	Fully disagree
2	Disagree
3	Somewhat disagree
4	Neither agree nor disagree
5	Somewhat agree
6	Agree
7	Fully agree

W1_ntb1_AUT	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements - I try hard not to do things that will make other people avoid or reject me.
W1_ntb2_AUT	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements - I need to feel that there are people I can turn to in times of need.
W1_ntb3_AUT	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements - I want other people to accept me.
W1_ntb4_AUT	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements - I do not like being alone.
W1_ntb5_AUT	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements - My feelings are easily hurt when I feel that others do not accept me.
1	Fully disagree
2	Disagree
3	Somewhat disagree
4	Neither agree nor disagree
5	Somewhat agree
6	Agree



Codebook IP-PAD Wave 1
Austria

7	Fully agree
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