

## BRIEF REPORT: CAN POLITICAL ORIENTATION EXPLAIN MENTAL HEALTH IN THE TIME OF A GLOBAL PANDEMIC? VOTING PATTERNS, PERSONAL AND NATIONAL COPING RESOURCES, AND MENTAL HEALTH DURING THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

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**Introduction:** The purpose of this study was to examine mental health during the coronavirus pandemic crisis and its explanation by personal and national level coping resources. This question was examined in the midst of a political crisis in Israel among voters from two different political orientations. **Method:** Questionnaires were delivered to a sample of 396 Israeli Jews, of them 180 (45.5%) right-wing and 216 (54.5%) left-wing voters. Right-wing voters presented higher levels of mental health during the crisis as compared to left-wing voters. **Results:** Right-wing voters also reported stronger levels of national coping resources such as sense of national coherence and trust in governmental institutions. Moreover, mental health was predicted only by personal resources among left-wing voters, while among the right-wing participants national resources were significant as well. **Discussion:** The results highlight the role of political orientation and low trust in the government as a possible risk factor for mental health even in times of global pandemic crisis.



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## INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus pandemic began spreading in the world in December 2019 and affected many facets of our lives. Although the character of the crisis is global, it appears that each nation developed its own way of dealing with it. "Stress is not an individual affair but must be viewed in terms of the social context in which it occurs" (Levine & Scotch, 1970, p. 287). Thus, personal as well as national level coping resources should be relevant to understanding of mental health during such a crisis.

The first weeks of the coronavirus global crisis found Israel in the midst of a prolonged political crisis, after a third round of elections that led to growing gaps and hate expressions between the camps and repeated failure to achieve an agreeable government. The political leaders of the pandemic crisis were of central and extreme right-wing parties, who represented the existing Israeli governmental coalition for the last decade. Considering this political context, our study explored the relationships between coping resources and mental health according to the voting patterns of the participants.

The framework of our study is Antonovsky's salutogenic model, and its core concept sense of coherence (SOC). The SOC is defined as a "global orientation of the world as comprehensible, meaningful, and manageable" (Antonovsky, 1987, p.19) According to the model, SOC is a determinant variable affecting health consequences and other aspects of well-being.

Sagy (2014) suggested to broaden the personal concept to the collective level of the nation and defined sense of national coherence (SONC) as an enduring tendency to perceive one's national group as comprehensible, meaningful, and manageable. SONC was related to delegitimization of the other's narratives and to voting patterns of Israeli adults (Mana, Srour, & Sagy, 2019).

While the relationships between SOC and mental health have been widely investigated (Mittelmarm et al., 2017), the role of the national level of SONC in coping with stressful events, and its connection with mental health has not been examined.

In this study we examined personal level resources (SOC, social support of family, workplace etc.) as well as national level resources (SONC, trust in national institutions) as predictors of mental health among left vs. right-wing voters.

### Hypotheses:

1. We expected to find different levels of national resources and mental health between right- and left-wing voters.
2. For the whole sample, we expected mental health to be predicted by personal and national resources.
3. We expected national resources to have a stronger explanatory power among right-wing than among left-wing voters.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

Data collection took place during March 23–25, 2020. Recruitment of participants was conducted via an online survey platform. The current data analysis included 396 Israeli Jewish participants, of them 180 (45.5%) moderate and extreme right-wing voters (mean age = 36.8,  $SD = 12.70$ ; 92 males 51%) and 216 (54.5%) moderate and extreme left-wing voters (mean age = 42,  $SD = 12.51$ ; 112 males 51.5%). Responders who reported voting for other parties were excluded from this data analysis. No significant differences between the groups were found regarding age, education level, and socio-economic status.

### INSTRUMENTS

*Mental Health Continuum (MHC-SF; Keyes, 2005)*. Fourteen items regarding three components of well-being: emotional, social, and psychological. The questionnaire was adapted to the current context and based on the experiences the participants had over the last two weeks (never, once in these two weeks, about once a week, 2 or 3 times a week, almost every day, or every day). Internal consistency of the questionnaire was estimated at 0.74 and in the current study  $\alpha = 0.87, 0.88$  (right-wing and left-wing accordingly).

*Sense of Coherence (SOC, Antonovsky, 1987)*. Thirteen items on a 7-point Likert scale explored the participants' perceptions of the world as comprehensible, meaningful, and manageable. The  $\alpha$

values in 127 studies using SOC-13 range from 0.70 to 0.92 and in this study the  $\alpha = 0.79, 0.79$  (right-wing and left-wing accordingly).

*Sense of National Coherence (SONC; Mana, Srour, & Sagy, 2019).* Eight items on a 7 point Likert scale from 1 (totally agree) to 7 (totally disagree) explored the participants' perceptions of the Israeli society as comprehensible, meaningful, and manageable. Internal consistency of the questionnaire was estimated at 0.80 and in the current study  $\alpha = 0.85, 0.81$  (right-wing and left-wing accordingly).

*Trust in Governmental and Other Institutions.* A 7-item questionnaire regarding level of trust in relevant institutions (media, prime minister, police, government, ministry of finance, ministry of health, health-care workers, and hospitals) on a 5 point Likert scale from 1 (very much) to 5 (not at all). Internal consistency was  $\alpha = 0.70, 0.77$  (right-wing and left-wing accordingly).

*Social Support.* A 5-item questionnaire explores feelings of support that one feels he or she receives from people in the close circles (family, community in the neighborhood or ones' own settlement, virtual community, and workplace) on a 5 point Likert scale from 1 (very much) to 5 (not at all). Internal consistency was  $\alpha = 0.68, 0.67$  (right-wing and left-wing accordingly).

*Voting Behavior and Demographic Variables.* We asked subjects about their voting in the last election to the Israeli Knesset (March, 2019) and divided the participants according to their answer to two groups: extreme and moderate-right (Likud & Yamina) vs. extreme and moderate left (Kahol-Lavan, Haavoda, Gesher, Merez). Age, gender, and number of children were also reported on the questionnaire.

## **RESULTS**

### **MEAN DIFFERENCES BETWEEN RIGHT-WING AND LEFT-WING VOTERS**

Results of one-way ANOVA analyses indicated that right-wing participants reported stronger levels of mental health, SONC,

and trust compared to left-wing voters. No significant differences were found in level of SOC and social support (see Table 1).

### REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Multiple regressions were conducted for each research group separately. A significant effect was found in SOC, social support, and trust on the level of mental health among right-wing voters,  $R^2 = .39$ ,  $F(4,169) = 27.019$ ,  $p < .001$ , and among left-wing voters,  $R^2 = .50$ ,  $F(6,200) = 50.014$ ,  $p < .001$ .

For right-wing participants SOC, SONC, and social support significantly predicted mental health scores, while for left-wing participants only SOC and social support significantly predicted mental health scores (see Table 2ab).

### DISCUSSION

Our study examined individual and national level resources in promoting mental health in a time of this severe global crisis. In Israel, specifically, the pandemic has taken place during a time of political crisis and increasing distrust in the national institutions among part of the population. Considering this political context, we expected right-wing voters to present stronger SONC, stronger trust in the national institutions, and, as a result, to report better mental health than people who voted for the center-left parties. The results support this hypothesis.

**TABLE 1. One-Way Analysis of Variance of Mental Health, SOC, SONC, Trust, and Social Support Among Right-Wing and Left-Wing Voters**

Measure	Right-Wing		Left-Wing		$\eta^2$	$F(1,396)$	Sig.
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Mental Health	4.15	0.96	3.79	0.98	.18	13.44	.001
SOC	4.60	0.82	4.53	0.84	.04	0.62	.43
SONC	4.64	1.10	3.63	1.05	.41	77.83	.001
Trust	3.77	0.68	3.09	0.76	.41	75.39	.001
Social support	3.70	0.94	3.57	0.98	.07	1.88	.171

**TABLE 2a. Predicting Mental Health by SOC, SONC, Trust, and Social Support for Right-Wing Voters**

Predictors	<i>b</i>	CI 95% for <i>b</i>		$\beta$	Sig.
		Lower	Upper		
SOC	.47	.32	.62	0.40	.000
SONC	.16	.04	.27	0.18	.008
Trust	.23	.04	.42	0.16	.017
Social support	.16	.03	.28	.15	.019

Personal resources significantly predicted levels of mental health in both groups. National level resources, however, were found as significant predictors of mental health only among right-wing voters.

In the face of the collective stressor we examined it appears that the national level SOC (SONC) was a strong promoter of mental health among groups with a specific political identity. Among other groups, those with a different political orientation than the government, SONC could be a risk factor for health. Stress management policy planners during crisis time in democratic states should be aware of this. We suggest, for example, that spokespeople during a health crisis should be professionals and experts rather than political figures.

**TABLE 2b. Predicting Mental Health by SOC, SONC, Trust, and Social Support for Left-Wing Voters**

Predictors	<i>b</i>	CI 95% for <i>b</i>		Symbol	Sig.
		Lower	Upper		
SOC	.56	.43	.68	0.47	.000
SONC	.05	-.05	.16	0.06	.310
Trust	.11	-.04	.25	0.08	.151
Social support	.06	.22	.44	0.32	.000

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