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# Cognitive characteristics of political thinking in Hungary

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## Preface

This paper consists of two closely related sections. In the first, the first localized Hungarian statistically reliable version of Webster and Kruglanski's (1994) scale for measuring need for closure (the Need for Closure Scale - NFCS) is presented. The second looks for relations between the data gained from this survey and political ideologies as well as political party preferences. The importance of this study is to learn more about the cognitive characteristics of Hungarian voters in political issues.

## Introduction

There are several kinds of cognitive and motivational needs behind the ideologies somebody can accept. The need for closure is a need as well, which is in the focus of this research. The theory belongs to the group of cognitive style concepts. The precursor of this concept was Adorno (1950) who, in his book titled "The authoritarian personality", presented viewpoints that can be considered as the basis for the later theory of open and closed thinking. Adorno created the F Scale, which in his view is a reliable measure for fascistic thinking, which can be considered the basis for closed thinking. He attributed this type of thinking to proponents of the political Right (Adorno et al, 1950). Moreover this F scale had serious methodological problems (Hunyady, 2005).

Rokeach (1960), who was the first to describe cognitive styles, identified two styles of information processing that we have about society: an open approach, capable of individual consideration, and a closed one, characterized by less flexibility and refinement. He argued that closed thinking can be observed in radical proponents of both leftist and rightist ideologies (Rokeach, 1960).

This theory was amended by Kruglanski and Webster (1994). They created the Need For Closure Scale (NFCS) which measures the relatively stable disposition of an individual's motivational attitude towards closure. There are objections to this scale (Neuberg et al, 1997; Roets et al, 2006). Neuberg et al, (1997) argue that the scale does not measure one dimension. Roets et al, (2006) recommended leaving out some items of the scale.

Over the last few decades, several authors have found connections between political conservatives and closed thinking. Others argued that a high need for closure is equally present in the political Left (summarized by Jost et al, 2002; Kruglanski, 2005). This statement is based on the findings of what several researchers noted, which is that the core of the conservative ideology (which is common independently of where we are talking about it) is that conservatives show resistance to changing and accept social inequalities. The resistance against changing is in connection with the higher need for closure (Jost et al, 2002).

There are only a few recent investigations in the post-communist countries with this scale. One of those is from Zavala and Bergh (2007) whose results showed connection between the higher need for closure and both the traditional and modern worldviews as well on a Polish sample (Zavala and Bergh, 2007). On the other hand, Kossowska and Van Hiel (2003) found connection between the higher need for closure and the acceptance of conservative ideologies both on a Flemish and Polish sample (Kossowska and Van Hiel, 2003). However, it should be noted that a higher need for closure is not necessarily unfavourable. As emphasized by Kruglanski (2005), higher need for closure can be beneficial in certain types of situations.

It is the first investigation in this question in Hungary with the psychometrically reliable means of measurement of NFCS.

## Hypothesis

Our first hypothesis (H1) was that a higher need for closure is present in proponents of both the political Left and Right. This assumption is partially based on the fact that political parties and ideologies in Hungary do not have such well defined camps of voters as do the parties in more developed democracies. In addition it is based on the examination of university students, whose commitments are not so strong with the ideologies and parties because of their age.

Our second hypothesis (H2) was that those respondents who have not changed their party preferences since the last elections (two years before) will show a higher need for closure than those who have changed their preferences, because they have more resistance to change.

**Our Hungarian translation of the NFC Scale**

We asked 258 university students (193 females and 65 males) in the first few month of 2008 to respond to the survey we created by translating Webster and Kruglanski's (1994) original Need for Closure Scale survey to Hungarian. To achieve the most accurate translation possible, the survey was translated from English to Hungarian and back by several translators.

Responding was anonymous and voluntary. The respondents' average age was 21.45 years (SD = 3.7) and the average need for closure is 157,58. (In Webster and Kruglanski's (1994) sample, this number was 154).

We identified four factors instead of the original five:

- Preference of Order and Structure
- Discomfort with Ambiguity and Predictability in one factor
- Decisiveness
- Closed Mindedness

The four factors summarize 37.59% of the whole information. (In Webster and Kruglanski's results, this number was 38%). The Cronbach Alpha values can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1: The Cronbach Alpha values of our translation and of the original Webster and Kruglanski's NFCS (1994)**

	Our research	Webster, Kruglanski (1994):
Preference of Order and Structure	.839	.8216
Discomfort with Ambiguity and Predictability in one factor	.810	.6656
Decisiveness	.791	.7001
Closed Mindedness	.609	.6152

The lowest Cronbach Alpha value was received for the Closed Mindedness factor (Cronbach Alpha = .609, which doesn't differ much from the original scale's Cronbach Alpha, which was 0.6152. (Webster and Kruglanski, 1994)

So, the survey provides a statistically reliable means of measurement, making it a possible first Hungarian version (Csanádi, Harsányi and Szabó, 2009 in press).

**Cognitive characteristics of political thinking**

*The Sample and the method*

The 150 respondents were also asked about their political party preference (at present and two years before at the last election), level of commitment to the party, and specific ideologies (conservative, liberal or socialist). The American researches mainly use a conservative – liberal axis. In Hungary the two strongest parties are the socialists (MSZP) and conservatives (FIDESZ-MPP), so we just asked them which ideologies are the nearest to them from these three. Those who answered correctly for the scale (answered each item and did not exceed the fifteen points of the social desirable scale in the NFCS) and for the other questions, were 78 students.

## Results

### *Party preferences and accepted ideologies of the sample*

We found connection between the party preferences and the political ideologies of voters with the two biggest parties. The other three parties of the Hungarian Parliament, SZDSZ (the liberal party in Hungary) and MDF (a middle-right party in Hungary) had only a few voters in our sample. KDNP, the Hungarian Catholic party did not appear. So we focused only on FIDESZ-MPP and MSZP.

**Table 2: The party preference and accepted ideologies of the sample**

	MSZP	FIDESZ-MPP	SZDSZ	MDF	other	did not vote	all together
conservative	0	22	0	3	0	2	27
liberal	4	6	2	2	2	9	25
socialist	9	1	1	1	1	2	15
did not choose	2	4	0	2	0	3	11
all together	15	33	3	8	3	16	78

### *NFC and ideologies*

Our results show that there is no significant difference ( $F = 0.793$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) between conservative (their average need for closure is 152.3) and socialist (152.7) voters in terms of the need for closure, while liberals (144.2) achieved remarkably lower scores. Henceforth the conservative, liberal and socialist voters differ significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ) from each other in some items of NFCS. (The original sentences of the scale are used here):

Conservative and liberal:

‘I think that having clear rules and order at work is essential for success.’

‘When dining out, I like to go to places where I have been before so that I know what to expect.’

‘When I am confused about an important issue, I feel very upset.’

Socialist and liberal:

‘When faced with a problem I usually see the one best solution very quickly.’

Conservative and socialist:

‘When I am confused about an important issue, I feel very upset.’

### *NFC and party preference*

In addition we did not find any difference (Mann-Whitney,  $t = 0.505$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) between MSZP (the largest Hungarian socialist party) and FIDESZ-MPP (the biggest conservative party) voters either. The average need for closure is 153.8 (SD = 26.3) for MSZP voters and 150.2 (SD = 20.8) for FIDESZ-MPP voters.

### *Party change and NFC*

The most interesting result of this study is that respondents who have changed their party preferences since the last elections showed a higher need for closure than those who have not.

We divided the whole ( $N = 258$ ) sample into three parts based on their need for closure results. The upper 25% of the sample, whose need for closure result was the highest can be named the ‘high need for closure group’. So that 25% of the sample who achieved the lowest score can be named as the ‘low need for closure group’, and the rest of the sample is in the middle group (named ‘middle need for closure group’).

Table 3 shows which group members changed their party preference (between the time of the last election in 2006 and the time of the research), and which did not. In this sample there are only 53 respondents (instead of 78): only that many voted in 2006 (some of them could not vote because they were under eighteen that time) and would now vote.

**Table 3: The persistence or change in party preference for groups based on NFC scores**

groups	did not change	changed their party	all together
low NFC	11	0	11
middle NFC	21	4	25
high NFC	11	6	17
all together	43	10	53

This result surprised us, because it is the opposite of what we expected and it is a significant difference (Mann-Whitney,  $Z = -2.362$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

### Explanations

We found connection between the party preferences and the political ideologies of the two leading parties, but the picture is not so clear. For our non-Hungarian readers we have to note something. In our country (almost twenty years after the demise of the communist system) ideologic identities of the parties are not as clear as in democratically more developed countries like the United States, or Western (not post-communist) countries. This can explain that only the majority of a party's voters choose the same ideology and not every one of them.

Using the NFCS the results showed no difference between the socialist and conservative voters in our Hungarian sample, but distinguished the liberal voters. In addition we did not find any difference between MSZP and FIDESZ voters either. This result supports the viewpoint of those who maintain that high need for closure is equally present in the political left and right.

Of the respondents who have changed their party preferences, most voted two years ago for the socialist party (MSZP, which won the elections in 2006) and would vote now for FIDESZ-MPP. At the time of the research FIDESZ-MPP had more than twice as many voters as MSZP had. One of the explanations can be the bandwagon effect (Henshel and Johnston, 1987) meaning that people tend to side with the party that currently seems to be more likely to win. In addition, it can be noted that people with higher need for closure are more easily affected by the majority, even when „majority” itself changes in the meantime.

So, our explanation of the most surprising result is that people with higher need for closure are not open for new ideologies, they turn to that party from which they expect the right answer: the right and most simple answer with the highest closure. It does not matter where it comes from.

### Future plans

We would like to examine the same questions on a more diverse sample, because university students represent just a small part of the Hungarian voters. We would like to measure ideological preferences by a special set of questions, instead of just accepting the self-claimed preference. This way, we could see which ideology is actually closest to the respondent's personality. Beyond this we would like to measure the ideologies with independent scales and not with bipolar ones as suggested by Kerlinger (1984).

I would like to dedicate this paper to my aunt: Ildikó Harsányi.

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