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The Politics of Dirty Money

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Abstract

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The present study examined how political orientation (i.e., liberal and conservative) influences people's reasonings about, and desire for dirty money. Given prior research on moral foundations, I hypothesized that conservatives would find dirty money more noxious than liberals because they seem to be more sensitive to purity concerns. In the current study, self-reported liberals and conservatives indicate their desire for money across five different scenarios. Overall, the data revealed that political affiliation did not interact with participants' judgments about dirty money. Future research is needed to determine the definitive impact of political orientation on dirty money.

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Introduction

In 2017, the women's filmmaking department at the University of Southern California (USC) received a \$5 million donation from Harvey Weinstein, a millionaire film producer who had been accused—and later convicted—of rape, sexual assault, and sexual misconduct. The controversy sparked national headlines and its implications were widely debated. On the one hand, \$5 million is a substantial amount that had the potential to transform USC's filmmaking program. On the other hand, accepting Weinstein's money could be viewed as disregarding his heinous actions. Ultimately, the University declined Weinstein's donation, because they viewed it as dirty money (Jang, 2017).

What this example reveals is that humans do not perceive money as fungible. Instead, people and institutions consider additional factors such as the source of the money and how it was earned. This thesis summarizes the current literature on dirty money and addresses a gap in the field. Specifically, I was interested in whether people's political leanings interact with their judgments about dirty money. To address this question, I conducted an experiment where participants rated their desire for money in five different situations and then reported their political orientation. With this approach, I was able to provide a first step at expanding the current literature by addressing how interpersonal differences—namely, political orientation— influence people's reasoning about, and desire for, dirty money.

As mentioned earlier, people do not treat a dollar like any other—that is, in contrast to the economic ideal that money is fungible (Coulborn et al., 1950; Thaler et al., 1990), people seem to consider additional factors above and beyond the monetary amount of money when considering its value. For example, bills that are faded, wrinkled, or ripped are less desirable than those that are not (Di Muro & Noseworthy, 2013). What is more, physically dirty money

influences people in the business world to practice greedy tactics whereas physically clean money inspires fair deals (Yang et al., 2013).

Drawing on these findings, Tasimi & Gelman (2017) conducted a series of studies to investigate attitudes on dirty money, that is, money that is both literally and metaphorically dirty. Study after study revealed that people prefer clean money over any version of dirty money, whether it is literally dirty (e.g., money with snot on it) or metaphorically dirty (e.g., stolen money). However, not all dirty money was viewed equally. Instead, Tasimi and Gelman found that individuals fixate on how the money was earned (i.e., its moral history) compared to its owner or source (i.e., its moral association). Interestingly, unlike physically dirty money (in which participants expressed a greater desire for \$100-bill with snot on it compared to a \$1-bill with snot on it), metaphorically dirty money was aversive independent of its amount. What this finding suggests is that people's perceptions of metaphorically dirty money, unlike literally dirty money, are not swayed by potential monetary gains.

Whether people want dirty money is one thing; how they choose to spend it is another. For example, Di Muro & Noseworthy (2013) found that individuals purposefully spend worn bills to avoid other's germs. Furthermore, researchers found that people demonstrate particular spending behaviors for morally dirty money. Specifically, people prefer to spend morally tainted money on virtuous causes, or they avoid spending it altogether (e.g., Levav & McGraw, 2009; Kardos & Castano, 2012). This contrasts with people's tendency to spend clean money on special treats for themselves (e.g., on a restaurant meal or a movie; see Tasimi & Gelman, 2017). Such effects can also be reflected on a broader level—for example, how businesses deal with physically and morally dirty money. For instance, Yang and colleagues (2013) determined that handling physically dirty money causes businesses to overcharge their customers. Additionally,

Chen and colleagues (2017) found that businesses prefer to invest morally dirty money in risky investments compared to neutral investments. Finally, governmental entities also exhibit unique behaviors towards dirty money. Specifically, when the United States Federal Reserve receives a cash deposit, they replace and destroy approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of the bills because they appear “worn-out” (Di Muro & Noseworthy, 2013). The United States also creates laws to limit behaviors that support morally tainted money. For example, prostitution is illegal because people believe that the combination of intimacy and economics is immoral and thus dirty (Zelizer, 2009). Overall, these studies demonstrate how individuals and institutions behave towards dirty money.

Although the research above explains that dirty money influences perceptions and behaviors, it is important to distinguish *why* these dynamics exist. Logically, one may reason that individuals resist dirty money because they fear potential consequences (e.g., getting arrested). However, Tasimi & Gelman (2017) ruled out this possibility. Specifically, when researchers asked participants to rate their desire for morally and physically dirty quarters—an untraceable currency—they found similar results from their previous studies that focused on physical bills, which can be traced. Even so, people might have thought that they were somehow still susceptible to getting caught or receiving punishment. In a follow-up experiment, Tasimi & Gelman (2017) addressed this concern, telling participants that they were immune from legal fallout if they accepted the dirty money. Once again, participants exhibited similar feelings to previous studies. Thus, even when there are no consequences, people remain averse to dirty money.

Since potential consequences are not the primary deterrent, why, then, do individuals dislike dirty money? Belk & Wallendorf (1990) offer a possible explanation. Specifically, they assert that people believe that the immorality of dirty money will seep into their personal

attributes. This explanation is consistent with research on human morality. For example, evidence suggests that people strive to create a positive sense of self through value-consistent behaviors (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Monin & Jordan, 2009). If people accept dirty money, then they could damage their sense of self by violating their value-consistent behaviors. Stellar & Willer (2013) offer additional support for this hypothesis. Specifically, they found that people resist morally tainted money because they anticipate that it will negatively impact their self concept. Nevertheless, this explanation—which focuses on moral taint, so to speak—does not account for a striking pattern found in the studies conducted by Tasimi & Gelman (2017): about 50% of participants reported an equal desire for clean and dirty money in each scenario. This stark division suggests that individual differences may influence how people approach dirty money.

Although many factors may influence the discrepancy described above, I decided to assess the influence of political orientation on people's desire for dirty money. The decision to focus on political orientation was based on prior research that suggests a strong correlation between political orientation and moral foundations. According to Haidt (2008), moral foundations are “sets of values, practices, institutions and evolved psychological mechanisms that... suppress or regulate selfishness and make social life possible” (p. 70). To determine the composition of these moral foundations, Haidt & Joseph (2004) administered a morality questionnaire to people in different cultures across various points in time. Their research yielded two types of moral foundations that appear paramount to human morality and decision making: (1) individualizing foundations and (2) binding foundations.

According to Haidt & Joseph (2004), individualizing foundations protect the rights, well-being, and freedom of others. Overall, they reflect two moral foundations: fairness/reciprocity

and harm/care. On the one hand, humans developed fairness/reciprocity to combat selfish behaviors and promote reciprocal altruism. Over time, these concepts were applied in constructs such as politeness, laws, and the justice system. On the other hand, harm/care mirrors the evolution of empathy and attachment styles. This is demonstrated through behaviors and instincts such as nurturing infants and protecting others from harm's way. Although fairness/reciprocity and harm/care are separated into subcategories, these moral foundations exist in the service of promoting human safety (Haidt & Joseph, 2004).

Looking at binding foundations, Haidt & Joseph (2004) assert that they highlight how individuals relate to group dynamics and divinity. As such, binding foundations hold three moral foundations: (1) in-group loyalty, (2) authoritative approval, (3) purity. In-group loyalty derives from the evolution of coalitional psychology, which refers to the human tendency to form alliances to maximize power and achievement. Anyone who opposes or betrays the group is perceived as an enemy who promotes conflicting goals and beliefs (Kruger, 2021; Kurzban et al., 2001). Meanwhile, authoritative approval stems from hierarchical models that originate in primate evolution. Research suggests that these hierarchies are mutually beneficial for authority figures and subordinates. Specifically, authority figures gain power and respect while subordinates receive protection and guidance (de Waal, 1982). While in-group loyalty and authoritative approval explain how individuals interact in group settings, purity relates to theology and immaculacy. As such, purity reflects religious laws and values such as disgust and contamination (Rozin, Haidt & McCauley, 2000). Additionally, purity is associated with resistance to hedonic tendencies, such as lust and greed (Shweder et al., 1997). Ultimately, in-group loyalty and authoritative approval are moral foundations that support group cohesion whereas purity delves into religiosity and cleanliness.

Graham and colleagues (2009) created a survey consisting of individualizing foundations and binding foundations to assess how liberals and conservatives differ on moral relevance, moral judgments, moral trade-offs, and moral texts. Through the survey data, Graham and colleagues (2009) found that liberals prioritize harm/care and fairness/reciprocity when they assess moral situations; thus, liberals emphasize individualizing foundations over binding foundations (things like in-group bias, authoritative approval, and purity). Conservatives, meanwhile, weigh individualizing foundations and binding foundations almost equally. Even so, they demonstrate a slight preference for individualizing foundations. However, compared to slightly conservative individuals, harm/care and fairness/reciprocity are less important to people who are strongly conservative. Meanwhile, in-group loyalty, authoritarian approval, and purity are more influential for strongly conservative individuals. In other words, individualizing foundations and binding foundations continuously converge for conservatives.

Building off these findings, Graham and colleagues (2009) also asked liberals and conservatives to indicate how much money it would take to violate each moral foundation. Even when they were offered \$100,000, liberals were hesitant to support acts that violated fairness. Liberals also required a large sum of money to inflict harm (around \$100,000). However, they were willing to accept less money for acts that infringed on binding foundations (between \$100-\$100,000). Similar to liberals, conservatives were also reluctant to compromise fairness, even if they were offered a significant payday (between \$100,000-\$1 million). While liberals and conservatives agreed on the importance of fairness, their views on harm/care, in-group loyalty, authoritative approval, and purity were fairly different. Unlike liberals, conservatives were willing to commit harmful behaviors for significantly less money (between \$10,000-\$100,000). Additionally, conservatives required considerably more money to violate binding foundations

(between \$1,000-\$100,000). These trends are clearer with participants who identify as very conservative (Graham et al., 2009).

Given these differences in moral foundations, it is worth examining whether conservatives and liberals differ in their reasoning about, and desire for, dirty money. To investigate this possibility, I replicated a key study from Tasimi & Gelman (2017) and collected participants' self-reported political orientation to explore potential differences between liberals and conservatives. Since Tasimi & Gelman (2017) found that money is intertwined with its moral history, "dirty money" seems to imply impurity. As such, I predicted that conservatives will prefer dirty money less than liberals.

Method

Participants

150 U.S. participants completed this study on Amazon Mechanical Turk ($N = 148$, 44.6% women, 54.7% men, 1 non-binary, $M_{age} = 38$, $SD = 11.16$, age range: 23-72). Participants received 25 cents for completing the study.

Procedure and Materials

Following Tasimi & Gelman (2017), participants rated their desire for a hundred-dollar bill in five scenarios: (1) *neutral-giver/neutral-money* ("Henry has a hundred-dollar bill in his desk. Henry says you can have the hundred-dollar bill, if you want."); (2) *bad-giver/neutral-money* ("Paul stole a hundred-dollar bill from another person. The hundred-dollar bill that he stole is in his pocket. Paul has another hundred-dollar bill that he did not steal in his desk. Paul says you can have the hundred-dollar bill in his desk, if you want."); (3) *neutral-giver/bad money* ("Frank found a stolen hundred-dollar bill in his desk. Frank says you can have the hundred-dollar bill, if you want."); (4) *bad-giver/bad money* ("Brian stole a hundred-dollar bill from

another person. Brian says you can have the hundred-dollar bill, if you want.”); (5) *dirty-money* (“Marvin sneezed and used a hundred-dollar bill to wipe his nose. Marvin says you can have the hundred-dollar bill, if you want.”). Participants indicated their desire on a 7-point scale (1 = “not at all”, 7 = “very much”); scenarios were presented in a random order.

Afterwards, participants disclosed their age, gender, political orientation, and income level. We used these demographics to create exploratory analyses on the relationship between participant’s ratings and their individual differences.

Results

Since this study is a replication of Tasimi & Gelman (2017), I followed their analytic plan for my analysis. Specifically, I conducted a repeated-measures ANOVA on participants’ ratings with scenario as a within-subject factor. Next, I performed three planned comparisons, as was done in Tasimi & Gelman (2017): (1) how moral history compares to moral association by comparing the *neutral-giver/bad-money* and *bad-giver/neutral-money* scenarios; (2) the role of moral history when controlling for the giver’s moral status by comparing the *bad-giver/neutral-money* and *bad-giver/bad-money* scenarios; (3) how the three scenarios involving a moral misdeed compare to the two baseline scenarios.

First, I conducted an ANOVA to determine how participants’ ratings varied across each scenario and found that participants’ ratings did, in fact, differ across scenarios, $F(4, 228) = 60.4$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .29$ (see Figure 1). Next, I assessed the three planned comparisons. On average, people consistently preferred the *bad-giver/neutral-money* scenario ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 2.37$) to the *neutral-giver/bad money* situation ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 2.38$), $t(146) = 8.08$, $p < .001$. This finding indicates that people focus on the money’s moral history more so than its moral association. Additionally, people demonstrated a lower desire for the *bad-giver/bad-money* situation ($M =$

2.28, $SD = 2.25$) compared to the *bad-giver/neutral-money* scenario ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 2.37$), $t(146) = 11.5$, $p < .001$. This suggests that money's moral history has a significant effect on people's desire for money. Lastly, when comparing the three scenarios involving a moral misdeed to the two baseline scenarios, I found that individuals prefer *neutral-giver/neutral-money* and *dirty-money* over *bad-giver/neutral-money*, *bad-giver/bad-money*, *bad-giver/bad-money*, $t(86) = 9.20$, $p < .001$. This implies that people prefer neutral money and physically dirty money over metaphorically dirty money.

Finally, I evaluated how political orientation influenced the participants' desires and perceptions for each scenario (see Figure 2). The results of pairwise t-tests comparing responses to each scenario between conservatives and liberals were the following: (1) *neutral-giver/neutral-money* scenario, $t(28) = 1.53$, $p = .137$, (2) *bad-giver/neutral-money* scenario, $t(28) = .625$, $p = .537$, (3), *neutral-giver/bad-money* scenario, $t(28) = .963$, $p = .344$, (4) *bad-giver/bad-money* scenario, $t(28) = .583$, $p = .565$, (5) *dirty-money* scenario, $t(28) = -.832$, $p = .413$. These numbers indicate that there was no significance between political affiliation and scenario.

Discussion

The current study examined whether political orientation (i.e., liberal and conservative) influences the perception and desire of dirty money (i.e., stolen money). I hypothesized that conservatives would demonstrate a stronger aversion to dirty money compared to liberals. This hypothesis was grounded on the basis of two ideas: (1) dirty money implies impurity and (2) conservatives tend to value purity more than liberals (Graham et al., 2009). My study, however, suggests that political orientation did not seem to influence people's desire for dirty money. Below I consider the current findings in greater detail.

Although the data did not support my hypothesis, this does not mean that political affiliation does not affect the perception or desire of dirty money; additional research is needed to address this issue. Instead, at the very least, this study provides tentative evidence that political orientation does not influence how people reason about the five scenarios created by Tasimi & Gelman (2017). Assuming these findings hold, it appears that liberals and conservatives may have similar views on dirty money which had been stolen. However, stolen money does not represent the totality of dirty money. Instead, there are other versions of dirty money that exist (e.g., drug money, money that was laundered, etc). Given that these other types of dirty money exist, future research should investigate whether and how political orientation may influence people's reasoning about different kinds of dirty money.

While political leanings did not influence the perception of each scenario, the findings reported here were consistent with the data reported in Tasimi & Gelman (2017). Specifically, people preferred clean money to any version of dirty money. Furthermore, people tend to focus on the money's moral history over its moral association, as can be reflected by the fact that participants, on average, preferred the money in the *bad-giver/neutral-money* than in the *neutral-giver/bad-money* scenario.

Limitations

While my hypothesis was not supported by the current findings, there were two primary limitations that may have contributed to the lack of significance between liberals and conservatives with respect to their judgments about dirty money. First, my study had significantly more liberal participants than conservative participants (i.e., 81 liberals v. 29 conservatives). Given the small sample size of conservatives, my study may have lacked the statistical power needed to detect any potential differences between the two groups. Looking

ahead, a larger sample size would be ideal. Second, while it is possible that liberals and conservatives do not hold unique desires for metaphorically dirty money (i.e., stolen), it is plausible that liberals and conservatives will react differently to various “flavors” of dirty money. For example, given that conservatives prioritize in-group loyalty more so than liberals (Graham et al., 2009), conservatives may express a stronger aversion to ingroup members who steal from other ingroup members. It would be interesting for future work to compare liberals and conservatives when it comes to different flavors of dirty money.

Implications

Circling back to the USC example, the dilemma of whether to accept dirty money is heavily reported throughout history and across numerous cultures. On the one hand, some people resist all forms of dirty money. For example, in 1905, Washington Gladden fought to return John D. Rockefeller’s \$100,000 donation to the Congregationalist Church because Rockefeller earned the money through immoral business practices. In Gladden’s eyes, the immorality of dirty money cannot be neutralized, even if it is for a good cause. Instead, he asserted that dirty money taints and punishes any beneficiary (Mislin, 2019). On the other hand, some individuals and organizations welcome dirty money with open arms. For instance, The Salvation Army founder William Booth was a proponent of dirty money. From Booth’s perspective, dirty money is purified once it is used for a good cause (Winston, 1999). Given the inconsistent reactions to this dilemma across various cultures and points in time, it is necessary to determine an explanation for these differences. Assessing individual differences is advantageous because it allows us to determine the variables that explain why some people dislike dirty money more than others. Once researchers identify these specific variables, then they could create interventions to increase peoples’ sensitivity towards dirty money.

Future Directions

Beyond politics, researchers should continue to explore other individual differences that may influence people's attitudes towards dirty money. For example, researchers could investigate how income level influences a person's desire for dirty money. This factor is likely to interact with judgments about dirty money because those with lower income levels may justify accepting dirty money because they are struggling financially. Meanwhile, people who belong to a higher socioeconomic status should not experience this specific justification because they do not necessarily need the (dirty) money to pay for bills or food. Future research should also determine how people perceive dirty money across numerous cultures. While this study analyzes the American perspective of dirty money, it is possible that other cultures view dirty money in a different context. This is plausible because different cultures view money in different ways. For example, Americans associate money with hard work, risk taking, and self-indulgence (Belk & Wallendorf, 1990; Goldberg & Lewis 1978). Meanwhile, the French take a more communal approach. For instance, they associate money with personal connections, commitments, and judgment from others (Hall & Hall 1990; Hofstede, 2001). Some cultures seem to exemplify a mixture of American and French tendencies. For example, the Hindu culture utilizes money to fulfill duties such as taking care of family members. However, Hindus also use money to establish status within their community (Merchant et al, 2015). These findings indicate that cultural differences may explain why people assess the dirty money dilemma. Overall, understanding how culture may interact with people's reasoning about dirty money presents many open and interesting questions.

Conclusion

Altogether, the data in the current study does not support my hypothesis that political orientation influences people's desire for dirty money. That said, this study provides a first attempt at making sense of this issue, which is why future research should continue to examine the potential influence of political orientation on the dilemma of dirty money. Determining this relationship—and uncovering the potential role of other individual difference factors—can help shed light on why some people are bothered by dirty money and others are not.

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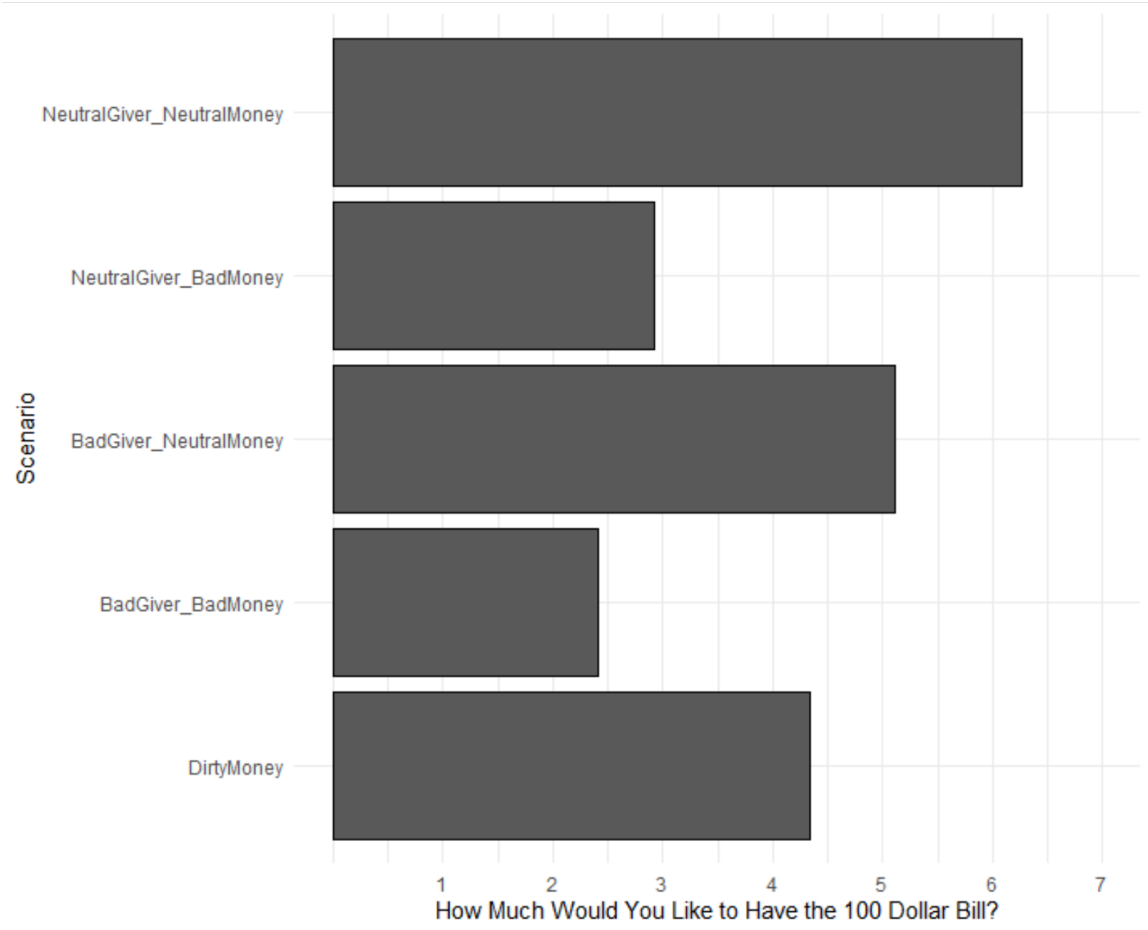


Figure 1. Average score for within-subject scenario.

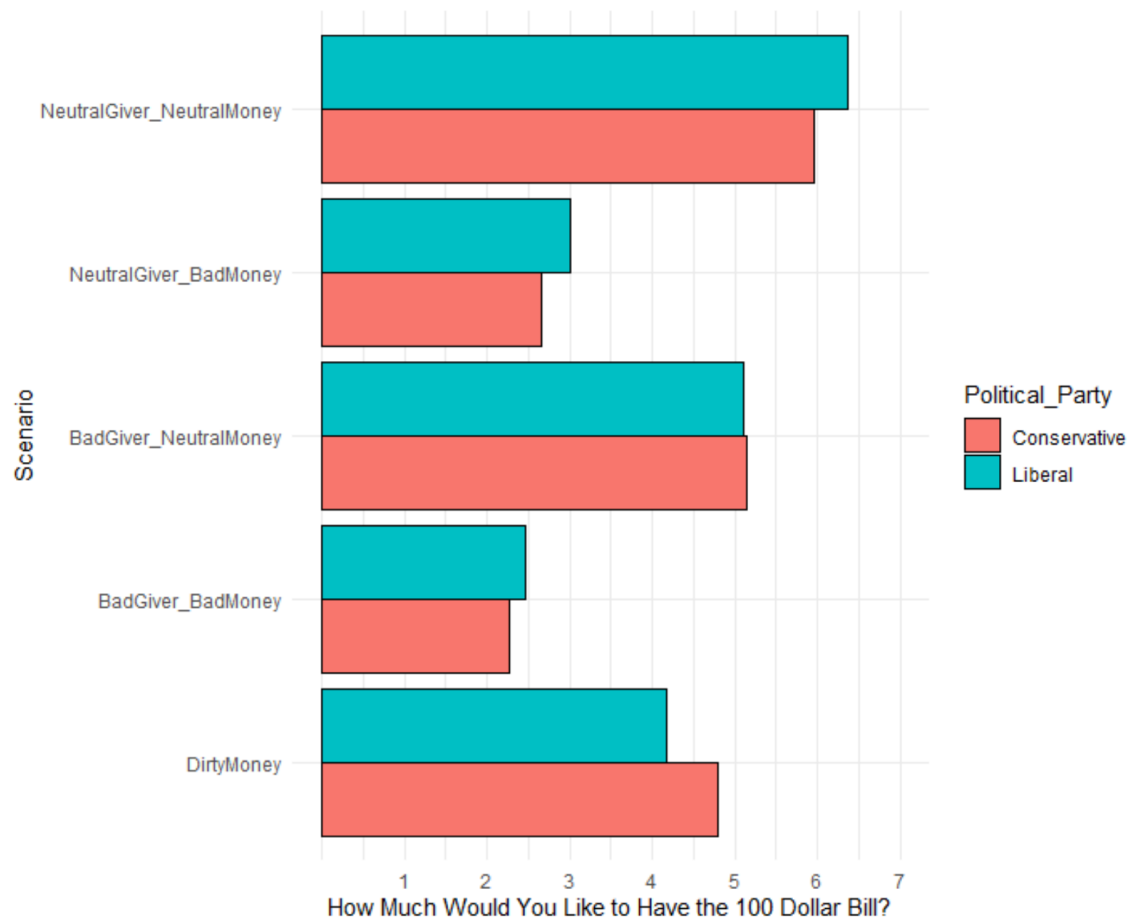


Figure 2. Average score for within-subject scenarios, partitioned by the between-subject variable of political party affiliation.