



## On a slippery slope to intolerance: Individual difference in slippery slope beliefs predict outgroup negativity<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Slippery slope beliefs capture the idea that a non-problematic action will lead to unpreventable and harmful outcomes. While this idea has been examined in legal and philosophical literatures, there has been no psychological research into the individual propensity to hold slippery slope beliefs. Across five studies and six samples (combined  $N = 5,974$ ), we developed and tested an individual difference measure of slippery slope beliefs, finding that it predicted intolerance of outgroup freedoms above and beyond key demographic and psychological predictors (Studies 1–2 and 5). We also found that slippery slope beliefs predict intolerance of debated behaviors in two countries (Study 3), and that it predicted agreement with real-world slippery slope examples across the political spectrum (Studies 4–5).

“The tsunami of Islamization forms a direct threat to the world as we know it and is the beginning of the end of our Western norms and values that are so dear to us”

(Geert Wilders, leader of the Dutch far-right Party for Freedom. *GeenStijl*, January 23th, 2007)

“There are so many emerging parallels with early fascist developments that to deny the potential to slide down such a slope would be to have your head firmly in the sand. I don’t believe we can yet be said to be sliding but the slope is there” (thread posting on the topic “*Are we on the slippery slope to fascism?*”, UKC<sup>1</sup>)

In public and political discourses, people use a range of methods to try to engage and persuade fellow citizens or political actors (Corner et al., 2011; Froehlich and Rüdiger, 2006; Gronbeck, 2004; McNair, 2017). Among these methods is the so-called “slippery slope” whereby a non-problematic proposal or event is presented as the beginning of an inevitable process of cause and effect that will likely end in harmful or unacceptable results (van der Burg, 1991; Volokh, 2003). For example, in the first quote above, it is argued that Muslim immigration eventually will lead to the destruction of Western culture. Similar arguments, such

that allowing speeches by right-wing political figures leads us on the path of fascism and ethnic cleansing are also common, as illustrated in the second quote.

Slippery-slope beliefs can be problematic, especially in the case of outgroup negativity and intolerance. Perceived threat is an important driver of outgroup negativity (e.g., Riek et al., 2006; Stephan and Renfro, 2002) and slippery slope beliefs might lead people to see single events as the first step on a road to a dangerous intergroup outcome, and therefore might reduce people’s openness to the practices and beliefs of others. However, individuals will differ in their general endorsement of slippery slope beliefs, with some individuals being more likely to think that there will be negative cascading outcomes to specific events than others. Understanding such individual differences in slippery slope beliefs may help us understand their importance for intergroup relations.

In this research, we provide a conceptualization of general slippery slope beliefs and develop a brief scale that allows for a comprehensive and comparative study of individual differences. Using six separate national samples from five large-scale studies conducted in two countries (Netherlands and Germany), we sought to validate slippery slope beliefs and measurement, and examine its distinctiveness from other

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ukclimbing.com/forums/off\\_belay/are\\_we\\_on\\_the\\_slippery\\_slope\\_to\\_fascism-707323?v=1](https://www.ukclimbing.com/forums/off_belay/are_we_on_the_slippery_slope_to_fascism-707323?v=1)

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theoretically meaningful correlates of outgroup intolerance (i.e., testing the unique associations between slippery slope beliefs and outgroup intolerance). We also examine the relevance of slippery slope beliefs for the evaluation of concrete examples of slippery slope arguments across the political spectrum.

## 1. Slippery slope beliefs

The academic literature has primarily focused on slippery slope reasoning as a logical and philosophical investigation of (flawed) argumentations in which a first action is considered to lead to unacceptable consequences, such as by distinguishing the logical, empirical and apocalyptic types of slippery slope argumentation (e.g., Collins and Hahn, 2018; Schauer, 1985; van der Burg, 1998; Volokh, 2003; Walton, 2015). In psychology, very little research has been conducted on slippery slope beliefs or argumentation. In one article, Corner and colleagues (2011) investigated the psychological underpinning of this form of thinking, and found that people's agreement with slippery slope arguments rests on how similar they consider the first (innocuous) action and the proposed (unacceptable) final consequence. Other empirical research (Haigh et al., 2016) suggests that people who hear slippery slope arguments make inferences about what the person making the argument believes about the initial action, and that these inferences can affect the persuasiveness of the slippery slope message.

In contrast to this focus on reasoning processes, the aim of the current research is to investigate individual differences in general slippery slope beliefs: the tendency to think that small or unobjectionable actions or events will inevitably lead to negative consequences. To our knowledge, no research has considered slippery slope beliefs as a general individual difference variable and investigated how these beliefs may relate to outgroup intolerance. Yet, individuals are likely to differ in their general propensity to see social events in terms of a slippery slope (Volokh, 2003; Walton, 2015). For example, when presented with a proposal regarding government spying on suspected terrorists or criminals, some individuals might be more likely to believe that if the government is permitted to spy on known criminals or terror suspects (unobjectionable action), it will end up using that power in an authoritarian manner to spy on ordinary citizens or political opponents (harmful consequence). These individuals will be inclined to perceive this as a likely chain of events because they in general tend to believe that an unobjectionable or a small action is a first step on an inevitable road to disaster (e.g., Corner et al., 2011; Volokh, 2003; Walton, 2015). Furthermore, the belief in this tendency for unobjectionable or small actions to lead to harmful outcomes goes beyond mistrust of other individuals in that it reflects how the world tends to work, beyond malevolent actors. It is the individual difference in general slippery slope beliefs that is examined here.

In introducing the concept of slippery slope beliefs, it is important to consider theoretically meaningful criterion measures. Specifically, as slippery slope beliefs involve the fear that any ground given up will result in the loss of a lot more, this may relate with the well-established concept of generalized trust for others (e.g., Delhey et al., 2011). Further, slippery slope beliefs reflect a feeling of the inability to control the consequences of small decisions and believing that they will inevitably lead to uncontrollable consequences, and therefore might reflect a weak sense of personal control (Lachman and Weaver, 1998). Alternatively, it might be that slippery slope beliefs, which usually involve believing in a catastrophic outcome, reflects the same irrationality of conspiratorial thinking (Brotherton et al., 2013; Van Prooijen et al., 2015). We also considered whether slippery slope beliefs might reflect a propensity to be less focused on the immediate present (and more focused on the future), by having a pessimistic outlook on life (optimism versus pessimism; Chang, 2001), or by thinking of all the potential (negative) consequences of present actions rather than the current unproblematic nature of these actions (Zhang et al., 2013). Based on our expectation that the slippery slope construct is a distinct individual

belief, we predicted that slippery slope beliefs are empirically distinct from these other constructs. Using six large scale data sets from two countries, we tested this expectation by examining various measurement models in confirmatory factor analyses, by investigating the correlations between similar but distinct concepts, and by assessing the unique predictive value of slippery slope beliefs on intolerance.

### 1.1. Outgroup intolerance

As illustrated in the quotes opening this article, one relevant risk of slippery slope beliefs is the reduced willingness to tolerate differences. This may be because slippery slope reflects a sense of threat to the status quo, which drives outgroup negativity and intolerance. Research on intergroup threat has demonstrated that various forms of threat predict prejudice toward many different outgroups and across different cultural contexts (e.g., Riek et al., 2006; Stephan et al., 2009). Given the importance of perceived threat in generating outgroup negativity, the risk of slippery slope beliefs become apparent. Individuals who are more susceptible to slippery slope thinking are more likely to consider a cascade of dangers as reasonably arising from accepting relatively benign outgroup practices and cultural expressions. As such, even these benign practices and cultural expressions can raise the specter of threatening outcomes leading to intolerance toward other groups.

We further consider the role of slippery slope beliefs for outgroup intolerance in relation to political orientation. Forms of slippery slope reasoning might be more common among conservatives than liberals because conservatives tend to score higher on measures of personal needs for structure and order, rigidity and cognitive closure, and focus more on respect for tradition and retaining the status quo (e.g., Jost et al., 2003; Jost, 2017). However, general slippery slope beliefs do not only have to characterize the psychology of the right, but might have a broader meaning and be used both by the political left and right (see opening quotes), in line with the ideological-conflict hypothesis (Brandt, Reyna, Chambers, Crawford, & Wetherell, 2014; Crawford and Brandt, 2020) and research on bipartisan bias (Ditto et al., 2019). We examine in all six samples the relation between slippery slope beliefs and political orientation, and then test whether these beliefs are uniquely associated with outgroup intolerance over and above other psychological constructs. Additionally, we examine the relevance of individual differences in general slippery slope beliefs for evaluating the possible negative implications of various real-world scenarios that either the political right or the political left is particularly concerned about. By testing whether slippery slope beliefs are associated with societal developments that align with or against ideological worldviews, we are able to examine whether these beliefs are a general phenomenon that occurs across the political spectrum, or rather whether it is specific to the political right.

### 1.2. Current research

The goal of our research was to investigate the concept of general slope beliefs and to understand how these beliefs relate to outgroup intolerance. To accomplish this, we first focused on developing a brief scale that allows for assessing general slippery slope beliefs in various contexts.

We used a three-step procedure for developing such a scale (Hahn et al., 2015; Hinkin, 1998). First, based on the theoretical literature and our conceptualization of slippery slope beliefs, we developed a pool of twelve possible items and, through consultation with peers both individually and in groups, selected six that had high face validity. In a second step, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) across the six large-scale national samples to examine the clustering of the items, evaluating the fit of different factor solutions and testing for measurement equivalence across Germany and the Netherlands. Furthermore, we examined different measurement models to determine whether a slippery slope beliefs construct empirically differs from measures of

generalized trust, sense of control, conspiratorial thinking, present-oriented focus, pessimism, optimism, authoritarianism, open-mindedness, and close-mindedness. Additionally, we examine whether the slippery slope measure is distinct, but related to, these constructs.

In addition to establishing the psychometric properties and empirical distinctiveness of the measure, we tested the expectation that slippery slope beliefs predict unique variance in intolerance towards cultural diversity and Muslim minorities, and with real-world examples of slippery slope arguments. Specifically, we examined whether slippery slope beliefs predicted intolerance toward minorities, above and beyond additional measures (Study 2), including political orientation (Studies 1–5), as well as status-quo conservatism and normative conformity (Study 3) as two key predispositions underlying political orientation (Jost et al., 2003). We also examined whether individual difference in general slippery slope beliefs is related to the acceptance of slippery slope reasoning about concrete societal developments that are mainly of concern for conservatives or rather for liberals (Studies 4 and 5). This allows us to examine whether slippery slope beliefs are specifically relevant for the political right or rather is used across the political spectrum.

### 1.3. Slippery slope measure

We collected a pool of twelve possible items to include in the slippery slope measure. We then asked eight peers (individually and subsequently in a group discussion) to identify the items that are most reflective of slippery slope beliefs, and we selected six items that inter-subjectively were considered to have the highest face validity. To be consistent with our aims, the formulation and selection of the items was subject to two criteria. One was that the items should pertain to general slippery slope beliefs without referencing any social groups or political events and actors, which could make the measure tautological with the various social attitudes and behaviors that it should predict. The second was that we wanted the scale to be as short as possible to enable researchers to measure slippery slope beliefs without overwhelming respondents, especially in large-scale research including public opinion research.

Based on these criteria, six items (on a 7-point Likert-scale) were considered to most clearly capture how small or unproblematic things can lead to dangerous or harmful outcomes. The following six items were used in the five studies, in a total of six national samples: (1) “If you give people one finger, they will eventually take the whole hand”, (2) “Tolerating small changes ultimately leads to major problems”, (3) “It doesn’t take much for things to get out of hand”, (4) “If you start to be okay with all sorts of things, you will slowly but surely end up on a slippery slope”, (5) “Small concessions often go from bad to worse”, and (6) “Once you start giving in, soon you cannot go back”.<sup>2</sup>

We then conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test whether a one-factor model is appropriate across all of the samples. The model fit for a single factor was acceptable once we allowed the two items that emphasize ‘small changes’ to correlate based on modification indices<sup>3</sup>,  $\chi^2(8) = 271.189, p < .001$ ; RMSEA = 0.074 [0.067-0.082]; CFI

<sup>2</sup> The items were developed in Dutch and for the German sample the back-translation procedure was used involving two bilingual persons.

<sup>3</sup> Modification indices across all samples suggested correlating the error terms of items 2 and 5 which both have a similar phrasing in stating that *small changes* will result in *problematic* outcomes. While Landis, Edwards, and Cortina (2009) note the risks of capitalizing on chance from the unique traits of specific samples, we would like to emphasize the consistency of this correlation across six national samples in two countries.

= 0.986; SRMR = 0.018.<sup>4</sup> See Table 1 for means, standard deviations, and factor scores for all items across the six samples, and see Table 2 for scale descriptives across the six samples.

In order to test whether the scale was interpreted similarly across the six samples, we tested for measurement invariance. We conducted this test in Mplus (Muthén and Muthén, 2011) by comparing the model fit of a configural model (allowing both intercepts and loadings to vary across samples) to a metric model (allowing intercepts across samples to vary), which was compared to a scalar model (which assumes the invariance or equivalence of factor structure, factor loading, and intercepts across samples). Investigation of the fit indices for the modified models were found to be very similar across the configural;  $\chi^2(40) = 328.49, p < .001$ , RMSEA = 0.085 [0.077-0.094], CFI = 0.98, SRMR = 0.022; metric;  $\chi^2(60) = 549.82, p < .001$ , RMSEA = 0.091 [0.084-0.098], CFI = 0.97, SRMR = 0.083; and scalar;  $\chi^2(80) = 658.14, p < .001$ ; RMSEA = 0.085 [0.079-0.091], CFI = 0.96, SRMR = 0.081; models. While chi-square difference tests indicated that the scalar model did not fit as well as the metric,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 108.32, \Delta df = 20, p < .001$ , and that the metric did not fit as well as the configural,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 221.34, \Delta df = 20, p < .001$ , these tests are usually significant with large sample sizes and therefore less meaningful (e.g., Hooper et al., 2008). The CFI difference tests ( $\Delta CFI$ ) support the invariance of the scale (scalar versus metric  $\Delta CFI = -0.01$ ; metric versus configural  $\Delta CFI = -0.01$ ). As recommended by Cheung and Rensvold (2002), a  $\Delta CFI$  (equal or smaller than -0.01) is a better indicator of change in goodness-of-fit as it is independent of sample size, complexity of the model, and overall fit. Given the similar fit indices across the three models, there is evidence for the generalizability and stability of our measure of slippery slope beliefs across multiple samples in two countries.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the scale was reliable in the different samples and the mean scores across studies were similar (Table 2). Given the support for an adequate slippery slope scale, we proceed to testing its unique role in understanding outgroup intolerance.

## 2. Study 1

Study 1 tested the predictive validity of the slippery slope measure by examining whether it independently predicts the endorsement of multicultural recognition in relation to immigrants and the acceptance of Muslim minority expressive rights. In doing so, we tested whether slippery slope beliefs predicted these outcomes over and above key demographic variables including education and political orientation. Furthermore, we also controlled for overall group-based feelings towards immigrants and Muslims and for national identification, which is typically associated with outgroup negativity and intolerance toward immigrants and Muslim minorities in ethnic nations such as the Netherlands (e.g., Pehrson et al., 2009).<sup>6</sup>

### 2.1. Method

**Participants.** A subsample of 416 ethnic Dutch participants within a larger national on-line survey on societal changes and cultural diversity completed the slippery slope beliefs measure. Of these participants slightly more than half were male (50.7%) and 38% was highly educated

<sup>4</sup> A two-factor model which treated the two correlated items (2 and 5) as a separate factor revealed an identical fit to the single factor model which allowed covariances to correlate. As treating these items as a distinct factor did not make theoretical sense, we used the parsimonious one-factor structure.

<sup>5</sup> While we opted for the Cheung and Rensvold (2002) standard, see also the more stringent guidelines recommended by Meade, Johnson, and Braddy (2008), along with their suggestion of flexibility when scales are for research (vs. individual assessment) purposes.

<sup>6</sup> Data and additional materials can be found on the Open Science Framework: [https://osf.io/4pehm/?view\\_only=70b833e7e7ef455b9bbfa5d11398389](https://osf.io/4pehm/?view_only=70b833e7e7ef455b9bbfa5d11398389). The studies were not pre-registered.

**Table 1**

Means (M), standard deviations (SD), and CFA factor scores (FS) for all six items of the slippery slope scale across six separate samples (five studies).

Item	Study 1		Study 2		Study 3a		Study 3b		Study 4		Study 5	
	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>FS</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>FS</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>FS</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>FS</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>FS</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>FS</i>
1	4.61 (2.10)	0.695	4.63 (1.91)	0.790	4.61 (2.12)	0.834	4.62 (2.20)	0.745	4.89 (2.01)	0.811	4.40 (2.73)	0.846
2	4.14 (2.46)	0.813	4.02 (2.19)	0.712	4.06 (2.18)	0.757	4.09 (2.23)	0.622	4.23 (2.25)	0.757	4.05 (2.51)	0.743
3	4.73 (2.18)	0.812	4.90 (1.42)	0.533	4.78 (1.90)	0.703	4.79 (1.81)	0.719	5.01 (0.171)	0.712	4.56 (2.39)	0.706
4	4.95 (2.24)	0.893	4.84 (1.83)	0.860	4.90 (1.97)	0.783	4.99 (1.97)	0.801	5.13 (1.72)	0.752	4.57 (2.57)	0.843
5	4.49 (2.49)	0.924	4.28 (1.85)	0.768	4.35 (2.02)	0.830	4.19 (2.00)	0.586	4.49 (2.18)	0.829	4.22 (2.40)	0.803
6	5.04 (2.40)	0.826	4.97 (1.75)	0.772	4.94 (2.12)	0.754	5.10 (1.88)	0.805	5.14 (1.86)	0.649	4.50 (2.90)	0.766

Note. *FS* signifies the factor score for each item into the latent variable for that sample. Study 1 *N* = 416, Study 2 *N* = 403, Study 3a *N* = 1,688, Study 3b *N* = 2,046, Study 4 *N* = 404, Study 5 *N* = 1,017.

**Table 2**

*N*, means, standard deviations, and reliability for slippery slope beliefs across the six samples

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>ρ</i> Reliability
Study 1	416	4.66	1.26	0.93
Study 2	403	4.61	1.01	0.89
Study 3 (Dutch sample)	1,688	4.61	1.11	0.90
Study 3 (German sample)	2,046	4.63	1.01	0.86
Study 4	404	4.81	1.05	0.89
Study 5	1,017	4.48	1.26	0.91

Note. Slippery slope beliefs were measured using 7-point likert-type scales. In Study 5, 11-point likert-type scales were used, but for this composite analysis, the 11-point scale was converted to a 7-point scale for comparability. The means and standard deviations presented here are calculated from the latent variable using MPLus. Reliability is calculated for latent variables (Raykov, 2009).

(at least propaedeutic certificate at the University), 45.7% had a middle level of education (vocational training and high school pre-university education), and 16.3% had relatively lower education (no education/primary school, lower secondary vocational training). Average participant age was 51.6 (*SD* = 17.01) years, and participants were near the midpoint on a 1 (extreme left) to 5 (extreme right) political self-placement scale (*M* = 2.89; *SD* = 1.22; Jost, 2006).

2.2. Measures

**Multicultural recognition.** To measure multicultural recognition in relation to immigrants, we used four items taken from previous research (Verkuyten, 2009) that formed a latent construct (*M* = 4.18, *SD* = 1.01; Latent  $\rho$  = 0.81; e.g., “Immigrants must be able to preserve traditions and customs that are important to them”).

**Muslim minority expressive rights.** Of the sample of 416, 197 participants also received a measure of acceptance of Muslims minority expressive rights which was drawn from previous work in the Netherlands (e.g., Gieling, Thijs, & Verkuyten, 2010; Smeekes et al., 2011), comprising six items (e.g., “Muslims in the Netherlands must be able to show and experience their own faith in public life”; *M* = 4.23, *SD* = 1.24; Latent  $\rho$  = 0.88).

**General feelings toward refugees and immigrants.** We measured general feelings toward refugees and immigrants using the average of two feeling thermometer scales which formed a latent variable (*M* = 5.36, *SD* = 2.18; Latent  $\rho$  = 0.93, *r* = 0.88). We also used a single feeling thermometer scale (11-point) with Muslims as the target group to measure general feelings toward Muslims living in the Netherlands (*M* = 5.38, *SD* = 2.39).

**Control variables.** In addition to age, gender, and political orientation, we included educational level and national identification to create a more stringent test of the unique role of slippery slope beliefs on multicultural recognition and Muslim minority rights. First, a wealth of research indicates that higher education is associated with more tolerant outgroup attitudes (Jenssen and Engesbak, 1994; Wagner and Zick, 1995), a better understanding of the importance of values of equality

and tolerance in democratic societies (Vogt, 1997; Sniderman et al., 1989), and higher cognitive abilities and flexibility (Bobo and Licari, 1989; Ohlander et al., 2005). Similar to other research (e.g., De Graaf et al., 2000), education was treated as a continuous variable in the analysis. Second, we used a validated single item (10-point scale; *M* = 8.50, *SD* = 1.51) to measure national identification (Postmes et al., 2013).<sup>7</sup>

2.3. Results

**Measurement model.** First, CFA analysis in Mplus was used to determine whether the four latent constructs (slippery slope beliefs, multicultural recognition, Muslim minority rights, and feelings toward immigrants) fit a four-construct solution. We found that a four-factor model is superior to other possible models,  $\chi^2$  (128) = 306.342 *p* < .001; RMSEA = 0.058 [0.050-0.066], CFI = 0.96, SRMR = 0.049,  $\Delta \chi^2$  = 79.786,  $\Delta df$  = 3, *p* < .001 (see appendix for details).

**Multiple regressions.** Using Mplus, we constructed a model testing whether slippery slope beliefs predicted support for multicultural recognition and for Muslim minority expressive rights, while controlling for political orientation, national identification, education, age, sex, and general feelings toward immigrants and Muslims, respectively. The results show that slippery slope beliefs are independently related to the recognition of immigrant cultures,  $\beta$  = -0.29, *SE* = 0.05, *p* < .001, full model *R*<sup>2</sup> = 0.39 (0.32 without slippery slope beliefs). The more people are inclined to display slippery slope beliefs in general, the less strongly they endorse immigrants maintaining and practicing their distinct culture.<sup>8</sup>

For the endorsement of Muslim minority rights, we also found an independent relationship with slippery slope beliefs,  $\beta$  = -0.37, *SE* = 0.08, *p* < .001, full model *R*<sup>2</sup> = 0.49 (0.43 without slippery slope beliefs), such that a stronger tendency to have general slippery slope beliefs was associated with lower endorsement of Muslim minority rights.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, we noted that slippery slope beliefs were not equally prevalent across the political spectrum, as the measure was positively

<sup>7</sup> MPlus multiple imputation was used to impute missing values for 57 participants who did not identify their political orientation and 1 participant who did not respond to the measure of national identification.

<sup>8</sup> Among other variables, positive attitudes toward immigrants,  $\beta$  = 0.11, *SE* = 0.02, *p* < .001, and education,  $\beta$  = 0.06, *SE* = 0.03, *p* = .018, were significantly associated with greater acceptance of immigrant practices, while political orientation (increasing right-wing orientation),  $\beta$  = -0.15, *SE* = 0.04, *p* < .001, was associated with lesser acceptance. Gender was marginally associated with greater acceptance of immigrant practices,  $\beta$  = 0.16, *SE* = 0.08, *p* = .056, while age,  $\beta$  = 0.00, *SE* = 0.00, *p* = .949, and national identification,  $\beta$  = 0.02, *SE* = 0.03, *p* = .391, were not significantly associated with acceptance.

<sup>9</sup> Positive attitudes toward Muslims,  $\beta$  = 0.17, *SE* = 0.03, *p* < .001, education,  $\beta$  = 0.13, *SE* = 0.04, *p* = .001, and national identification,  $\beta$  = 0.12, *SE* = 0.05, *p* = .011, were associated with greater acceptance of Muslim practices, and political orientation,  $\beta$  = -0.16, *SE* = 0.06, *p* = .012, was associated with lesser acceptance of Muslim practices. Age,  $\beta$  = -0.00, *SE* = 0.00, *p* = .485, and gender,  $\beta$  = -0.00, *SE* = 0.13, *p* = .996, were not associated with acceptance.

correlated with political orientation ( $r = 0.37, p < .001$ ), indicating that the more politically right-wing participants were, the more they tended to endorse slippery slope beliefs.

The results of this study provide evidence for the unique predictive value of the proposed construct of general slippery slope beliefs, which was assessed without reference to any social groups, political events, and societal changes. These beliefs predicted lower recognition of immigrants' cultures and lower support for Muslim minority rights. Importantly, we found these associations above and beyond the statistical effects of general feelings toward the target groups as well as political orientation, national identification, and education as three key predictors of anti-immigrant prejudice. Indeed, of all variables included in the models, increases in the slippery slope beliefs variable predicted the strongest decrease in recognition of immigrants' cultures and support for Muslims minority rights.

### 3. Study 2

Study 2 expanded the distinctiveness and unique predictive value of slippery slope beliefs alongside other theoretically related constructs of generalized trust (Delhey et al., 2011), sense of control (Lachman and Weaver, 1998), conspiratorial thinking (Brotherton et al., 2013; Van Prooijen et al., 2015), and a present-oriented focus (Zhang et al., 2013). Furthermore, considering these constructs allowed us to examine the nature of slippery slope beliefs in relation to theoretically meaningful criterion measures. More specifically, slippery slope beliefs were expected to be negatively associated with generalized trust and sense of control, and positively with conspiratorial thinking and a focus on the present. We then examined whether slippery slope beliefs predicted intolerance of Muslim expressive rights above and beyond the other psychological variables.

#### 3.1. Method

**Participants.** A sample of 403 ethnic Dutch participants were recruited from another national data collection on social attitudes. These participants were 54.3% female, slightly above middle age on average ( $M = 54.20, SD = 16.61$ ), mostly higher (48.9%) or middle (26.6%) educated, rather than low educated (24.6%), and near the midpoint of the political spectrum (1–7 scale from left-wing to right-wing,  $M = 3.94, SD = 1.40$ ).

#### 3.2. Measures

**Muslim expressive rights.** To measure the endorsement of Muslim expressive rights, we used five of the six items from Study 1 ( $M = 3.83, SD = 1.27$ ; Latent  $\rho = 0.89$ ).

**General trust.** We measured general trust with four items (e.g., "Most people are honest in principle") adapted from Yamagishi, 1986; Yamagishi and Yamagishi, 1994). The measurement model revealed that one item fit especially poorly with the others (see below) and therefore was excluded ( $M = 3.83, SD = 0.70$ ; Latent  $\rho = 0.63$ ).

**Sense of control.** We measured sense of control with four items adapted from Lachman and Weaver (1998; e.g., "I can do almost everything I really want"). The measurement model indicated that one item did not fit the construct well, leaving three items to form the latent construct ( $M = 4.75, SD = 0.91$ ; Latent  $\rho = 0.74$ ).

**Conspiratorial thinking.** To measure this construct, we used four items drawn from a measure involving examples that are relevant to the Dutch context (Brotherton et al., 2013; Van Prooijen et al., 2015): e.g., "A small secret group of people is responsible for all important decisions in the world, such as starting wars" ( $M = 4.23, SD = 0.94$ ; Latent  $\rho = 0.71$ ).

**Present-oriented focus.** Drawing on a validated measure of the Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory (Zhang et al., (2013)), we used the future and present hedonism subscales to create a four-item scale

intended to measure present vs. future focused perspective. However, the measurement model reported below, indicated that the future items ( $r = 0.20$ ) did not fit with the present items, and that the future items did not form a subscale of their own. Therefore, the two future items were excluded, and the two present items were retained to form a measure of present focus ( $M = 2.75, SD = 0.60$ ; Latent  $\rho = 0.52$ ;  $r = 0.34$ ).

**Control variables.** Political orientation, Dutch national identification ( $M = 8.32, SD = 1.51$ ), education, gender, and age were all measured using the same items as in Study 1.

#### 3.3. Results

**Measurement model.** We tested a measurement model in Mplus (Muthén and Muthén, 2011) to examine whether slippery slope beliefs, general trust, sense of control, conspiratorial thinking, and present-oriented focus are empirically distinct constructs. Initial investigations of the models indicated that a number of items fit poorly within their constructs. Specifically, the two future-orientation items ("I often think about what the future will bring"; "I would like to finish my work and tasks before I do things for pleasure") did not fit well (the second item fit especially poorly,  $\beta = 0.19, SE = 0.14, p = .169$ , leading to both items being dropped to avoid a single-item scale). The second trust item ("Most people will trust others if they themselves are trusted by them.",  $\beta = 0.14, SE = 0.06, p = .022$ ) and the fourth sense of control item ("Whether I get what I want depends entirely on myself.",  $\beta = 0.27, SE = 0.05, p < .001$ ) were similarly excluded. As can be seen in Table 3, the model that kept each of the predicted factors separate had an acceptable fit, and was superior to all of the second-level models where the slippery slope factor was paired with one of the other factors.

As expected, slippery slope beliefs were negatively associated with generalized trust ( $r = -0.64, p < .001$ ) and sense of control ( $r = -0.36, p < .001$ ), and positively with conspiratorial thinking ( $r = 0.62, p < .001$ ), but unexpectedly not to a present-oriented focus ( $r = -0.13, p < .087$ ). These findings provide further evidence of the validity of the slippery slope measure consistent with the CFA, as we find mid-to-high relationships between slippery slope beliefs and these theoretically related constructs, indicating that the slippery slope beliefs measure is related

**Table 3**  
Confirmatory factor analysis MPlus models for Study 2.

Model Description	$\chi^2$ (df)	$\Delta \chi^2$ (df)	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA [95%]
1. All items combined	1698.852 (229)***		0.615	0.099	0.126 [0.121-0.132]
2. Slippery slope + General Trust	630.434 (219)***	1068.418 (10)***	0.892	0.062	0.068 [0.062-0.075]
2. Slippery slope + Sense of Control	804.400 (219)***	894.452 (10)***	0.847	0.071	0.081 [0.075-0.088]
2. Slippery slope + Conspiratorial Thinking	694.776 (219)***	1004.076 (10)***	0.876	0.063	0.073 [0.067-0.080]
2. Slippery slope + Present Focus	625.170 (219)***	1073.682 (10)***	0.894	0.065	0.068 [0.062-0.074]
2. Slippery slope + Muslim Practices	1222.042 (219)***	476.81 (10)***	0.738	0.084	0.107 [0.101-0.112]
3. All factors maintained separate	548.699 (214)***	76.471 (5)***	0.912	0.057	0.062 [0.056-0.069]

Note. Second level models (designated by number 2) combined the slippery slope measure in a single factor with another one of the measures. The rest of the measures were left as independent factors. Second level models were compared to the "all items combined" model (designated by number 1); the "all predicted model" (designated by number 3) was then compared to best fitting model among the second level models.

to, but remains distinct from, these constructs. We also again found that slippery slope beliefs were positively associated with right-wing political orientation ( $r = 0.31, p < .001$ ).

**Muslim expressive rights.** To test whether slippery slope beliefs predicted the endorsement of Muslim expressive rights, we used MPlus to construct a multiple regression model in which we regressed endorsement on to slippery slope beliefs, general trust, sense of control, conspiratorial thinking, present-oriented focus, political orientation, national identification, education, age, and gender. Similar to Study 1, higher slippery slope beliefs were associated with lower endorsement of Muslim expressive rights, above and beyond the other psychological and demographic predictors (Table 4), combined  $R^2 = 0.42$  (0.38 without slippery slope beliefs), and predicting a similar decrease in endorsement of Muslim rights as conspiratorial thinking.

Thus, the results of Study 2 support and extend the findings of Study 1. General slippery slope beliefs appear to be a distinct empirical construct that is associated both positively and negatively with other relevant psychological constructs in the expected directions, while nonetheless being distinct from those constructs. Furthermore, slippery slope beliefs are an important independent predictor of the endorsement of Muslim minority expressive rights.

#### 4. Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 were both conducted in the Netherlands, raising the possibility that the findings are unique to this national context. Therefore, a first goal of Study 3 was to examine slippery slope beliefs and its relation to minority group acceptance among nationally representative samples from the Netherlands and Germany.

A second goal was to further examine the relationship between slippery slope beliefs and political orientation. In the first two studies, we used a single-item measure of political orientation and found that more conservative people were more likely to perceive the risk of the slippery slope. However, some researchers have criticized the left–right self-placement scale as too general a measure of political orientation (e.g., Bauer, Barberá, Ackermann, & Venetz, 2017). Political orientation is composed of a complex set of underlying ideological beliefs and psychological dispositions (e.g., Habib, Adelman, Leidner, Pasha, & Sibii, 2019) and this may not be fully captured with a single self-placement scale. Therefore, in Study 3, we included measures of individual differences in the predisposition to endorse status quo conservatism and normative conformity (Stenner, 2005). Both are key psychological aspects underlying political orientation with the former referring to the general resistance to social change per se and the latter to the authoritarian aversion to normative difference (Jost et al., 2003).

Third, in the earlier studies, we focused on the associations between slippery slope beliefs and the acceptance of immigrant cultures and Muslim minority rights. However, slippery slope as general beliefs should be similarly associated with acceptance of controversial practices

**Table 4**  
Standardized regression coefficients for the effect of slippery slope beliefs and the other predictors on acceptance of Muslim expressive rights.

	B	SE	p
<b>Slippery Slope</b>	<b>-0.30</b>	<b>0.083</b>	<b>&lt; 0.001</b>
General Trust	-0.02	0.101	0.853
Sense of Control	-0.10	0.064	0.122
Conspiratorial Thinking	-0.31	0.095	0.001
Present Focus	-0.28	0.072	<0.001
Political Orientation	-0.21	0.057	<0.001
National Identification	-0.07	0.049	0.131
Education	0.19	0.054	<0.001
Age	0.08	0.051	0.137
Gender	-0.02	0.045	0.741

Note. The first five predictors are latent variables, the others are manifest variables.

and rights of non-immigrant minority groups. Therefore, in Study 3, we focus not only on the endorsement of Muslim minority rights, but also examined whether slippery slope beliefs predict non-acceptance across a broader range of practices that are debated and controversial in both countries.

#### 4.1. Method

##### 4.1.1. Participants

Data was collected as part of a large data collection of 3,762 participants forming representative samples of Dutch and German participants. All participants completed the slippery slope measure, which as discussed, achieved measurement invariance across the Dutch and German samples. While everyone in the study completed the slippery slope measure, 950 participants were randomly assigned to complete additional measures presented below, 424 of whom were from the Netherlands and 526 from Germany. These participants varied in age ( $M = 50.51, SD = 16.56$ ), were evenly divided between males and female (50.2% female), slightly tilting toward middle (37.9%) and higher (32.5%) educated than low educated (29.6%), and on average were near the center of the political spectrum on the political self-placement scale (1–7 scale;  $M = 3.85, SD = 1.27$ ).

##### 4.2. Measures

**Muslim expressive rights.** To measure the endorsement of Muslim minority rights, we used a set of four items drawn from Studies 1–2 ( $M = 4.00, SD = 1.47$ ; Latent  $\rho = 0.91$ ).

**Acceptance of controversial practices.** To measure the acceptance of a range of controversial practices we used six items. One question asked about the acceptance of security organizations gathering personal information ( $M = 4.23, SD = 1.81$ ), the second about the installation of gender-neutral toilets in public buildings ( $M = 4.20, SD = 2.09$ ), the third about non-vaccination of children ( $M = 2.29, SD = 1.86$ ), the fourth about replacing words like “manpower” with gender-neutral terms ( $M = 3.37, SD = 1.98$ ), the fifth about gay men kissing in public ( $M = 5.36, SD = 1.77$ ), and the sixth about mocking people’s religious beliefs in words or art ( $M = 3.37, SD = 1.99$ ). As these items were selected to span a broad range of controversial practices, we did not expect them to form a cohesive scale (most items correlated between -0.04 and 0.17, although two of the items, on gender-neutral toilets and the use of gender-neutral terms were correlated at  $r = 0.50$ ), and hence we treated them as six independent outcomes.

**Conservatism.** Drawing on research into alternative measures of status quo conservatism (Stenner, 2009), we used four items on seven-point scales that asked participants to choose between two options anchored at the ends of the scale ranging from a social change-minded approach to the world to a social stability-minded approach. The items were based on previous research (Stenner, 2009) and do not refer to any social groups, or political objects, events or actors but rather measure a general conservative disposition against change in and of itself (e.g., “You have to be careful about making big changes” vs. “You have to take risks to achieve something in life” (reverse-scored to indicate higher conservatism;  $M = 3.99, SD = 0.88$ ; Latent  $\rho = 0.66$ ).

**Normative conformity.** In order to have a similar relative measure for status-quo conservatism, an extended version of the “child-rearing preference” measure was used (Feldman, 2003; Stenner, 2005). This measure taps into a key aspect of authoritarianism by examining prioritization of social conformity and obedience over self-direction and autonomy in socializing children without referencing any social group. In the first step, respondents were presented with four pairs of qualities children could be taught (e.g., obeying parents versus making one’s own choices) and asked which one they would consider to be more important. Subsequently, they were asked to indicate how much more important they found this quality using a 3-point scale. The two items for a given pair of qualities were then combined into a six-point scale so that

a higher score indicates higher normative conformity ( $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ; Latent  $\rho = 0.70$ ).

**National identification.** National identification was measured using two items similar to the item used in the previous studies ( $M = 5.17$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ; Latent  $\rho = 0.82$ ;  $r = 0.70$ ).

**Control variables.** We also measured education ( $M = 4.93$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ), age ( $M = 50.51$ ,  $SD = 16.56$ ), sex (dummy-coded), and experimental condition using the same items from previous studies.<sup>10</sup>

## 5. Results

**Measurement model.** We subjected the items forming the constructs of slippery slope beliefs, conservatism, normative conformity, endorsement of Muslim rights, and national identification to a confirmatory factor analysis in Mplus (see Table 5). We compared the expected five-factor model to a one-factor model with all latent constructs combined and to a four-factor model where conservatism and normative conformity were combined into a single factor.<sup>11</sup> The model fit indices indicate that the five-factor model was superior to both models. Furthermore, the five-factor measurement model had a good fit in both the German and Dutch samples separately.

**Accepting controversial practices.** To test the role of slippery slope beliefs in predicting acceptance of a range of controversial practices, we conducted a structural equation model with Mplus. Each of the six different acceptance examples were predicted by slippery slope beliefs (constructed as a latent variable). To examine whether this relation emerged similarly in both countries, we compared a model in which the association between slippery slope beliefs and the different practices were constrained to be the same across the two countries versus a non-constrained model in which these relations were free to vary by country. A comparison of these models revealed that the unconstrained model,  $\chi^2(178) = 401.956$ ,  $p < .001$ ; RMSEA = 0.051 [0.045-0.058]; CFI = 0.965; SRMR = 0.036, does not fit better than a constrained model,  $\chi^2(185) = 410.917$ ,  $p < .001$ ; RMSEA = 0.051 [0.044-0.057]; CFI = 0.965; SRMR = 0.040,  $\Delta \chi^2 = 8.961$ ,  $\Delta df = 7$ ,  $p = .255$ . This means that slippery slope beliefs were associated with acceptance of the different practices in similar ways across the two countries.

We examined the relationship between slippery slope belief and acceptance while controlling for conservatism, normative conformity,

**Table 5**  
Confirmatory factor analysis MPlus models for Study 3.

Model Description	$\chi^2(df)$	$\Delta \chi^2(df)$	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA [95%]
1. Single factor	3443.447 (169)***	0.58	0.117	0.039 [0.139-0.147]	
2. Conservatism and normative conformity combined	600.659 (163)***		0.94	0.042	0.053 [0.049-0.058]
3. All predicted factors	394.065 (159)***	206.594 (4)***	0.97	0.034	0.039 [0.035-0.044]

<sup>10</sup> In Study 3 we also tested whether slippery slope beliefs could be manipulated by asking people to reflect on possible negative outcomes of genetic modification research for humans and animals. Results indicated that there were no effects of the manipulation on any of the acceptance outcomes, all  $F_s < 2.31$ , all  $p_s > 0.129$ . However, there was a trending effect of the manipulation on slippery slope beliefs,  $F(1, 948) = 2.84$ ,  $p = .093$ , so we included the experimental condition as a control variable in the analyses.

<sup>11</sup> Models in which slippery slope beliefs were combined with conservatism, with normative conformity, or with both these measures all fit worse than the five-factor model (see Appendix for details).

national identification (these three variables being latent), political orientation, education, age, gender, and the conditions of an experiment (which was dummy coded).<sup>12</sup> We find that stronger slippery slope belief was significantly associated with lower levels of acceptance of gender-neutral toilets, gender-neutral terms, gay men kissing, and the reduced endorsement of Muslim minority (Table 6). It should be noted that latent variables tend to have more explained variance than observed variables given that the former account for measurement error. We also found a surprising positive association between slippery slope belief and acceptance of mocking others' beliefs.

In light of the findings in the previous studies of the positive correlation between stronger right-wing political orientation and slippery slope belief, we also tested the correlations between slippery slope belief, political orientation measured as a single-item self-placement, and the status quo conservatism and normative conformity measures. We again found support for the relationship between slippery slope belief and political orientation using the single item ( $r = 0.30$ ,  $p < .001$ ) as well as the status quo conservatism ( $r = 0.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and normative conformity ( $r = 0.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ) measures. This suggests that slippery slope belief is consistently related to, but nonetheless distinct from, different political orientation measures.

In this study, we attempted to accomplish three goals. First, we sought to test the cross-national applicability of the slippery slope measure in predicting the endorsement of Muslim minority rights and the acceptance of various controversial practices. We found that in both countries, general slippery slope belief was independently associated with lower acceptance, mainly of behaviors related to gender, sexuality, and Muslim minority practices. Second, given the expected importance of political orientation as a correlate of slippery slope belief, we used a measure of status quo conservatism and normative conformity in addition to political self-placement. As in Studies 1–2, we found that even when taking these variables into account, slippery slope belief independently predicted the non-acceptance of various controversial practices. Thirdly, we found that the type of practice may be important to slippery slope belief, such that on issues related to Muslims, sexuality, and gender, slippery slope belief was a significant independent predictor of reduced acceptance. On two other issues, non-vaccination and privacy, however, there was no independent effect of slippery slope belief. This might be because concerns about the negative societal implications of non-vaccination and privacy reduction are more broadly shared across society, thus weakening the impact of individual differences in slippery slope belief. Unexpectedly, we also found that slippery slope belief was positively associated with acceptance of mockery toward others' religious beliefs. While this effect may be due to some people interpreting it as accepting ridicule toward a minority group's religion (a controversial practice), and others as acceptance of political satire (more broadly acceptable), it may also be due to the political nature of the controversial practices. The practices that saw reduced acceptance with increased slippery slope belief were those pursued by the political left, whereas this practice may be more supported by the political right. Although these effects emerged above and beyond the effects of political orientation, this highlights the need to further investigate whether slippery slope belief is more associated with the political right than left.

## 6. Study 4

In Studies 1–3, we presented findings in support of the usefulness and importance of general slippery slope belief. However, the gap between how people respond to abstract compared to concrete issues and questions (Alper, 2020; Burgoon et al., 2013; Dixon et al., 2017) leaves open the possibility that our general measure of slippery slope belief may not

<sup>12</sup> For these analyses, we found that the model constrained across both countries fit as well as an unconstrained model, so we retained the constrained model for parsimony. See Appendix for details.

**Table 6**  
Standardized coefficients of predictors of acceptance of seven social and controversial practices.

	1 $\beta$ (SE)	2 $\beta$ (SE)	3 $\beta$ (SE)	4 $\beta$ (SE)	5 $\beta$ (SE)	6 $\beta$ (SE)	7 $\beta$ (SE)
Slippery Slope	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.17 (0.04)***	0.04 (0.04)	-0.15 (0.04)***	-0.11 (0.04)**	0.09 (0.04)*	-0.36 (0.04)***
Conservatism	-0.14 (0.06)*	0.02 (0.05)***	-0.00 (0.06)	-0.09 (0.05)	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.19 (0.05)***
Normative conformity	0.17 (0.05)**	-0.23 (0.05)***	-0.10 (0.06)	-0.19 (0.05)***	-0.18 (0.05)***	-0.20 (0.05)***	-0.12 (0.05)*
Political Orientation	0.11 (0.04)**	-0.15 (0.04)***	-0.05 (0.04)	-0.16 (0.04)***	-0.07 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	-0.20 (0.03)***
National Identification	0.16 (0.04)***	0.04 (0.04)	-0.12 (0.04)**	0.02 (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.04)	0.11 (0.03)***
Education	0.09 (0.03)**	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.11 (0.03)***	0.11 (0.03)***
Age	0.01 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	-0.10 (0.03)**	-0.06 (0.03)	-0.15 (0.03)***	-0.14 (0.04)***	0.03 (0.03)
Gender	-0.07 (0.03)*	0.01 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	-0.06 (0.03)	0.21 (0.04)***	0.07 (0.03)*
Experimental Condition	-0.03 (0.03)	0.07 (0.03)*	0.04 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.03)	0.03 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.03)
R <sup>2</sup> Full Model	0.084	0.150	0.043	0.178	0.111	0.105	0.385
R <sup>2</sup> Without Slippery Slope Beliefs	0.083	0.129	0.042	0.160	0.102	0.106	0.289

Note. 1 = Acceptance of privacy reduction, 2 = acceptance of gender-neutral toilets, 3 = acceptance of non-vaccination, 4 = acceptance of gender-neutral terms, 5 = acceptance of gay male public kissing, 6 = acceptance of mocking of others' beliefs, and 7 = acceptance of Muslim practices (latent variable). Gender represents the difference from female to male.

closely map on to how people respond to concrete examples of slippery slope reasoning that they encounter. Therefore, the first goal of Study 4 was to examine whether individual differences in general slippery slope belief are related to perceptions of concrete slippery slope examples.

Second, Studies 1–3 demonstrated that the general inclination of slippery slope belief is positively related to a more right-wing political orientation and the related predispositions of status quo conservatism and normative conformity. Further, research suggests that the kind of threat and change perceptions involved in slippery slope thinking are psychological features of the political right (e.g., Jost et al., 2003; Jost, 2017). However, slippery slope belief might be similarly used on both the political left and right when it comes to the evaluation of concrete situations that matter ideologically (see opening quotes in the article). Both the politically left and right have been found to be susceptible to intolerance and biased ways of thinking (e.g., Brandt et al., 2014; Crawford and Brandt, 2020; Ditto et al., 2019). Therefore, for testing whether slippery slope belief is relevant across the political spectrum, we examined the role of slippery slope belief for situations that are typically of concern among people on the left or for people on the right. To the extent that the propensity toward slippery slope belief reflects a general approach to expect small things or innocuous acts to lead to disastrous outcomes, we would expect to find that slippery slope belief predicts agreement with the concrete examples regardless of the political orientation of the participants and of whether these examples reflect politically left-wing or politically right-wing issues.

### 6.1. Method

**Participants.** A sample of 404 ethnic Dutch participants were recruited as part of another national survey.<sup>13</sup> Participants (gender: 52.7% male; age:  $M = 54.08$ ,  $SD = 16.13$ ) were more likely to be higher educated (44.8%) than middle educated (30.2%) or low educated (25.0%).

## 7. Measures.

**Slippery slope situations.** To test how the general slippery slope belief was associated with concrete examples of slippery slope reasoning across the political spectrum, we identified six situations of politically relevant slippery slope scenarios. These were drawn from social science research, legal and philosophical scholarship, and Dutch media discussions. We selected two situations that represented right-wing slippery

slope examples (i.e., “If immigrants retain their own language and culture, Dutch culture will eventually change beyond recognition” [Haigh et al., 2016] and “If we always agree with European [EU] directives and rules, then we will ultimately lose all control over the future of our country”), two as non-partisan examples (i.e., “As national security services collect more and more personal information, we ultimately lose all control over our privacy” [Volokh, 2003] and “If we legally restrict the distribution of fake news, we ultimately lose freedom of expression” [e.g., Gardner, 2010], and two as representing left-wing slippery slope examples (i.e., “If we allow right-wing extremists to say what they want, fascists will eventually take over” (Wright, 2017) and “If we allow new discounts on benefits, we will eventually lose the social security system”). For each of these situations, participants responded to two items designed to assess the two main components of slippery slope thinking: how likely they thought it was that the extreme outcome would occur, and how bad it would be if it did occur. We found that these items were moderately to highly correlated within each scenario (correlations between the two items ranged from 0.30 to 0.66, average 0.48; Latent  $\rho$  range = 0.46–0.83, average = 0.64), thus, we combined the two items to create measures of acceptance for each of the specific slippery slope scenarios.

**Political orientation.** To measure political orientation, we again used the single item of political placement (5-point scale) from previous studies ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ). Forty-one participants were missing values on this measure, so we imputed values through MPLus to retain them in the analyses.

**Control variables.** We also included the same control variables from the previous studies with the measure of national identification ( $M = 8.33$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ), education, age, and gender.

### 7.1. Results

We constructed multiple regressions in MPLus with which we regressed the six slippery slope scenarios on slippery slope belief, political orientation, and the control variables of national identification, education, age, and gender. Table 7 presents the standardized coefficients for the main effects of these variables. First, we found that agreement with the slippery slope examples designed to represent right-wing worldviews were associated with higher right-wing political orientation, while those designed for left-wing participants showed the mirror effect. This supports the choice of our examples as being more relevant to either the politically left or right. Additionally, for the non-partisan items, results were mixed, suggesting that, as intended, they did not clearly fit into a political profile.

Second, in support of our expectations, we found that general slippery slope beliefs predicted increased agreement with slippery slope reasoning regardless of the political worldview the reasoning represented, ( $R^2$  range = 0.06–0.45,  $R^2$  average = 0.19; without slippery slope

<sup>13</sup> The participants comprised a subsample from a survey of 807 ethnic Dutch participants who were randomly assigned to receive the measures reported in this study. The larger survey also included measures on diversity, language, and European identity.



Table 7

Standardized coefficients for the effects of slippery slope belief, political orientation, and control variables on concrete slippery slope examples.

	Immigration $\beta$ (SE)	EU $\beta$ (SE)	Privacy $\beta$ (SE)	Free Speech $\beta$ (SE)	Fascism $\beta$ (SE)	Social security $\beta$ (SE)
Slippery Slope	0.48 (0.04)***	0.40 (0.05)***	0.25 (0.06)***	0.14 (0.06)*	0.12 (0.06)*	0.16 (0.06)**
Political Orientation	0.28 (0.04)***	0.14 (0.05)**	-0.14 (0.05)**	0.01 (0.05)	-0.22 (0.05)***	-0.30 (0.05)***
National Identification	0.14 (0.04)***	0.03 (0.05)	-0.11 (0.05)*	-0.02 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)
Education	-0.15 (0.04)***	-0.18 (0.05)***	0.01 (0.05)	0.15 (0.05)**	-0.10 (0.05)	-0.08 (0.05)
Age	-0.02 (0.04)	0.06 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)	0.18 (0.05)***	0.12 (0.05)*	0.27 (0.05)***
Gender	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.04)	0.10 (0.05)*	0.03 (0.05)	0.09 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.05)
R <sup>2</sup> Full Model	0.446	0.254	0.077	0.060	0.090	0.180
R <sup>2</sup> Without Slippery Slope	0.280	0.166	0.033	0.040	0.090	0.178

belief measure,  $R^2$  range = 0.03-0.28,  $R^2$  average = 0.13). Furthermore, when we included the interaction between slippery slope belief and political orientation, there was no significant interaction effect for five of the six outcomes (see Appendix for details). This indicates that the effect of general slippery slope belief on agreement with these examples is not contingent on the fit between the worldview of the participants and the worldview expressed in the example. Only for the example regarding immigration, a significant interaction was found,  $b = -0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $p = .001$ . However, the interaction was such that the judgments of left-wing participants ( $-1SD$ ),  $b = 0.69$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $p < .001$ , were more strongly affected by individual slippery slope belief than those of right-wing participants ( $+1SD$ ),  $b = 0.41$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $p < .001$ . This finding provides additional evidence that slippery slope beliefs as an individual difference variable can predict agreement with slippery slope reasoning even when it runs in contrast to one's political worldview. However, when we compared the strength of the effects of slippery slope belief on agreement with right-wing vs. left-wing framed slippery slope arguments, Wald tests revealed that slippery slope belief consistently predicted more agreement with the right-wing framed slippery slope scenarios than the left-wing framed ones,  $W > 11.214$ ,  $p < .001$ . Similarly, we also found that slippery slope beliefs were again associated with stronger right-wing political orientation ( $r = 0.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Thus, results from Study 4 support the meaningfulness of our measure of general slippery slope beliefs by showing, firstly, that it can predict a set of real-world examples of slippery slope reasoning, and secondly, that these predictive effects cross the political spectrum, and may even influence people's decisions in ways that operate in contrast to their political worldview.

## 8. Study 5

To provide further evidence of the connection between slippery slope beliefs and real-world slippery slope arguments in society, as well as to further test the distinctiveness of our slippery slope measure, in Study 5 we replicated the test of the relationship between slippery slope beliefs and specific examples of slippery slope reasoning across the political spectrum, while further investigating the distinction between slippery slope beliefs and related psychological constructs. As one component of slippery slope beliefs is a pessimistic perspective on the future, we measured trait-like optimism and pessimism (Scheier & Carver, 1985). We also included measures of open-mindedness and close-mindedness (Stanovich & West, 1997), authoritarianism (Feldman, 2003; Stenner, 2005), and general tolerance to further test whether slippery slope beliefs would be empirically distinct in CFA analysis. Additionally, we tested whether slippery slope belief would again uniquely predict agreement with the real-world examples of slippery slope arguments from across the political spectrum used in Study 4.

## 8.1. Methods and results

Using a nationally representative sample of 1,017 Dutch adults (gender: 52.9% female; age:  $M = 47.29$ ,  $SD = 17.46$ ; education: 18.7% low educated, 47.7% middle educated, and 33.1% highly educated<sup>14</sup>), confirmatory factor analyses again showed that the best model of the data supported the slippery slope beliefs measure as empirically distinct from the other measures, including pessimism,  $\chi^2(355) = 1049.200$ ,  $p < .001$ ; RMSEA = 0.044 [0.041-0.047]; CFI = 0.933; SRMR = 0.046, with the best alternative model performing worse by combining slippery slope beliefs with close-mindedness  $\chi^2(361) = 1325.487$ ,  $p < .001$ ; RMSEA = 0.051 [0.048-0.054]; CFI = 0.907; SRMR = 0.060, providing further evidence for slippery slope beliefs representing a distinct construct.

We found that slippery slope beliefs were a unique predictor of agreement with the politically diverse scenarios designed for both the right and the left, although not for non-partisan issues, above and beyond the effects of theoretically related constructs such as pessimism.

Specifically, agreement with the right-wing slippery slope argument about immigration was significantly predicted by slippery slope beliefs,  $\beta = 0.267$ ,  $SE = 0.034$ ,  $p < .001$ , general tolerance,  $\beta = -0.077$ ,  $SE = 0.037$ ,  $p = .037$ , and authoritarianism,  $\beta = 0.193$ ,  $SE = 0.041$ ,  $p < .001$ . Similarly, agreement with the right-wing slippery slope argument about the EU was significantly predicted by slippery slope beliefs,  $\beta = 0.245$ ,  $SE = 0.034$ ,  $p < .001$  and authoritarianism,  $\beta = 0.214$ ,  $SE = 0.041$ ,  $p < .001$ .

However, the centrist arguments were not predicted by slippery slope beliefs; with the argument about privacy being predicted by optimism,  $\beta = -0.149$ ,  $SE = 0.056$ ,  $p = .008$ , pessimism,  $\beta = 0.155$ ,  $SE = 0.066$ ,  $p = .019$ , general tolerance,  $\beta = 0.226$ ,  $SE = 0.040$ ,  $p < .001$ , and authoritarianism,  $\beta = -0.092$ ,  $SE = 0.045$ ,  $p = .041$ . The second centrist argument about fake news was predicted only by general tolerance,  $\beta = 0.103$ ,  $SE = 0.041$ ,  $p = .017$ , and close-mindedness,  $\beta = 0.167$ ,  $SE = 0.078$ ,  $p = .032$ .

Slippery slope beliefs again predicted agreement with the left-wing slippery slope argument about fascism,  $\beta = 0.107$ ,  $SE = 0.038$ ,  $p = .005$ , as did authoritarianism,  $\beta = 0.109$ ,  $SE = 0.045$ ,  $p < .001$ . Slippery slope beliefs also significantly predicted agreement with the left-wing argument about social security,  $\beta = 0.102$ ,  $SE = 0.038$ ,  $p = .007$ , as did close-mindedness,  $\beta = 0.152$ ,  $SE = 0.078$ ,  $p = .050$ .

Collectively, these results provide further evidence that slippery slope beliefs are an empirically unique construct from pessimism, open-minded thinking, and other constructs, and such beliefs can predict acceptance of real-world examples of slippery slope arguments on the right and the left side of the political spectrum.

## 8.2. General discussion

Slippery slope beliefs are frequently found in public and political discourse as an argument against specific behaviors, events, and

<sup>14</sup> Six participants did not identify their education level.

developments. This research aimed to provide the first empirical research to investigate individual differences in the endorsement of this belief and its intergroup and societal consequences. Using six national samples, we developed and tested a measure of general slippery slope beliefs, showing that it is an empirically distinct construct that is related in a theoretically meaningful way, and yet distinct from other relevant psychological constructs including generalized trust, closed mindedness, conspiratorial thinking, present focus, political orientation, pessimism and optimism, and authoritarianism. Moreover, these studies demonstrate that slippery slope beliefs are a relatively strong predictor of negative support for multicultural recognition and minority rights, above and beyond common demographic, ideological and psychological predictors. We finally demonstrate that the slippery slope measure predicted the rejection of a range of socially and normatively debated behaviors, and that it did so above and beyond the effects of status quo conservatism and normative conformity in two different countries (Netherlands and Germany).

Higher slippery slope belief was consistently found to be associated with a stronger right-wing political orientation, and also with status quo conservatism and normative conformity as two underlying psychological aspects of right-wing orientation (Jost et al., 2003). Additionally, while slippery slope beliefs predicted agreement with concrete slippery slope examples across the political spectrum, these effects were stronger for the examples designed to reflect right-wing concerns than those designed to reflect left-wing concerns. These findings thus appear to provide partial support for the rigidity of the right proposition (Jost, 2017) with conservatives favoring traditions and stability and perceiving higher risk of changes to the status quo inherent in the slippery slope process (Van der Berg, 1998). It might also be that the liberal, left-leaning societies in the Netherlands and Germany generate more fear of slippery slope outcomes among people on the political right.

However, slippery slope belief does not simply reflect the psychology of the right because slippery slope beliefs were often the most powerful predictor of multicultural recognition and minority rights, even when controlling for personal political orientation. Furthermore, we found that, independently of the individual's personal political orientation, slippery slope beliefs predicted agreement with a range of slippery slope examples drawn from real-world ongoing policy debates that crossed the political spectrum. Slippery slope beliefs were even found to be associated with lower acceptance of immigrants among left-wing oriented people. This indicates that people who in general are inclined to think about small or innocuous events and acts as leading inevitably to dangerous consequences can be more negative towards societal changes, even when these align with their ideological worldview.

## 9. Limitation and future directions

Despite the important and novel contributions of our research, we want to mention several limitations that provide directions for future research. Although our data were collected with national samples from two countries and we considered various outcomes, the generalization of our findings should be examined in future studies. Furthermore, as is common with large-scale, cross-country, data collections, various researchers were involved and this inevitably means that constructs are measured with a limited number of items and not always with the same number of items across the data collections. Although the measures that we were able to include formed distinct and reliable latent constructs, future research could try to use more extensive measures.

Further, we focused on individual differences in general slippery slope beliefs, but future studies could also examine the situational relevance and impact of this belief using an experimental design. It is likely that individuals who more strongly endorse slippery slope belief will be more easily persuaded by slippery slope type reasoning about societal developments than those not endorsing such a belief. However, it may be difficult to prompt people into engaging more or less with slippery slope thinking, and research into paradoxical thinking suggests

that attempts to engage people with extreme slippery slope situations may, in fact, backfire (Hameiri, Porat, Bar-Tal, Bieler, & Halperin, 2014). Additionally, we have focused on individual differences in general slippery slope beliefs, but it is also possible to examine different forms of slippery slope reasoning and their related argumentations as discussed in the philosophical and cognitive thinking research (e.g., Collins and Hahn, 2018; van der Burg, 1998).

Additionally, future research can look into the origins and development of individual differences in general slippery slope beliefs. Similar to research on the origins of personality and individual differences, future work can, for example, examine the role of evolutionary, genetic, and sociocultural factors in the emergence of slippery slope beliefs (e.g., Caspi, 1998; Caspi and Shiner; Petersen, 2015). Additionally, other work can examine whether such belief changes over time and may be driven by anxiety or threat related processes similar to political conservatism (e.g., Jost et al., 2003), or if these are a result of cognitive errors and biases similar to the availability heuristic or representativeness heuristic. In the current research, we found that slippery slope beliefs are positively associated with conservatism, and thus may reflect a more general predisposition against change. General slippery slope beliefs may also be defensive as it avoids change to new and unpredictable situations by focusing on a cascade of negative consequences. One important direction for future research is therefore to investigate the origins and over-time stability of slippery slope belief to better understand its role in how people perceive and think about their social world.

## 10. Conclusion

With this research, we make a novel contribution to the psychological literature that aims at understanding how individuals respond to strong public and political debates about important societal changes. While slippery slope reasoning has been discussed in detail in legal and philosophical literature, there has been no empirical research into the general tendency towards slippery slope beliefs and its consequences. Using large-scale data from six samples and in two countries, this research provides a first extensive investigation into such beliefs. The findings show that slippery slope beliefs are an individual difference variable that independently and meaningfully predicts how various societal changes are evaluated. Slippery slope beliefs are not only important theoretically, but also for understanding and addressing concerns that people can have about ongoing developments in their social worlds.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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