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March 16, 2017

### Political Differences and Polarization:

#### Conservative versus Liberal Ideology and Psychology

Currently, the country seems to be growing more politically divided; the recent presidential election was messy, unpleasant, and polemic, making polarization seem a prominent and distressing issue in the US. Liberals and conservatives can find little common ground, as they disagree about morality, policy, and expectations for officials, and many times just disagree on principle. While it can feel melodramatic to worry about this apparent polarization, actual data exists showing that it is indeed worsening, with liberals and conservatives seriously differing in their beliefs, and even in their psychology and ways of understanding and interacting with the world.

There are two measures of purely political polarization, both of which have increased since the 1970s after a period of relatively moderate political beliefs and activity throughout most of the 20th century. Ideological distance, also known as issue distance, refers to the degree of overlap or distance between two groups' beliefs, in this case the Democrats and Republicans, which has recently increased substantially according to various surveys. Response variability, the diversity of beliefs within each group, has decreased as well, meaning that members of political parties have homogenized in their beliefs, clumping at either end of the conservative versus liberal spectrum (Garner and Palmer 236-239). In Congress, this divergence and clustering of beliefs has led to frequent gridlock, and a resulting decline in the public's confidence in our

government. Democratic legislators have become slightly more liberal in their voting since the 70s, while Republicans have become much more conservative, and legislators have also homogenized within their parties, voting alongside their fellow party members more frequently (Kuo 13-14; Garner and Palmer 225). At this point, a typical individual's opinions about political policy issues, like health care, women's rights, or military spending, are noticeably linked to that individual's core political beliefs and party affiliation, much more than in the past (Garner and Palmer, 225). While there are many hard to decipher reasons for this shift, it seems that some citizens might be "following the crowd" more than they did in the past, which could weaken the US's democracy by leaving common citizens open to manipulation by political elites (Garner and Palmer 239). Alternatively, the changes might simply reflect changes in the composition of the US's political parties since the 60s and the introduction of many divisive "hot topics" like abortion and gay marriage that are sometimes melodramatically discussed as part of a "cultural war," issues that are involved with morality, making it difficult to reach a compromise (Kuo 14).

Along with this apparent polarization in actual political beliefs, the US has and continues to become more polarized through more "partisan affect," the automatic treatment of members of one's political in-group, for example liberal Democrats, differently than their out-group, in this example, conservative Republicans (Iyengar and Westwood 690). Studies show that since the 80s, party members in the US have begun to hold increasingly negative views of members of the opposing political party (Munro et al. 173; Iyengar, Sood et al. 405). Those at both the left and right of the spectrum now tend to see their political "enemies" as morally wrong, ignorant, and deeply unreasonable, a mindset that isn't conducive to compromise or constructive political debate (Iyengar and Westwood 691). According to surveys, while Republicans think that other Republicans are patriotic, altruistic, and well-informed, they see Democrats as just the opposite:

selfish, ignorant people who don't support the US (Iyengar, Sood et al. 412; Iyengar and Westwood 691). Accordingly, "partisan cues" have begun to sneak into nonpolitical situations, causing Americans to treat those who share their beliefs differently, and usually better, than those who don't (Iyengar and Westwood 690-691). While in-party affect has remained positive and fairly constant over the years, opinions of the out-party have dropped significantly since the 80s (Iyengar, Sood et al. 412), attributing this change in discrimination mainly to negative views of the out-group rather than a positive drive to support members of the in-group (Iyengar and Westwood 691). Importantly, this "affect" is only weakly connected to ideology or policy attitudes, and the connection hasn't strengthened as affect has increased, meaning that it doesn't solely stem from changes in ideological distance and homogenization of beliefs within political parties (Iyengar, Sood et al. 406). It doesn't even increase after losing a major election: negative feelings toward the out-party remained constant before and after presidential elections in the 80s and 90s (Iyengar, Sood, et al. 415), although it will be interesting to see if this holds true in more current, divisive elections.

As noted by Iyengar and Westwood, "Unlike race, gender, and other social divides where group-related attitudes and behaviors are constrained by social norms, there are no corresponding pressures to temper disapproval of political opponents" (Iyengar and Westwood 690). The idea that discrimination based upon characteristics dependent upon genetics and heritage, like race and sex, is wrong, doesn't apply to politics. Political orientation is seen as, and to an extent is, based upon choice and personal values. Many leaders actually speak and act to validate discrimination based upon politics, and political parties often seem to be openly hostile and belligerent, disregarding diversity of opinion within each party and valuing only in-group loyalty (Iyengar and Westwood 690, 703-704). While negative feelings are generally stronger toward

more abstract ideas and groups, like “Republicans” or “Democrats,” than specific people, partisans do frequently judge and treat people differently based upon their party affiliation, more strongly than they now do on other historically important social breaks like religion and race (Iyengar, Sood et al. 415-416). When political affiliation is openly shared, members of both parties consistently choose to be more generous to copartisans in theoretical situations, and tend to see these copartisans as more qualified for jobs than those in the opposing party, regardless of actual qualifications. (Iyengar and Westwood 698, 702). According to a survey in 2010, the number of party members who dislike the idea of their children marrying someone outside of their party has skyrocketed, from single digit percentages in the 60s to a current 49% of Republicans and 33% of Democrats (Iyengar, Sood et al. 418).

Researchers disagree upon the true cause of this increased polarization and resulting discrimination, although it’s probably a result of a complicated mix of many societal and specifically political changes since the 80s. Political views have become closely linked to identity and people’s “protected values.” A study at the University of Southern California found that political beliefs showed less, more temporary reduction in strength after being challenged than nonpolitical, more factual beliefs (Kaplan et al. 6). People in general, and especially those with very strong political beliefs, have experience and practice with dealing with and explaining away counter-arguments to their political views, having already altered and rationalized their views as much as they are willing, and prepared defenses against common challenges (Kaplan et al. 10). Increasing political inflexibility even more, when “protected values” are challenged, people experience negative emotions and try to avoid these challenges, rationalizing why they’re wrong and often questioning the validity of the challenges’ sources in order to explain them away (Kaplan et al. 1).

Some researchers point to party elites, activists, and politicians as the driving force behind polarization. Party elites' policy preferences have diverged slightly from those of their party members' recently, tending to be more extreme (Garner and Palmer 236-238; Iyengar, Sood et al. 412). Didi Kuo, a researcher at Stanford, claims that "Given the disparate participation of intense partisans and affluent individuals in politics, it seems more likely that polarization is more a product of the institutions and rules that govern participation and representation than a product of citizens' preferences overall" (Kuo 16). From this viewpoint, only the most politically active are responsible for our polarization, which seems difficult to support in the face of such widespread increases in common citizens' partisan affect. Whatever the case, political campaigns often involve attacks on the opposition's candidates and party, reinforcing people's political identities and stereotypes (Iyengar, Sood et al. 405, 427). Citizens of battleground states, usually the location of more intense campaigning, have been shown to have more partisan affect, although researchers think that campaigns are one of many factors influencing affect, and probably have a relatively small impact (Iyengar, Sood et al. 407, 425). The number of people who are very politically active, unsurprisingly referred to by researchers as political activists, has increased in recent presidential elections, which is to be expected, as increased affect pushes more people to the extremes of the political spectrum, and calls for them to be active and perhaps protest (Iyengar, Sood et al. 414). Since 2000, the number of people who describe themselves as moderates has decreased, with a 3% increase in those identifying as conservatives and a 2% increase in those who identify as liberals (Haidt 35). As partisan affect becomes more apparent and important, it can push people into picking a side, as well as being more extreme and less accepting of other ideas.

As a result or perhaps partial cause of partisan affect, Americans have begun to group based on politics. In 1976, only 27% of Americans lived in very politically lopsided counties, in which one political party had an overwhelming majority of support. The US has now homogenized significantly, with 48% of Americans living in such counties as of 2008 (Haidt 37). In a large-scale study of a dating website, it was found that liberals and conservatives usually expressed more interest in others who were similar to them (Klofstad et al. 520). While ideology was found to have a small direct impact on mate choice, online daters, and perhaps other daters, unintentionally assort based on other, nonpolitical traits that correlate with their political ideology. Conservatives were less accepting of dissimilarity in race, body types, and other traits, but liberals favored others with similar traits as well (Klofstad et al. 528, 534). According to a 2009 survey by Rosenfeld et al., bipartisan marriages are rare, making up only 9% of marriages in the US (Iyengar and Westwood 692). This political sorting, even though it mostly results from nonpolitical preferences, can increase polarization, as parents tend to have children with similar ideologies. Over a few generations, this can theoretically change the makeup of a society, with more people on either extreme of the liberal-conservative continuum, and fewer moderates (Klofstad et al. 531-534), which is actually what is being seen in the US.

Obviously, this political polarization and increase in affect are troubling. First, unfair discrimination tends to provoke unhappiness and conflict, and is generally seen as wrong. Also, with more affect, people become biased against the out-party's leaders' successes, not seeing their legislation or rule as entirely legitimate or acceptable, decreasing faith in our democracy and occasionally leading to violence (Iyengar, Sood et al. 428). However, at least in the 80s and 90s, partisan affect and negative feelings toward the out-party didn't seem to increase after losing a major election (Iyengar, Sood et al. 415). As "every collaboration... requires that the beliefs of

those involved remain open to mutual influence through conversation” (Kaplan et al. 1), the present and increasing political inflexibility in the US may be dangerous to society. While openly expressed diversity, disagreement, and accompanying argument is important to creating a functional and inclusive democracy and society, we must also be able to function as a group and country, despite any internal disputes (Kaplan et al. 1).

Overall, our country is clearly, politically polarized, much more than during most of the 20th century. While the reasons for this remain numerous and unclear, we’ve begun to notice and study the issue, which will hopefully aid in reconciliation or at least more widespread understanding. Haidt maintains that the real issue is liberals’ and conservatives’ inability to reconcile their different morality and narratives of human progress, which leads people to cluster and behave tribally when it comes to politics (Haidt 37). If America is truly so separated in its beliefs, Congress seems to be fulfilling its job through frequent gridlock, representing the electorate’s inability to agree or compromise (Kuo 15). Somehow, we’ll have to overcome our differences.

Complicating matters, aside from having ideological differences and negative views of political out-groups, conservatives and liberals actually differ psychologically, and evidence has begun to suggest that there are genetic and brain-structural differences as well. The formation of political ideology has been studied for years, trying to answer the complex question of how individuals develop their ideology and resulting political affiliations; the general consensus is that it’s the product of a confusing mix of social upbringing, life-changing experiences, and genetics (Klofstad et al. 519).

In 2006, a (relatively) famous study of public opinion was released by Taylor et al. at the Pew Research Center, reporting that 47% of Republicans claimed to be “very happy” with their

lives while only 28% of Democrats felt similarly (Napier and Jost 565). This prompted speculation about the validity and origins of this “happiness gap,” as well as gloating from several prominent conservatives (Napier and Jost 565). Many studies have since confirmed the existence of this self-reported happiness gap, with greater levels of conservatism consistently predicting higher satisfaction with life (Wojcik et al. 1244; Napier and Jost 570). While conservatives are happier in general, the gap doesn’t remain constant over time, growing and shrinking based upon the prevalence of conservative ideology within the country, with more overall conservatism predicting higher life satisfaction among conservative individuals (Stavrova and Luhmann 31). This happiness gap is present even outside of the US, in one study found in more than half of 92 countries investigated. The strength of these gaps are based on the overall prevalence of conservatism, but according to one study, not related to social inequality (Stavrova and Luhmann 33). Conservatives did, however, have a larger advantage in countries with an overall lower quality of life (Napier and Jost 569). When greater overall liberalism was present in a country, conservatives either had no advantage in happiness, or were actually less happy than their liberal counterparts (Stavrova and Luhmann 33).

Obviously, researchers are interested in the origin of this happiness gap. Some demographic differences, like relative wealth, have been suggested as possible explanations, but fail to fully explain the magnitude and consistency of conservatives’ greater happiness. Alternatively, as conservatives have a “cognitive style” that generally calls for closure and simple rationalizations rather than extended thought, this might give them a boost in their perceived quality of and satisfaction with life. Other researchers also suggest that conservatives tend to have more “transcendent moral beliefs” that allow them to be happier (Wojcik et al.

1244). Yet another more interesting explanation focuses on conservatism's tendency to be "system-justifying," supporting and rationalizing the status quo, which allows conservatives to ignore social inequality and other problems, perhaps allowing them to be happier (Napier and Jost 565; Wojcik et al. 1244). For example, conservatives believe more strongly in meritocracy than liberals, blaming social inequality on individuals' failure to work hard and succeed, and thus validating the inequality and making the idea of the necessity of social welfare or other governmental and societal reform seem ridiculous (Napier and Jost 568, 570). Conservatives follow similar patterns in other countries where they report more happiness, rationalizing inequality and valuing the idea of meritocracy (Napier and Jost 569). This explanation of conservatives' self-reported happiness seems the most likely and easy to explain; another study found that, while more economic inequality decreases overall happiness, it affects liberals much more severely, probably because of their inability or unwillingness to rationalize and accept this unfairness to buffer themselves against unhappiness (Napier and Jost 570).

However, other researchers have called the legitimacy of conservatives' greater happiness into question. In a number of studies by Wojcik et al., it was found that liberals consistently exhibit slightly but consistently more happy behavior than conservatives. In Congress, liberal members used a higher ratio of positive to negative words, and conservatives had less genuine and intense smiles in their professional pictures (Wojcik et al. 1246). Similarly, professional photos of employees of a variety of fairly liberal companies had more intense and genuine smiling than those of their conservative counterparts, and subscribers to the Democratic Party on Twitter used more positive words, fewer negative words, and even more happy emoticons than those of Republican Party subscribers (Wojcik et al. 1246-1247).

If conservatives aren't actually exhibiting more happiness, their *self-reported* happiness becomes confusing. Self-enhancement, the tendency to have an unreasonably positive view of one's life and self, is also consistently higher for conservatives, at comparable levels to their greater reported happiness, as found through the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding, providing a possible explanation (Wojcik et al. 1244). Conservatives' tendency to self-enhance is unsurprising, as meritocratic beliefs tend to be linked to similar increases in self-reported wellbeing (Napier and Jost 568). Self-enhancement is also higher among people with a number of other traits that are linked to more conservative ideologies, including religious affiliation, being competitive and hierarchy oriented, and being more individualistic (Wojcik et al. 1244). As a result of their apparent self-enhancement, conservatives might truly have more life satisfaction and happiness, but they also might simply have a tendency to be unreasonably positive about themselves when asked to report on their lives (Wojcik et al. 1245). Overall, it remains unclear if conservatives truly live happier lives, largely because "happiness" is fairly subjective. The trend of behavior going against the self-reported gap, with liberals acting happier, seems to suggest that conservatives and liberals either experience happiness differently, or actually might have very little difference in their level of happiness.

Aside from differences in happiness, researchers have found a variety of other psychological and neurocognitive differences between conservatives and liberals. According to studies by Jost, Glaser, et al. and a variety of other researchers, typical conservatives have a more structured and slow to change "cognitive style," desiring order, structure, and closure, whereas liberals are more able to deal with complexity, ambiguity, and new experiences (Amodio et al. 1246). Accordingly, conservatives are more perseverant in repeating habitual responses, even if

they receive cues that the response is no longer appropriate, exhibiting less neurocognitive sensitivity to these conflicts between habitual behavior and what is required by a situation. More liberal Americans tend to have more neural activity when breaking a habitual response is necessary, specifically in their anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), a part of the brain in charge of “conflict monitoring,” detecting change in one’s surroundings and altering behavior to deal with it. If no change ever occurs, conservatives can be expected to be as accurate or even more successful than liberals in making simple, habitual responses, like pushing a button when prompted (Amodio et al. 1246-1247). Interestingly, those who identify as more liberal actually have more gray matter volume in the ACC, although it’s unclear if this is from more use or structurally allows more successful use of conflict monitoring. Conservatives, on the other hand, tend to have more gray matter in their right amygdalae (Kanai et al. 678-679). While this is probably just evidence of one of the many parts of the processes that form political beliefs, and not a direct representation of a person’s political beliefs, it seems to support one theory that claims political orientation is influenced by and partly formed through different ways of dealing with uncertainty and fear (Kanai et al. 679). It’s possible that these structural differences in the brain contribute to the formation of political orientation, or that different world views and politics can actually influence the structure of the brain: we know that the brain can change after training and be related to a person’s skills and experiences (Kanai et al. 680). Whatever the case, liberals’ larger ACCs might be connected to tolerating more uncertainty and ambiguity, while conservatives’ larger amygdalae suggest more sensitivity to fear and disgust (Kanai et al. 679), which aligns with various studies of the actual behavior and beliefs of conservatives and liberals.

Jost, Glaser, et al. report that conservatives show more aggression when threatened, and react more strongly to threatening facial expressions (Kanai et al. 677). Many researchers, like G. D. Wilson and Hibbing et al., view conservatism to be characterized by ego defensiveness and sensitivity to negativity, indeed behavior more fearful and defensive (Wojcik et al. 1244). High disgust sensitivity, the tendency to be disgusted, has also been linked to conservatism by a number of studies. Liberals tend to believe that the morality of actions is determined by their effects on others, while conservatives stress the idea that doing something disgusting is inherently wrong, whatever its actual impact, valuing the idea of purity and connecting it to their morals. This disparity may partly stem from religion's connection to disgust sensitivity and the large number of religiously affiliated conservatives, but the connection isn't strong enough to account for the entirety of conservatives' sensitivity (Inbar et al. 714-718). Disgust sensitivity also correlates with several typically conservative political viewpoints, including negative responses to gay marriage and abortion, and oddly, a positive reaction to the idea of tax cuts, but doesn't correlate with a number of other political issues, making it possible that a proneness to disgust is an important part of what leads people to become more conservative in the first place (Inbar et al. 721, 723). Conservatism and disgust sensitivity share links to a number of traits, including more fear of death and less openness to new experiences, further strengthening the connection between the two (Inbar et al. 722); this closedness to new experience is a personality trait that's very strongly related to conservatism, as opposed to liberals' typical desire for novelty, difference, and diversity (Settle et al. 1191).

Aside from morality and disgust, conservatives' clichéd use of stereotypes might also have to do with a desire for certainty and sensitivity to fear. They use physical stereotypes to

categorize people into groups much more frequently than liberals, as found by Stern, West et al. (Stern et al. 15337). When it is necessary to group people using a stereotype, and will continue to be in the future, conservatives tend to negatively evaluate counterstereotypical people, those who don't conform to the stereotypes of their apparent group. For example, they judge masculine gay men and feminine straight men more harshly than those who fit appearance-based stereotypes for their group, feminine gay men and masculine straight men (Stern et al. 15338). Importantly, when the level of uncertainty is increased, liberals also begin to evaluate counterstereotypical people negatively, suggesting that liberals might generally do this less because of their lower need for certainty or maintenance the status quo (Stern et al. 15339). Conservatives' desire for certainty even seems to extend into the avoidance of dissonance provoking situations that call their political beliefs into question. They tend to show extreme inflexibility and an inability to see politics from other people's perspectives (Nam et al. 6).

These difficulties and tendencies may have genetic connections as well as those that are more psychological and social. One specific gene is the DRD4 gene, and specifically its 7R allele, which is linked to openness and seeking out novelty and sensation, all of which are more liberal personality traits that reduce tolerance of monotony (Settle et al. 1190-1191). Having more of these alleles doesn't automatically predict greater liberalism, but it does when combined with having more friends during adolescence, the first evidence of a genetic and environmental link to ideology (Settle et al. 1193-1195). Genetics' influence on the disparate traits of conservatives and liberals has just begun to be researched, but it may be a large part of the cause of conservatives' desire for certainty, closure, and routine as suggested by the DRD4 gene. In the past, most experts viewed ideology as the product of the social environment of one's upbringing

and the overall political atmosphere of the time, but we now know that there is definitely a “core element” to ideological orientation that is rooted in personality, psychology, and genetic predispositions (Settle et al. 1189-1190). At this point, a number of potential genetic markers have been identified, but it remains unclear how most of them come together to affect ideology (Hatemi et al. 277-278). It’s likely that genetics have an indirect influence, affecting biological processes that affect socialization, influencing political attitudes.

Overall, the difference between liberals and conservatives is an exciting and broad topic for research, with much more to be done. How people develop their beliefs remains confusing, but it’s clear that there are real psychological, brain, and genetic differences between conservatives and liberals, as well as increasing polarization through more political affect and diverging ideology. It’s also interesting to note how polarizing just the categorization of people as “liberals” and “conservatives,” or “Democrats” and “Republicans” can be, separating Americans into two camps, ignoring nuance within the groups and pitting them against each other. At some point, our society will need to make a change in order to continue to function, but it remains unclear whether research and awareness of our differences will ever make it easier to overcome them.

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