

THE WEEK

<http://theweek.com/article/index/228375/why-you-vote-the-way-you-do>

ESSAY

Why you vote the way you do

Genes play a role, says Jonathan Haidt, but your political outlook is also determined by six moral values

PUBLISHED MAY 25, 2012, AT 10:32 AM

HERE'S A SIMPLE definition of ideology: "a set of beliefs about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved." And here's the most basic of all ideological questions: Should we preserve the present order or change it?

Political theorists long assumed that people chose ideologies to further their self-interest. The rich and powerful want to preserve and conserve; the workers want to change things. But that link has been largely broken in modern times, when the rich go both ways (industrialists mostly right, tech billionaires mostly left), and so do the poor (rural poor mostly right, urban poor mostly left). So for most of the late 20th century, political scientists embraced blank-slate theories in which people soaked up the ideology of their parents.

But then came the studies of twins in the 1980s, which found that genes contribute to just about every aspect of our personalities. We're not just talking about IQ and basic traits such as shyness. We're talking about the degree to which you like jazz, your likelihood of getting a divorce, your religiosity, and your political orientation as an adult. Whether you end up on the right or the left of the political spectrum turns out to be just as heritable as most other traits.

Researchers have found several genes that differ between liberals and conservatives. Most of them relate to the functioning of neurotransmitters, particularly glutamate and serotonin, both of which are involved in the brain's response to threat and fear. Other studies have focused on genes related to receptors for the neurotransmitter dopamine, which is tied to sensation seeking and openness to experience. Even though the effects of any single gene are tiny, these findings are important because they illustrate one pathway from genes to politics: The genes (collectively) give some people brains that are more (or less) reactive to threats and that produce less (or more) pleasure when exposed to novelty, change, and new experiences. Many studies have shown that conservatives react more strongly than liberals to signs of danger, while novelty seeking and openness to experience are among the best-established correlates of liberalism.

Let's imagine a pair of fraternal twins, a brother and sister raised together in the same home. During



How voters react to signs of danger can influence which party they prefer. *Photo: Hill Street Studios/Blend Images/Corbis*

their nine months together in the womb, the brother's genes constructed a brain that was a bit higher than average in its sensitivity to threats, a bit lower than average in its tendency to feel pleasure when exposed to radically new experiences. The sister's genes made a brain with the opposite settings.

The two siblings attend the same schools, but they gradually create different worlds for themselves. Even in nursery school, their behavior causes adults to treat them differently. One study found that women who called themselves liberals as adults had been rated by their nursery school teachers as having traits consistent with threat insensitivity and novelty seeking.

But traits such as novelty seeking are just the first level of personality. The second level is our "characteristic adaptations." These are traits that emerge as we grow. They are called adaptations because people develop them in response to the specific environments and challenges that they happen to face. Let's follow our twins into adolescence, and let's suppose they attend a fairly strict and well-ordered school. The brother fits in well, but the sister engages in constant battles with the teachers. She becomes angry and socially disengaged. These are now parts of her personality — her characteristic adaptations — but they would not have developed had she gone to a more progressive and less structured school.

The sister chooses to go to college in New York City, where she majors in Latin American studies and finds her calling as an advocate for the children of illegal immigrants. Because her social circle is entirely composed of liberals, she is enmeshed in a moral matrix based primarily on the psychology of care and compassion. In 2008 she is electrified by Barack Obama's promise of change and concern for the poor.

The brother, in contrast, has no interest in moving far away to a dirty, and threatening, city. He stays close to family and friends, earns a degree in business, and then works for a local bank. He becomes a pillar of his church and his community. There is occasional talk in church of helping victims of oppression, but the most common moral themes in his life are personal responsibility and loyalty. He resonates to John McCain's campaign slogan, "Country First."

Things didn't have to work out this way. On the day they were born, the sister was not predestined to vote for Obama; the brother was not guaranteed to become a Republican. But their different sets of genes gave them different first drafts of their minds, which led them down different paths, through different life experiences, and into different moral subcultures.

Narratives Left and Right

THE SOCIOLOGIST CHRISTIAN Smith has written about the moral webs or networks of meaning within which human life takes place. He shows how stories, particularly "grand narratives," identify and reinforce the sacred core of each network. Each narrative is designed to orient listeners morally — to draw their attention to a set of virtues and vices, or good and evil forces — and to impart lessons about what must be done now to protect, recover, or attain the sacred core of the vision.

One such narrative, which Smith calls the "liberal progress narrative," organizes much of the moral matrix of the American academic Left. It argues that traditional societies were unjust, repressive, and oppressive. People who valued autonomy, equality, and prosperity struggled against the forces of oppression, and established modern, liberal, democratic welfare societies. But the struggle for a good society in which individuals are equal and free to pursue their self-defined happiness is not

over.

This is a heroic liberation narrative. Authority, hierarchy, power, and tradition are the chains that must be broken to free the "noble aspirations" of the victims.

In my research, I have sought to describe the universal psychological "foundations" of morality. My colleagues at YourMorals.org and I have identified six in particular, six clusters of moral concerns — care/harm, fairness/cheating, liberty/oppression, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation — upon which all political cultures and movements base their moral appeals. Political liberals, we find, tend to rely primarily on care/harm, followed by fairness/cheating and liberty/oppression. Social conservatives, in contrast, use all six foundations. They are less concerned than liberals about harm to innocent victims, but they are much more concerned about the moral foundations that bind groups and nations together, i.e., loyalty (patriotism), authority (law and order, traditional families), and sanctity (the Bible, God, the flag).

Smith's liberal narrative derives its moral force primarily from the care/harm foundation (concern for the suffering of victims) and the liberty/oppression foundation (a celebration of liberty as freedom from oppression, as well as freedom to pursue self-defined happiness). In this narrative, fairness is political equality (which is part of opposing oppression). Authority is mentioned only as an evil, and there is no mention of loyalty or sanctity.

Contrast that narrative with one for modern conservatism. Emory University clinical psychologist Drew Westen has extracted the master conservative narrative from the major speeches of Ronald Reagan: Once upon a time, America was a shining beacon. Then liberals came along and undermined America by building up the federal bureaucracy and choking off the free market. They opposed God and faith. They took money from hardworking people and gave it to welfare queens. They worried more about the rights of criminals than those of victims. They pushed the sexual revolution and weakened the family by promoting first a feminist agenda and then a gay one. They cut military spending, disrespected our soldiers, and burned the flag. Then Americans decided to take their country back from those who undermined it.

This too is a heroic narrative, but it's a heroism of defense. The Reagan narrative is visibly conservative in that it relies for its moral force on at least five of the six moral foundations. There's only a hint of care (for the victims of crime), but very clear references to liberty (as freedom from government constraint), fairness (as proportionality, which means it's wrong to take money from those who work hard and give it to those who don't), loyalty (soldiers and the flag), authority (subversion of the family and of traditions), and sanctity (replacing God with the celebration of promiscuity).

Can we just get along?

THE TWO NARRATIVES are as opposed as they could be. Can partisans even understand the story told by the other side? The obstacles to empathy are not symmetrical. There is no foundation used by the Left that is not also used by the Right. Even though many conservatives opposed some of the great liberations of the 20th century — of women, sweatshop workers, African-Americans, and gay people — they have applauded others, such as the liberation of Eastern Europe from communist oppression.

But when liberals try to understand the Reagan narrative, they have a harder time. When I speak to

liberal audiences about the three "binding" foundations — loyalty, authority, and sanctity — I find that many in the audience reject these concerns. Loyalty to a group shrinks the moral circle; it is the basis of racism and exclusion, they say. Authority is oppression. Sanctity is religious mumbo-jumbo that suppress female sexuality and justifies homophobia.

I conducted a test to see how well liberals and conservatives could understand each other. I asked more than 2,000 Americans to fill out a questionnaire. One third of the time they were asked to fill it out by answering as themselves. One third of the time they were asked to fill it out as they thought a "typical liberal" would respond. One third of the time they were asked to fill it out as a "typical conservative."

The results were clear and consistent. Moderates and conservatives were most accurate in their predictions, whether they were pretending to be liberals or conservatives. Liberals were the least accurate, especially those who described themselves as "very liberal." The biggest errors in the whole study came when liberals answered the care and fairness questions while pretending to be conservatives. When faced with statements such as "one of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal" or "justice is the most important requirement for a society," liberals assumed that conservatives would disagree. If you have a moral matrix built primarily on intuitions about care and fairness (as equality), and you listen to the Reagan narrative, what else could you think? Reagan seems completely unconcerned about the welfare of drug addicts, poor people, and gay people.

What's the lesson here? It's that morality binds us and blinds us. We all get sucked into tribal moral communities and enmeshed in their narratives. Morality binds us into ideological teams that fight each other as though the fate of the world depends on our side winning each battle. It blinds us to the fact, so often denied in today's politics, that each team is composed of good people who have something important to say.

From The Righteous Mind, by Jonathan Haidt, ©2012 by Jonathan Haidt. Published by arrangement with Pantheon Books, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc. For more information see RighteousMind.com.