



Can You Guess a Person's Politics by Their Personality? Psychologist Team Says Yes

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If your office is a mess, you're known as a chatty Cathy, and you consider yourself hard to scare, then chances are, you will be voting for Obama in six days. But your neighbor, an optimistic clean freak who prides himself on the fact that he has woken up at 5 a.m. every day for the last 10 years, is a likely McCainiac.

It may sound a little like political palm reading, but some social psychologists say personality and biology may form the basis of a person's political leanings. While there's no Republican or Democrat gene, researchers are coming closer to pinpointing fundamental psychological and biological differences between conservatives and liberals.

In fact, professor John T. Jost, a political psychologist at New York University, found that a map illustrating regional personality differences was surprisingly similar to the red state/blue state map of the nation. He says a deeper understanding of the differences between right-wing and left-wing psyches has the "potential not only for predicting electoral outcomes through the development of more sophisticated public opinion polling techniques, but also for figuring out what kinds of political campaigns are most likely to be effective in certain environments and for various constituencies."

Jost and his colleagues have been hard at work putting the American voter on the metaphorical couch. Their conclusions, thus far, have proven both illuminating and entertaining.

Chatty Democrats, Orderly Republicans

Conventional wisdom tells us that states with high population of city dwellers and minorities tend to vote liberal, while small-town white America sways conservative. But Jost and his colleagues, psychologists Peter J. Rentfrow, Jeff Potter and Samuel Gosling, wanted to delve deeper than demographics when investigating the blue state/red state

divide. They felt that there was something much more fundamental at play: personality.

To test their hypothesis that regional personality differences account for whether a state bleeds red or blue, they gave online personality tests to almost 500,000 people across the nation. Using a 44-question survey, they were able to measure five key aspects of personality: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. (It's called the "Big Five" personality questionnaire, a test so popular it even has a [Facebook application](#).) For example, respondents were asked to rate how anxious and easily upset they are (an indicator of neuroticism), and whether they consider themselves sympathetic and warm (an indicator of agreeableness), dependable and self-disciplined (a measure of conscientiousness) or open to new experiences and complex (openness).

Sure enough, researchers found significant differences in personality between states that voted Democratic versus Republican in the past three presidential elections. The best predictor of Democratic-voting states was a disproportionately high score on openness, which is associated with creativity, curiosity, intellectualism and tolerance of differences. Conversely, residents of Republican states scored disproportionately low on openness but high on conscientiousness, which is associated with tradition, self-discipline, following rules and being organized, dependable and responsible. The findings held true even after adjusting for sociodemographic differences. The connection between openness and Democratic voting was so strong that a mapped-out illustration of openness looked almost identical to red state/blue state maps illustrating the nation's voting patterns over the past three elections.

As for extroversion, blue-state residents rated themselves as "more talkative, enthusiastic, energetic and sociable and less inhibited, quiet and reserved than people living in red states," according to the study. One odd fact that came out of the study, for which researchers provided no analysis: States that chose Kerry as their man in 2004 scored high on neuroticism. Insert your own John Kerry joke here.



A blue state/red state map of Democrats versus Republicans is strikingly similar to a blue/red map that was done based on regional personality traits.

Jost has also researched what he calls the "behavioral residue" of these liberal and conservative personality traits. A team of three researchers, including Jost, Columbia University professor Dana R. Carney, and Gosling, professor at the University of Texas at Austin and author of *Snoop: What Your Stuff Says About You*, found clues to people's political attitudes simply by observing their offices and homes. People who described themselves as political conservatives occupied rooms that were cleaner, more organized and more brightly lit, displaying the Republican trait of conscientiousness. The right-wingers were also found to have more cleaning supplies, calendars, postage stamps and laundry products. The liberal participants of the study, perhaps predictably, had more cluttered offices and bedrooms with more color. They also had a greater number of CDs and DVDs, and more eclectic taste in music and movies.

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Those Conservatives with Catlike Reflexes

In another recent study, published in the journal *Science*, researchers found 46 Nebraska residents with strong political convictions, both right- and left-wing. Participants were asked their positions on a number of issues, from the Patriot Act and warrantless wiretap searches to immigration and gun control. The poor suckers were then hooked up to monitors that measured how much they blinked and sweated, as researchers gauged their physical reactions to a series of images. It went something like this: an image of a bunny, then a happy child, and then an open wound with maggots on it. A bowl of fruit, then a dazed person with a bloody face. The subjects of the study were also asked to look at a focal point on a computer screen, then had a loud, startling noise blasted at them multiple times.

So what do loud noises and images of open wounds have to do with politics? According to the researchers, the way people react to threatening images and sounds may tell us something about their political attitudes toward threats on society. The hypothesis is that involuntary reactions to being startled and political reactions to things that may disrupt social order are both related to a part of brain called the amygdala. Therefore, conservatives who react most vividly to threats -- whether it's a threat to social order or a national security threat -- should, theoretically, also sweat the most when presented with an image of a scary spider.

The results of that study did, in fact, reveal that "individuals with measurably lower physical sensitivities to sudden noises and threatening visual images were more likely to support foreign aid, liberal immigration policies, pacifism and gun control, whereas individuals displaying measurably higher physiological reactions to those same stimuli were more likely to favor defense spending, capital punishment, patriotism and the Iraq War." In other words, the folks who most supported the war in Iraq, for example, sweated more when presented with an image of a scary spider.

Fear, in fact, has been shown to be one of the most powerful predictors of support for conservative leaders. Robb Willer, a sociologist at Cornell University, published a study in 2004 showing that each time a new terror alert was issued by the government between February 2001 and May 2004, the approval ratings for President Bush would subsequently rise by an average of 2.75 percentage points. Not only did the fear of external attacks produce increased support for the standing leadership, but the terror alerts also increased support for Bush's economic policies. (Read the results of the [study here](#).)

The Happiness Quotient

Although right-wingers may respond more viscerally and dramatically to threats, it's liberals who are actually the Debbie Downers of the nation. ✓

According to a 2006 Pew Research Center opinion survey, 46 percent of conservative Republicans reported that they were "very happy" while only 28 percent of liberal Democrats could say the same. This was not a one-time fluke of polling. In an analysis of data from the United States and nine other countries, Jost and a colleague found that right-wingers consistently said they were happier than their left-wing counterparts.

Some of the difference may have to do with demographics and religious beliefs; people of faith regularly report more satisfaction with their lives than the nonreligious, and conservatives tend to be more religious as a group. However, researchers suggested that two more big factors may be at play.

The first reason for all the unhappiness on the left: Liberals think too much. "To the extent that liberals tend to enjoy thinking more and to prolong cognitive closure, whereas conservatives tend to prefer relatively simple, unambiguous answers to life's questions ... liberals might become less satisfied with their current situation because of the deleterious effects of rumination and introspection," the authors of the study wrote.

Second: Right-wingers don't let the inequality in the world get to them. "Our research suggests that inequality takes a greater psychological toll on liberals than on conservatives, apparently because liberals lack ideological rationalizations that would help them frame inequality in a positive (or at least neutral) light." Because conservative politics promote the status quo, it allows conservatives to view the status quo economic inequality as acceptable, they said. To back up this argument, researchers pointed to historical data that showed how liberals and conservatives reacted differently between the growing gap between rich and poor. As income inequality grew significantly in the United States from 1974 to 2004, the numbers of conservatives who said they were happy decreased mildly. Meanwhile, the number of happy liberals plunged. A bleeding heart, apparently, is an unhappy one. ✓

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What about the web responses (several hundred)?