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Across the Great Divide: Investigating Links Between Personality and Politics

By PATRICIA COHEN

Folk music and a collection of feminist poetry may well be dead giveaways that there is a liberal in the house. But what about an ironing board or postage stamps or a calendar?

What seem to be ordinary, everyday objects to some people can carry a storehouse of information about the owner's ideology, says a new wave of social scientists who are studying the subtle links between personality and politics.

Research into why someone leans left or right — a subject that stirred enormous interest in the aftermath of World War II before waning in the 1960s — has been revived in recent years, partly because of a shift in federal funds for politics and terrorism research, new technology like brain imaging and a sharper partisan divide in the nation's political culture.

“I believe that recent developments in psychological research and the world of politics — including responses to 9/11, the Bush presidency, the Iraq War, polarizing Supreme Court nominations, Hurricane Katrina, and ongoing controversies over scientific and environmental policies — provide ample grounds for revisiting” the psychological basis of Americans' opinions, party and voting patterns, John T. Jost, a psychologist at New York University, wrote in a recent issue of *American Psychologist*.

The newest work in the field, found in a growing number of papers, symposiums and college courses, touches on factors from genetics to home décor. Some people have greeted the results with fascination. Books by George Lakoff, a linguist and cognitive scientist at the University of California, Berkeley, who studies the psychological power of metaphors and the framing of issues, became required reading among Democrats after their defeat in the 2004 elections. Others have been decidedly less thrilled with studies they say portray conservatives as

pinched and neurotic.

For anyone who assumes political choices rest on a rational analysis of issues and self-interest, the notion that preference for a candidate springs from the same source as the choice of a color scheme can be disturbing. But social psychologists assume that all beliefs, including political ones, partly arise from an individual's deep psychological fears and needs: for stability, order and belonging, or for rebellion and novelty.

These needs and worries vary in degree, develop in childhood and probably have a temperamental and a genetic component, said Arie Kruglanski of the University of Maryland. A study of twins, for instance, has shown that a conservative or progressive orientation can be inherited, while a decades-long study has found that personality traits associated with liberalism or conservatism later in life show up in preschoolers.

No one is arguing that an embrace of universal national health care or tax cuts arises because of a chromosome or the unconscious residue from a schoolyard spat. What Mr. Jost and Mr. Kruglanski say is that years of research show that liberals and conservatives consistently match one of two personality types. Those who enjoy bending rules and embracing new experiences tend to turn left; those who value tradition and are more cautious about change tend to end up on the right.

What's more, these traits are reflected in musical taste, hobbies and décor. Dana R. Carney, a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University, who worked with Mr. Jost and Samuel D. Gosling of the University of Texas at Austin among others, found that the offices and bedrooms of conservatives tended to be neat and contain cleaning supplies, calendars, postage stamps and sports-related posters; conservatives also tended to favor country music and documentaries. Bold-colored, cluttered rooms with art supplies, lots of books, jazz CDs and travel documents tended to belong to liberals (providing sloppy Democrats with an excuse to refuse clean up on principle).

Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist at the University of Virginia, said he found this work intriguing but was more inclined to see a person's moral framework as a source of difference between liberals and conservatives. Most liberals, he said, think about morality in terms of two categories: how someone's welfare is affected, and whether it is fair. Conservatives, by contrast, broaden that definition

to include loyalty, respect for authority, and purity or sanctity. Conservatives have a richer, more elaborate moral horizon than liberals, Mr. Haidt said, because there is a “whole dimension to human experience best described as divinity or sacredness that conservatives are more attuned to.”

So how does he explain the red-blue divide? “Areas with less mobility and less diversity generally have the more traditional,” broadened definition of morality, “and therefore were more likely to vote for George W. Bush — and to tell pollsters that their reason was ‘moral values,’ ” he and his co-writer, Jesse Graham, say in a paper to be published this year by The Journal Social Justice Research.

Mr. Jost did his own research on the red-blue divide. Using the Internet he and his collaborators gave personality tests to hundreds of thousands of Americans. He found states with people who scored high on “openness” were significantly more likely to have voted for the Democratic candidate in the past three elections, even after adjustments were made for income, ethnicity and population density. States that scored high on “conscientiousness” went Republican in the past three elections.

Some of these psychological studies have been dogged by charges of bias however. In 2003 a mammoth survey of more than 50 years of research on the psychology of conservatism that Mr. Jost and Mr. Kruglanski undertook with the help of Jack Glaser and Frank Sulloway at Berkeley concluded that conservatives tend to be “rigid,” “close-minded” and “fearful,” less tolerant of minorities and more tolerant of inequality. At the time the conservative columnist George F. Will ridiculed the results: “The professors have ideas; the rest of us have emanations of our psychological needs and neuroses.”

The authors insist they are not making value judgments; whether a particular trait is positive or negative depends on circumstance. “Fear of death has the highest correlation with being conservative,” Mr. Sulloway said. But he continued: “What’s wrong with fearing death? If you don’t fear death, evolution eliminates you from the population.”

Accusations of bias against conservatives go way back, to Theodor Adorno and other scholars who, after World War II, came up with the “authoritarian personality” to explain the link between the far right and fascist regimes.

As for the present research, John Zaller, a political scientist at Berkeley, said: “I

am personally embarrassed by some of the leading work by psychologists on personality and conservatism. I take the data to be valid, but I feel the manner of describing it too often sets up conservatives to look bad.”

Mr. Haidt, who agrees liberals and conservatives have distinct dispositions, still thinks bias is a problem: “Our own biases as researchers — because we are almost all liberal — make it difficult for us to understand the psychology of conservatives.”

A slanted interpretation isn’t the only cause of skepticism. Definitions of liberal and conservative shift, critics say. How would you define a liberal or conservative in the former Soviet Union? And what about people who are conservative on economic policy but liberal on social issues?

What is important, said Larry Bartels, a political scientist at Princeton University, is how psychological tendencies are translated into views about specific political issues: “In 2000, George W. Bush ridiculed nation-building; now he seems pretty committed,” he wrote in an e-mail message. “Which of those positions (if either) represents rigidity, resistance to change, or discipline? On the other hand, how many flexible, curious, open-to-experience liberals do you know who want to experiment with restructuring the Social Security system?”

Personality may have something to do with a particular political outlook, he said, but so do a lot of other things.

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