

Current Edition

Ideology is back and the divides are still deep

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Psychologists see that the elements that turn people to the Left or Right lie deep in the psyche, says John Jost

The "end of ideology" was declared more than 40 years ago, after the titanic struggle between fascism and communism. The declaration was made by a tiny but influential band of sociologists and political scientists who were glad to see it go. Their assumption that ordinary citizens don't care about, or even understand, ideological concepts has dominated scholarship on voting behaviour for decades. Increasingly, however, reality is getting in the way of believing, however conveniently, that political differences are only skin deep - and therefore easy to resolve.

An ideological divide that has loomed for years became gaping in the aftermath of the Bush Administration's polarising response to 9/11 and the Iraq War. Nearly everyone in the US now knows whether they live in a predominantly liberal, conservative or "swing" state. Almost all of us have friends and family whom we have learnt, over the past five years, to avoid on the subjects of politics and religion.

Ideology is back with a vengeance, and psychologists are willing to study it, even if sociologists and political scientists are still reticent. There is a steadily growing list of differences between people who are drawn to liberalism and those drawn to conservatism. There are also situations or experiences, such as 9/11, that evoke intense feelings of threat and uncertainty and move most people to the Right, even temporarily. Other experiences, such as travel and education, make what is unfamiliar less threatening and what is uncertain less aversive, thereby moving most people to the Left.

Two of the most stable or "core" differences between the Left and the Right pertain to attitudes to traditionalism (versus change) and equality (versus inequality). People who call themselves conservatives hold significantly more favourable attitudes than liberals towards traditional cultural and "family values", including religious forms of morality. They are also more likely to support conventional authority figures and oppose activists who are seeking to change the status quo, especially toward greater equality.

People who identify themselves as liberals place a higher priority on egalitarianism, achieved through policies such as welfare, social security and affirmative action. They are also significantly less likely to hold prejudicial attitudes, at both conscious and unconscious levels, toward racial minorities, homosexuals, women and members of other disadvantaged groups. These differences may themselves be rooted in more basic psychological needs for stability versus change, order versus complexity, familiarity versus novelty, conformity versus creativity, loyalty versus rebellion.

Other differences, such as those involving aesthetic preferences, musical tastes, hobbies and personal belongings, may share the same psychological roots but seem more harmless. The bedrooms of conservatives, for example, are more likely to contain organisational supplies such as calendars, postage stamps and laundry baskets, the bedrooms of liberals art supplies, books, CDs and maps. As a rule, conservatives tend to pursue lives that are more orderly, conventional and conscientious, whereas liberals are more open-minded in their quest for creativity, novelty and diversity.

Results from the American National Election Studies reveal that more than three quarters of respondents

since 1996 can and do place themselves on a continuous scale of liberalism-conservatism. These ideological self-placements account for an astonishing 85 per cent of the statistical variance in candidate preferences between 1972 and 2004. They also predict many other important outcomes for the individual, including traits, values, behaviours and even mental health characteristics.

Many other discoveries concerning the causes and consequences of ideological differences await us, but only if we accept the obvious fact that ideological differences exist and that they can be studied scientifically.

Ideology, because it appears to satisfy many social and psychological needs of our species, is probably a natural part of the human constitution and will always be present in one form or another. Human beings have required and will continue to require the characteristics that are associated with the political Left as well as the political Right. We need tradition, order, structure, closure, discipline, competition and conscientiousness, to be sure, but if the human race is to continue to survive new challenges we will also just as surely need creativity, curiosity, tolerance, diversity, co-operation and open-mindedness.

Getting both "sides" to agree on this is the hardest part.

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