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Study Ties Political Leanings to Hidden Biases

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Put a group of people together at a party and observe how they behave. Differently than when they are alone? Differently than when they are with family? What if they're in a stadium instead of at a party? What if they're all men?

The field of social psychology has long been focused on how social environments affect the way people behave. But social psychologists are people, too, and as the United States has become increasingly politically polarized, they have grown increasingly interested in examining what drives these sharp divides: red states vs. blue states; pro-Iraq war vs. anti-Iraq war; pro-same-sex marriage vs. anti-same-sex marriage. And they have begun to study political behavior using such specialized tools as sophisticated psychological tests and brain scans.

"In my own family, for example, there are stark differences, not just of opinion but very profound differences in how we view the world," said Brenda Major, a psychologist at the University of California at Santa Barbara and the president of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, which had a conference last week that showcased several provocative psychological studies about the nature of political belief.

The new interest has yielded some results that will themselves provoke partisan reactions: Studies presented at the conference, for example, produced evidence that emotions and implicit assumptions often influence why people choose their political affiliations, and that partisans stubbornly discount any information that challenges their preexisting beliefs.

Emory University psychologist Drew Westen put self-identified Democratic and Republican partisans in brain scanners and asked them to evaluate negative information about various candidates. Both groups were quick to spot inconsistency and hypocrisy -- but only in candidates they opposed.

When presented with negative information about the candidates they liked, partisans of all stripes found ways to discount it, Westen said. When the unpalatable information was rejected, furthermore, the brain scans showed that volunteers gave themselves feel-good pats -- the scans showed that "reward centers" in volunteers' brains were activated. The psychologist observed that the way these subjects dealt with unwelcome information had curious parallels with drug addiction as addicts also reward themselves for wrong-headed behavior.

Another study presented at the conference, which was in Palm Springs, Calif., explored relationships between racial bias and political affiliation by analyzing self-reported beliefs, voting patterns and the results of psychological tests that measure implicit attitudes -- subtle stereotypes people hold about various groups.

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That study found that supporters of President Bush and other conservatives had stronger self-admitted and implicit biases against blacks than liberals did.

"What automatic biases reveal is that while we have the feeling we are living up to our values, that feeling may not be right," said University of Virginia psychologist Brian Nosek, who helped conduct the race analysis. "We are not aware of everything that causes our behavior, even things in our own lives."

Brian Jones, a spokesman for the Republican National Committee, said he disagreed with the study's conclusions but that it was difficult to offer a detailed critique, as the research had not yet been published and he could not review the methodology. He also questioned whether the researchers themselves had implicit biases -- against Republicans -- noting that Nosek and Harvard psychologist Mahzarin Banaji had given campaign contributions to Democrats.

"There are a lot of factors that go into political affiliation, and snap determinations may be interesting for an academic study, but the real-world application seems somewhat murky," Jones said.

Nosek said that though the risk of bias among researchers was "a reasonable question," the study provided empirical results that could -- and would -- be tested by other groups: "All we did was compare questions that people could answer any way they wanted," Nosek said, as he explained why he felt personal views could not have influenced the outcome. "We had no direct contact with participants."

For their study, Nosek, Banaji and social psychologist Erik Thompson culled self-acknowledged views about blacks from nearly 130,000 whites, who volunteered online to participate in a widely used test of racial bias that measures the speed of people's associations between black or white faces and positive or negative words. The researchers examined correlations between explicit and implicit attitudes and voting behavior in all 435 congressional districts.

The analysis found that substantial majorities of Americans, liberals and conservatives, found it more difficult to associate black faces with positive concepts than white faces -- evidence of implicit bias. But districts that registered higher levels of bias systematically produced more votes for Bush.

"Obviously, such research does not speak at all to the question of the prejudice level of the president," said Banaji, "but it does show that George W. Bush is appealing as a leader to those Americans who harbor greater anti-black prejudice."

Vincent Hutchings, a political scientist at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, said the results matched his own findings in a study he conducted ahead of the 2000 presidential election: Volunteers shown visual images of blacks in contexts that implied they were getting welfare benefits were far more receptive to Republican political ads decrying government waste than volunteers shown ads with the same message but without images of black people.

Jon Krosnick, a psychologist and political scientist at Stanford University, who independently assessed the studies, said it remains to be seen how significant the correlation is between racial bias and political affiliation.

For example, he said, the study could not tell whether racial bias was a better predictor of voting preference than, say, policy preferences on gun control or abortion. But while those issues would be addressed in subsequent studies -- Krosnick plans to get random groups of future voters to take the psychological tests

and discuss their policy preferences -- he said the basic correlation was not in doubt.

"If anyone in Washington is skeptical about these findings, they are in denial," he said. "We have 50 years of evidence that racial prejudice predicts voting. Republicans are supported by whites with prejudice against blacks. If people say, 'This takes me aback,' they are ignoring a huge volume of research."

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