AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

COVER STORY

Politics is personal

Research by political psychologists helps to explain why we vote the way we do—and is informing ways to improve democratic elections

By Kirsten Weir Date created: November 1, 2019 12 min read
Vol. 50, No. 10
Print version: page 44

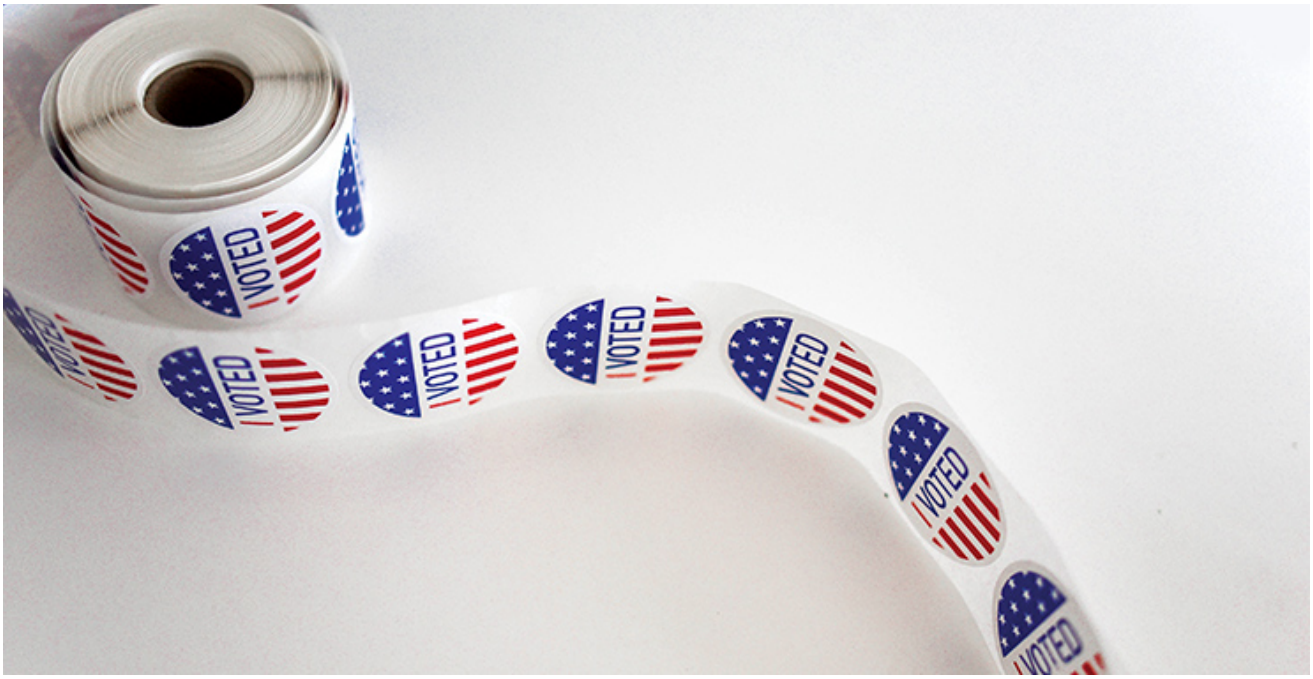
The 2016 U.S. presidential election took a lot of people by surprise. But while the election of Donald J. Trump may have been an anomaly in many ways, it wasn't the "unexpected asteroid strike" it's often made out to be, says Christopher Federico, PhD, a political psychologist at the Center for the Study of Political Psychology (CSPP) at the University of Minnesota.

“Trump’s election was the culmination of a trend, more than some radical unexpected disruption that occurred on November 8, 2016,” Federico says. “It resulted from a long period of evolution in terms of how and why people in the U.S. identify with different political parties.”

That insight is one of many from political psychologists who over the past few decades have plumbed the factors behind voter behavior and political identities, helping us understand politics on an individual level.

“Historically, political science has focused on institutions such as governments or political parties, and how they constrain the behavior of individuals,” says Federico. “What political psychology brings to the table is … understanding individual motivations and how we make sense of this complex world.”

Beyond offering insights into the political mind, political psychology can have practical applications such as improving ballot design, designing methodologically sound polls and, possibly, creating a healthier, more civil democracy.



The partisan divide

Polarization may be the defining feature of American politics in 2019. It's not just politicians fighting across the aisle. The general public, too, shows growing antipathy toward those in the opposite political camp. In 1960, only 4% of Democrats and 4% of Republicans said they would be disappointed if their child married someone from the opposite political party, according to a study by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (Almond, G., & Verba, S., *Civic Culture Study* (https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR07201.v2) , 1959–60). By 2018, 45% of Democrats and 35% of Republicans reported they'd be unhappy if their child did the same, according to a survey by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) and *The Atlantic* (Najle, M., & Jones, M., *PRRI* (https://www.prri.org/research/american-democracy-in-crisis-the-fate-of-pluralism-in-a-divided-nation/) , 2019).

"Party identification is a monster that is creating these intense divisions," says Howard Lavine, PhD, who directs the CSPP. "Understanding what goes into that is a major goal in political psychology right now."

Most political researchers agree that the modern media environment has a lot to do with that hostility. "Once there were three networks that saw it as their responsibility to cover the news events in an objective way. Then people realized they could cover the news in such a way that they could turn a profit," says political psychologist John Jost, PhD, co-director of the Center for Social and Political Behavior at New York University. Today, we have partisan cable news networks and clickbait "news" websites that feed off of political disagreement. "They're making money by energizing polarized audiences," Jost says.

Though the media arguably turns up the volume on partisan conflict, that doesn't explain why American voters sort themselves so readily into opposing groups. To better understand how that happens, political partisanship is increasingly being studied through the lens of socialidentity theory, as Leonie Huddy, PhD, of Stony Brook University in New York, and Alexa Bankert, PhD, of the University of Georgia, describe in a chapter on the subject ("*Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (https://oxfordindex.oup.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.250) ," 2017). Social identity theory holds that a person's self-concept is based on their membership within a group, whether one's group is defined by a religious affiliation, political party, gender, propensity to support a particular baseball team—or, sometimes, all of the above.

As soon as you identify as a member of one group or another, it influences how you think about the world. “You like members of that group more than others. You want things to reflect favorably upon your group. You’re biased toward believing things that reflect positively on your group,” says Federico. “Once you’re a member of a group, all kinds of group processes related to social identity kick in.”

Motivated reasoning

In the United States, political affiliation is a strong driver of political behavior, as Huddy and Bankert describe. On the positive side, they write, citizens who identify as strongly Republican or Democrat are more likely to vote and participate in politics. On the other hand, when partisan citizens become angry about politics, they are less influenced by information and less likely to support bipartisan politicians who reach across the aisle to find compromise—a stance that can drive politics in a more extreme direction.

One feature of group identity is that people want to protect and promote their own groups. As a result, partisan identity makes us more accepting of information that supports our beliefs and more critical of information that contradicts them, says social psychologist Peter Ditto, PhD, who studies political reasoning at the University of California, Irvine. Most psychologists agree that people engage in this tendency, known as motivated reasoning or motivated cognition.

And though experts disagree about which side is quicker to use motivated reasoning, some research suggests it’s an equal opportunity bias. In a meta-analysis, Ditto and colleagues concluded conservatives and liberals engaged in motivated reasoning to an equal degree (*Perspectives on Psychological Science* (https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691617746796) , Vol. 14, No. 2, 2019). “This pattern was found in judgments about a host of different political topics,” Ditto says. “The clearest finding from the study was the robustness of political tribalism.”

Researchers are beginning to understand the nuances of the ways group identity influences our political choices. Before the 2016 election, Briony Swire-Thompson, PhD, then at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and colleagues asked participants to rate their belief in factual and inaccurate statements Trump made during the campaign.

As motivated cognition would predict, Republican participants were more likely to believe the statements if they were attributed to Trump, and less likely to believe them if they were presented without attribution. The opposite pattern was true for Democrats. But Trump voters didn't accept their candidate's statements blindly. When inaccurate statements by Trump were presented along with notes that indicated they had been retracted as misinformation, Trump supporters were less likely to believe them—at least initially. After a week, however, participants began to "rebelieve" the misinformation, reverting to their initial assumptions, the authors found. Ultimately, being told the statements were inaccurate had no effect on participants' voting preferences (*Royal Society Open Science* (https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.160802) , Vol. 4, No. 3, 2017).

Justifying the status quo

Motivated reasoning can help explain how people on opposite ends of the political spectrum can have such different views of the world. Another theory, known as system justification, describes people's tendency to defend and justify the status quo—even when it means supporting politicians or policies that appear to be at odds with their own self-interest.

"People are motivated to defend and justify aspects of the status quo because they are part of the status quo," says Jost, who developed the theory with Harvard psychologist Mahzarin Banaji, PhD (*British Journal of Social Psychology* (https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.1994.tb01008.x) , Vol. 33, No. 1, 1994). System justification seems to have played a role in support for Trump, Jost says, with people motivated to support a traditional American way of life—a theme made plain in Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again."

To explore how system justification may have factored into Trump's success, Jost and colleagues analyzed responses from a nationally representative sample of Americans surveyed shortly before the 2016 election. The researchers found that justification of economic and gender-based disparities in society was strongly associated with support for Trump. But after adjusting for economic and gender-related variables, system justification overall was associated with support for Hillary Clinton. In other words, Trump's victory seems to not only represent a rejection of the status quo of liberal government that existed under President Barack Obama, but also an embrace of the

traditional social systems that maintain disparities in wealth and gender, the authors conclude (*Translational Issues in Psychological Science* (http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tps0000122) , Vol. 3, No. 3, 2017).

“There are interesting differences in what aspects of the status quo people want to change or to preserve,” Jost says.

Politics & personality

For decades, political psychologists have explored why we are drawn to the views and values of one party over another. Examining data from more than 200 such studies from around the world, Jost and colleagues explored the relationship between political ideology and multiple categories of motivation, including dogmatism, personal need for order and structure, and tolerance for uncertainty. Across studies, conservatives score higher than liberals on tests of dogmatic thinking and cognitive rigidity. To a lesser degree, conservatives also have higher needs for order and structure. Liberals tend to have a higher tolerance for uncertainty and a greater need for cognition, which researchers measured with statements such as “I find satisfaction in deliberating hard and for long hours” (*Political Psychology* (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/pops.12407) , Vol. 38, No. 2, 2017).

Jost’s research also suggests that a preference for authoritarian leadership styles is associated with Republicans—and with support for Trump in particular. Since at least the 1960s, research has shown that voters who prefer authoritarian styles are more likely to favor Republican presidential candidates, and 2016 was no different. But Jost and his colleagues wondered how that preference might describe voters who favored Trump over other Republican primary candidates.

They found that Trump supporters scored higher than other Republican supporters on two particular facets of authoritarianism: authoritarian aggression and group-based dominance (that is, a preference for group-based social hierarchies). These voters were more likely to support statements asserting that the country needs more law and order and that some groups are naturally inferior to others (Womick, J., et al., *Social Psychology and Personality Science* (https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550618778290) , Vol. 10, No. 5, 2019).

Over the past three decades, Americans who are high in authoritarianism have increasingly shifted into the Republican Party, Federico says. Many left-leaning authoritarians have responded by becoming less politically engaged, he and his colleagues found—paying less attention to politics and choosing not to vote, for example (*The Journal of Politics* (https://doi.org/10.1086/692126) , Vol. 79, No. 3, 2017).

Of course, political ideology is more than just the sum of your personality traits. Many other factors go into determining one's political preferences. In a paper with Ariel Malka, PhD, of Yeshiva University in New York, Federico describes how traits such as a high need for certainty and security are associated with right-wing beliefs—but only when someone is also knowledgeable about politics (*Advances in Political Psychology* (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/pops.12477) , Vol. 39, Suppl. 1, 2018). "Personality

traits are more likely to play themselves out in your political preference if you also know and care about politics," Federico says.

Voters' pre-existing biases and prejudices matter, too. For example, there's evidence that gender discrimination may have been a factor in the 2016 election. In an analysis of nationally representative American National Election Studies data, researchers at Brock University in Ontario found greater sexism predicted support for Trump over Clinton, especially among left-leaning voters, who might otherwise have supported a Democratic candidate (Rothwell, V., et al., Personality and Individual Differences (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2018.09.034) , Vol. 138, No. 1, 2019).

Liberal bias?

The research on politics and personality is not without critics, who have suggested that a liberal bias in the field of psychology paints conservatives in a negative light. In recent years, scientists have begun studying this assertion. In one example, psychologist Jay Van Bavel, PhD, of New York University, and colleagues recruited a politically diverse sample of U.S. residents to code 194 original social psychology studies for ideological slant. Then the researchers examined published replication attempts of those studies. They found the average rated ideology of the research was fairly centrist. And they found no evidence that research aligned with liberalism was less replicable or less statistically robust than research aligned with conservatism (Reinero, D.A., in press (https://psyarxiv.com/6k3j5/)).

Research has shown that social psychologists are more likely to identify as liberals. But that doesn't mean that their science is skewed, Jost says. "The whole point of our research methods is to separate characteristics of the researchers themselves from the findings."

Still, scientists are human, and they are vulnerable to having their judgments tainted by their political feelings just like anyone else, Ditto notes. "Whenever a field is intellectually homogeneous on some dimension, it opens the door to potential bias—for some findings to be more welcome and thus less carefully scrutinized than others, for certain kinds of behavior or people to be seen as the exception rather than the rule, for basic assumptions to go unexamined because everyone shares them," he says. "Given

the subtle power of political tribalism to influence our judgments, social psychologists would be wise to be vigilant about the potential for our political affinities to shape our scientific conclusions."

Better ballots

Political psychologists still have plenty to unpack about the ways that personality, prejudice and various other factors influence our political leanings. But understanding election outcomes doesn't always require deep insights into the human mind. Thanks to the design of the electoral system, factors that seem inconsequential can be enough to tip an election in one direction or another.

In research over several decades, for example, Jon Krosnick, PhD, a political psychologist at Stanford University, has shown that the candidate whose name appears first on a ballot earns 2 to 3% more of the vote, on average—a margin that spells the difference between winning and losing in many battleground states (*Public Opinion Quarterly* (https://academic.oup.com/poq/article-abstract/62/3/291/1936633?redirectedFrom=fulltext) , Vol. 62, No. 3, 1998). Over the years, lawsuits have been filed in several states to push for rotating names, and Krosnick is testifying about his research in a lawsuit in Florida. "About 90 percent of candidates benefit when they are listed first," he says.

Yet only seven states have laws that require candidates' names be rotated from precinct to precinct. The rest use other approaches, such as alphabetical order, or giving priority to the candidate from the governor's party. In 2016, Trump was listed first on ballots in almost all of the states that he won with narrow margins, Krosnick found—a factor that he believes was enough to deliver the presidency to Trump. "If names had been rotated from precinct to precinct, he likely wouldn't have won," he says.

Creating fairer ballots is just one example of the concrete ways that political psychology could influence the political process for the better. But the field has the potential to do even more, Krosnick says, to understand our political motivations and, perhaps, help us move beyond our worst political instincts. "Instead of just trying to understand phenomena like motivated reasoning, we can ask how we can build bridges and create collaboration between people who hate each other," he says. "If political and social psychology embrace that, we can transform ugliness into solutions."

Further reading

Open Versus Closed: Personality, Identity, and the Politics of Redistribution (https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/open-versus-closed/C469BBB3DA2A6F7E12C9258A5AED9DFA)
Johnston, C.D., et al. Cambridge University Press 2017

Liberals and Conservatives Are Similarly Motivated to Avoid Exposure to One Another's Opinions (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2017.04.003)
Frimer, J.A., et al. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 2017

False Equivalence: Are Liberals and Conservatives in the United States Equally Biased? (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1745691618788876)
Baron, J., & Jost, J.T. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 2019

Political Diversity Will Improve Social Psychological Science (https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X14000430)
Duarte, J.L., et al. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 2015

Additional reading

Past, present and future (/monitor/2019/11/cover-politics-sidebar)