

What's the difference between a liberal and conservative?

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Political conservatives operate out of a fear of chaos and absence of order while political liberals operate out of a fear of emptiness, a new Northwestern University study soon to be published in the *Journal of Research in Personality* finds.

"Social scientists long have assumed that liberals are more rational and less fearful than conservatives, but we find that both groups view the world as a dangerous place," says Dan McAdams, study co-author and professor of human development and psychology at Northwestern University. "It's just that their fears emerge differently."

To better understand the differences between politically conservative Christian Americans and their liberal counterparts, McAdams and Northwestern University co-author Michelle Albaugh asked 128 socially active churchgoers this question: What if there were no God?

"Social scientists -- who are generally liberals -- have for decades done research to figure out what makes conservatives tick," says McAdams. The study, "What if there Were No God? Politically Conservative and Liberal Christians Imagine their Lives without Faith," available online to journal subscribers.

Like the Northwestern study, the preponderance of research finds that conservatives fear unchecked human impulses that challenge the status quo. What McAdams and Northwestern researcher Albaugh also find is an underlying, but different, fear that drives liberals as well.

"Political conservatives envision a world without God in which baser human impulses go unchecked, social institutions (marriage, government, family) fall apart and chaos ensues," says McAdams. Liberals, on the other hand, envision a world without God as barren, lifeless, devoid of color and reasons to live.

"Liberals see their faith as something that fills them up and, without it, they conjure up metaphors of emptiness, depletion and scarcity," McAdams said. "While conservatives worry about societal collapse, liberals worry about a world without deep feelings and intense experiences."

The study findings may shed light on why conservatives prefer more authoritarian leaders while liberals do not, he adds.

"What's clear is that it is their political and not religious orientation that underlies the different psychologies of political conservatives and liberals," says McAdams. After all, all of the adults he and Northwestern researcher Albaugh studied were members of churches, and their data suggested that most were socially involved, altruistic people.

The Northwestern University study sample included 128 highly religious and politically active Americans who attend church regularly. Although nationally conservatives are more likely to attend church than liberals, the Northwestern study was set up to sample equally from religious conservatives and religious liberals.

The researchers also observed gender differences, but said they did not interfere with the relationship between political orientation and narrative themes. The study is part of a larger project that looks at the relationships of faith, politics and life stories in well-functioning American adults. It is funded by the Foley Family Foundation in Milwaukee.

Source: Northwestern University

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