

# Liberal? Conservative? Stanford study says mental nudge can make voters flip-flop

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Christopher Bryan, a postdoctoral scholar in psychology

(PhysOrg.com) -- No doubt you've worked hard for your success. But chances are you've also had some help and lucky breaks along the way.

So are you more likely to vote for conservative or liberal politicians and causes?

A group of Stanford psychologists say most people can be swayed toward either the right or left depending on whether they're prompted to think about the payoff of their own hard work or the good fortune that has smiled upon them.

When they're asked to focus on the qualities of self-reliance and hard work, they're more likely to express conservative viewpoints. And when

they zero in on things like luck and opportunity, they come out more liberal.

It turns out some voters can flip-flop just as fast as any politician. All they need is a little push.

The reason, the researchers say in a paper [posted online](#) and slated for publication in the [Journal of Experimental Social Psychology](#), is that most Americans can see both sides of an issue and understand that a combination of hard work and good fortune play important roles in success.

“Whether they identify themselves as liberal or conservative, many people are capable and perfectly willing to share the perspective of the other side,” said Christopher Bryan, a postdoctoral scholar in psychology who spearheaded the study. “It’s just a matter of prompting them to do so.”

In one experiment, Bryan and his fellow researchers had a group of Stanford students write short essays about how hard work, self-discipline and wise decisions helped get them into the university. Another group was told to write about the roles that chance, opportunity and help from others played in their admission.

After the two groups were prompted to think in those terms, they filled out a questionnaire gauging their opinions on welfare, education, taxes, health care, and [crime](#) and [punishment](#). Those whose essays focused on personal merit ranked more conservatively than the students who wrote about the benefits of good fortune.

A second experiment reached the same conclusion.

Although the findings don’t show that people can be pushed in a lasting

manner from one end of the political spectrum to the other, the study indicates most people are flexible when thinking about social issues. And it shows how even a temporary change in mindset can make a big difference when a voter heads to the polls.

Consider a ballot measure asking for an expansion of welfare benefits. If a voter is thinking about the important role of good fortune and help from others in most people's lives, he's more likely to see the measure as legitimate, the findings suggest.

But present that issue to the same voter when he is thinking about the value of hard work and self-reliance and he is likely to feel differently.

"The way people think about issues at any given moment is a function of what's salient to them in that moment," Bryan said. "Most people realize that political attitudes change over a long period of time, but there hasn't been as much acknowledgement in conventional wisdom or in psychology that people's political views can change from moment to moment. But they do."

Provided by Stanford University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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