

# Liberals vs. conservatives: How politics affects charitable giving

May 31 2012

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Image courtesy: Rice University/Photos.com

Americans are more likely to donate to a charity that reflects the values of their political affiliation, according to a new study from Rice University, the University of Texas at San Antonio and Pennsylvania State University.

"The political divide not only impacts political actions, but everyday actions such as donating to charity," said Rice University Professor Vikas Mittal, co-author of the research paper. "When you ask people if their donation behavior to a charity helping children will change because

of their political leanings, most say, 'Of course not!' We wanted to see if that is true or not."

The paper, which will appear in the *International Journal of Research in Marketing: Special Issue on Consumer Identities*, is based on three studies, two of which comprised nationally representative samples of adults and another based on a randomized experiment with students. The researchers asked why liberals or conservatives would donate more or less to a specific charity.

According to Mittal, the J. Hugh Liedtke Professor of Marketing at Rice's Jones Graduate School of Business, donations to a specific charity by [Republicans](#) and [Democrats](#) are strongly affected by their perceptions of the charity's alignment with each party's respective moral foundations. Republicans' moral foundations are embedded in respect for authority and traditions, loyalty and purity; Democrats' moral foundations are rooted in equality and protection from harm.

In a novel study, the researchers presented participants with a description of the same charity, Rebuilding Together. However, they subtly changed small parts of the description to suggest that the charity was either supporting American traditions and loyalty or ensuring equality. Among participants who indicated that morals are highly important, they found that Republicans were almost three times as likely as Democrats to donate when the charity was described as supporting working American families following traditions and supporting their communities (that is, Republican moral foundations). In contrast, Democrats were twice as likely as Republicans to donate when the charity was described as ensuring the protection of a home to every individual.

The researchers said their findings were supported in two additional studies that focused on children's charities, including one for children's advocacy, which seeks to break the cycle of child abuse through

prevention, education, advocacy and funding. The charity was described as either aligning with Republican moral foundations of purity and loyalty or Democratic moral foundations of equality and protection from harm. Again focusing on the participants who value morals highly, the researchers found that when the charity description emphasized protection from harm, Democrats were much more likely than Republicans to donate; when the charity description emphasized purity and loyalty to community, Republicans were more likely than Democrats to donate.

"We found that while both Republicans and Democrats tend to equally value justice and caring for the vulnerable, Republicans place a much higher value on issues of purity and respect for authority," said Karen Page Winterich, study co-author and assistant professor of marketing at Pennsylvania State University. "Given these differences, Republicans are more inclined to donate to a [charity](#) when these values of purity and respect are met, whereas Democrats are more inclined to donate when the emphasis is purely on equality or protection rather than respect or purity."

"Charities, in addition to focusing on their main mission, must also clarify how their mission is aligned with the moral foundations of a donor's political identity," said Yinlong Zhang, study co-author and associate professor of marketing at the University of Texas at San Antonio. "A very simple repositioning of the charity's description so that it aligns with a person's political identity can increase donation intentions two- or threefold. Of course, this raises important questions for charities in terms of their communication strategy. But assuming this divide does not exist can only hurt their chances of maximizing donations from liberals and conservatives."

Provided by Rice University

Citation: Liberals vs. conservatives: How politics affects charitable giving (2012, May 31)  
retrieved 8 May 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2012-05-liberals-politics-affects-charitable.html>

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