

Tendency to fear is strong political influence

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It's no secret that fear is a mechanism often used in political campaigns to steer public opinion on hot-button issues like immigration and war. But not everyone is equally predisposed to be influenced by such a strategy, according to new research by Rose McDermott, professor of political science, and colleagues published in the *American Journal of Political Science*.

By examining the different ways that [fear](#) manifests itself in individuals and its correlation to political attitudes, the researchers found that people who have a greater genetic liability to experience higher levels of social fear tend to be more supportive of anti-immigration and pro-segregation policies. Thus far, research examining the link between fear and political attitudes has seldom accounted for trait-based fear, with transitory state-based fear being a more common focus area.

McDermott co-authored the study, titled "Fear as a Disposition and an [Emotional State](#): A Genetic and Environmental Approach to Out-Group [Political Preferences](#)," with Peter K. Hatemi of Penn State University, and Lindon J. Eaves, Kenneth S. Kendler, and Michael C. Neale of Virginia Commonwealth University.

Using a large sample related individuals, including twins, siblings, and parents and children, the researchers first assessed individuals for their propensity for fear using standardized clinically administered interviews. Looking at subjects who were related to one another, the researchers were able to identify influences such as environment and personal experience and found that some individuals also possessed a genetic

propensity for a higher level of baseline fear. Such individuals are more prepared to experience fear in general at lower levels of threat or [provocation](#). Next, the researchers surveyed the sample for their attitudes toward out-groups—immigrants in this case—as well as toward segregation. Participants were also ranked on a liberal-conservative partisanship scale depending on how they self-reported their [political attitudes](#).

The research indicates a strong correlation between social fear and anti-immigration, pro-segregation attitudes. While those individuals with higher levels of social fear exhibited the strongest negative out-group attitudes, even the lowest amount of social phobia was related to substantially less positive out-group attitudes.

"It's not that conservative people are more fearful, it's that fearful people are more conservative. People who are scared of novelty, uncertainty, people they don't know, and things they don't understand, are more supportive of policies that provide them with a sense of surety and security," McDermott said.

The researchers make clear, however, that genetics plays only part of the role in influencing political preferences. Education, they found, had an equally large influence on out-group attitudes, with more highly educated people displaying more supportive attitudes toward out-groups and education having a substantial mediating influence on the correlation between parental fear and child out-group attitudes.

"In this way, the definition of unfamiliar may shift across time and location based on experience and education, and a genetically informed fear disposition is hardly permanent or fixed," the researchers wrote.

McDermott said that while more research is needed to determine how various genetic, biological, and developmental pathways influence fear

and what other factors might influence [attitudes](#) in concert with these forces, there are still several takeaways to the study, not least of which is how [political campaigns](#) might be manipulated to affect some people more than others.

The study also highlights the role emotion plays in the political process.

"We can roll our eyes and get really frustrated at Congress for being paralyzed, but we're applying a rational perspective to it because we're detached. But we have to recognize that a lot of what's driving the paralysis and disagreement has to do with emotional factors that are not necessarily amenable to or easily shifted by rational arguments," McDermott said.

Provided by Brown University

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