

# Are conservatives more obedient and agreeable than their liberal counterparts?

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Over the last few years, we've seen increasing dissent among liberals and conservatives on important issues such as gun control, health care and same-sex marriage. Both sides often have a difficult time reconciling their own views with their opposition, and many times it appears that liberals are unable to band together under a unifying platform. Why do conservatives appear to have an affinity for obeying leadership? And why do conservatives perceive greater consensus among politically like-minded others?

Two studies publishing in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* shed light on these questions.

## Loyalty to leadership

Historically, conservatives are viewed as being more obedient and more respectful of leadership. Whereas, liberals tend to be associated with protests and blatant acts of rebellion. Previous research has seemed to suggest that the act of obedience is divisive, and that this cultural war among liberals and conservatives may stem from the fact that obedience elicits different emotional responses. Researchers at the University of Winnipeg delved further into this perception of obedience to authority with three studies, and found that liberals and conservatives are more similar than they may appear.

Lead researcher Jeremy Frimer explains that "beneath the surface of

some of these ideological debates is a fundamental need to belong to a group that has a strong leader. Both sides feel the need. And both sides believe that people should do as their leader tells them to do. The difference between the groups is not whether they value obedience to authority. Rather, the difference is about which authority they think is worthy of obedience."

In surveying participants, the researchers found that the act of obedience itself elicits similar moral sentiments from both conservatives and liberals; the differences sparked only when participants perceived the authorities to advance a political agenda. Testing the participants' perceptions proved trickier than expected, because the researchers found that the concepts of authority and obedience automatically elicit thoughts of a conservative authority. This finding may explain why [obedience to authority](#) appears to be a concept conservatives favor over liberals.

Once researchers were able to move beyond the cognitive baggage of the term 'authority' in the first two studies, the third and final study illustrates that liberals and conservatives do value obedience equally. Authorities with a conservative agenda, such as religious leaders and commanding military officers, elicit a positive moral response from participants who are politically conservative. Authorities with liberal agendas, such as environmentalists and civil rights activists, elicited positive moral sentiment from liberal participants. Neutral leaders, like office managers and janitors, were equally positive for both liberals and conservatives. Obedience itself is not ideologically divisive, but rather depends on how similar the authority is in their viewpoints and opinions, and conservatives will call for rebellion when the authorities are from the 'other team.'

## **Agreement and consensus**

Researchers at New York University and the University of Toronto

explored the concept that conservatives desire to share reality more strongly than liberals. The perception of in-group consensus can help mobilize group members toward collective efforts and a stronger intention to vote in a particular election.

"Individuals can attain a sense of shared reality through perceiving that other people hold similar beliefs as they personally do," lead researcher Chadly Stern explains. "For example, we found that conservatives, more than liberals, perceived that politically like-minded others made similar judgments concerning whether a target person was born in November or December, simply based on seeing a picture of the person. Even though this judgment was devoid of political meaning, conservatives' perceptions of similarity were associated with the feeling that they "shared reality" with other conservatives."

The findings suggest that perceiving consensus on non-political judgments, like guessing someone's birth month, has implications for outcomes that are politically meaningful. Liberals appear to be more motivated to perceive their beliefs as relatively unique, which can undermine the development of a cohesive movement. A stronger desire for shared reality among conservatives may be why the Tea Party gained more momentum than the Occupy Wall Street movement.

**More information:** Frimer, J.A., Gaucher, D., Schaefer, N.K. (2014). Political Conservatives' Affinity for Obedience to Authority is Loyal, Not Blind. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 40(9).

Stern, C., West, T.V., Jost, J.T., Rule, N.O. (2014). "Ditto Heads": Do Conservatives Perceive Greater Consensus Within their Ranks than Liberals? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 40(9).

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