

# Conservatives and liberals motivated by different psychological factors, new study shows

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Liberalism and conservatism are associated with qualitatively different psychological concerns, notably those linked to morality, shows a new study.

Liberalism and conservatism are associated with qualitatively different psychological concerns, notably those linked to morality, shows a new study that explores how political ideology and [moral values](#) are connected to motivated [social cognition](#). The findings, which appear in the journal *PLOS ONE*, offer deeper psychological insights into the nature of political division in the United States.

"Psychological research on the different motives underlying support for liberal versus conservative leaders and agendas, such as those separating Biden and Trump supporters, can help to explain why, for instance, one group is much more focused on promoting equality and [social justice](#) than the other," explains John Jost, a professor of

psychology, politics, and [data science](#) at New York University and the study's senior author.

The work centered on the concept of "moral foundations" and its connection to political ideology. In this, and similar research, [social scientists](#) have sought to determine how important matters such as "whether or not someone conformed to the traditions of society" or "whether or not someone cared for someone weak or vulnerable" are to morality.

Previously, some have argued that liberals have an impoverished sense of morality, emphasizing only issues of fairness and harm avoidance, which they see as individualistic, whereas conservatives have a broader "moral palette" that values ingroup loyalty, obedience to authority, and the enforcement of purity sanctions, which they view as "binding foundations."

In the *PLOS ONE* article, however, the researchers found something important that previous studies have failed to consider.

Specifically, the studies by Jost and his colleagues, including Michael Strupp-Levitsky, who conducted the work as an NYU undergraduate and is now a doctoral candidate at Long Island University-Brooklyn, showed that those moral foundations known to be more appealing to liberals than conservatives—specifically, fairness and harm avoidance—are linked to empathic motivation, whereas the moral foundations that are more appealing to conservatives than to liberals—such as ingroup loyalty and deference to authority—are not.

In fact, the "binding foundations" cited by previous studies as evidence of a broad "moral palette" are associated with authoritarianism, social dominance, and economic system justification—matters quite

apart from morality. Moreover, they are also associated with psychological motives to reduce uncertainty and threat, consistent with a theory of political ideology as motivated social cognition that Jost and other collaborators proposed in 2003.

"All of this may help to explain why the endorsement of 'binding foundations' is associated with prejudice, outgroup hostility, and other antisocial outcomes, whereas the endorsement of 'individualizing foundations' is negatively associated with prejudice, outgroup hostility, and other antisocial outcomes," explains Jost.

To explore these matters in the *PLOS ONE* work, the researchers conducted two studies.

They asked American participants a series of questions that sought to capture different motivations (e.g., "I have an intense fear of death" and "I only think as hard as I have to"), empathies (e.g., "After being with a friend who is sad about something, I usually feel sad"), and moral intuitions (e.g., "Respect for authority is something all children need to learn") as well as beliefs about system justification (i.e., the legitimacy of the existing social, economic, and political order) and political orientation (e.g., conservative, liberal) on social and economic issues. Here, the researchers sought to illuminate the relationship between [political ideology](#) and motivated social cognition.

Their results showed that liberalism and conservatism were indeed associated with qualitatively different psychological concerns, as suggested in previous research.

The motivational basis of conservative preferences for "binding" intuitions has for years been assumed to be independent of needs to reduce uncertainty and threat and to represent a broad, prosocial sense of morality. However, the new findings in *PLOS ONE* indicate that the endorsement of "binding foundations" is linked to the very same motives associated with many other conservative preferences, including authoritarianism, social dominance, system justification, and underlying psychological needs to reduce uncertainty and threat.

**More information:** Michael Strupp-Levitsky et al. Moral "foundations" as the product of motivated social cognition: Empathy and other psychological underpinnings of ideological divergence in "individualizing" and "binding" concerns, *PLOS ONE* (2020). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0241144](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0241144)

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