



Sunday Review

The Paradox of the Free-Market Liberal

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Gray Matter

By **ARIEL MALKA** and **MICHAEL INZLICHT**

IN American politics, personality is, supposedly, destiny: Having a conservative personality makes us conservative on economic and social policy, and vice versa for liberals. Think of the stereotypes: the free-spending, libertine liberal; the rock-ribbed, free-market conservative.

But there's nothing natural about this pairing between personality and such broad ideologies. Instead, the structure of our ideological divide is shaped by political messaging rather than psychological differences. In fact, our research, which we recently published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, suggests that the personality characteristics that make someone culturally conservative will often tend to promote left-wing economic views, favoring redistributive economic intervention by the government. How is this possible?

Start by considering the most influential scholarly view of how personality affects political ideology: the “rigidity of the right” model. It holds that people differ from one another in terms of whether they are closed-minded and prefer what is familiar, or are open-minded and prefer diverse experiences.

According to this view, those with a conservative personality — which is thought to be implemented by basic neurocognitive and structural brain differences — are likely to gravitate toward a broad-based conservative ideology, both culturally and economically. A conservative personality, the

view posits, makes you favor the stability and continuity of traditional cultural norms, and it makes you favor right-wing economic policy because that sort of policy will not disrupt the prevailing economic hierarchy.

Though very influential, the rigidity of the right model has incurred charges of ideological bias within the scholarly community. But we think that there is something more fundamentally wrong with it: Most of the core disagreements between the left and right concern economic matters, and there are often decisive forces compelling those with a conservative personality to be economically left wing.

Our research, which we published along with Christopher J. Soto of Colby College and Yphtach Lelkes of the University of Amsterdam, was the largest cross-national test of how a conservative personality style actually relates to cultural and economic attitudes. Analyzing responses from over 70,000 people from 51 countries, we found that people with a conservative personality did indeed tend to adopt culturally conservative attitudes on matters like abortion, homosexuality and immigration. On this count, the rigidity of the right model seems to be valid.

But when it came to economic matters related to social welfare policy and economic intervention — the central feature of the left-right divide in much of the world — the results were far different. People with a conservative personality tended to lean slightly to the left.

According to the political scientist Christopher Johnston of Duke and his colleagues Christopher M. Federico and Howard G. Lavine of the University of Minnesota, a conservative personality might actually pull people in two directions with respect to their economic attitudes. Prioritizing order and stability will lead to a yearning for the security that left-wing economic policies aim to provide — but having such a conservative personality will also lead to cultural conservatism, which, if a person is politically attentive, might indirectly lead to favoring economically conservative policy as well. Why? Political messaging.

Political messages often promote the view that right-wing economic preferences naturally fit with right-wing cultural preferences under a broad

“conservative” banner. These messages define what constitutes an ideologically consistent package of preferences, and make people more likely to adopt a consistent ideological bundle. They make you say, “If I am culturally conservative, I should also be economically conservative.”

Our cross-national evidence was consistent with this argument: Over all, having a conservative personality made people lean to the left economically — with an important exception. Among people who were both highly attentive to politics and from countries in which left-right ideological conflict was prominent, like the United States, having a conservative personality was associated with holding right-wing economic views.

What does all of this mean for ideological conflict in the United States? For one thing, we must be cautious about accepting claims that a broad ideological conflict, pitting culturally traditional and free-market conservatives against culturally progressive and redistributive liberals, is a natural consequence of personality differences. There’s nothing natural about it: Such a conflict has more to do with the political messages that Americans receive about the nature of politicians’ ideological conflict.

If there is nothing set about the combinations of political views we adopt, then there is nothing to say those combinations of attitudes can’t change. Indeed, decades of research in political science have shown that the dominant packages of political attitudes often do change, as a result of messages from political elites. While such insight will not soften our hostile partisan climate, it might be helpful to keep in mind as we experience the highest levels of political polarization that the nation has seen in decades.

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