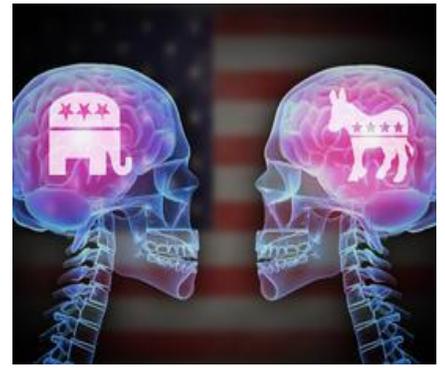


Why Are Liberals So Narrow-Minded?

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According to Jonathan Haidt's "[The Moral Mind](#)," liberals tend to focus on questions about harm and fairness when considering moral issues while conservatives look to a broader range of concerns such as purity, authority, and loyalty. Following the Enlightenment, liberal doctrines became so influential that conservative concerns for honor, temperance, respect, and obedience became identified with authoritarianism and subservience to religious and nationalist sentiments. Haidt's experimental and anthropological work helps us assess how conservatives and liberals frame issues. ("[Shifting Liberal and Conservative Attitudes using Moral Foundations Theories](#)").

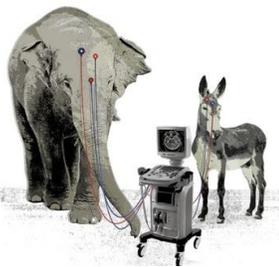


Rhetoric attends to the three-dimensions of political debates:

- 1. If you can't be reasonable, there's no point in discussing it.**
 - Liberals often assume reasonable people think as they do, and
 - Others will become more reasonable if they check the facts and learn to rise above their prejudices.
However, conservatives and liberals think differently, and attending to those differences can help us listen and learn from each other.
- 2. Who are you calling liberal?**
 - We generally tend to become more conservative as we age.
 - Each of our generations has distinctive experiences that shape our political outlooks.
 - Our experiences tend to use the Presidents we first voted for as political baselines.
 - LBJ and Reagan provide benchmarks for the evolution of liberal and conservative perspectives.
 - Their rhetorical appeals document how our political thinking has been motivated and mediated.
- 3. How can we deliberate if we cannot even agree on the facts?**
 - Research shows that facts do not change minds in the ways we might hope.
 - Such findings become even more depressing when we consider our current "postfactual" politics.
 - "Factfulness" can help us sustain our hopes because our problems are not as bad as they often seem.
 - The power of believing that we can make positive changes is vital to our faith in our collective self-efficacy.
 - Empathy for other views is vital to our collective deliberations.

- The distinctive modes of **reasoning** that groups use to interpret issues and situations.
- The **emotional** sources and resources that groups draw upon to motivate collective action.
- The characteristic **ethos** that the group looks to in its leaders.

How Liberals and Conservatives Think (from [Laber-Warren](#))



- Conservatives' eyes tend to linger 15% longer on repellent images such as car wrecks—suggesting that conservatives are more attuned to assessing potential threats.
- Conservatives tend to be "orderly and self-disciplined," while liberals are more likely to be "open and novelty-seeking."
- We generally tend to become more conservative in the face of risks, and take more risks when we feel safe.

The Values of Liberal and Conservative Thinking

- Are these actions immoral? If so, why?

Old Glory: After finding an old flag in a closet, a woman cuts it up into pieces and uses the rags to clean her toilet.

A Promise to Mom: After promising his mother on her deathbed to visit her grave every week, a son finds he is too busy to keep his promise.

Eating Our Best Friend: A couple's dog is killed by a car. They had heard that dog meat is delicious, so they cook the dog and eat it

Family Affairs: A brother and sister like to kiss each other passionately, and so they hide out to do it. (Haidt et al. "[Affect, Culture & Morality](#)")

If conservatives are so risk adverse, why did the risky candidate win the Republican primaries?

We take more risks when choices are framed as potential losses rather than gains according to Kahneman and Tversky's research on economic decision making. ("[The Appeal of Donald Trump](#)") These findings align with studies of how reminding people of their own morality makes them more willing to support "charismatic nationalists." ("[The Fact That You Are Going to Die](#)")

Liberal and Conservative Realignment Elections

The root of *motivation* and emotion are the same, from the Latin *mot* to move. Social movements mobilize people through appeals to anger, fear, and pride. Such movements are sustained by developing a sense of solidarity around a shared sense of collective agency that builds confidence in the group's shared potentials. Hope and empathy are common themes in liberal rhetoric, while conservative appeals tend to focus on the need to defend one's family and country against perceived threats ([“Differences in Negativity Bias,”](#) [“Emotions and Social Movements”](#)). These appeals make sense given research on the differing cognitive styles and moral outlooks of conservatives and liberals.

The historical impact of such appeals is evident in two of the most significant realignment elections of the last century—the elections of Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan. Their liberal and conservative moral outlooks are evident in two opposing speeches from the 1964 election. The Great Society set out Johnson's agenda for the “war on poverty,” while Reagan's “A Time for Choosing” established his leadership of the conservative movement in the wake of Goldwater's overwhelming defeat. Reagan became known as “The Great Communicator,” and his [later speeches](#) provide a much more broadly appealing conservative agenda, ranging from his [“First Inaugural Address”](#) to his [“Farewell Address.”](#)

“The Great Society,” Lyndon Baines Johnson (U of Michigan, 5/22/64)

The purpose of protecting the life of our Nation and preserving the liberty of our citizens is to pursue the happiness of our people. Our success in that pursuit is the test of our success as a Nation.

For a century we labored to settle and to subdue a continent. For half a century we called upon unbounded invention and untiring industry to create an order of plenty for all of our people. The challenge of the next half century is whether we have the wisdom to use that wealth to enrich and elevate our national life, and to advance the quality of our American civilization.

Your imagination and your initiative and your indignation will determine whether we build a society where progress is the servant of our needs, or a society where old values and new visions are buried under unbridled growth. For in your time we have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society.

The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time. But that is just the beginning.

The Great Society is a place where every child can find knowledge to enrich his mind and to enlarge his talents. It is a place where leisure is a welcome chance to build and reflect, not a feared cause of boredom and restlessness. It is a place where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community. It is a place where man can renew contact with nature. It is a place which honors creation for its own sake and for what it adds to the understanding of the race. It is a place where men are more concerned with the quality of their goals than the quantity of their goods. . . .

For better or for worse, your generation has been appointed by history to deal with those problems and to lead America toward a new age. You have the chance never before afforded to any people in any age. You can help build a society where the demands of morality, and the needs of the spirit, can be realized in the life of the Nation.

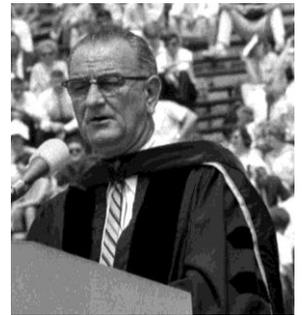
So, will you join in the battle to give every citizen the full equality which God enjoins and the law requires, whatever his belief, or race, or the color of his skin?

Will you join in the battle to give every citizen an escape from the crushing weight of poverty?

Will you join in the battle to make it possible for all nations to live in enduring peace -- as neighbors and not as mortal enemies?

Will you join in the battle to build the Great Society, to prove that our material progress is only the foundation on which we will build a richer life of mind and spirit?

. . . . Those who came to this land sought to build more than just a new country. They sought a new world. So I have come here today to your campus to say that you can make their vision our reality. So let us from this moment begin our work so that in the future men will look back and say: It was then, after a long and weary way, that man turned the exploits of his genius to the full enrichment of his life.



"A Time for Choosing." Ronald Reagan, (Barry Goldwater Campaign, 10/27/64)



And *this idea that government is beholden to the people, that it has no other source of power except the sovereign people, is still the newest and the most unique idea in all the long history of man's relation to man. This is the issue of this election: whether we believe in our capacity for self-government or whether we abandon the American Revolution and confess that a little intellectual elite in a far-distant capitol can plan our lives for us better than we can plan them ourselves.*

*You and I are told increasingly we have to choose between a left or right. Well I'd like to suggest there is no such thing as a left or right. There's only an up or down: [up] man's old -- old-aged dream, **the ultimate in individual freedom consistent with law and order, or down to the ant heap of totalitarianism.** And regardless of their sincerity, their humanitarian motives, those who would trade our freedom for security have embarked on this downward course.*

*In this vote-harvesting time, **they use terms like the "Great Society," or as we were told a few days ago by the President, we must accept a greater government activity in the affairs of the people. . . . "[T]he full power of centralized government" -- this was the very thing the Founding Fathers sought to minimize.** They knew that governments don't control things. A government can't control the economy without controlling people. And they know when a government sets out to do that, it must use force and coercion to achieve its purpose. They also knew, those Founding Fathers, that outside of its legitimate functions, **government does nothing as well or as economically as the private sector of the economy.***

. . . Each year the need grows greater; the program grows greater. We were told four years ago that 17 million people went to bed hungry each night. Well that was probably true. They were all on a diet. But now we're told that 9.3 million families in this country are poverty-stricken on the basis of earning less than 3,000 dollars a year. Welfare spending [is] 10 times greater than in the dark depths of the Depression. We're spending 45 billion dollars on welfare. Now do a little arithmetic, and you'll find that if we divided the 45 billion dollars up equally among those 9 million poor families, we'd be able to give each family 4,600 dollars a year. And this added to their present income should eliminate poverty. Direct aid to the poor, however, is only running only about 600 dollars per family. It would seem that someplace there must be some overhead. . . .

*But seriously, what are we doing to those we seek to help? Not too long ago, a judge called me here in Los Angeles. He told me **of a young woman who'd come before him for a divorce. She had six children, was pregnant with her seventh.** Under his questioning, she revealed her husband was **a laborer earning 250 dollars a month.** She wanted a divorce to get an 80 dollar raise. She's eligible for 330 dollars a month in the Aid to Dependent Children Program. She got the idea from two women in her neighborhood who'd already done that very thing.*

*Yet anytime you and I question **the schemes of the do-gooders,** we're denounced as being against their humanitarian goals. They say we're always "against" things -- we're never "for" anything. Well, **the trouble with our liberal friends is not that they're ignorant; it's just that they know so much that isn't so.***

*Now -- we're for a provision that destitution should not follow unemployment by reason of old age, and to that end we've accepted Social Security as a step toward meeting the problem. . . . Now are we so lacking in business sense that we can't put this program on a sound basis, so that people who do require those payments will find they can get them when they're due -- that the cupboard isn't bare? At the same time, can't we introduce voluntary features that would permit a citizen who can do better on his own to be excused upon presentation of evidence that he had made provision for the non-earning years? . . . **I think we're for telling our senior citizens that no one in this country should be denied medical care because of a lack of funds. But I think we're against forcing all citizens, regardless of need, into a compulsory government program. . . .***

Those who would trade our freedom for the soup kitchen of the welfare state have told us they have a utopian solution of peace without victory. . . . You and I know and do not believe that life is so dear and peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery. If nothing in life is worth dying for, when did this begin -- just in the face of this enemy? Or should Moses have told the children of Israel to live in slavery under the pharaohs? Should Christ have refused the cross? Should the patriots at Concord Bridge have thrown down their guns and refused to fire the shot heard 'round the world? The martyrs of history were not fools, and our honored dead who gave their lives to stop the advance of the Nazis didn't die in vain. Where, then, is the road to peace? Well it's a simple answer after all. . . .

***You and I have a rendezvous with destiny. We'll preserve for our children this, the last best hope of man on earth, or we'll sentence them to take the last step into a thousand years of darkness.** We will keep in mind and remember that Barry Goldwater has faith in us. He has faith that you and I have the ability and the dignity and the right to make our own decisions and determine our own destiny.*

Owning up to the Facts

Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts.
Daniel Patrick Moynihan

We tend not to be very reasonable about politics.

We often steadfastly refuse to revise our beliefs in response to new evidence. Political thinking often takes the form of “motivated reasoning” in which we seek support for our preconceptions and ignore facts that challenge them. Research shows that “[Facts Don’t Change Minds.](#)” In laboratory studies, both liberals and conservatives dismiss incontrovertible evidence that refutes their presuppositions, though some studies have concluded that conservatives are more resistant to opposing views than liberals (“[The Brain in the Voting Booth](#)” and [The Republican Brain](#)).

The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion ... draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there be a greater number and weight of instances to be found on the other side, yet these it . . neglects and despises. . . [so that] its former ,

Francis Bacon, 1620

This tendency has been reinforced by the rise of the internet and partisan TV news channels because we can now use our own favored terms and channels to seek information that fits our presuppositions. This tendency is compounded by online “bots” (short for robots) that imitate human interactions, track our searches, feed us stories that fit our preferences, and in some cases make up the stories to feed our biases.

Daily accusations about “fake news” and “alternative facts” have become so commonplace that facts do not seem to matter much anymore. As noted in the [2010 blog that reportedly coined the term “post-truth politics,”](#) our partisan brains are overloaded with information that is often tailored to our biases in ways that have proliferated with the breakdown of journalistic and other forms of expert knowledge that functioned as a check on the tabloid tendencies of muckrakers.

Our loss of faith in facts has fed anxieties that our world is getting worse when education, health, income, and other vital benchmarks are rising.

Liberal and conservative defenders of liberal democracy have argued that the advances of science, deliberative democracy, and enlightened reform need to be defended against populism, identity politics, and other forms of tribalism ([Suicide of the West](#) and [Enlightenment Now](#)).

Rosling’s *Factfulness* offers a fitting conclusion because it argues for renewing our faith in facts by reflecting upon our negativity biases.

Factfulness is defined as “The stress-reducing habit of only carrying opinions for which you have strong supporting facts.” Rosling presents this habit as a sort of mindfulness that arises from reflecting upon one’s presumptions and challenging others to question the misunderstandings that arise from the tendencies we have discussed, including

- The biases toward negativity that foster our worst fears,
- The tendency to focus on extremes and ignore the expansive gap in between (where most of a population or range is found),
- The related tendency to project trends and generalize from examples,
- And the consequent tendency to propose quick solutions and blame opponents in ways that fuel fatalism and sap self-efficacy.

Historical reflections on the course of our own lives and the progress of our country and world can help us approach current challenges with more faith in our collective abilities to realize our shared hopes.

Suggested Readings

- Emily Laber-Warren, “[Unconscious Reactions Separate Liberals and Conservatives.](#)” *Scientific American* (9/1/2012)
- Brian Resnick, “[How Politics Breaks Our Brains.](#)” *Atlantic* (9/24/14)
- Lyndon Baines Johnson, “[The Great Society](#)” (5/22/1964)
- Ronald Reagan, “[A Time for Choosing](#)” (10/27/1964)



Hans Rosling’s influential [Factfulness](#) and [Ted Talks](#) led to the founding of **Gapminders** to educate the public about improvements in world health, education and wealth to foster a shared commitment to evidence-based deliberations and reforms.



This handout and the PowerPoint from this talk are on line:
<https://tmiller.faculty.arizona.edu/content/other-projects>