

# Voting is Irrational

A political psychology handbook



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Politics has gotten a little crazy recently. But maybe it's always been a little crazy – I mean, it's not really rational to think one vote can make any difference, is it?

Maybe that's why there's so much research on how voters can be psychologically 'nudged' into voting one way or another.

I've worked on major political campaigns around the world, and I've written my learnings into this guidebook, on political nudging and political personality. And it's all yours, for free.

You're welcome!

Patrick Fagan

(Your favourite behavioural scientist)





## Voting is Irrational.

How many hours a day do you spend thinking about current affairs? How many arguments have you had, or relationships spoiled? Politics is a high-investment game.

But really, what's the point? Your single vote has statistically zero impact on the outcome, and even if your favoured party wins, the chances of their platform meeting your specific needs, them keeping their promises, and the policies having a tangible effect on your day-to-day life are negligible.

Psychologists call it **the paradox of voting** – the costs of voting far outweigh the benefits. As one researcher put it, voter turnout is 'the paradox that ate rational choice theory'.

In short, voting is not a logical act. Besides, surveys tend to find that the public is extremely ignorant on most political issues. So, it's unsurprising that voting is subject to biases...

# Biases Influence Votes



**Easy.** Voters are ‘cognitive misers’ with limited time and energy. An online registration form decrease turnout by 0.3 percentage points in one study; even rainfall can decrease turnout. Voters tend to do the easiest thing – most people are habitual voters. And, in a striking example, one study found that candidates listed first on the ballot had a 2.5 percent advantage.

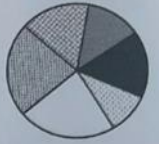


**Social.** Voters tend to follow the crowd. One study increased turnout by 1.3–2.3 percentage points by posting mailers on the perfect voting history of 10 neighbours. Research has also shown that lawn signs increase votes for the advertised candidate and that voters form their preferences for politicians using body language cues from interviewers and broadcasters.



**Identity.** A key motivation for voting is to express identity, in the same way that cheering for a sports team does not actually help them win. For example, postal voting reduces effort but may not always increase turnout, likely as the visibility of voting is so important. The value of voting ‘to tell others’ is about \$15 per vote, contributing 2 percentage points to turnout.

# Election of the Member of Parliament for the Thornbury & Yate constituency



Vote for **only one candidate** by putting a cross  in the box next to your choice

**BANWELL, Andrew Dafydd Charles**

Hazel Cottage, Chapel Lane,  
Hinton SN14 8HD

**Reform UK**



**HALL, Luke Anthony**

(address in the Thornbury and Yate Constituency)

**The Conservative Party Candidate**



**JENNER-FUST, Alexandra**

(address in the Thornbury and Yate Constituency)

**Green Party**



**LOGAN, Rob**

21 Rownham Close, Bristol BS3 2JN

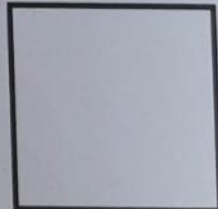
**Labour Party**



**YOUNG, Claire Louise**

33 The Causeway, Coalpit Heath,  
Bristol BS36 2PD

**Liberal Democrats**



## Reform's arrow logo

...might be a brilliant nudge, subtly encouraging people to place a cross in Reform's box.

# Message Nudges



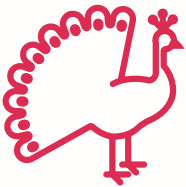
**Fluency.** Voters respond better to easy arguments (e.g., “If NAFTA passes, you’ll lose your job”) and visuals (e.g., “Build a wall”).



**Mental Availability.** Reminding people to vote via text messages increased turnout by 3 percentage points in one study.



**Source Credibility.** We naturally distrust politicians, so ads from unknown interest groups are more persuasive.



**Costly Signalling.** Higher-quality mail materials are more effective at influencing voter choice, since we assume seriousness.



**Framing.** Support for the Equal Rights Amendment was 9% higher when presented as undoing a loss (vs. a gain).



**Negativity Bias.** Attack campaigning recipients were 3.8 pps. more likely to vote than those receiving positive messages.

# Messenger Nudges



**Liking.** Vote share correlates with ratings of physical attractiveness given by people who are unfamiliar with the candidates.



**Halo Effect.** People change their opinions to adopt those of their favoured candidate (rather than the other way around).



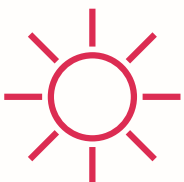
**Social Discounting.** People are likelier to accept a message from their in-group (e.g., ethnicity) and reject it otherwise.



**Mere Exposure Effect.** Voters assume politicians they have not heard of or who don't 'feel' familiar will be a poor choice.



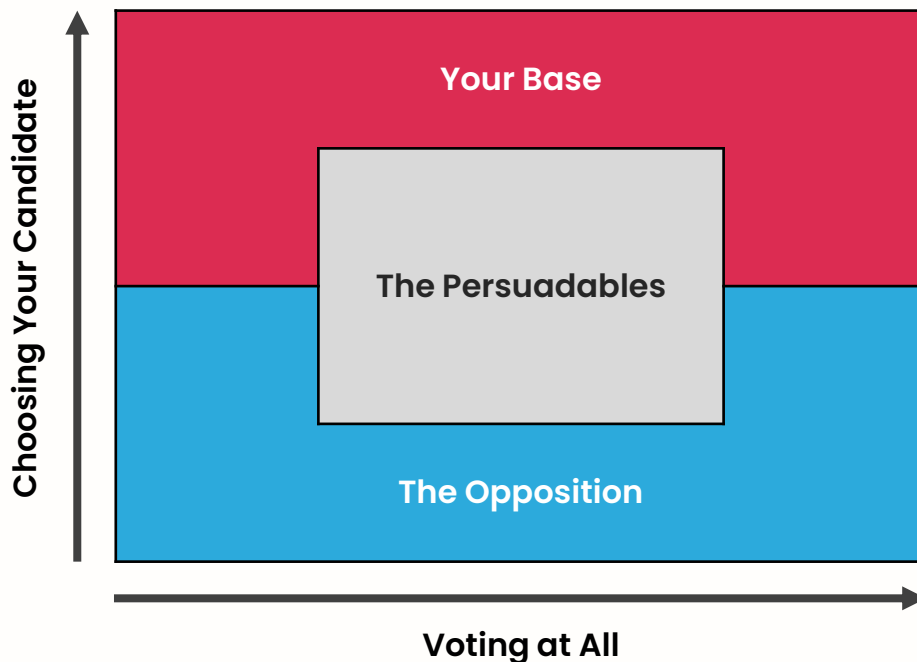
**Authority.** 'Baby-faced' or higher-voiced candidates get fewer votes; those picked by children to captain a boat do better.



**Optimism Bias.** When candidates are vague, people optimistically assume that the politician's ideals are close to their own.

# It Must be Targeted

We're all biased, so behavioural science techniques can influence who we vote for. However, they don't work for all audiences the same. The most foundational way of segmenting the electorate is based on voter propensity (how likely they are to vote) and affinity (who they'll vote for).



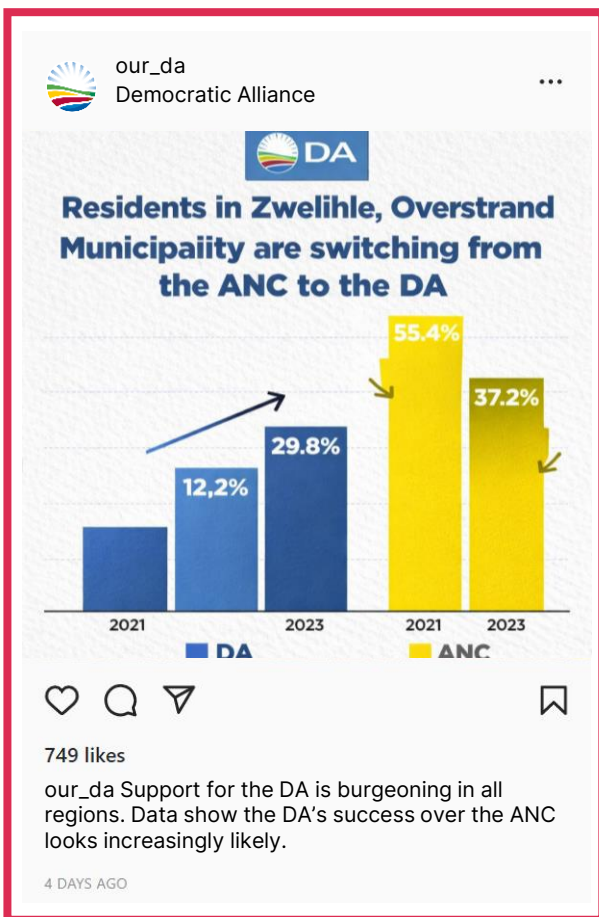
- Your **Base** needs to be energised into going out to vote and advocating – by, for example, making them feel like they or their values are under attack.
- The **Opposition** can't be persuaded, but you can reduce their voting power through the tactics of divide, distract, and demoralise (e.g., 'pied piper' candidates to split the vote share,, etc.).
- The **Persuadables** are where you should focus of your efforts, breaking them into microsegments for targeted campaigning based on wedge issues.

# It Must be Targeted

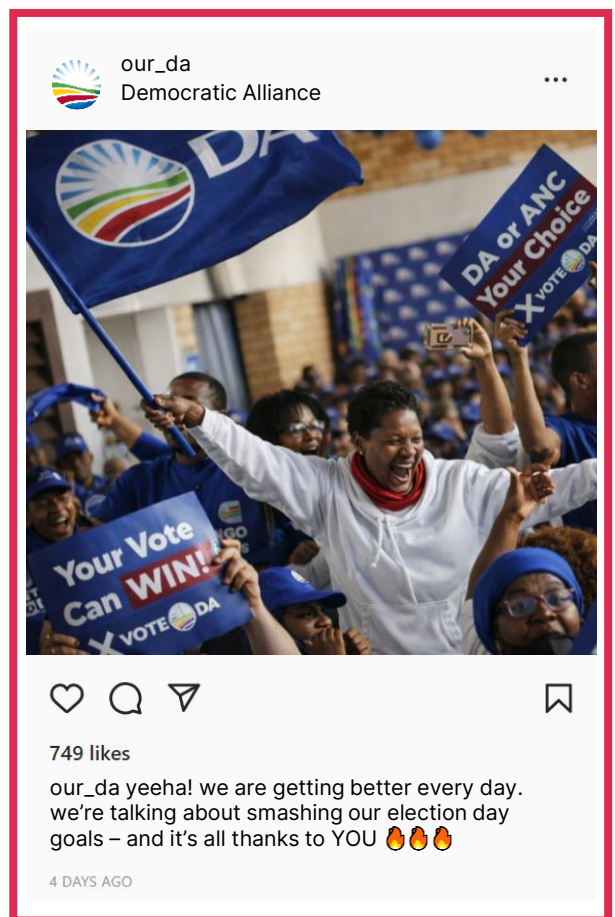
Then, you break voters into **psychological groups** – using things like motivations, personalities, and moral values, as well as aesthetic preferences.

That means you can speak to them about the things they care about in their own language. For example...

## Introverts



## Extraverts

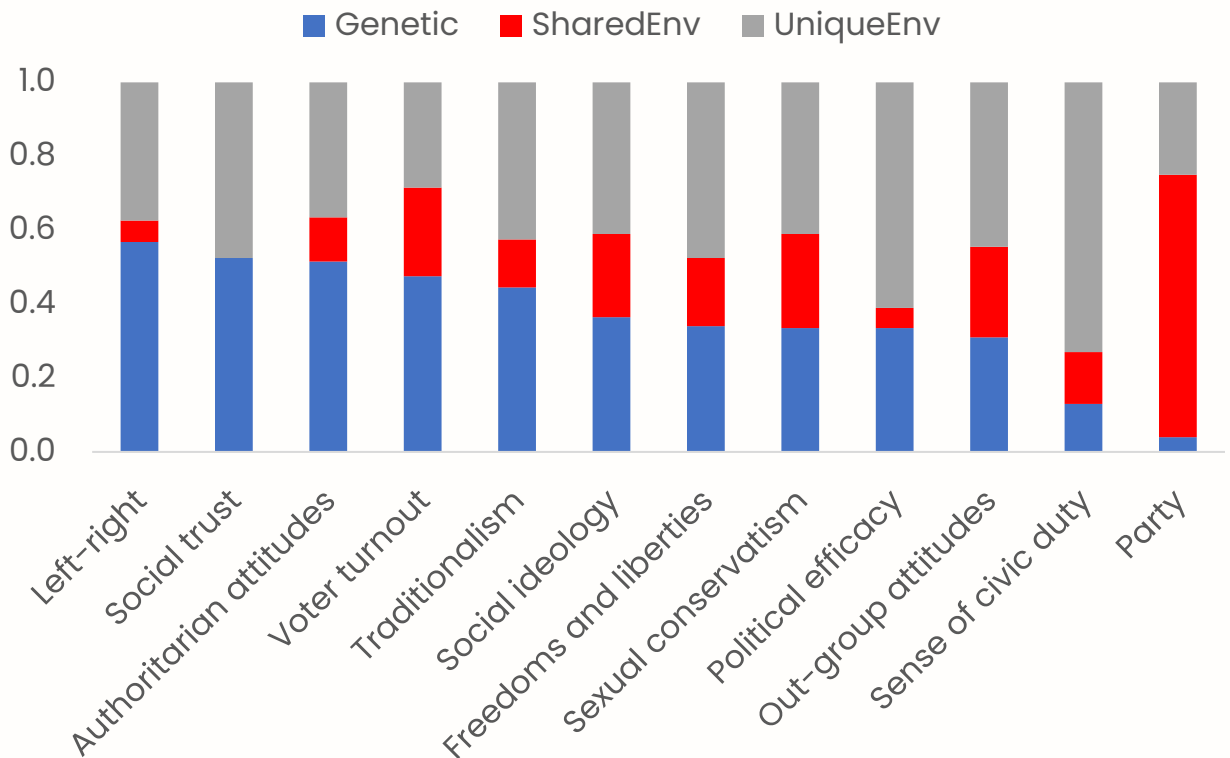


The results show evidence that citizens are more strongly persuaded by political ads that match their own personality traits. (Zarouali et al., 2022)



# The Political Personality

Political behaviour might be influenced more by psychological traits than you think. Some elements are even somewhat genetically hardwired.



There's a vivid case study in the form of a 63-year-old conservative woman who developed bvFTD, a type of dementia. Her political views flipped to anti-conservative, and she became interested in animal rights, to the point of confronting strangers about it.

Brain imaging has suggested that conservatives have more activation in the right amygdala (**threat sensitivity**) while liberals have more activation in the left posterior insula (**interpersonal trust**) and the anterior cingulate cortex (**change-processing**).



# Would you kill Remy the rat?

Some would be caring, while others might say that a rat should never be in a kitchen, no matter how mean a ratatouille he makes.

If you found a rat in your kitchen, would you kill it, or release it? Your answer might say something about your politics.

Which matters more to you: **kindness** or **cleanliness**?

# Rules and Empathy

I ran a study where 1,000 respondents answered dozens of semantic differentials. I used factor analyses to see how items clustered together, finding two factors - here are the top five scales for each one.



## RULES

Low

High

I like a little chaos in my life

I can't stand chaos in my life

Rules were made to be broken

Rules must be maintained

Self is more important than duty

Duty is more important than self

Following authority and confirming to the group is immoral

Following authority and conforming to the group can be moral

I am impulsive

I am restrained



## EMPATHY

Low

High

Good fences make good neighbours

Build bridges, not walls

Sometimes one needs to be Machiavellian

The end never justifies the means

As a group, we should put ourselves first

As a group, we should care for others as much as ourselves

I value wealth, power, and success

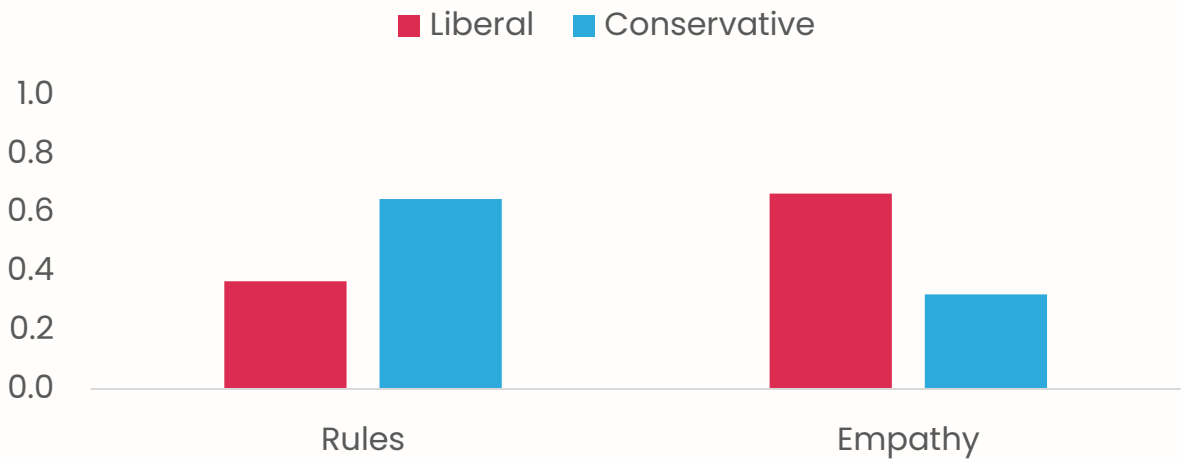
I value kindness, tolerance, and sensitivity

Stereotypes are usually factual

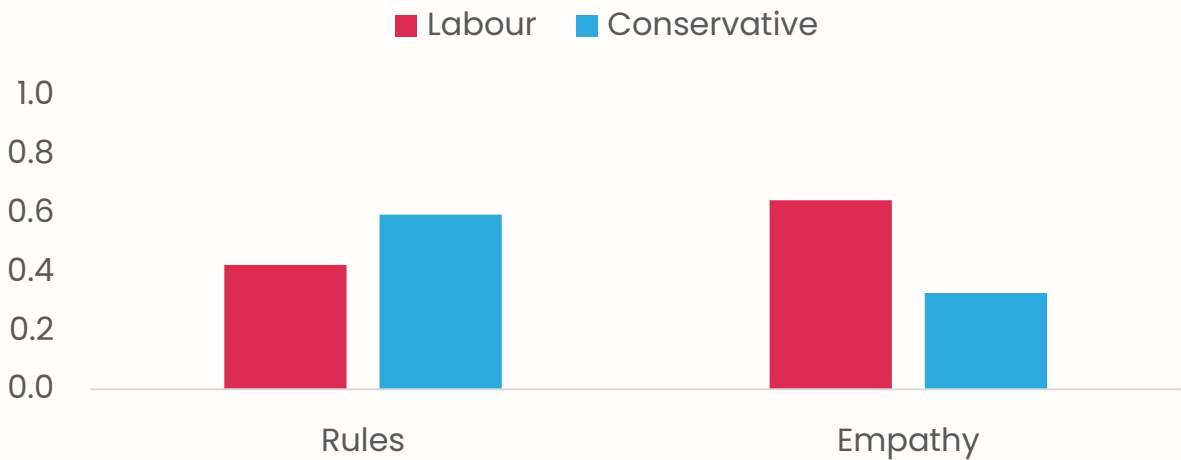
Stereotypes are usually irrational and untrue

# Rules and Empathy

...by "Do you consider yourself to be more liberal or more conservative?" | Normalised



...by "For whom did you vote in the 2017 UK general election?" | Normalised





## Mums Love, Dads Rule

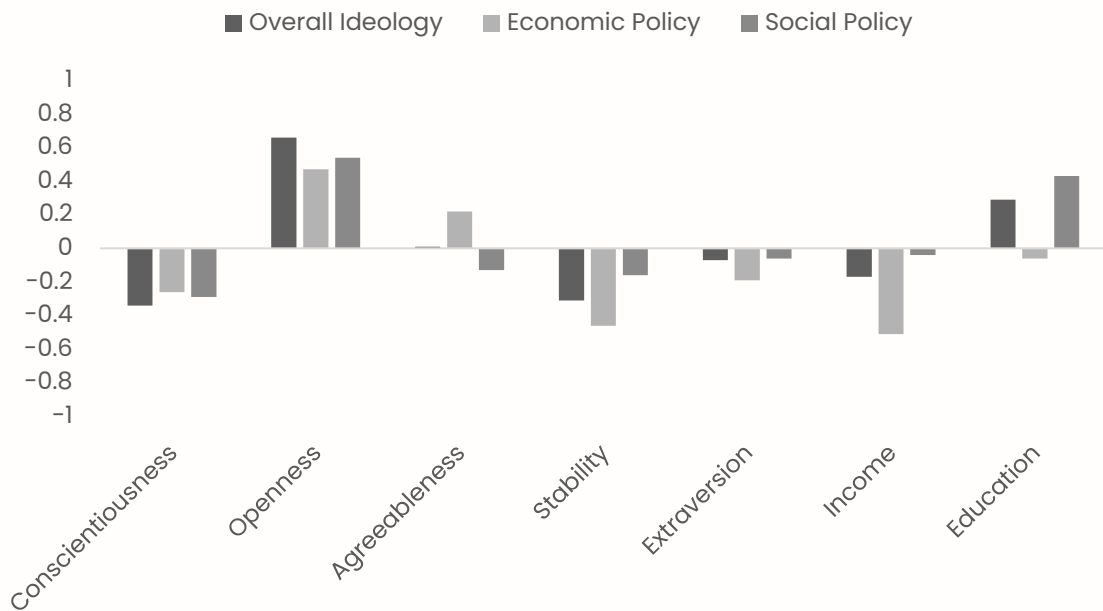
This is an ancient dichotomy. You might call it Yin and Yang. Freemasons call it Boaz and Jachin. One factor is more feminine (beauty, mercy, equality) while the other is more masculine (strength, justice, hierarchy).

As the saying goes, mums love and dads rule.

You can see this symbolised in Lady Justice, wielding the erect sword of justice on the one hand, and the pendulous scales of mercy on the other.

One study found that sex was a better predictor than personality of politics, while another found that masculinity-femininity was even better than sex.

## Aggregate Effect of Changes in Model Variables on Ideology and Policy Attitudes (Conservative (-) to Liberal (+))



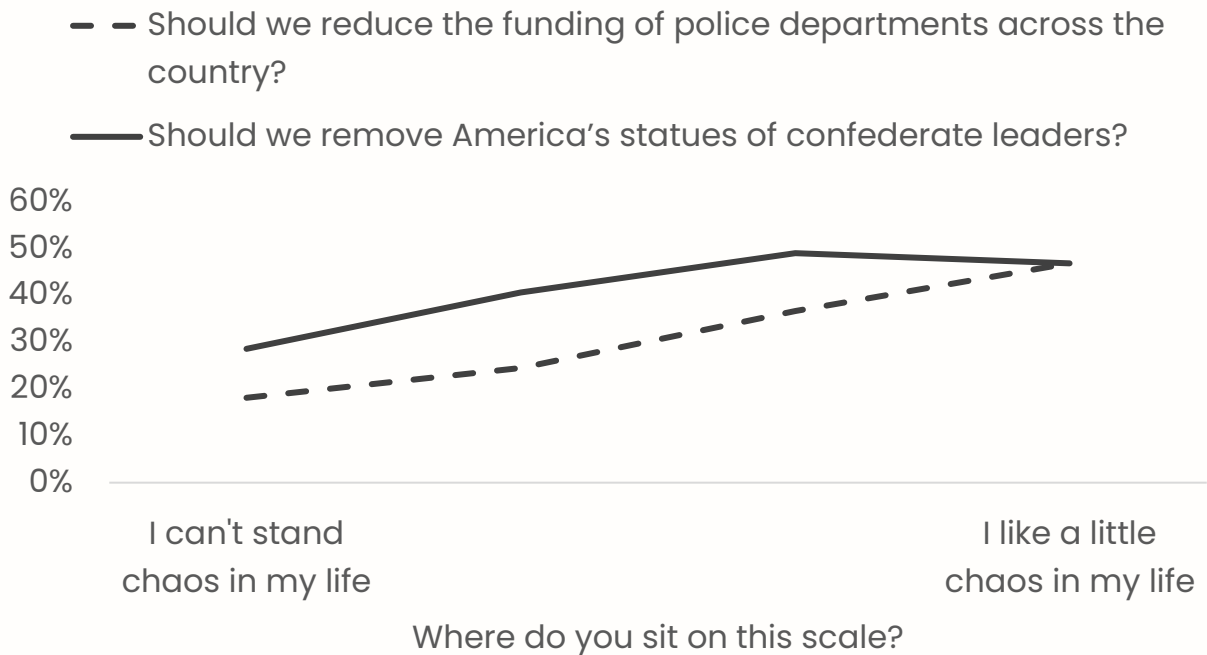
# Fluidity

The best personality predictor of political views is openness to experience.

People on the left side of the spectrum tend to be more cognitively fluid (i.e., creative, philosophical) while those on the right are more cognitively stable (i.e., pragmatic, action-oriented). People on the left are more comfortable with ambiguity – for example, they'll prefer subversive or open-ended jokes, while conservatives will prefer puns.

So, for example, the idea of dissolving national borders or dichotomous gender boundaries – and breaking taboos around contentious social topics – is naturally more appealing to people on the left.

% answering "Probably" or "Definitely"



## Chaos Within and Without

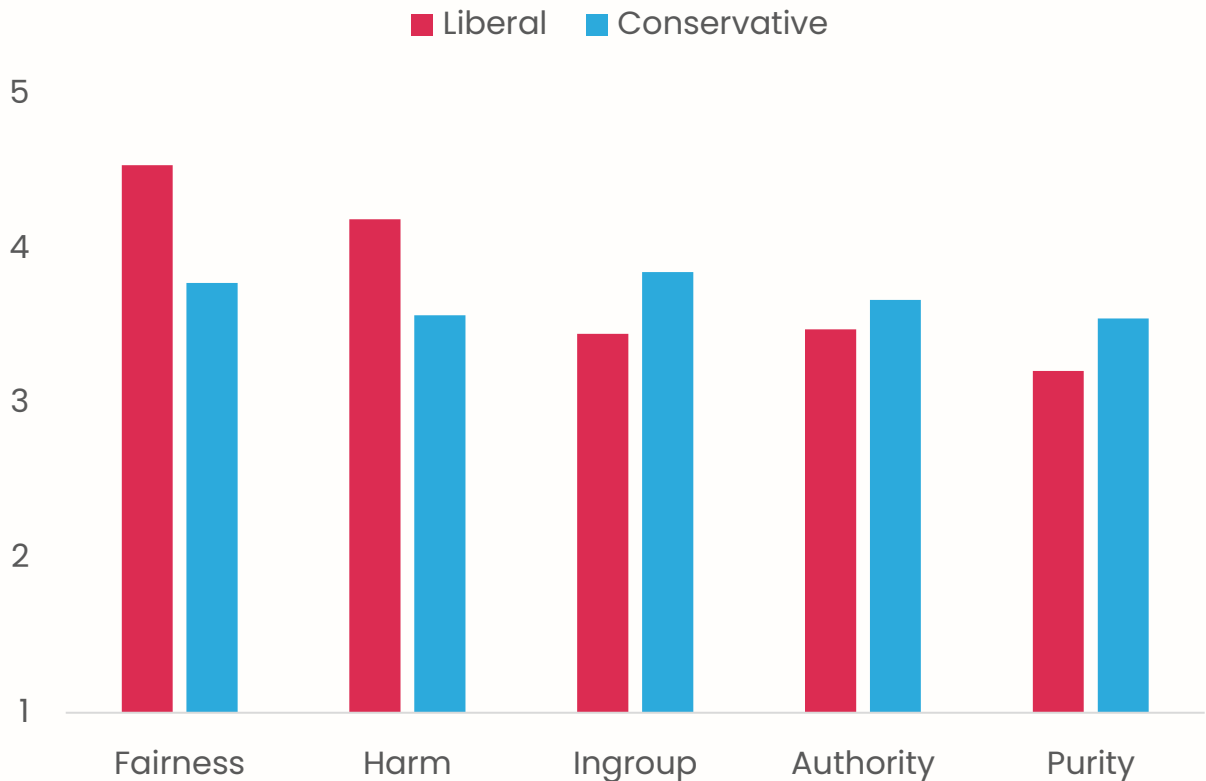
Working on a campaign, I found that people who were more tolerant of chaos (i.e., more fluid) were more supportive of revolutionary, deconstructive policies.

There is a contradiction here in that people on the left are more fluid but also favour state intervention. But, as Edmund Burke said, 'Society cannot exist, unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without.'

Some research has found that the left has a more external locus of control – seeing the world as a place of victims and oppressors, rather than a place where anyone can captain their own destiny (which is more of a right-wing view).

This may explain why Democrats tend to engage more with fear-based tweets, and Republicans with anger.

## Mean Score on Moral Foundations

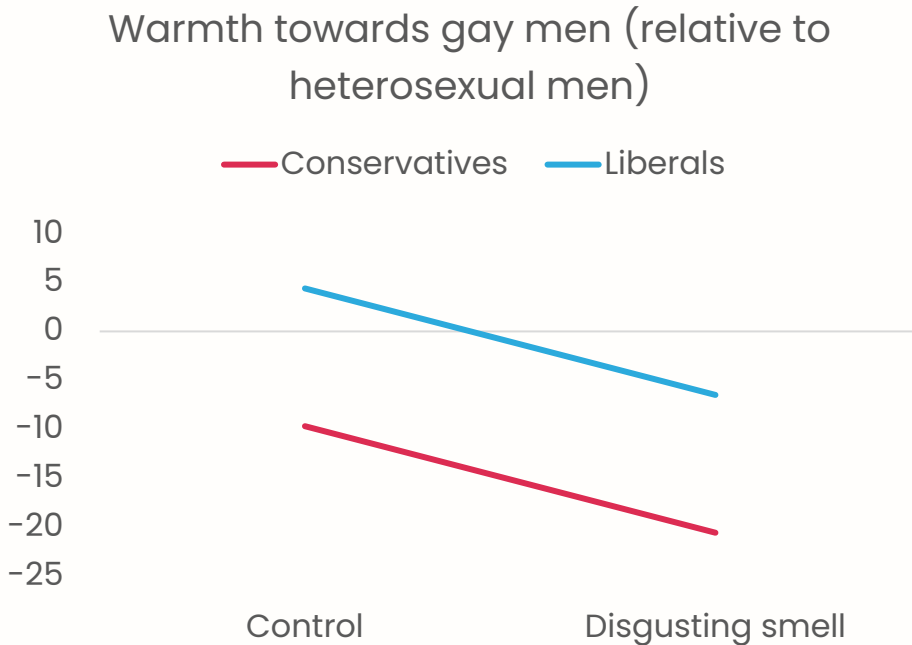


# Moral Foundations

Liberals tend to place more value on the so-called 'individualising' morals of fairness and harm-reduction, while conservatives put more value on the 'binding' morals of group loyalty, authority, and purity. We can view this through the lens of Rules and Empathy.

**Rules** is about not breaking natural laws or taboos (purity), and it's about following the group norms and authority figures. This hierarchical focus (what's called Social Dominance Orientation) is antithetical to equality and care. As Solzhenitsyn said, people have different talents and thus they can be either free or equal – they can't be both.

**Empathy** is about treating fairly, avoiding harm, and being tolerant of people even if they do break norms.

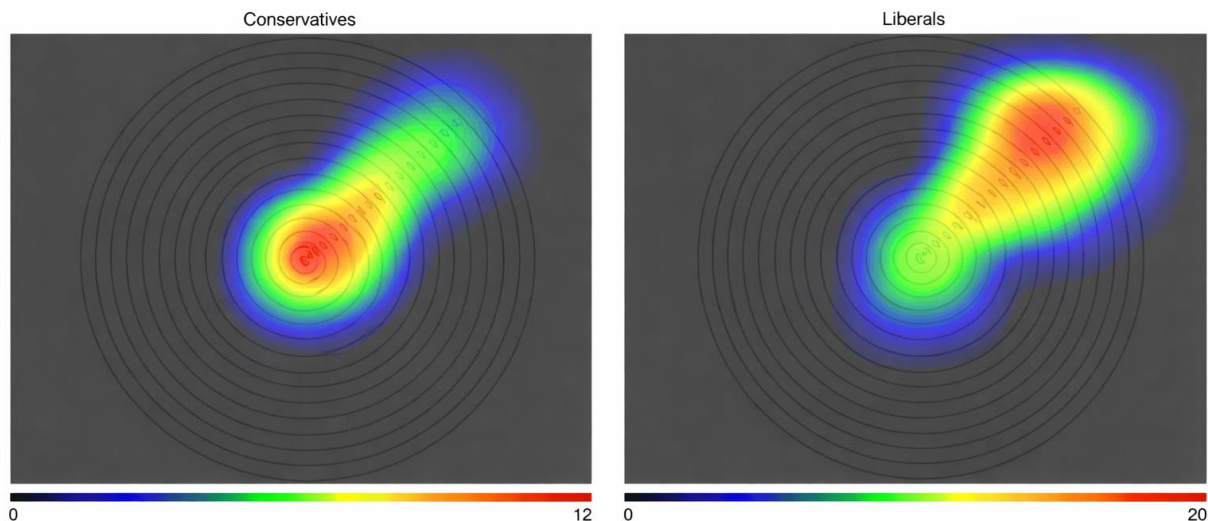


## Disgust Sensitivity

Researchers have consistently found a link between conservatism and disgust sensitivity. A stink spray, for example, can prime more socially conservative views (as shown above).

Disgust is like the emotional enforcer of structure. Where creativity (fluidity) allows things to go together that normally wouldn't, disgust is the antithesis, preventing mixing of things that normally don't mix.

In the extreme, this trait is believed to partly explain prejudice towards immigrants or sexual minorities.



Heatmaps indicating highest moral allocation by ideology, Study 3a. Source data are provided as a Source Data file. Note. The highest value on the heatmap scale is 20 units for liberals, and 12 units for conservatives. Moral circle rings, from inner to outer, are described as follows: (1) all of your immediate family, (2) all of your extended family, (3) all of your closest friends, (4) all of your friends (including distant ones), (5) all of your acquaintances, (6) all people you have ever met, (7) all people in your country, (8) all people on your continent, (9) all people on all continents, (10) all mammals, (11) all amphibians, reptiles, mammals, fish, and birds, (12) all animals on earth including paramecia and amoebae, (13) all animals in the universe, including alien lifeforms, (15) all living things in the universe including plants and trees, (15) all natural things in the universe including inert entities such as

## Global vs. Local

Rules and Empathy play out nicely in this study on identifying with local versus distant groups. Conservatives are more likely to allocate the highest moral good to family and close friends, whereas liberals are more likely to allocate it to the ecosystem and all living things.

Liberals are better able to empathise with abstract concepts, due to higher empathy and fluidity. On the other hand, conservatives are more practical, keeping their empathy for those they can see and touch.

Fluidity also plays out nicely in occupations. People who work with their hands – engineers, truckers, farmers – tend to be conservative, while those who work with their minds – teachers, journalists, academics – tend to be more liberal.

# This silly right-wing meme is a great example.

It lampoons **empathy** (left-wing) for immigrants coming at the cost of the **structure** (right-wing) of border laws.



**14 Heartbreaking Photos That Will Make You Say "F [REDACTED] Having Borders and Law And S [REDACTED]"**



## Left-Wing

Fluidity

Empathy

Ambiguity

Progression

Global

Individuality

Equality

Relativism



## Right-Wing

Structure

Practicality

Purity

Conservation

Local

Conformity

Hierarchy

Absolutism



**Extreme Left**



**Extreme Right**

# Let's Apply It...

Differences in Rules and Empathy can explain why wedge issues split liberals and conservatives.



## Climate Change

	Left-Wing	Right-Wing
<b>Fluidity v. Rules</b>	Make change based on abstract data for future outcomes	Maintain status quo; no real impact felt day-to-day.
<b>Empathy v. Reality</b>	Care for wildlife, future generations and the third world	Be practical and protect businesses



## Gender Identity

	Left-Wing	Right-Wing
<b>Fluidity v. Rules</b>	Gender is fluid / exists on a spectrum	Gender is fixed and there is no in-between
<b>Empathy v. Reality</b>	Be kind towards people who are different, everyone is equal	Women simply can't, e.g., compete with men in sports



## Immigration

	Left-Wing	Right-Wing
<b>Fluidity v. Rules</b>	Borders are imaginary; we're all one race, the human race	National/Ethnic groups have inherent differences
<b>Empathy v. Reality</b>	Have empathy for people even if they are the out-group	Have empathy for people you can see and touch

**I don't like 'em puttin'  
chemicals in the water that  
turn the friggin' frogs gay!**



## **Moral Reframing**

Once you understand the political psychology of your target group, you can understand how to get them to support any message.

For example, if you had a pro-environmental message, the usual approach of harm-reduction (e.g., 'Don't let these turtles choke on plastic bags') would work for liberals. But for conservatives, a message would be more effective if it focused on spoiling the great American countryside, for example.

The right-wing movement was not extremely interested in plastic pollution until it was discovered that plastics are endocrine disruptors (and to be fair, peer-reviewed academic research has in fact found they increase homosexuality among frogs and gender-switching among fish and prevent rabbits' testicles from descending). This violation of so-called 'natural law' spoke to their moral foundation of purity.



## 'They're Eating the Cats'

In his 2024 run for president, Donald Trump made the claim during a debate: 'In Springfield, [immigrants] are eating the dogs... They're eating the cats. They're eating the pets of the people that live there.'

Whatever you think of Trump, or his claim, you can't deny that, as a political message, this uses weapons-grade psychology. It ticks both boxes discussed in this report:



It uses **nudges**. It is surprising, easy to visualise, and exploits our hardwired tendency to pay attention when cute things are involved.



It is **targeted** to what his running mate crassly called 'childless cat ladies' just a few days earlier (in fairness, it is true that single women tend to vote more liberal, as do cat owners). It tapped into the left-wing moral of caring for animals.



## Here's the sell.

Look - you could probably do kind-of-a-good-job applying this stuff yourself. But why not bring in the expert? (Me.)

I'm an applied behavioural scientist with almost fifteen years' experience finding out what makes people tick. I've worked at the highest level of political campaigns around the world.

I also used to be the lead psychologist at Cambridge Analytica, and I'm a Sunday Times bestselling author and a part-time university lecturer.

In short, I know my stuff. And here's what I could do for you.



### **Research**

...to get inside the electorate's heads and find the right voting buttons to push.



### **Profiling**

...to break the electorate into psychographic segments for targeted nudging.



### **Data**

...to read voter data through a behavioural science lens and make it actionable.



### **Modelling**

...to build predictive algorithms on data and forecast and change votes just in time.



### **Nudging**

...to use psychology to optimise your flyers, speeches, and adverts.

Are you  
**irrationally**  
reaching **voters?**



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