

Wassermann calculated that House Democrats now represented 78 percent of all Whole Foods locations, but only 27 percent of Cracker Barrels. In theory, there is nothing about organic apples or all-day waffles that should predict our politics, but our affinities and preferences layer atop each other in complex ways.²⁸

It's easy to overstate the direct role partisanship is playing in these decisions. While it's true that Democrats prefer to live among Democrats and Republicans like living among Republicans, research shows that the dominant considerations when people are choosing a place to move are housing prices, school quality, crime rates, and similar quality-of-life questions.²⁹ However, the big driver here isn't the small moves people make between communities, but the big decision they make—or that their parents, or their parents' parents, made—to live in an urban or rural area.

As the parties become more racially, religiously, ideologically, and geographically different, the signals that tell us if a place is our kind of place, if a community is our kind of community, heighten our political divisions. The more sorted we are in our differences, the more different we grow in our preferences. In 2017, Pew found that “most Republicans (65%) say they would rather live in a community where houses are larger and farther apart and where schools and shopping are not nearby. A majority of Democrats (61%) prefer smaller houses within walking distance of schools and shopping.”³⁰ Thus, a preference that seems nonpolitical on its face—“I want a big house with a yard,” or “I want to live in a diverse city with lots of new restaurants”—becomes yet another force pulling partisans away from each other.

There's a reason these divides are all stacking on top of one another. They don't merely track differences in our politics. They track differences in our psychologies.

The psychological roots of our politics

Let's start with the obvious. People are different. My older brother is a social animal, eager to make small talk, able to forge connections with strangers in seconds. I stand in the corner at cocktail parties, uncomfortable with people I don't already know well. My younger sister is a talented artist who designs jewelry and has been making psychedelic art since she was six. I have such bad penmanship that I started a course to improve my handwriting in my thirties, and if you ask me to sketch a person, I'll plop a small circle for a head over a fatter circle for a body, like a six-year-old who just learned to draw. As a result, my brother, who likes socializing more than I do, does more socializing. My sister, with her talent for art, makes more art.

Some of these differences are rooted in nurture, in experience. But others are evident from our earliest days. Psychologists speak of the Big Five personality traits: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extroversion-introversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Where we fall on these scales is measurable in childhood and shapes our lives thereafter. It affects where we live, what we like, who we love. And, increasingly, it shapes our politics.

In their book *Open versus Closed: Personality, Identity, and the Politics of Redistribution*, political psychologists Christopher Johnston, Christopher Federico, and Howard Lavine write that “Democrats and Republicans are now sharply distinguished by a set of basic psychological dispositions related to experiential *openness*—a general dimension of personality tapping tolerance for threat and uncertainty in one's environment.”³¹

A similar argument, using slightly different data, can be found in political scientists Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler's

Prius or Pickup? How the Answers to Four Simple Questions Explain America's Great Divide:

Of the many factors that make up your worldview, one is more fundamental than any other in determining which side of the divide you gravitate toward: your perception of how dangerous the world is. Fear is perhaps our most primal instinct, after all, so it's only logical that people's level of fearfulness informs their outlook on life.³²

Different studies categorize people in different ways, but the common thread is that openness to experience—and the basic optimism that drives it—is associated with liberalism, while conscientiousness, a preference for order and tradition that breeds a skepticism toward disruptive change, connects to conservatism. People high in openness are more likely to enjoy trying new foods, traveling to new places, living in diverse cities, keeping a messy desk. They're less sensitive to threatening photos and disgusting images, even when measuring subrational indicators like eye tracking and saliva chemicals. In *Predisposed: Liberals, Conservatives, and the Biology of Political Differences*, John Hibbing, Kevin Smith, and John Alford write:

Numerous studies have linked these personality dimensions to differences in the mix of tastes and preferences that seem to reliably separate liberals and conservatives. People who score high on openness, for example, tend to like envelope-pushing music and abstract art. People who score high on conscientiousness are more likely to be organized, faithful, and loyal. One review of this large research literature finds these sorts of differences consistently cropping up across nearly 70 years of studies on personality research. The punch line, of course, is that this same

literature also reports a consistent relationship between these dimensions of personality and political temperament. Those open to new experiences are not just hanging Jackson Pollock prints in disorganized bedrooms while listening to techno-pop reinterpretations of Bach by experimental jazz bands. They are also more likely to identify themselves as liberals.³³

This is why Whole Foods and Cracker Barrel locations track deep partisan divisions. Whole Foods is a grocer catering to those high in openness to experience. The aisles are thick with ethnic foods, unusual produce, and magazines touting Eastern spirituality. Cracker Barrel, by contrast, is aimed at those preferring tradition: it offers comforting, Southern favorites that are delicious without being surprising. These are large corporations with skilled teams that carefully choose the placements of new locations. Their choices map onto our politics not because they are trying to serve one side of the political divide but because our politics map onto our deeper preferences, and those deeper preferences drive much more than just our politics.

We like to think that we choose our politics by slowly, methodically developing a worldview, using that worldview to generate conclusions about ideal tax and health and foreign policy, and then selecting the political party that fits best. That's not how the political psychologists see it. They argue that our politics, much like our interest in travel and spicy food and being in crowds, emerges from our psychological makeup. "Certain ideas are attractive to some people and repulsive to others, and that means, essentially, that ideologies and psychologies are magnetically drawn to each other,"³⁴ says John Jost, a political psychologist at New York University.

When Obama paired the words "hope" and "change," he was expressing something fundamental to the liberal psychology:

change makes some fearful, but within the liberal temperament, it carries the hope of something better. The kinds of people most attracted to liberalism are the kinds of people who are excited by change, by difference, by diversity. Their politics are just one expression of that basic temperament—a temperament that might push them to live in polyglot cities, to hitchhike across Europe, to watch foreign-language films. By contrast, the job of the conservative, wrote *National Review* founder William F. Buckley, is to “[stand] athwart history, yelling Stop.”³⁵ You can see how that might appeal to a person who mistrusts change, appreciates tradition, and seeks order. That kind of person might also prefer living in a small town nearer to family, going to a church deeply rooted in ritual, celebrating at restaurants they already know and love.

Depending on the type of person you are, you might read one of those descriptions as compliment and one as indictment. Don't think of it that way. Society needs lots of different kinds of people, with lots of different kinds of psychologies, to thrive. There are times when a mistrust of outsiders is necessary for a culture to repel a threat. There are times when enthusiasm about change is the only thing standing between a society and stagnation. Open isn't better than closed. Conscientious is a trait, not a compliment. Evolutionarily, the power is in the mix of outlooks, not in any one outlook—that's why this psychological diversity has survived.

What is changing is not our psychologies. What is changing is how closely our psychologies map onto our politics and onto a host of other life choices. As the differences between the parties clarify, the magnetic pull of their ideas and demographics becomes stronger to the psychologically aligned—as does their magnetic repulsion to the psychologically opposed.

In *Praxis or Pickup?*, Hetherington and Weiler use a psychological scale they call “fluid” and “fixed.” They write:

People with what we call a fixed worldview are more fearful of potential dangers, and are likely to prefer clear and unwavering rules to help them navigate all the threats. This mind-set leads them to support social structures in which hierarchy and order prevail, the better to ensure people don't stray too far from the straight and narrow. By contrast, people with what we call a fluid worldview are less likely to perceive the world as dangerous.

By extension, they will endorse social structures that allow individuals to find their own way in life. They are more inclined to believe that a society's well-being requires giving people greater latitude to question, to explore, and to discover their authentic selves.³⁶

In the mid-twentieth century, this psychological dimension doesn't seem to have split American politics. It's notable, for instance, that opposition to the Vietnam War was evenly distributed across the two parties during the 1960s. As late as 1992, the fluid and the fixed were nearly identical in which party they chose. Now, though, these psychologies are the dividing line of American politics, at least among white voters (more on why the psychological sort is concentrated among whites, and what it means for politics, later). On the fluid side, 71 percent were Democrats and only 21 percent were Republicans. On the fixed side, 60 percent were Republicans and only 25 percent were Democrats. The results are even stronger if you look at ideology. According to Hetherington and Weiler, “Among the fixed, 84 percent of those who chose one of these two labels chose conservative. Among the fluid, 80 percent of those who chose one of them chose liberal.”

Every dimension of our lives—ideology, religiosity, geography, and so on—carries a psychological signal. And those psychological signals strengthen as they align. What's been happening to

American life is we're taking the magnets and stacking them all on top of one another, so the pull-push force of that stack is multiplied—particularly for the people most engaged in politics.

In *Open versus Closed*, Johnston, Federico, and Lavine tested a variety of psychological tendencies against people's level of interest in politics. What they found, again and again, is psychology doesn't predict political opinions among people who don't pay much attention to politics, but it's a powerful predictor of political opinions among those who do. For the politically disengaged, "there is little dispositional sorting," but among the highly engaged, the effects are huge: different levels of openness to experience can account for as much as 35 percentage point swings in party identification, overwhelming almost all other factors.

These findings led the researchers to an interesting conclusion: "In forming an opinion, the question for the unengaged citizen is: what will this policy *do for me*? Among the engaged, however, reactions to economic issues are better understood as expressively motivated signals of identity. The question for the engaged citizen is: what does support for this policy position *say about me*?"³⁷

Psychological sorting, in other words, is a powerful driver of identity politics. If you care enough about politics to connect it to your core psychological outlook, then politics becomes part of your psychological self-expression. And as the political coalitions split by psychology, membership in one or the other becomes a clearer signal, both to ourselves and to the world, about who we are and what we value. When we participate in politics to solve a problem, we're participating transactionally. But when we participate in politics to express who we are, that's a signal that politics has become an identity. And that's when our relationship to politics, and to each other, changes.

Chapter 3

Your Brain on Groups

In 1970, Henri Tajfel published a paper with the anodyne title "Experiments in Intergroup Discrimination." It would prove among the most important in social psychology, and even today, it stands as one of the most unnerving windows into the subtleties of the human mind.

Tajfel began by recalling a Slovene friend of his detailing the stereotypes his countrymen had for Bosnian immigrants. Tajfel doesn't record what those stereotypes were, but they stuck with him. He thought he had heard them, or something like them, before. He decided to test his hunch. "Some time later I presented this description to a group of students at the University of Oxford and asked them to guess by whom it was used and to whom it referred," he writes. "The almost unanimous reply was that this was the characterization applied by native Englishmen to 'colored' immigrants: people coming primarily from the West Indies, India and Pakistan."³⁸

From this, Tajfel took a lesson. Discrimination varies in its targets and intensity across cultures, but it is surprisingly similar in its rationalizations. Perhaps, he thought, the way we treat people