

To Provide or Protect: Motivational Bases of Political Liberalism and Conservatism

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Political liberalism and conservatism differ in provide versus protect orientations, specifically providing for group members' welfare (political Left) and protecting the group from harm (political Right). These reflect the fundamental psychological distinction between approach and avoidance motivation. Conservatism is avoidance based; it is focused on preventing negative outcomes (e.g., societal losses) and seeks to regulate society via inhibition (restraints) in the interests of social order. Liberalism is approach based; it is focused on advancing positive outcomes (e.g., societal gains) and seeks to regulate society via activation (interventions) in the interests of social justice. As evidenced by specific policy positions, the domains of social regulation and individual autonomy are mirror images for liberals and conservatives. These differences in regulation and motivation suggest fundamental divergences in conceptions of the group and bases of group membership (i.e., societal inclusion), with conservatives focusing on intergroup boundaries and common social identity, and liberals focusing on intragroup variability and interdependence. Implications for society are discussed.

Partisanship and polarization characterize contemporary American politics, as differences are increasingly defined by chasms rather than blurred lines. We categorize ourselves as Left or Right, blue or red, liberal or conservative, and these labels provide a deep sense of both group identity and moral satisfaction. We are convinced of our own side's superiority, viewing our positions as self-evident and eminently justifiable and the other's perspective as unreasonable and ethically suspect. What underlies our political preferences? How can we better understand our differences?

We are fundamentally social animals; from day one we are socially dependent, and over time we grow socially interdependent, in that our individual survival is generally tied to the success of our group. At the smallest group level, the family, the primary parental responsibilities are to protect and provide for the child; more specifically parents protect their children from threats and danger (i.e., keep children safe from harm) and provide for their welfare and well-being (e.g., give food, shelter, physical comfort). Security minimizes children's fears and anxieties; nurturance fosters their growth and advancement. As we move to a far broader level—that of society—these same two responsibilities continue to define group living. A successful society protects members from danger and provides them with the means to subsist and thrive.

These very basic motivations—to protect and provide—represent distinct preferences regarding social regulation, and they offer a means for understanding

differences between the political Right and Left. More specifically, conservatives are oriented toward protecting, and liberals are oriented toward providing. In spite of the antagonisms these distinct perspectives engender in the political domain, both are moral motivations; that is, both are aimed at addressing the interests and needs of the larger group—by protecting society's members from harm or providing for their well-being. This seemingly simple difference has broad political implications and reflects a very basic distinction in psychology, in fact the most fundamental difference recognized in work on motivation and self-regulation.

Approach Versus Avoidance: A Lens for Understanding Provide (Liberal) Versus Protect (Conservative) Orientations

Research in diverse fields of psychology supports the primary distinction between approach and avoidance orientations in motivation. Building on early work on reward and punishment in learning and more recent research in neuroscience, psychopathology, and animal conditioning, contemporary psychologists posit two systems of self-regulation: a behavioral inhibition system, based in avoidance motivation, and a behavioral activation system based in approach motivation (for reviews, see Carver & Scheier, 2008, and Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2003).

Thus Carver and his colleagues (Carver & Scheier, 1998, 2008; Carver, Sutton, & Scheier, 2000) distinguish between an approach system that involves

discrepancy-reducing loops between behaviors and desired goals and an avoidance system that involves discrepancy-enlarging loops; here the behaviors are efforts to avoid “a threat or an *anti-goal*” (Carver & Scheier, 2008, p. 309). Similarly, in his work on motivation, Gray (1982, 1990) differentiates between the Behavioral Activation System (BAS) and the Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS). The BAS is an appetitive system associated with approach behaviors, whereas the BIS is an aversive system associated with avoidance behaviors. Higgins (1997, 1998), too, posited a dual-regulation system; a promotion orientation is advancement based and focused on positive outcomes, whereas a prevention orientation is security based and focused on negative outcomes. Recent neuroscience research provides support for these two distinct motivational systems. Sutton and Davidson (1997), for example, found that the BIS and BAS have distinct neural substrates; the aversive-avoidance system is associated with activity in the right prefrontal cortex, whereas the appetitive-approach system is associated with activity in the left prefrontal cortex (also see Davidson, Ekman, & Saron, 1990).

A review of work on these dual regulatory systems suggests two primary characteristics that distinguish between approach and avoidance motivation: regulatory focus and action tendency. The regulatory focus of the approach system is positive, whereas for the avoidance system it is negative; that is, the approach system focuses on positive outcomes and gains, whereas the avoidance system focuses on negative outcomes and losses. Further, the action tendency for the approach system is activation (i.e., movement toward the goal), whereas for the avoidance system it is inhibition (withdrawal from the “anti-goal”). There are therefore natural links between behavioral activation and positive outcomes (i.e., rewards, incentives) and between behavioral inhibition and negative outcomes (i.e., threats, punishments).

Recent research in psychology has demonstrated the value of this regulatory distinction for understanding areas as diverse as achievement (e.g., Elliot & Church, 1997), attention (e.g., Forster, Friedman, Ozelsel, & Denzler), power (e.g., Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), interpersonal relationships (Gable & Strachman, 2008), and morality (Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Hepp, 2009). Of interest, these motivational differences may also provide a meaningful lens for capturing and comprehending differences in the political domain as well.

Approach-Avoidance: Applications to Politics

Most generally, I propose that political conservatism is based in avoidance motivation, whereas political liberalism is based in approach motivation.

Conservatism is attuned to negative outcomes and relies on inhibition or restraint as a primary means of social regulation. Liberalism is focused on positive outcomes and utilizes activation as a primary means of social regulation (see Table 1). The Right seeks to prevent negative outcomes and losses; the Left seeks to advance positive outcomes and gains. Both seek optimal outcomes for society but have different orientations in achieving their ends. More specifically, conservatives emphasize society’s protection and security; their politics are centrally based in *protecting* group members from threats and dangers (protect *from* = avoidance). Liberals emphasize *providing* for the welfare of others across society (provide *for* = approach); their politics are centrally based in promoting the social welfare of group members. These differences in regulatory focus and activation-inhibition (action tendency) lead to divergences in social regulation. Inhibition, which is naturally associated with avoidance, is reflected in conservatives’ general resistance to change and emphasis on social order. Activation, which is naturally associated with approach, is reflected in liberals’ general embrace of change and emphasis on social justice.

The claim that conservatism is avoidance based and evident in the broad motivation to protect, and liberalism is approach based and evident in the broad motivation to provide, is not meant to suggest that liberals are oblivious to danger and society’s security needs, or that conservatives are oblivious to others’ hardships and social needs. Rather, attunement to danger and threats is essentially the default mode for conservatives and not liberals; liberals will respond to specific instances of apparent danger as they arise, but an avoidance-based concern with protection and security does not pervade their worldviews. Likewise conservatives will respond to salient instances of need,¹ but concern for others’ social welfare does not define their worldview.

Given that avoidance motivation is generally responsive to threats (i.e., negative outcomes), and conservatism is associated with avoidance motivation, it is not surprising that in times of salient dangers and insecurity societies become more conservative (see, e.g., Bonanno & Jost, 2006; Janoff-Bulman & Sheikh, 2006; Landau et al., 2004; McCann, 1997). As Power (2008) noted,

Since 1968, with the single exception of the election of George W. Bush in 2000, Americans have chosen Republican presidents in times of perceived danger and Democrats in times of relative calm. . . . Americans have long trusted the views of Democrats on the

¹ This would be most apt to occur in instances when victim blaming is least likely (Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Hutchinson, & Chamberlin, 2002), as in natural disasters, although the Bush administration’s response to the Katrina disaster could certainly be interpreted as evidence of the extent to which social hardships are typically “off the radar” in conservatives’ worldview.

Table 1. *Differences Between Political Liberalism and Conservatism.*

	Liberalism (provide)	Conservatism (protect)
Basic motivation:	Approach	Avoidance
Regulatory focus	Positive (societal gains)	Negative (societal threats)
Action tendency	<i>Activation</i>	<i>Inhibition</i>
Social regulation:	Social justice	Social order
Regulation domain	Social goods, economics	Lifestyles, personal behaviors
Mode	<i>Intervention</i> (activation)	<i>Restraint</i> (inhibition)
Autonomy domain (<i>no</i> social regulation)	Lifestyles, personal behaviors	Social goods, economics
Group definition:	Interdependence	Common social identity
Focus	Intragroup variability	Intergroup boundaries
Membership	<i>Inclusive</i>	<i>Restrictive</i>

environment, the economy, education, and health care, but national security is the one matter about which Republicans have maintained what political scientists call ‘issue ownership.’” (p. 66)

And in a June *Fortune* interview, Charles Black, a top McCain campaign advisor, recognized the election benefits for conservatives of priming national insecurities and fears when he noted that another terrorist attack on U.S. soil would “be a big advantage” for McCain (Shear, 2008).

Although there are general conservative trends in times of salient threats, conservatives in particular are more avoidance oriented and attuned to negative outcomes than liberals. Research studies that have manipulated threat have found that conservatives, but not liberals, typically respond with harsher recommendations associated with their beliefs in societal protection. Pyszczynski et al. (2006), for example, found that mortality salience (i.e., reminders of participants’ own death) increased conservatives’ (but not liberals’) support for extreme military force. Further, conservatives score higher than liberals on a scale measuring “perception of a dangerous world”; liberals, in contrast, score higher on Openness to Experience, which essentially measures willingness to approach novelty and change (see, e.g., Altmeyer, 1998; Duckitt, 2001; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Jost et al., 2007). Conservatives focus primarily on negative outcomes and societal threats, whereas liberals focus primarily on positive outcomes and societal gains (also see Braithwaite, 1994, 1997).

Zakaria (2008), in writing about the 2008 presidential candidates, implicitly acknowledged this conservative–liberal difference in regulatory focus:

McCain is a pessimist about the world, seeing it as a dark, dangerous place where, without the constant and vigorous application of American force, evil will triumph. Obama sees a world that is in many ways going our way. As nations develop, they become more modern and enmeshed in the international economic

and political system. . . . America’s job is to push these progressive forces forward, using soft power rather than hard. . . . Call him an Optimistic Realist or a Realistic Optimist. But don’t call him naïve. (p. 22)

As Zakaria (2008) suggested, a conservative world-view is attuned to negative outcomes (dangers, threats, “evil”), and society needs to be protected through the use of “hard power.”² A liberal perspective is attuned to positive possibilities and gains, which can presumably be promoted through the use of “soft power.” It follows that fear generally sells well among conservatives in election campaigns, whereas hope sells better among liberals.

Protecting via Social Order and Providing via Social Justice

The approach–avoidance bases of the Left and Right, respectively, are evident in the results of recent research we conducted on moral motives and political orientation (Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Baldacci, 2008). We conceptually crossed approach and avoidance motivation with a focus on self (i.e., self-regulation) versus others (i.e., social regulation), because moral regulation can involve one’s own behavior or the behavior of others; thus, moral philosophers have discussed the importance of recognizing both the intrapersonal and interpersonal domains of morality (see, e.g., Flanagan, 1991). The resulting 2 × 2 model includes two “avoidance” cells that involve behavioral restraint (i.e., inhibition action tendency)—Self-Restraint and Social Order—and two “approach” cells that involve behavioral activation—Self-Reliance and Social Justice.

²It does not follow from the conservative focus on negative outcomes that they will be more pessimistic. If in perceiving a threat they also believe that it can be prevented or overcome, pessimism is unlikely. In other words, liberals and conservatives can be pessimistic or optimistic about the success of their efforts.

Self-Restraint (avoidance-based self-regulation) can best be understood in terms of *self-protection*; it is focused on one's own negative outcomes and in particular, *inhibition* in the face of threatening temptations. *Social Order* (avoidance-based social regulation) relies on *inhibition*-based policies and behaviors to *protect* the larger community. The focus is on threats to the group—both physical threats to the group's safety and psychological threats to the group's identity; the call for strict adherence to group-defining rules serves to restrain non-normative behaviors that are perceived as threatening and "deviant." *Self-Reliance* (approach-based self-regulation) involves *providing* for the self and one's own advancement through the *activation* of industriousness and independence. *Social Justice* (approach-based social regulation) involves *providing* for societal members through the *activation* of policies and behaviors that help others in the community advance, particularly those less well off in society.

Across three studies (Janoff-Bulman et al., 2008) conservatives had significantly higher scores than liberals on both *Self-Restraint* and *Social Order*; in other words, they scored higher on the avoidance-based motives. Liberals had significantly higher scores on *Social Justice*, an approach motive. Although conservatives and liberals did not differ on *Self-Reliance*, an interesting pattern of results arose in this research, providing support for a general approach orientation for liberals but not conservatives. For liberals, *Self-Reliance* scores were significantly positively correlated with their *Social Justice* scores; the more they believe in providing for the self, the more they also believe in providing for others. Yet for conservatives, there was no positive association; in fact, *Self-Reliance* scores were generally negatively correlated with *Social Justice* scores, suggesting that the more conservatives believe in providing for themselves, the less they support providing for others. The relationship between the two activation-based regulatory motives suggests a strong approach orientation for liberals and the absence of same for conservatives.

Of interest, these findings help clarify beliefs about self-reliance on the political Left and Right. Liberals and conservatives do not seem to differ when considering their own behaviors and advancement. Rather, the popular belief that self-reliance is a "conservative" rather than "liberal" virtue appears to derive from its application to others. Conservatives believe others need to be self-reliant and do not warrant help from other people, whereas liberals believe in providing help for others, particularly those less well off in society. Compared to the conservative perspective, the liberal view implicitly acknowledges differences in circumstances and opportunities across individuals and groups in society.

Regarding social regulation, liberals place a strong emphasis on social justice, whereas conservatives place

a strong emphasis on social order (see Table 1). Conservatives value stability and norm adherence; they respect established authority and believe "order is precious and at least a little fragile" (McWilliams, 1995, p. 177). Liberals are attuned to the well-being of other societal members and value fairness and communal sharing. Given their interest in protecting, conservatives regard toughness as a special virtue, whereas liberals particularly value generosity.³ Criticisms from the political Left focus on perceptions of conservatives as fear-mongering and mean-spirited, whereas criticisms from the political Right focus on perceptions of the left as squandering and naïve (McWilliams, 1995).

Of interest, these different orientations of the political Left and Right are even evident in the nominating systems of the Democratic and Republican parties.

As a prominent Republican strategist, Mike Murphy, suggested, perhaps jocularly, in a recent appearance on NBC's 'Meet the Press,' Democrats are hung up on ideas of fairness and equity. Democrats, being the nice liberals they are, grade on a curve. . . . They give you delegates for coming in second. Republicans . . . being mean social Darwinists, we tend to punish the second-place guy with a lot of winner-take-all primaries. . . . In other words, the Republican who kills the buffalo gets all the meat; the Democrat has to crouch around the campfire and share it with his brethren and sistren. (Broder, 2008, p. 4)

Sharing or redistributing resources to produce greater social equity is a way of providing for the general well-being of the group and is central to the politics of the Left. With this in mind, it is interesting that Haidt (2008; Haidt & Graham, 2007) seems to suggest that conservatives are more community oriented than liberals. In his groundbreaking work on morality, Haidt posits five foundational moral categories—harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity—and concludes that liberal morality is based on the first two, whereas conservative morality is based on all five. Haidt regards conservatives as particularly communal because they rely on the three "collective" categories in his model—ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect/ and purity/sanctity. Suggesting that conservatives are more community oriented may, then, be a consequence of the particular categories in the model. If equality (see Jost et al., 2003; Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008) or communal sharing, for example, were included (for they are not the same as harm/care or fairness/reciprocity as presented by Haidt), liberals would no doubt rely on these more than conservatives. It is important to note that the three "collective" categories used by the political Right are all strongly associated with social order, which no doubt accounts for conservatives' greater endorsement.

³The gendered nature of these attributes should not go unnoticed.

A more complete picture of political orientation and morality indicates that both liberals and conservatives are community oriented but emphasize different aspects of community—order versus justice. In fact in a recent study with more than 1,000 respondents using the Triandis and Gelfand (1998) Individualism–Collectivism scale, we found no differences between liberals and conservatives on collectivism (or individualism) but large differences on the vertical–horizontal dimension of the scale. Conservatives endorsed vertical social relationships significantly more than liberals, a finding consistent with their support for hierarchy and authority. Liberals, in contrast, scored higher on measures of horizontal relationships, which is consistent with their support for equality and social justice in society. Both groups have strong but different communal concerns; again, conservatives focus on protecting the group and emphasize social order, whereas liberals focus on providing for the group and emphasize social justice.

Social Justice and Social Order via Policy Preferences: Activation Versus Inhibition

How are these differences in communal concerns reflected in specific political positions and policy recommendations? When it comes to social regulation, which is essentially what politics is all about, liberals and conservatives differ dramatically. The conservative “moral values vote” of the 2004 presidential election was primarily about prohibiting abortion, same-sex marriage, and stem cell research (Pew Research Center, 2004). These remain key conservative issues. Liberals clearly want to allow these activities and seek social regulation elsewhere. Their concern for social welfare leads to an emphasis on issues such as health, education, and employment. Thus liberals are more likely than conservatives to support government welfare, social security, and affirmative action (see Bobbio, 1996; Jost et al., 2008; Kerlinger, 1984; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Liberals’ preference for equality is even apparent when tapped at the implicit level (e.g., Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004), and years of research on Social Dominance Orientation finds liberals are more egalitarian and less hierarchical in orientation than conservatives (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994).

In research we conducted to assess support for a number of contemporary political issues (Janoff-Bulman et al., 2008), two independent factors emerged: a “Lifestyle” factor that included items such as legal abortion, stem cell research, and same-sex marriage, and an “Equity” factor that included government welfare programs, affirmative action, and tax cuts for the rich (reverse-scored). Both factors were strongly associated with political orientation, with approval strongly associated with liberalism and disapproval strongly as-

sociated with conservatism. Yet the Lifestyle factor, but not the Equity factor, was significantly correlated with avoidance-based motivation (and not approach motivation); the greater the *disapproval*, the higher the scores on both Self-Restraint and Social Order (the avoidance motives). In contrast, the Equity factor, but not the Lifestyle factor, was significantly correlated with approach (and not avoidance), for here the greater the approval, the higher the Social Justice scores.

When examined more closely, it is apparent that the specific policy preferences of conservatives and liberals differ in terms of inhibition and activation, the primary means of regulating avoidance and approach, respectively. For conservatives, social regulation primarily involves the prohibition of behaviors—in particular, laws and normative expectations that seek to inhibit particular outcomes perceived as threats to society. Their political positions focus on restraining societal members’ choices regarding behaviors such as abortion, stem cell research, and same-sex marriage. Liberal regulation primarily involves activating behaviors and government interventions that promote redistributive societal outcomes and provide for others’ welfare. Both groups rely on social regulation in selected domains, with conservatives emphasizing restraint and prohibition and liberals emphasizing activation and intervention.

Conservatives focus on restraint-based regulation of lifestyles and behaviors. Liberals believe that personal choice and individual autonomy should apply to these domains, which include matters related to the body, health, and intimate relationships; from a liberal perspective, these domains should be free from social regulation. Liberals instead focus on the activation-based regulation of economics and social goods, and it is here that conservatives eschew regulation; conservatives believe personal choice and individual autonomy should apply to matters related to wealth accumulation and distribution. The political Left and Right focus on different domains for social regulation and manifest their distinct action tendencies in their desire for restraint (conservatives) versus intervention (liberals) (see Table 1). Similarly, both liberals and conservatives value autonomy, an important value in America (Feldman, 2003; Markus, 2001), but they view the appropriate realm of autonomy quite differently. In fact the domains of social regulation and individual autonomy are essentially mirror images for liberals and conservatives, reflecting their distinct orientations towards protecting versus providing (see Table 1).

Activation and inhibition characterize the social regulatory preferences of the Left and Right, respectively. There are clearly exceptions to this pattern, and two important ones in contemporary politics are attitudes regarding gun control and the death penalty. In these two cases we get a reverse pattern—liberals seek restrictions and prohibitions on gun ownership and the

death penalty, whereas conservatives want to promote both. Yet notice the domain of these two: They immediately elicit differences in fundamental beliefs and associations regarding protection and security. In contrast to liberals, conservatives believe that owning guns is protective. They believe that the death penalty makes us safer (by both deterrence and punishment of non-normative behaviors; see Carlsmith & Darley, 2008), and thus their positions on these two issues are coincident with their more general avoidant regulatory (protect-based) focus. Further, these conservative policy preferences regarding gun control and the death penalty are consistent with the “toughness” conservatives believe is important in social regulation, whether at home or abroad.

In a related vein, it is interesting that conservatism is typically equated with a desire for more limited government (Kinder, 1998; Markus, 2001). Yet this conservative preference seems to apply only to government policies focused on improving social welfare. Conservatives clearly are not advocates of more limited government when it comes to the military or police; bigger appears to be better in these domains. When conservatives call for more limited government, they are referring to government as provider, not protector.

Defining Group Membership: Social Markers Versus Social Interdependence

In their political positions and policy preferences, both conservatives and liberals seek ingroup homogeneity of a sort, but the two types of homogeneity are starkly different. For conservatives it is a matter of adherence to group norms—following rules, conforming to “proper” conventions. This reflects the desire for social order and entails minimizing “difference” in terms of group members’ behaviors. For liberals this homogeneity goal is apparent in desires for greater equality; they seek to minimize “difference” in terms of social goods and outcomes, reflecting their commitment to social justice. Why do conservatives focus on personal behaviors whereas liberals focus on social outcomes? And what are the implications of these differences for each group’s understanding of group membership?

Conservatives’ protection orientation—their focus on avoiding negative outcomes and sensitivity to dangers—seems likely to lead to a particular interest in (and unease about) ingroup-outgroup membership. In their attunement to threats, they are especially interested in who can be trusted, which is essentially a matter of knowing who is in your group and who is not (Brewer, 2004). In other words, for conservatives, ingroup-outgroup (i.e., us–them) boundaries become very important; normative adherence and conformity to the group’s rules become signs of “true” belonging and commitment to the community, and defiance of

group norms become the basis for exclusion. Lifestyles and personal behaviors thus become social markers of group membership and allegiance. Conservatives are attuned to indices of group loyalty, reflected in “proper” behaviors and more general indicators of support for one’s group. Not surprisingly, the political Right particularly values patriotism, and more specifically blind patriotism and nationalism (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989; Shatz, Staub, & Lavine, 1999), which entail uncritical acceptance of one’s country.

This sensitivity to group boundaries is evident in liberal-conservative differences in categorization processes. If conservatives are more sensitive to boundaries (i.e., ingroup-outgroup membership), then they should be *less* inclusive when categorizing, allowing fewer potential members into the group and exhibiting an “ingroup overexclusion effect” (see Leyens & Yzerbyt, 1992; Castano, Yzerbyt, Bourguignon, & Seron, 2002). In recent research on cognitive categorization we found that conservatives in fact used narrower, more restrictive categories (Rock & Janoff-Bulman, 2009). More specifically, we found that when primed with avoidance motivation, significantly narrower categories were used by conservatives than liberals, and this was the case even when the dependent measures were not at all associated with politics (and were unconfounded with social perceptions) but rather involved cognitive categorization based on the work of Rosch (1975). Avoidance-primed conservatives were significantly more likely to exclude less prototypical items from a category than were similarly primed liberals. These differences were not apparent in the two approach-prime conditions or the control no-prime conditions, suggesting both the greater sensitivity of conservatives to avoidance motivation and the role of avoidance-based motives in conservatives’ more restrictive categorization. Conservatives in this research required stronger evidence of category fit than liberals; similarly, in social categorizations involving “us” and “them,” conservatives require particularly strong evidence of “fit” as well.

For conservatives, group membership is defined via social identity markers indicating warranted inclusion. For liberals, who are attuned to positive outcomes and gains rather than danger and losses, ingroup-outgroup boundaries are not the focus of attention. The focus instead is on intragroup variability in social and economic outcomes. Liberals, in other words, are particularly attuned to within-group differences rather than between-group differences.

Whereas for conservatives it is common social identity that defines the group and one’s obligations, for liberals it is intragroup interdependence (see Table 1). Membership is more flexible for liberals than conservatives. These differences are apparent in their attitudes toward illegal immigrants in our country. Conservatives focus on their outsider status and not

surprisingly take a “tough” approach by focusing on punishment and deportation; the immigrants are clearly regarded as members of an outgroup, outside the valued category “American.” For conservatives it is the boundary between American and non-American that seems central. For liberals, on the other hand, the focus is on the common humanity of immigrants; although not unconcerned about their illegal status, liberals nevertheless are more apt to regard these immigrants as members of society, for it is here that they live and work. Liberals focus not on punishment but rather on the reality of the social needs of others in their midst. Conservatives focus on intergroup boundaries; liberals focus on intragroup interdependence.

Some Final Thoughts

The avoidance-based motivations of conservatives and the approach-based motivations of liberals are reflected in their respective protect and provide orientations. Although it is interesting to speculate about what leads people to be more sensitive to positive or negative outcomes, it is likely that there are multiple paths and diverse factors that can lead to these differences. Temperament may provide a unique starting point for some, as self-regulation research on infant anxiety and reactivity suggests (see, e.g., Vaish, Grossmann, & Woodward, 2008). Researchers have also pointed to the crucial role of parents; thus, parental use of rewards and incentives may orient children toward positive outcomes, whereas use of punishment and threats may orient them toward negative outcomes (see, e.g., Higgins, 1997, 1998; also see Lakoff, 2002, who argued that the “strict father” and “nurturant parent,” respectively, define conservatism and liberalism, both developmentally and metaphorically). But there are no doubt many routes to these motivational orientations, for our personal histories and socialization provide unique experiences that sensitize each of us to positive or negative outcomes, whether in the home, the classroom, the schoolyard, or the workplace. Significant people in our lives or important reference groups may orient us toward dangers, security, toughness and strength or positive incentives, nurturance, caring, and fairness. Ultimately we develop protect or provide orientations toward the larger group.

These different orientations are reflected in political positions, particularly our preferences regarding social regulation. In spite of individual differences in approach–avoidance orientations, when it comes to self-regulation we all rely on both systems; after all, a successful organism must be able to avert dangers and achieve satisfactions. Yet when we move to the societal level and social regulation in particular, approach and avoidance seem to turn into mutually exclusive rather than complementary motives. When they are the

bases for political perspectives, they seem to become antagonistic. Protecting and providing are reflected in dramatic differences regarding how best to serve society and what is worth attending to—potential gains or possible losses, social justice or social order, and prohibitions that restrain personal behaviors or interventions that advance social welfare.

Research indicates that those with strong approach motives are biased toward positive cues, and those with strong avoidance motives are biased toward negative cues (see Derryberry & Reed, 1994), suggesting that conservatives may overestimate dangers (i.e., overperceive threat cues) and liberals may overestimate the feasibility of societal advances and gains. This no doubt makes compromise and rapprochement all the more difficult. The extreme partisanship of contemporary American politics seems to produce ever-increasing polarization of views and ever-greater moral outrage felt toward the other group. In the halls of politics racking up another point for one’s side often seems more important than the broader interests of society. In this climate it might seem a somewhat radical proposition to suggest that the political Left and Right could actually be complementary rather than wholly antagonistic, with each side functioning as a counterweight—at times perhaps even a necessary counterweight—to the other’s protect or provide perspective. After all, just as a healthy individual strives to approach positive outcomes and avoid negative ones, surely a healthy society is one that balances the old and the new, traditions and reforms, and attends to both the social needs of its members as well as dangers to the group.

Note

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