How Could Human Nature Have Become This Politicized?

The partisanship of the Trump era has very deep roots.

By Thomas B. Edsall
Mr. Edsall contributes a weekly column from Washington, D.C. on politics, demographics and inequality.

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The nation’s faltering attempt to contain the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed once again the role of political partisanship in every aspect of American society.

Academic studies show that Republicans were far less willing to adopt safety procedures and were far more skeptical of scientific warnings than their Democratic counterparts.

In “Partisan Pandemic: How Partisanship and Public Health Concerns Affect Individuals’ Social Distancing During Covid-19,” published on June 28, Joshua Clinton, of Vanderbilt University, and three colleagues concluded that

Rampant partisanship in the United States may be the largest obstacle to the social distancing most experts see as critical to limiting the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The four political scientists continue:

All else equal, the relative importance of partisanship for the increasing (un) willingness of Republicans to engage in social distancing highlights the challenge that politics poses for public health.

Along similar lines, Christos Makridis of the MIT Sloan School of Management and Jonathan Rothwell, principal economist at Gallup and a Brookings senior scholar, reach a devastating conclusion in their June 30 paper, “The Real Cost of Political Polarization: Evidence from the Covid-19 Pandemic.”

Based on data collected by Gallup on 45,000 individuals between March and June, the authors conclude

that fear, economic expectations, workplace visits, social-distancing, and mask-wearing are all driven by party identification to a much greater extent than local public-health conditions, state economic conditions, or state public health policies.

With partisanship and polarization holding center stage, the question becomes: What exactly are we talking about when we talk about partisanship and polarization?

Two political scientists, Sean Westwood of Dartmouth and Erik Peterson of Texas A&M, have broken new ground in the study of one of the oldest and most powerful factors in shaping partisanship, race.

In “Compound Political Identity: How Partisan and Racial Identities Overlap and Reinforce,” Westwood and Peterson argue that “partisanship and race are so enmeshed in the minds of citizens that experiences which involve only one of the two groups affect evaluations and behavior toward both” — or, put another way, that “views of partisan and racial out-groups are inextricably connected.”

In a series of experiments, Westwood and Peterson found that affective polarization — defined as intense partisan animosity or the tendency “to view opposing partisans negatively and copartisans positively” —
is not merely the consequence of a growing sense of partisanship as it is a social identity or a greater alignment between other social identities and partisanship.

Instead, they argue, affective polarization contributes to racial animosity. To understand affective polarization along partisan lines, our results suggest, requires us to consider partisanship and race not only as related groups but as inseparable in the minds of Americans.

Westwood is a co-author of another recent paper, “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States,” along with Shanto Iyengar and Neil Malhotra, both of Stanford, and Yphtach Lelkes and Matthew Levendusky, both of the University of Pennsylvania. In it, the authors offer another helpful analysis of affective polarization:

Democrats and Republicans both say that the other party’s members are hypocritical, selfish, and closed-minded, and they are unwilling to socialize across party lines, or even to partner with opponents in a variety of other activities. This phenomenon of animosity between the parties is known as affective polarization.

How has this come about? The authors argue that:

First, in the last 50 years, the percentage of “sorted” partisans, i.e., partisans who identify with the party most closely reflecting their ideology, has steadily increased.” At the same time, “as partisan and ideological identities became increasingly aligned, other salient social identities, including race and religion, also converged with partisanship.

In addition, they write, campaigns intensify partisanship:

Across recent election cycles, people were between 50 percent and 150 percent more affectively polarized by Election Day than they were a year earlier.

Republican or Democratic allegiance has, the authors continue, become a factor in socializing, consumer choices and in labor markets. They cited a study of responses to résumés sent out to employers in two counties, one Republican, the other Democratic:
In the Democratic county, Democratic resumes were 2.4 percentage points more likely to receive a callback than Republican resumes; the corresponding partisan preference for Republican resumes in the Republican county was 5.6 percentage points.

The intensifying differences between the two parties, particularly over matters of race, sex and the family have created a fertile environment for what amounts to the partisan politicization of human nature.

What had been differences over deeply rooted moral convictions, along with such personality traits as openness to experience and the need for closure — which were once distributed in roughly equal proportion among members of the two parties — have become engines of polarization, driving the two parties further apart into warring camps.

The formulation of what come to be known as moral foundations theory has been crucial to a deeper understanding of this process. The theory proposes that the human mind is organized in advance of experience so that it is prepared to learn values, norms, and behaviors related to a diverse set of recurrent adaptive social problems.

Leading proponents argue that there are five foundations of intuitive ethics: care/harm; fairness/cheating; loyalty/betrayal; authority/subversion; and sanctity/degradation.

The theory is described in detail in “Moral Foundations Theory: The Pragmatic Validity of Moral Pluralism,” a 2013 paper by Jesse Graham of the University of Utah; Jonathan Haidt of N.Y.U.; Sena Koleva, a research consultant; Matt Motyl of the University of Illinois at Chicago; Ravi Iyer, chief data scientist for Ranker, a consumer internet platform; Sean P. Wojcik, a senior data scientist at the news site Axios; and Peter H. Ditto, of the University of California-Irvine.

What makes moral foundations theory especially relevant now is that in recent decades liberal and conservative partisans have divided over the importance they place on these five moral foundations:

Liberals valued Care and Fairness more than did conservatives, whereas conservatives valued Loyalty, Authority and Sanctity more than did liberals.

These differences mattered little for politics when both parties included liberals and conservatives, but beginning around 1964, this disagreement between left and right on moral values began to coincide more strongly with party affiliation.

A number of scholars have put forth ideas in an effort to understand these developments.

Kevin Smith, a political scientist at the University of Nebraska whose research explores “the biology and psychology of individual-level differences in political attitudes and behavior,” emailed in response to my inquiry:

Fights about abortion, gay rights, gun rights etc. are less about policy than about underlying core values, values that for many are not up for discussion or compromise because they are deeply held — indeed, given the genetic influences on such attitudes, it's probably fair to say they are at least partly biologically instantiated.

Smith, who is a co-author of “Predisposed: Liberals, Conservatives and the Biology of Political Differences,” argues that as political parties have coalesced along ideologically consistent lines, especially on issues related to race, they have
created a political environment where genetically influenced predispositions, what most people would experience as gut feelings that one side or the other is right or wrong on a given set of issues of the day, made partisanship something that was much more likely to become a central part of someone’s identity.

Smith is quite explicit that he does not posit that there is biological determinism of political views or anything else, but he does contend that there’s little doubt that ideological orientations are genetically influenced, and to a surprisingly high degree — studies consistently estimate roughly 40-60 percent of the population level variance in ideology is under genetic influence.

The ideological realignment of the parties that has pushed many liberal Republicans into the Democratic camp and conservative Democrats in the opposite direction, Smith writes, has created a political environment in which those with strong predispositions to lean one way or the other can readily mate those instinctual feelings to a political party that espouses and affirms those predispositions.

At that point, he continues, you’ve got a recipe for deeply polarized politics that is going to feed on its own dynamics and be hard to change. And that sounds awfully like the political environment we have right now.

In “Predisposed,” Smith and John Hibbing and John Alford, his co-authors, stress “that we are not making a nature versus nurture argument.”

Instead, they write, “innate forces combine with early development and later powerful environmental events to create attitudinal and behavioral tendencies.” A predisposition can be altered. Nonetheless, predispositions nudge us in one direction or another, often without our knowledge, increasing the odds that we will behave in a certain way, but leaving plenty of room for predispositions to be contravened.

Kevin Arceneaux, a political scientist at Temple, stressed in an email that it is important to resist the tendency to see heritability of eye color, for example, as the same thing as the heritability of an attitude. I cannot change my eye color, but I can change my attitudes.

Some of the most interesting work in the field of behavioral genetics, Arceneaux continues, shows how context interacts with genetic influences. If you change the context, the heritability of behavioral constructs changes. So, I would caution against drawing a straight line from heritability to unchanging/intractable.

Along the same lines, Yuan Chang Leong, a postdoctoral fellow in the psychology department at Berkeley, emailed me that what is heritable is unlikely to be ideology per se, but something more akin to personality traits or a predisposition to respond to certain information in a particular way.

The relationship between these factors and policy positions, Leong continued, are not set in stone. There is evidence that partisans can be persuaded by political messages, especially when the messages are framed in a manner that appeals to them, so efforts at persuasion are not futile.

Ariel Malka, a professor of psychology at Yeshiva University, believes that “religiosity, authoritarianism, and conservative cultural attitudes” are rooted in personality traits that have some heritable components.
In an email, Malka noted that

Increased partisan polarization in the U.S. has coincided with the parties placing greater (and opposing) emphases on racial and ‘culture war’ positions. So it's certainly plausible that American polarization stems from partisan conflict having expanded into the racial and cultural areas, aligning this heritable attitude syndrome with partisanship.

Malka cited the work of Amanda Friesen and Aleksander Ksiazkiewicz, political scientists at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis and the University of Illinois-Urbana, who are the authors of “Do Political Attitudes and Religiosity Share a Genetic Path?”

Friesen and Ksiazkiewicz are persuaded that

certain religious, political, and first principle beliefs on social organization can be explained by genetic and unique environmental components, and that the correlation between these three trait structures is primarily due to a common genetic path.

Malka also points to the work of Steven Ludeke, Wendy Johnson and Thomas J. Bouchard Jr., psychologists at the University of Southern Denmark, the University of Edinburgh and the University of Minnesota, whose findings are described in the title of their 2014 paper, “‘Obedience to traditional authority’: A heritable factor underlying authoritarianism, conservatism and religiousness.”

In Malka's view, the strength of these predispositions to authoritarianism, religiousness and conservatism has been crucial to the success of Republicans in winning support from white middle-class and working-class voters, many of whom hold strongly liberal views on economic policy.

Malka's analysis suggests one possible answer to the question famously posed by Thomas Frank in his book, “What’s the Matter with Kansas?”: Why do many white working class people vote for Republicans, a choice at odds with their economic interests?

These voters “have taken on ‘ideology-appropriate’ economic positions, in order to complete their culturally based political identities,” Malka wrote:

So even if economic attitudes are not genetically constrained to go with cultural attitudes, the polarized political context can certainly bring them along for the ride. And this is very important for Republican elites who want to attract cultural conservatives to their economic agenda.

Peter Hatemi, a political scientist at Penn State, also makes a case for a constrained degree of heritability in political predispositions.

He is one of the authors of “Genetic Influences on Political Ideologies,” a 2014 paper in which he and his colleagues suggest that “between 30-60 percent of the variance in social and political attitudes could be explained by genetic influences.”

To further this line of inquiry, Hatemi and his 14 co-authors analyzed “over 12,000 twins pairs, ascertained from nine different studies conducted in five democracies” and “results from one of the first genome-wide association studies” of 11,388 individuals.

They write that “the combined evidence suggests that political ideology constitutes a fundamental aspect of one's genetically informed psychological disposition:”
Almost forty years ago, evidence from large studies of adult twins and their relatives suggested that between 30-60 percent of the variance in social and political attitudes could be explained by genetic influences. However, these findings have not been widely accepted or incorporated into the dominant paradigms that explain the etiology of political ideology. This has been attributed in part to measurement and sample limitations, as well the relative absence of molecular genetic studies. Here we present results from original analyses of a combined sample of over 12,000 twins pairs, ascertained from nine different studies conducted in five democracies, sampled over the course of four decades. We provide evidence that genetic factors play a role in the formation of political ideology, regardless of how ideology is measured, the era, or the population sampled. The only exception is a question that explicitly uses the phrase “Left-Right.” We then present results from one of the first genome-wide association studies on political ideology using data from three samples: a 1990 Australian sample involving 6,894 individuals from 3,516 families; a 2008 Australian sample of 1,160 related individuals from 635 families and a 2010 Swedish sample involving 3,334 individuals from 2,607 families. No polymorphisms reached genome-wide significance in the meta-analysis. The combined evidence suggests that political ideology constitutes a fundamental aspect of one's genetically informed psychological disposition, but as Fisher proposed long ago, genetic influences on complex traits will be composed of thousands of markers of very small effects and it will require extremely large samples to have enough power in order to identify specific polymorphisms related to complex social traits.

Jaime Settle, a political scientist at the College of William and Mary, has also explored the ambiguities of heritability of psychological traits with political consequences. “While there is a consistent pattern that ideology is heritable, the direction of partisanship typically has not been found to be heritable,” she wrote in an email. However, she continued,

My expectation is that the sorting in American politics that occurred in the post-Civil Rights Era has changed that. Thus, partisanship today might show up to be heritable, but it would be a statistical artifact of the consequence of the alignment of ideology and partisanship.

More expansively, Settle wrote that
Our ideological labels in America have become identities as much as statements about our political beliefs. In the parlance of political scientists, people have much stronger symbolic ideologies than operational ideologies. The intractability of polarization is because of the alignment of many of our social identities, an argument that Lily Mason makes, and the reason “culture war” issues resonate so much is that they are much more threatening to people's layered identities.

The electorate has been divided into two separate camps based on voters’ preference for key foundational moral principles and the policies that derive from them, their social and cultural identities, and their preference for democratic or illiberal leadership. Politicians understand this intuitively, which means that even as Donald Trump is convinced that chaos, confusion and conflict will enhance his prospects for re-election, Joe Biden is working to quell the fires that Trump is lighting.

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