

Psychology helps explain political divide

John Hood

December 30, 2019

Because I spend much of my time these days encouraging constructive engagement across political difference, through such programs as Duke University's North Carolina Leadership Forum, readers sometimes ask me if I think political differences are more appearance than reality — that if we just tried hard enough, we could reach a broad public consensus on many seemingly contentious issues.

That's not what I believe at all. I think political differences are very real, very deeply ingrained, and very difficult to bridge.

Learning how to disagree without coming to blows or resorting to personal ridicule and attack is important precisely because the political divide is a semi-permanent feature of our cultural topography. We can't pretend it isn't there. We can't wish it away. And we shouldn't expect it to wither away as a result of inevitable social forces.

Why not? Because the political divide isn't primarily an artifact of statistical claims or carefully reasoned political ideologies. It's about differences in how we see the world and our place in it.

The Cato Institute's public-opinion analyst, Emily Ekins, provides a fascinating example in her 2019 "Welfare, Work, and Wealth" poll. Conducted in partnership with YouGov, the survey asked a representative sample of 1,700 Americans a wide range of questions about political, economic, and social issues.

Most relevant here is the battery of questions about what psychologists call "locus of control." If you tend to believe that the major events in your life are largely the consequence of your own choices and efforts, you are considered to have an internal locus of control. On the other hand, if you tend to think what happens to you isn't greatly determined by your choices and efforts, you have an external locus of control. "While in reality both external forces and personal choices play a role," Ekins observes, "the question is what individuals emphasize."

Their answers appear to be related to political identification. While Americans as a whole lean towards internal locus of control to a remarkable degree — much more so than Europeans and Asians tend to do — American conservatives are more likely than American progressives to express the internal-control view.

Consider this statement: "My life is determined by my own actions." While 52 percent of respondents identified as very conservative agreed with this statement, only 33 percent of very

liberal respondents agreed. Here's another one: "When I get what I want, it's usually because I worked hard for it." Support was 53 percent among the very conservative and 30 percent among the very liberal.

Perhaps even more to the point: "I feel like what happens in my life is mostly determined by powerful people." Fully 61 percent of the very conservative disagreed with this statement, while only 34 percent of the very liberal did.

I've long cited another survey finding when I teach classes on navigating political differences. At first glance, you may find this Pew Research Center question to have little bearing on politics: "Would you prefer to live in a community where 1) the houses are larger and farther apart but schools, stores, and restaurants are several miles away; or 2) the houses are smaller and closer to each other but schools, stores, and restaurants are within walking distance."

Americans as a whole are closely divided on this question, with 49 percent preferring the former and 48 percent the latter. When you adjust for political views, however, a striking pattern emerges — 75 percent of consistently conservative and 65 percent of mostly conservative respondents say they prefer the lower-density, automobile-oriented lifestyle while 77 percent of consistently liberal and 57 percent of mostly liberal respondents say they prefer higher-density, walkable communities.

These are correlations only. We can't say for certain what the casual factors are. What we can say is that our political differences extend far beyond our contrasting views on specific pieces of legislation or electoral candidates. Deeply held feelings and values are at play. They aren't easily modified. The best we can do is accommodate them.