



Research Dialogue

Red, blue and purple states of mind: Segmenting the political marketplace

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Abstract

John Jost (2017 – this issue) provides a thoughtful review of the literature in political psychology that speaks to important distinctions between conservatives and progressives. I use his essay as a point of departure to accomplish three goals: a) further elaborate on the left/right segmentation scheme, identifying other portions of the political market that are less brand loyal and therefore more persuadable; b) offer preliminary suggestions based on consumer psychology perspectives on how voter attitudes and behaviors might be nudged by political candidates and campaigns; and c) identify some areas in which the fields of political and consumer psychology might profitably benefit from cross-pollination of theories, approaches and evidence.

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Introduction

The target article that is the topic of this commentary (Jost, 2017) is remarkable in at least three respects. First, it covers an enormous amount of intellectual ground to surface important differences between people on the right or “conservatives” and people on the left or “progressives”, a term I prefer to “liberal” because liberalism has acquired a pejorative patina, in large part due to the efforts of right-of-center media and commentators. These differences are pertinent to their psychology (personality, motivations and values), underlying cognitive processes, and the neuroanatomy that might account for or reflect these processes. Second, the article examines important dependent variables that reflect consumer preferences and behavior in a fashion that is immediately accessible and appealing to scholars in consumer psychology and marketing. Third, the article acknowledges the potential that the disciplines of marketing and

consumer psychology have to influence thinking in political science and political psychology, much like the literature in those fields has influenced research in marketing and consumer psychology on political persuasion (cf. Hedgcock, Rao, & Chen, 2009; Klein & Ahluwalia, 2005). It is this last element of Jost’s essay that will serve as a point of departure for my commentary. I will take Jost up on the implicit invitation in his concluding sentence: “...it is only a matter of time until work in consumer psychology begins to shape, in reciprocal fashion, theoretical and empirical developments in political psychology” (Jost, 2017, p. xx). I will focus on marketing and consumer psychology based approaches that political candidates and campaigns may employ to realize their goals. Specifically, in the remainder of this article, I

- a) elaborate on the left/right dichotomy that underpins Jost’s view, and develop a more nuanced set of segmentation approaches that have practical applications for understanding and motivating voter behavior;
- b) draw from extant literature in marketing and consumer psychology that might be employed to “nudge” voter attitudes, preferences and behavior based on the segmentation approaches I describe; and

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- c) briefly discuss how our two disciplines of consumer psychology and political psychology might inform each other in developing an understanding of voter and consumer behavior.

Beyond the left/right segmentation scheme

The principal concept underpinning Jost's framework is a concept that is central to marketing theory, that of *segmentation*. Specifically, Jost (2017) argues that there are "...tremendous opportunities for *ideological market segmentation*" (p. yy, emphasis added), implicitly relying on the thesis that there are two groups of people who are homogenous within and heterogeneous between. In other words, most or all progressives are likely to be alike, and the segment is relatively stable; and most or all conservatives are likely to be alike, and the segment is relatively stable. This segmentation approach allows for the development and test of a series of interesting and practical predictions regarding differences in a) marketing approaches designed to influence the consumption of commercial products and services, and b) strategies and tactics that political candidates may employ to influence voters, donors and volunteers.

Jost offers an interesting description of the historical and semantic antecedents of the left/right dichotomy in the political realm. The underlying religious and pejorative elements of the labels are provocative, to say the least. For instance, the etymology of the term "left" derives from the Latin *sinistra* (sinister in English, and "gauche" in French), designed to associate leftist political views with "ungodliness" (Laponce, 1981). In contemporary America, the divide between individuals who populate the two segments covers a substantial range of issues, from products and brands consumed, to belief in the value of the media, educational institutions, and demonstrable facts. For instance, a) when National Public Radio (NPR) tweeted the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 2017, some supporters of President Trump thought NPR was tweeting anti-Trump propaganda (see https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/07/05/some-trump-supporters-thought-npr-tweeted-propaganda-it-was-the-declaration-of-independence/?utm_term=.d44bc60af496); b) a recent Pew Research Center survey shows that Republicans generally believe that colleges and Universities have a negative effect on the way things are going in the country (58% negative to 36% positive), whereas Democrats do not (72% positive to 19% negative) (<http://www.people-press.org/2017/07/10/sharp-partisan-divisions-in-views-of-national-institutions/>); and c) a 2003 study by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland found that Fox News viewers (who are predominantly conservative) were more likely than National Public Radio listeners (who are predominantly progressive) to believe that i) Saddam Hussein had collaborated with Al-Qaeda (there is no evidence that he had); ii) Saddam Hussein had been involved in the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center (there is no evidence that he had); and iii) that weapons of mass destruction had been discovered in Iraq (there is no evidence that they had). Similarly, disputes have occurred with respect to crowd sizes at the Presidential inauguration in 2017,

human agency and climate change, the success or lack thereof of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA also known as "Obamacare"), and whether or not Muslims celebrated in New Jersey following the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York City.

Based on the existing empirical evidence about the world, it is tempting for progressives to question conservatives' grasp of reality. To paraphrase Pennycook, Cheyne, Barr, Koehler, and Fugelsang (2015) and Jost (2017), the right has a relatively high "bovine manure receptivity". However, denigration is not a particularly interesting or useful approach, as far as behavioral science is concerned. It is far more valuable to understand the underlying *emotional* bases for political belief systems, and whether and how the political preferences of the segments that subscribe to these belief systems might be "nudged".

Left/right tribalism: the Capulets and the Montagues

Perhaps it is not reason and a reliance on reality and evidence that can resolve political disputes (see Laudan, 1984 for a philosophy of science view regarding resolution of theoretical conflicts in science, and Anderson (1986) for an application to consumer research). The antecedent of the dispute between left and right lies elsewhere. Various sources suggest that there is a tribal element (in marketing we might refer to this as "brand loyalty") to political orientation at the extremes and this tribal adherence to a belief system relies to a great degree on emotion. Haidt (2012) traces the tendency to form politically like-minded tribes to a moral echo-chamber that is evolutionarily adaptive, as in-group cohesiveness is enhanced when members agree with one another and disagree with out-group members, thus increasing the odds of survival, particularly in settings where group-based activity is valuable for survival. Recent popular press accounts (e.g., Hessler, 2017) provide strong evidence that such tribalism exists and is reinforced in the face of evidence that challenges the veracity of the tribe's beliefs.

The scholarly evidence from neuroscience is consistent with this thesis. For instance, in one study, Kaplan, Friedman and Iacoboni (2007) exposed registered Republicans and Democrats to pictures of the faces of Presidential candidates (George W. Bush, John Kerry and Ralph Nader). When respondents viewed the face of the Presidential candidate representing a political orientation different from their own, the findings showed enhanced activation in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC), the Anterior Cingulate Cortex (ACC) and insula. The enhanced insula activation suggests the elicitation of distaste, perhaps even disgust, at the sight of the opposing candidate's face. The ACC activation was located within the "cognitive" sub-region, and in combination with the observed activation in the DLPFC, the authors surmised that respondents were *up-regulating* rather than suppressing the negative emotions they were experiencing. Specifically, "... the DLPFC and the ACC actively induce increased feelings of anger, fear, and disgust in the insula, putamen, anterior temporal cortex, and inferior frontal gyrus, (and) may be the physiologic basis of *negative thoughts inducing negative emotions*"

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