

Conservatives and liberals do think differently

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Big differences in the ways conservatives and liberals think about solving the nation's most pressing problems couldn't be more apparent during this presidential election cycle.

But political ideas aside, people who hold conservative versus liberal perspectives appear to differ in everyday thinking processes and problem solving, according to research from Northwestern University and the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago (RIC).

When solving short (non-political) verbal [problems](#) in an experiment, [liberals](#) were more likely than conservatives to achieve solutions with a sudden insight or "Aha!" In contrast, both groups achieved roughly an equal number of solutions through gradual, analytical processing.

Different from instinctive or gut reactions, insight problem solving occurs when after working on a problem for awhile and maybe feeling stuck, a solution unexpectedly emerges into consciousness in an 'Aha!' moment. The problem is suddenly seen in a new light, often surprising the solvers who are typically unaware of how the reorganization of their thought processes occurred.

Insight solutions contrast with methodical and analytical problem solving, which involve a gradual approach toward the solution and awareness of the steps involved.

"This view is consistent with similar results from other labs across

behavioral, neuroscientific and genetic studies, which converge in showing that conservatives have more structured and persistent cognitive styles," said Carola Salvi, lead author of the study and a postdoctoral fellow in cognitive psychology at Northwestern and RIC.

"Liberals have a less structured and more flexible cognitive style, according to those studies. Our research indicates that cognitive differences in people with different political orientations also are apparent in a task that some consider to be convergent thinking: finding a single solution to a problem," Salvi said.

Given previous findings relating political orientation with [cognitive styles](#), the researchers hypothesized that liberals and conservatives would preferentially employ different processes when tackling problems that could be solved using either an analytical or insight approach.

"It's not that there's a different capacity to solve problems," stressed Mark Beeman, senior author of the study and professor and chair of psychology at Northwestern. "It's more about which processes people end up engaging in to solve the problem."

And it's not about preferences, said Jordan Grafman, co-author of the study and professor in physical medicine and rehabilitation at Northwestern's Feinberg School of Medicine and director of brain injury research at RIC.

"People may default automatically to a particular approach out of habit or predisposition, but they are not consciously choosing to solve a problem one way or the other," Grafman said.

Approximately 130 Northwestern students were randomly assigned to the study. Those whose survey responses demonstrated a particular political ideology were ultimately divided into either a liberal or

conservative group and balanced for age and ethnicity. A third group of students who scored "neutral" were excluded from the analysis.

To test their hypothesis, the researchers used a well-known task in the problem-solving literature—the Compound Remote Associate (CRA) problems. These problems can be solved through either insight or analytic processes with participants reporting how they solved each problem. Each problem consisted of the simultaneous presentation of three words, each of which could form a compound word or phrase with the solution word. For example: pine/crab/sauce - the solution word is APPLE.

Past research has demonstrated that different mental processes and distinct brain regions are involved when people report solving these problems with insight, versus when solving analytically.

"Liberals tended more than conservatives to use insight to solve verbal problems in which you have to 'think outside the box,'" Salvi said.

In life you often use both approaches, Salvi noted.

"Everyday life presents us with a variety of scenarios where we are asked to solve problems analytically, others only with a spark of insight, most of them can be solved either way," Salvi said. "In this last case, liberals are more likely to achieve the solution with an 'Aha!' moment, whereas conservatives' [problem solving](#) approach does not prefer one style or the other."

More information: Florian Hintz et al. Encouraging prediction during production facilitates subsequent comprehension: Evidence from interleaved object naming in sentence context and sentence reading, *The Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/17470218.2015.1131309](https://doi.org/10.1080/17470218.2015.1131309)

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