

Tribalism is Human Nature

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### Abstract

Humans evolved in the context of intense intergroup competition, and groups comprised of loyal members more often succeeded than those that were not. Therefore, selective pressures have consistently sculpted human minds to be "tribal," and group loyalty and concomitant cognitive biases likely exist in all groups. Modern politics is one of the most salient forms of modern coalitional conflict and elicits substantial cognitive biases. Given the common evolutionary history of liberals and conservatives, there is little reason to expect pro-tribe biases to be higher on one side of the political spectrum than the other. We call this the *evolutionarily plausible null hypothesis* and recent research has supported it. In a recent meta-analysis, liberals and conservatives showed similar levels of partisan bias, and a number of pro-tribe cognitive tendencies often ascribed to conservatives (e.g., intolerance toward dissimilar others) have been found in similar degrees in liberals. We conclude that tribal bias is a *natural* and nearly ineradicable feature of human cognition, and that no group—not even one's own—is immune.

*Keywords:* politics, bias, symmetry, tribal loyalty, intergroup conflict

## Tribalism is Human Nature

The human mind was forged by the crucible of coalitional conflict (Geary, 2005). For many thousands of years, human tribes have competed against each other. Coalitions that were more cooperative and cohesive not only survived but also appropriated land and resources from other coalitions and therefore reproduced more prolifically, thus passing their genes (and their loyalty traits) to later generations (Tooby & Cosmides, 2010). Because coalitional coordination and commitment were crucial to group success, tribes punished and ostracized defectors and rewarded loyal members with status and resources (as they continue to do today). Thus, displays of loyalty and commitment to other members of the tribe also enhanced individual-level fitness (by increasing status and resources and minimizing risks of ostracization). Over time, this would select for traits that signal and enhance coalitional commitment (Berreby, 2005) such as ingroup favoritism (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Tribalism, therefore, is *natural*.<sup>1</sup>

### Tribal Bias

Although tribal loyalties inspire many noble behaviors, they can impel humans to sacrifice sound reasoning and judgmental accuracy for group belonging and commitment (Kahan, Peters, Dawson, & Slavic, 2017). In other words, tribal loyalties can lead to *tribal biases*. For example, people selectively approach information that supports their tribe's interests and avoid information that has potential to harm their tribe (by watching particular news networks, or by forming "echo chambers" in their social environments; Stroud, 2010). And people evaluate information they are exposed to in a biased manner by being uncritically

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<sup>1</sup> By *tribe*, we simply mean a human social group sharing a common interest, and by *tribalism*, we mean tendencies to be loyal to and favorable toward one's own tribe (and less favorable toward other tribes). By *human nature* or *natural*, we mean evolved human propensities that develop in most humans.

accepting of information that supports their tribe's agenda and more skeptical of information that opposes it (Ditto et al., 2018). These kinds of cognitive biases are problematic because (1) post-enlightenment societies prize reason and rationality and no longer explicitly tolerate obvious displays of ingroup favoritism, and (2) modern governments require the coordination of multiple groups (e.g., political groups) to function. Biases decrease the likelihood of consensus as groups fail to agree even on the facts in a particular debate.

There are at least two reasons tribalism distorts beliefs. First, beliefs display and signal loyalty to group goals. Asserted opinions at least partially function as behavioral intention indicators and therefore as coalitional membership indicators (Pietraszewski, Curry, Petersen, Cosmides, Tooby, 2015). When one asserts "Abortion is immoral," one indicates willingness to coordinate with others to regulate abortion. Coalitions that generally oppose abortion (e.g., the modern GOP) react negatively toward putative members who assert skepticism about pro-life principles (Ditto & Mastrorarde, 2009) because this indicates an unwillingness to cooperate on that goal. If beliefs are held fervently, compel strong emotional displays, or are costly to hold, they might function as honest (and thus trustworthy) loyalty signals (Kurzban & Christner, 2011). Perhaps perversely, dogmatism and resilience to contrary evidence likely enhance the persuasiveness of the signal, because they show that one is strongly dedicated to the group's ideology in spite of potential consequences (e.g., being wrong about a difficult to answer question).

Second, beliefs are precursors to potential arguments that support the interests of the group, which coalitions are often formed to pursue and protect (e.g. wealthy people who want low tax rates). In modern societies, violence is verboten, so tribes prevail not by conquering other tribes, but by persuading other people—often, by making arguments. Sincere beliefs

generally lead to better and more zealous arguments than cynical hypocrisy (von Hippel & Trivers, 2011). Therefore, people are motivated to favor and *believe* information that promotes their group's interests and to resist information that opposes their group's interests because it makes them more persuasive proponents of their group's cause (Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, & Braman, 2011).

### **Political Bias**

These two reasons also likely explain why *politics appears to be one of the most fertile grounds for bias* (Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018). Political contests are highly consequential because they determine how society will allocate coveted resources such as wealth, power, and prestige. Winners gain control of cultural narratives and the mechanisms of government and can use them to benefit their coalition, often at the expense of losers. Given these high stakes, motivations to signal group loyalty and to defend the positions of the group are likely particularly powerful in politics.

Within the political domain, *individuals appear most biased about those issues most important to the group, which often include moral commitments* (Ditto, Pizarro, & Tannenbaum, 2009). As noted above, moral commitments signal that one is willing to conform to the rules of the coalition. Therefore, groups are particularly prone to giving status to those who conform to and vocalize support for moral norms and to deducting status from those who rebel and vocalize dissent against those norms (Descioli & Kurzban, 2013). Thus, we can expect tribal biases to be especially large for important moral commitments (Tetlock, 2002). For example, if opposing abortion is a central goal for the political right, conservatives will be particularly biased about facts surrounding abortion. If enhancing the status of women in society is a central moral goal of

the political left, liberals might be particularly biased about facts surrounding the gender wage gap.

However, humans also care about truth and accuracy (for obvious evolutionary reasons), and so *biases are most likely to emerge for issues where the truth is ambiguous* (Munro, Weih, & Tsai, 2010). Many if not most political (and moral) disagreements are about ambiguous issues. Experts disagree about when a fetus or child can experience conscious pain and about the many contributors to the gender wage gap (and even the size of it). Even if experts could agree on the facts, political positions often reflect opinions about what ought to be the case (often subjective beliefs) based on beliefs about what is the case (ideally objective facts). For example, if the within-profession wage gap is largely due to women's choices to work fewer hours, should they be paid the same as men? Policy choices often involve painful and complicated tradeoffs (e.g., interfering with free market autonomy to reduce income inequality, investing in new and more costly energy technology to minimize climate change).

When the truth is ambiguous, tribal biases are more powerful because argument is more important than when the truth is clear. Groups do not debate whether trees exist because the answer is virtually undeniable. They do, however, debate whether fetuses deserve various legal protections or whether women are paid less than men for equal work, because there are intelligent arguments on both sides of these issues and there is no one obvious correct answer. There is an unfortunate tribal logic here. One might imagine that ambiguity would compel humility and confessions of uncertainty, but when ambiguity occurs in the context of coalitional conflict, it may actually increase epistemic arrogance and bias. This is perfectly sensible, however, if we remember that humans are coalitional animals, not dispassionate reasoners. They

were not “designed” to be humble; rather, they were “designed” to conform and to protect the status of their tribe (Kahan et al., 2017).

Our guiding assumption, then, is that tribal bias is a nearly ineradicable element of human nature and that it causes predictable cognitive biases (those that benefit the self and the group). Specifically, people will be biased in favor of their tribe, particularly for issues important to the tribe (often moral issues) and particularly when ambiguity is high and therefore the importance of argument and persuasion is high. Given that modern liberals and conservatives share evolutionary histories that favor loyalty signals and tribal biases, it is *a priori* likely that the *psychological propensities for bias* would be similar on the political left and right. We call this the *evolutionarily plausible null hypothesis* and recent research has supported it.

### **Everyone’s a Little Bit Biased...**

Social sciences for a long time focused especially on the biases of conservatives, with some scholars arguing that conservatives are more biased than liberals (e.g., Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003).<sup>2</sup> But in recent years, researchers have pushed back against this narrative, contending that the overwhelming preponderance of liberals in the social sciences may have skewed research about political ideologies and the people who hold them. Liberals likely see their own biases as *truths* (Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002) and see conservative beliefs as peculiar and *wrong*; therefore, they seek to explain the “conservative mind” and its perplexing biases (Duarte et al., 2015; Eitan et al., 2019).

This insight inspired Ditto and colleagues (2018) to conduct a meta-analysis to test these competing hypotheses. Across 51 experiments that tested the tendency for liberals and

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<sup>2</sup> Likely all political tribes display group loyalty biases, but the majority of this work has been conducted in the U.S., so we focus on U.S. politics here. Future work should examine these patterns in other political systems.

conservatives to evaluate identical information more favorably when it supports their own political commitments than when it opposes them (for example, a death penalty supporter evaluating scientific methods as more valid when the results of those methods support rather than oppose the deterrent efficacy of the death penalty), there was strong support for the symmetry hypothesis: liberals and conservatives were both biased, and to virtually equal degrees. Because the included studies were performed under tightly controlled laboratory conditions, these results cannot tell us how liberal and conservative biases might vary over time and context, but they do suggest that liberals and conservatives share the same basic psychology that leads to bias—and to similar degrees. This finding is consistent with the *evolutionarily plausible null hypothesis*: tribal bias is *natural*, and thus all political tribes should be similarly susceptible to it.

### **...Even liberals**

Whereas earlier scholars often emphasized that conservatives were higher in proclivities that ought to predict stronger biases (than liberals) such as authoritarianism and dissonance avoidance, a new wave of research in social psychology suggests that many of these proclivities exist in equal levels in conservatives *and liberals*. As can be seen in Table 1, these include authoritarianism, discrimination, dissonance avoidance, prejudice, selective exposure, and resistance to science. For example, although researchers previously thought conservatives were more intolerant of dissimilar others, such results may have been due to confounds between the target groups investigated by liberal researchers (e.g., African Americans) and the political ideology of the target groups (e.g., African Americans tend to be politically liberal). More recent work suggests that people exhibit higher intolerance toward groups perceived as more dissimilar to their own group, and to similar degrees for liberals and conservatives (Brandt, Reyna, Chambers, Crawford, & Wetherell, 2014).



Table 1. Recent work demonstrating more symmetry between liberals and conservatives than previously believed.

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Claim</b>	<b>Reference</b>
Authoritarianism	Left-wing authoritarianism exists, and predicts similar outcomes as right-wing authoritarianism	Conway, Houck, Gornick, & Repke, 2018
Discrimination	Liberals and conservatives similarly endorse more discrimination against groups that violate their values than groups that do not	Wetherell, Brandt, & Reyna, 2013
Dissonance avoidance	Liberals and conservatives similarly avoid writing counter-attitudinal essays	Collins, Crawford, & Brandt, 2017
Prejudice	Liberals and conservatives are similarly intolerant toward ideologically dissimilar and threatening groups	Brandt et al., 2014
Resistance to science	Liberals and conservatives have similar negative reactions to dissonant science communication	Nisbett, Cooper, & Garrett, 2015
	Liberals and conservatives similarly deny scientific interpretations of results that conflict with their attitudes	Washburn & Skitka, 2018
Selective exposure	Liberals and conservatives are similarly averse to learning the views of ideological opponents	Frimer, Skitka, & Motyl, 2017
	Extreme conservatives demonstrate the most selective exposure, but moderate conservatives demonstrate the least	Rodriguez, Moskowitz, Salem, & Ditto, 2017

This does not mean that conservatives and liberals are similar in all ways or that one group will never be vastly more biased or incorrect than the other—they will (Federico & Malka, 2018; Ditto et al., 2019). Groups, as we have argued, are most biased about issues that are morally important and ambiguous. The general psychological propensities for bias appear similar on the political left and right, but there are predictable domain-specific asymmetries in bias.

To consider a few examples, conservatives appear more motivated to reject anthropogenic climate change than liberals, likely because it seems to support government

regulation and more centralization and hurts the fossil fuel industry, an important part of the Republican base in the United States (Lewandowsky & Oberauer, 2016). Conservatives may also exaggerate the amount of choice people exercise over their sexuality because homosexuality is considered immoral by a substantial proportion of the religious believers in the Republican coalition (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2008), and contending that it is a free decision rather than an innate inclination is more compelling for moral condemnation (Clark, Baumeister, & Ditto, 2017). On the other hand, a growing body of work suggests that liberals in general are more biased than conservatives about traditionally conceived disadvantaged groups (e.g. women, Blacks; see Table 2), likely because an important moral value of the political left is opposition to inequality (Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008).

Table 2. Recent work documenting a domain-specific bias asymmetry about disadvantaged groups such that liberals are more biased than conservatives

<b>Finding</b>	<b>Reference</b>
All political orientations demonstrate a pro-black bias, but higher liberalism was associated with a larger pro-black bias	Axt, Ebersole, & Nosek, 2016
Liberals were more willing to make a utilitarian sacrifice of a White man's life than of a Black man's life, whereas race had no influence on conservatives' judgments	Uhlmann, Pizarro, Tannenbaum, & Ditto, 2009
Whereas liberals are more inclined to amplify the successes of disadvantaged groups (i.e., Blacks, women) than advantaged groups (i.e., Whites, men), conservatives treat the successes of both groups more similarly	Kteily, Rocklage, McClanahan, & Ho, 2019
White liberals present less self-competence to Black than White interaction partners, whereas White conservatives treat the groups more similarly	Dupree & Fiske, 2019
Liberals are biased against the notion that there could be biological differences between demographic groups when those differences appear to favor advantaged groups, whereas conservatives display less of a bias	Winegard, Clark, Hasty, & Baumeister, 2018
A study from a political bias meta-analysis with the closest relevance to disadvantaged groups (affirmative action and same-sex marriage) found one of the largest effect sizes for liberal bias (Crawford, Jussim, Cain, & Cohen, 2013)	Ditto et al. (2018)

Note that if one group currently has more or stronger concerns (because of historical and time variant factors such as rapidly changing demographics or having recently lost a presidential election), or if one group has more moral convictions in general, one might predict *more bias* in that group (during that time period, or in general). However, our best current estimate is that domain-specific asymmetries between liberals and conservatives appear to produce general symmetries in pro-tribe biases among liberals and conservatives when averaged across multiple domains (and over at least a brief period of time). Until newer or better information contradicts these recent findings, it seems reasonable to posit that liberals and conservatives are roughly symmetrical in their pro-tribe cognitive tendencies.

### **Conclusion**

Humans are tribal creatures. They were not designed to reason dispassionately about the world; rather, they were designed to reason in ways that promote the interests of their coalition (and hence, themselves). It would therefore be surprising if a particular group of individuals did not display such tendencies, and recent work suggests, at least in the U.S. political sphere, that both liberals and conservatives are substantially biased—and to similar degrees. Historically, and perhaps even in modern society, these tribal biases are quite useful for group cohesion but perhaps also for other moral purposes (e.g., liberal bias in favor of disadvantaged groups might help increase equality). Also, it is worth noting that a bias toward viewing one's own tribe in a favorable light is not necessarily irrational. If one's goal is to be admired among one's own tribe, fervidly supporting their agenda and promoting their goals, even if that means having or promoting erroneous beliefs, is often a reasonable strategy (Kahan et al., 2017). The incentives for holding an accurate opinion about global climate change, for example, may not be worth the

social rejection and loss of status that could accompany challenging the views of one's political ingroup.

However, these biases decrease the likelihood of consensus across political divides. Thus, developing effective strategies for disincentivizing political tribalism and promoting the much less natural but more salutary tendencies toward civil political discourse and reasonable compromise are crucial priorities for future research. A useful theoretical starting point is that tribalism and concomitant biases are part of human nature, and that no group, not even one's own, is immune.

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### Recommended Readings

1. Ditto et al., 2018 (see References): A meta-analysis of partisan bias studies (which found liberals and conservatives showed an equivalent tendency to evaluate politically congenial information more favorably than politically uncongenial information), including a discussion of how to reconcile conflicting literature on the question of symmetry in partisan bias.
2. Eitan et al., 2019 (see References): An article demonstrating the extent to which political social psychology research can be affected by liberal viewpoints and values.
3. Van Bavel and Pereira, 2018 (see References): A comprehensive and topical overview on ways in which partisan identity can affect individuals' cognition, judgments, and decision-making.
4. Kahan, Peters, Dawson, and Slavic, 2017 (see References): An article for understanding how motivated reasoning in politics serves to maintain individuals' standing in important ingroups (e.g., based on political identity).
5. Federico and Malka, 2018 (see References): Example of a review article that challenges the notion that conservative ideology is invariably linked with certain psychological dispositions and argues instead that the association is often dependent on various factors, such as issue, context, and group loyalty.