

A study reported last week in the journal *Nature Neuroscience* has determined that – drum roll, please – liberals and conservatives don't think alike.

Um... duh.



But no, we're talking literally. They literally don't think alike. According to the *LA Times*, scientists at New York University and UCLA have proven that political orientation is related to differences in how the brain processes information. More specifically, "Liberals tolerate ambiguity and conflict better than conservatives because of how their brains work."

Of course, this is how the *LA Times* chose to articulate the findings of the study. An alternate translation might read as follows: "Conservatives are better at distinguishing right from wrong... because of how their brains work."

I don't think you'll find that spin in the mainstream media, nor do I think you should. I'm just making the point – or trying to, anyway – that a study like this one is all about spin... and about who's doing the spinning.

Here's how the study worked, according to the *LA Times*:

□□□ *Participants were college students whose politics ranged from "very liberal" to "very conservative." They were instructed to tap a keyboard when an M appeared on a computer monitor and to refrain from tapping when they saw a W.*

□□□ *M appeared four times more frequently than W, conditioning participants to press a key in knee-jerk fashion whenever they saw a letter.*

□□□ *Each participant was wired to an electroencephalograph that recorded activity in the anterior cingulate cortex, the part of the brain that detects conflicts between a habitual tendency (pressing a key) and a more appropriate response (not pressing the key). Liberals had more brain activity and made fewer mistakes than conservatives when they saw a W, researchers said. Liberals and conservatives were equally accurate in recognizing M.*

*Researchers got the same results when they repeated the experiment in reverse, asking another set of participants to tap when a W appeared.*

UCLA neurologist Dr. Marco Iacoboni, who was not connected to the study, told the *LA Times*

the results show that "there are two cognitive styles – a liberal style and a conservative style." The article also said the study's findings support previous psychological studies showing that "conservatives tend to be more structured and persistent in their judgments, whereas liberals are more open to new experiences."

Fair enough. Or is it? I've got a few questions.

For instance: How old were the college students who participated in this study? Were they freshmen? Seniors? How much higher education did they have? How much life experience? What kind of homes did they grow up in? Were their parents involved in politics?

More important, did these students have a clear understanding of the terms "conservative" and "liberal"? I didn't at their age. Not really. I entered college believing myself a conservative Republican – not because I'd thought about it very hard, but because that's what my parents were. Six years later, I emerged from graduate school calling myself a liberal Democrat – again, not because I'd thought about it very hard, but because that's what my professors were... and

what my parents *weren't*.

Doesn't almost everybody leave college a liberal? Especially those who attend liberal arts colleges? College was where my world opened up – where I learned, for the first time, that there were people out there who'd grown up very differently from me, who'd had different experiences from mine, who even had different beliefs. It was also where my mind opened up – where all the precepts of my childhood – the very bedrock of my young life – were challenged for the first time. Intensive study in the humanities jerked my cultural rug out from under me in big way! Suddenly, down was up and up was down; the sacred was profane and the profane, sacred. Nothing was off limits – no question too shocking to ask, no subject sacrosanct. It was exciting. Invigorating. Life-changing. This is what a liberal arts education should be – an initiation into discovery and critical thinking, an introduction to a brave new world.

But in my brave new worldliness, in my enthusiasm to shed my old skin and embrace all things “other,” I was all too eager to turn my back on my foundation – a foundation I've only recently begun to credit with almost every good thing that ever happened to me. Including my college education. I'm talking, in part, about the foundation of a strong, loving family – people who valued responsibility, hard work, marital fidelity, education, civic duty, spiritual development, and, most of all, each other. In a wider sense, I'm talking about the blessed foundation we all share as Americans and heirs of Western civilization. Not all that long ago, I took so much of that for granted, valuing the exotic over the familiar just because it was exotic, secretly sneering at old friends who'd taken a more conventional path, periodically telling my parents how little they knew. What an arrogant brat I was!

It's only been in my calmer, more circumspect adulthood – after having married, run a business, had a child – that I've begun to truly “tolerate ambiguity.” For me, tolerating ambiguity means embracing aspects of the “brave new world” without rejecting the tried-and-true. It means seeing good – and bad – in both major political parties without becoming paralyzed when it comes time to vote. Tolerating ambiguity means appreciating all the good that liberalism has done for our country over the past decades, while recognizing that it hasn't been all good... that we've lost sight of some important things along the way.

Today, the legacy of modern liberalism is alive and flourishing (okay, everywhere but South Carolina). To call yourself a “conservative” on almost any college campus (outside of South Carolina) is to be branded a radical. For better and worse, the “counter culture” has become the culture. Now, I'll admit America needed some remodeling, but we didn't need to tear the whole house down. It had good bones. It has a great foundation. I believe in that foundation – in traditional Western values – and I believe it's in danger. I wish to “conserve” it. This is why, despite plenty of reservations – and if you don't have reservations when it comes to politics, you've probably stopped thinking (or feeling) – I now find myself leaning gently, and ever so humbly, to the Right. They worry about the same stuff I do over there. And they need me more.

But where does that put me in terms of the scientific study? I can tolerate ambiguity – very well, thank you – but I can also make value judgments. I can appreciate both sides of an argument, but I can also determine which side seems more right to me. (And it's not always the Right side, by the way.) I believe I could handle the “M vs. W” challenge with aplomb; but all I know for sure is that, when I'm spelling my name, one letter works and the other doesn't... unless you turn it upside down, of course...

Whoa! Too much ambiguity! I'm getting a headache...

I admit there are plenty of conservatives who lack nuanced thought and fear new experiences. I know some of them. But there are plenty of liberals who are just as firmly (and

sometimes blindly) wed to their positions as those unthinking conservatives are to theirs. Jonah Goldberg of National Review Online, who found the brain study as silly as I do, addressed that notion in a recent column, writing:

“Liberals from Jonathan Chait to Nancy Pelosi have a white-knuckled grip on the welfare state created by FDR and LBJ – in other words they’re conservative about the liberal status quo. Meanwhile, so-called paleoconservatives are quite radical in their agendas... And what about the millions of people... who have switched sides?...What are we to make of the 9/11 converts to conservatism? Did these people metaphorically rip out their brain wiring like an angry man pulling off the sensors from his heart monitor?” Giggle.

Goldberg admits there is probably some merit to the study, that there may be such a thing as a “small c” conservative personality – someone who is more averse to change than others, who seeks, above all, to “conserve” the status quo. But he balks at the implication that such personality traits necessarily line up with a particular political agenda.

As for me, I just wish these scientists hadn’t limited their study to college students. Why not use subjects with a bit more life experience? A few battle scars? A little more self-knowledge and seasoned wisdom behind their politics? As it stands, any meaning we might glean from this so-called “scientific” study is purely academic. Not to mention, utterly... ambiguous.

Just one more thing for my sluggish, inflexible little brain to tolerate. Sigh.