

Consensus at the Heart of Division: Comment on Norton & Ariely

Elizabeth W. Dunn

University of British Columbia

Emma E. Buchtel

Hong Kong Institute of Education

Lara B. Aknin

University of British Columbia

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Abstract

We argue that seemingly deep-seated partisan divisions may be built on a foundation of surprising consensus, not only in terms of the wealth distributions that people prefer (Norton & Ariely, 2011; this issue), but also in the gut-level moral reactions and beliefs about money and happiness that may underlie those preferences.

Occasionally, a paper appears that challenges our assumptions about the way the world works; in the context of modern America, which often appears starkly color-coded into red and blue, Norton and Ariely (2011, this issue) pose just such a challenge. They report the remarkable finding that when it comes to nationwide distributions of wealth, “Americans prefer Sweden.” But even more surprising is their finding that this preference for more equal distributions of wealth holds up for Democrats and Republicans, rich and poor.

How is broad consensus on such a central issue possible in an age of division, a time of Tea Party Patriots and Obama maniacs? Our own current research illuminates how seemingly deep-seated partisan divisions may be built on a foundation of surprising consensus. We presented participants with harmless, but disgusting scenarios, asking them to consider individuals such as Henry, who “likes the taste of his own dried blood” and privately “licks at his old scabs” (Buchtel & Dunn, 2010). When participants were given time to think through these scenarios, Conservatives rated them as more immoral than did Liberals, consistent with past research showing that Conservatives place more weight on their feelings of disgust than do Liberals in making moral judgments (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). But, when participants were forced to make the same judgments quickly while under cognitive load, consensus emerged: Liberals’ gut reactions to these scenarios converged with those of Conservatives. Thus, even in moral domains that are well-known to produce disagreements along partisan lines, the gut reactions of liberals and conservatives may be more similar than we realize.

In making judgments about ideal wealth distributions, people may draw on their moral instincts about right and wrong, as well as their intuitions about the relationship between wealth and happiness. When we asked a nationally representative sample of Americans to predict how

happy they would be given various levels of income, they correctly envisioned the declining marginal utility of wealth, recognizing that \$1,000,000/year would provide almost no more happiness than \$500,000/year (Aknin, Norton, & Dunn, 2009). By contrast, at the lower end of the income spectrum, people expected even relatively small differences in income to yield substantial differences in happiness (predicting, for example, that someone earning \$35,000 year would be much happier than someone earning \$10,000/year). In fact, while participants were fairly accurate in estimating the happiness of people with high levels of income, they vastly underestimated the happiness of low income earners. Although wealthier participants tended to imagine a particularly tight relationship between income and happiness, the perception that poverty is associated with misery was consensually held across the income spectrum. This suggests that Americans' shared preference for relatively equal wealth distributions may stem from their consensual belief in the declining marginal utility of wealth.

According to our perspective, then, there is a remarkable degree of consensus not only in Americans' apparent preferences for Swedish wealth distributions, but also in the gut-level moral reactions and the beliefs about money and happiness that may underlie those preferences. While these forms of consensus emerge when people are asked to step behind the veil of ignorance (Norton & Ariely, 2011, this issue), provide their gut-level response (Buchtel & Dunn, 2010), or focus on their expected emotions (Aknin, Norton, & Dunn, 2009), it is hard to imagine our public discourse without deep discord. Identifying practical ways to peel back these layers of disagreement and unearth the consensus at the heart of these divisions represents a pressing goal for future research.

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