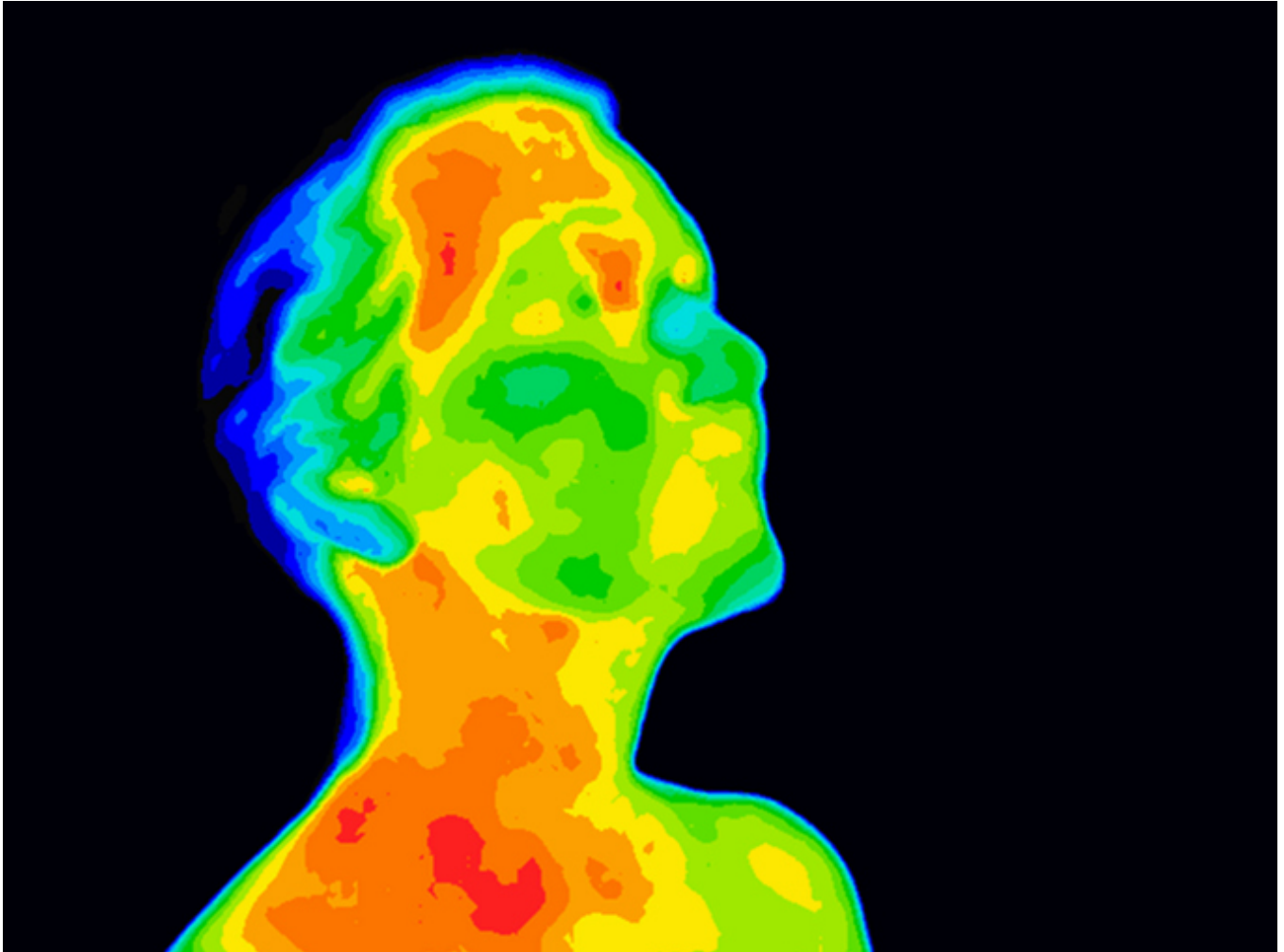


# Liberals and Conservatives May Feel Moral Violations Differently

January 22, 2020



Whether it's feeling certainty in your gut or a tingle of fear down your spine, we often describe feelings not just in emotional terms, but as physical sensations as well. But while all humans have this in common, research in *Psychological Science* suggests that individuals on the conservative and liberal ends of the political spectrum [may 'feel' their feelings somewhat differently](#) when their moral expectations are violated.

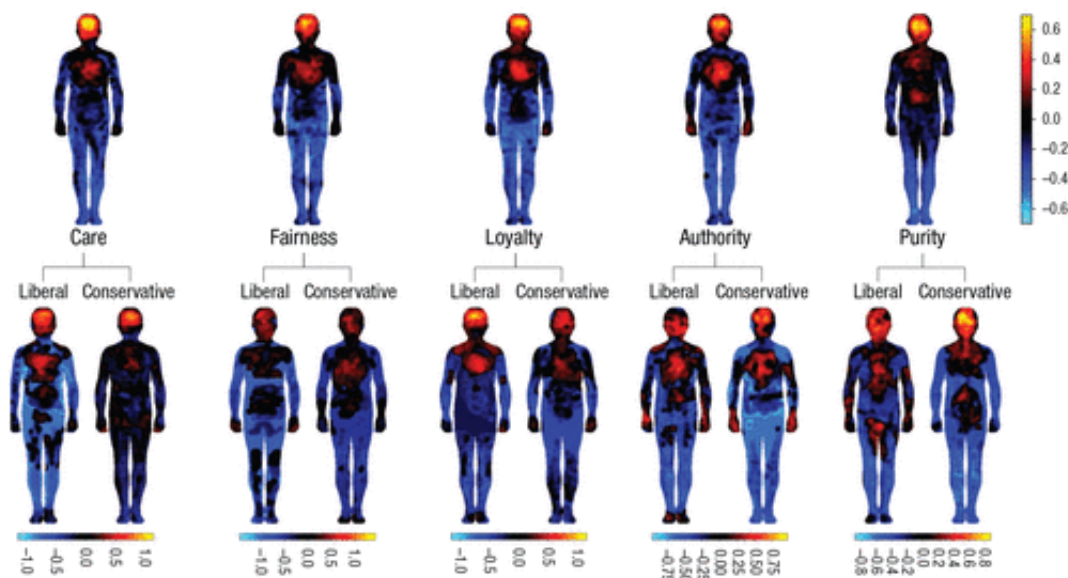
"Liberals and conservatives rely on different moral foundations and react differently to different moral violations," Mohammed Atari and colleagues Aida Mostafazadeh Davani and Morteza Dehghani (University of Southern California) write. "Therefore, it is possible that, as we found, liberals and conservatives feel moral violations in different body regions, interpret them as distinct complex feelings, and subsequently make different moral and political judgments."

In their initial study, the researchers presented 596 online participants with five randomly selected

vignettes detailing a moral violation. In line with moral foundation theory (MFT), these scenarios focused on the domains of care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity.

In one vignette, for example, participants read, “You see a woman clearly avoiding sitting next to an obese woman on the bus.” They were asked to rate both how morally wrong they felt this action to be, as well as the strength of their emotional response to the behavior, on a scale of one to five. The participants were then presented with two silhouette images on which they colored the areas where they felt an increase or decrease in bodily activity in response to the scenario. Finally, participants self-reported their political orientation and completed a questionnaire assessing the strength of their moral concerns in the MFT domains.

Through overlaying these body maps, the researchers found that each moral concern resulted in a “slightly distinct” increase or decrease in average activity. Most notably, violations of care, fairness, loyalty, and authority were associated with activation in the chest area, while purity violations resulted in higher activation in the abdomen.



(Atari, 2020)

Furthermore, the body-sensation maps could be used to accurately determine the political orientation of highly conservative and liberal participants at a rate higher than chance, but not for individuals who fell somewhere in between.

“For all moral concerns, we could classify political ideology on the basis of body-sensation maps, indicating that liberals and conservatives feel moral violations, especially perceptions of feelings of loyalty and purity, in different parts of their body,” Atari and colleagues write.

Individuals who were found to be high or low in moral concern also reported feelings associated with moral violations in different parts of the body.

Atari and colleagues further examined the relationship between body sensation, moral concern, and political orientation in a follow-up study of 300 online participants. This time, in addition to the measures used in the first study, participants also completed a survey of their social and economic conservatism,

allowing for a multi-issue measure of political orientation, including topics such as abortion, national security, religion, and fiscal responsibility.

Similar to the previous study, the researchers found they were able to accurately classify participants' political ideologies, as well as whether they were high or low in moral concern, based on their body-sensation maps.

“Moral judgments are caused by emotional responses to a person, an action, or a violation,” Atari and colleagues write. “Together, these results suggest that moral violations may evoke a ‘moral upset’ that cannot be differentiated across moral foundations but can differ between groups.

Evolutionarily, emotions prepare individuals to adaptively respond to changes in social and physical circumstances, the researchers explain. Individuals with greater interoceptive sensitivity — that is, greater sensitivity to their own physiological activities such as changes in heartbeat — have been found to feel emotions more intensely, further supporting the link between body-sensation and conscious emotional experience.

Future studies might build on these findings by directly measuring changes in physiological state in response to moral violations, as well as using visual stimuli that may evoke a stronger response and exploring how these findings may or may not generalize to non-Western cultures, the researchers note.

## **Reference**

Atari, M., Mostafazadeh Davani, A., & Dehghani, M. (2020). Body maps of moral concerns. *Psychological Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797619895284>