

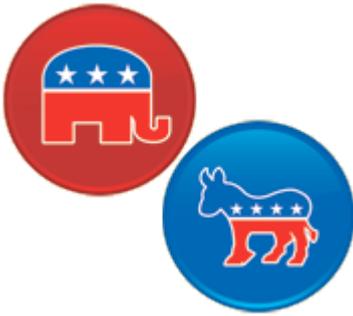
“Liberal gene” identified

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Courtesy of University of California - San Diego
and World Science staff

Researchers have for the first time identified a gene that they say can influence political outlook.

Past studies had found that political views have a genetic component, but hadn't pointed out actual genes involved. The new research from the University of California and Harvard University indicates that a variant of a gene called DRD4 makes people more likely to be liberal, if they also had many friends as teenagers.



DRD4 codes for the production of molecular structures in the brain that facilitates transmission of the chemical dopamine among brain cells. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter, or a brain signaling chemical.

Appearing in the current edition of *The Journal of Politics*, the research focused on 2,000 subjects from The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a federally funded U.S. project that surveyed health in relation to a range of behaviors. By matching genetic information with maps of the subjects' social networks, the researchers found that people with a specific variant of DRD4 were more likely to be liberal as adults, but only if they had an active social life in adolescence.

Dopamine is a messenger chemical affecting processes that control movement, emotional response, and ability to experience pleasure and pain. DRD4 codes for the production of a receptor, or molecular gateway, that regulates dopamine transmission.

Previous research has identified a connection between a variant of DRD4 and novelty-seeking behavior. This behavior has previously been associated with personality traits related to political liberalism, the investigators noted.

Lead researcher James H. Fowler of University of California, San Diego and colleagues hypothesized that people with the novelty-seeking gene variant would be more interested in learning about their friends' points of view. Thus, they might be exposed to a wider variety of social norms and lifestyles, which could foster a liberal viewpoint.

It's "the crucial interaction of two factors – the genetic predisposition and the environmental condition of having many friends in adolescence – that is associated with being more liberal," the investigators wrote, adding that this held true regardless of ethnicity, culture, sex or age.

Fowler said he hopes "more scholars will begin to explore the potential interaction of biology and environment." He added that he would like to see scientists try to replicate the findings "in different populations and age groups."