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Good teen pals = good politics

A lifelong extension of high school

December 31, 2010 | By Clarence Page

Of all the scientific studies that came out this past year, the most intriguing to me confirms an old theory: Adult [politics](#) are really an extension of which clique you joined in high school.

That conclusion rises out of a [University of California at San Diego](#) and Harvard University study released in October that found political ideology may be heavily influenced by genetics and adolescent social life.

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In a study of 2,000 teens, researchers found that the dopamine receptor gene DRD4, which they called the "liberal gene," may predispose people to left-progressive political views.

As humorist Dave Barry would say, I am not making this up.

Without going too deeply into the scientific weeds here, dopamine is very important to our feelings of pleasure or depression, among other emotions. Researchers found that people with a specific variant of the DRD4 gene were more likely to be liberal as adults, but — here's the catch — only if they had an active social life in high [school](#).

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You see, this clever little DRD4 gene variant has previously been associated with novelty-seeking behavior, which also has been linked to personality traits related to political liberalism. That's because novelty-seeking people are likely to be more interested in learning about their friends' points of view, says researcher James Fowler of UCSD, which could lead to a larger number of friends and a wider variety of accepted social norms and lifestyles — which might make them more liberal than folks who stick more often to people just like themselves.

In other words, it appears that adulthood really is an extension of which clique you joined — or wanted to join — in high school, as many of us who have been to high school reunions have long theorized.

Suddenly, today's bizarre political scene makes a new amount of familiar sense.

Sarah Palin looks like the homecoming queen who gets votes no matter how many goofy observations she makes on her Facebook page.

Barack Obama looks like the class brain who everybody might hate were he not also a star on the basketball team.

John Boehner, incoming speaker of the House, is the captain of the football team who everybody hopes won't "party too hard" before the next big game.

Other than that, I think this gene study puts a new spin on how social critic Ambrose Bierce defined political personalities a century ago: The conservative, he said, is "enamored of existing evils, as distinguished from the liberal, who wishes to replace them with others."

The study would indicate that the liberal also is eager to find new friends to get him or her into trouble, while the conservative might be more content with old ones.

These findings also come on the heels of a British study that associates conservative voting with the brain's "primitive" region, an assessment that is sending my conservative friends' tongues to wagging angrily about "liberal scientist" conspiracies.

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In fairness, I think my conservative friends might have a point, although that might just be my primitive brain talking.

The brain scientists at University College London scanned the brains of 90 college students, plus two members of parliament, one liberal and one conservative, who were willing to [risk](#) possible mockery in future attack ads for "having their heads examined."

As reported by the The Telegraph, a London newspaper, the scientists found that people with conservative views have larger amygdalas. That's the almond-shaped nugget in the center of the brain that the scientists associated with "anxiety and emotions." The conservatives also tended to have a smaller anterior cingulate, an area of the brain's more sophisticated frontal region that the scientists associated with "courage and optimism."

Maybe. But military personnel, for example, are a pretty conservative bunch politically, yet their work is hardly cut out for the timid. And President Ronald Reagan, to name another example, was famous for his sunny "Morning in America" optimism, although he did start out as a Democrat.

Even so, the British study reminds us that, as much as politicians and activists might wish to rely on facts and reason as they try to win votes and influence people, voters base their votes just as often on gut feelings that they formed, if not in the womb, at least as far back as high school.

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