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## Researchers see genes influencing votes

By Colby Sledge, The Tennessean

When you step into the voting booth in November, you will have only a partial say in your decision.

And it's your parents' fault.

A class at Vanderbilt University is studying the role genetics plays in political decisions, from an electorate's willingness to vote to the ballot it casts.

The research, conducted across the country, is shedding light on how our candidate of choice might not be entirely our own choosing.

"It's clearly cutting edge, but we're cutting at the very edge," said professor John Geer, who teaches the Genetics and Politics class with Dr. David Bader, a Vanderbilt biology professor.

The professors play off each other, tying together studies of voter turnout with discussions on social Darwinism.

What's inescapable, though, is their argument that genetics have some role in how we think about politics.

"It's not just socialization, it's not just nurture," Bader said. "There really are differences in people.

"I think it's silly to say genes don't play a difference."

Three years ago, a Rice University study examined the political similarities between identical twins versus fraternal twins. Identical twins, who have the same genetic blueprint, tend to share more political views than fraternal twins, the study found.

Since then, scientists — both political and biological — have fought quietly over the origin of our political views: whether they're entirely a product of the people around us, or whether we've already chosen our candidates without even realizing it.

The verdict, like those pesky swing voters, lies somewhere in the middle.

"Your genotype doesn't define you," Bader said. "It may put you on a generalized path, but is there a single gene of whether you're a conservative or liberal? I would sincerely doubt that."

But liberals and conservatives do have differences that may not be dictated by choice, according a study by New York University psychology professor David Amodio.

Amodio was the lead author of a September study that analyzed how self-proclaimed liberals and conservatives use a portion of the brain that activates when a person is confronted with information or ideas contrary to his established beliefs.

Liberals' use of that portion of the brain was higher than that of conservatives in the study, suggesting that liberals are more responsive to different ideas, the report said.

"More liberal people tend to be able to deal with pros and cons of decisions, and as they get more conservative, people like to focus on one side of the story," Amodio said.

Of course, conservatives could argue they're more steadfast in their beliefs and less likely to be persuaded by argument. What's politics without spin, right?

And so Bader and Geer's class has raised questions about what should be done with the "flood" of genetic data the professors predict will be available in the next 10 to 20 years.

Future campaigns could use such studies to support their arguments, and might even rely on genetic data to convince voters they're predisposed to support a certain party.

"As we learn more and more, it's more important that (your genetics) be a private thing," said Justin Cahill, a senior political science major. "I want to keep that to myself."

But as research moves forward, genetic information will likely become more available, Geer and Bader say. Genetic analyses that now cost about \$1,000 could be available in shopping malls in 10 years.

For now, though, the professors say they'll stick to examining the relationship between the science and the ballot box.

"The question of what to do with the information is one for society," Bader said. "The question of how we get the information is one for science."

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