Back in my misspent youth, I helped manage a political campaign. My candidate was, like myself, an energetic liberal Democrat, and we ran a summer-long door-to-door campaign throughout the sprawling district. I accompanied the candidate on his daily outings, recording data about each visit on 3 x 5 cards that had been prepared in advance. They included the party registration of the voters, as gathered from Board of Elections printouts.

After a number of weeks of this ceaseless contact with our would-be constituents, both of us noticed something disturbing. There was a consistent disparity between what we expected and what we found in the people we met. Self-labeled liberals would, at most, dutifully proclaim their support for our candidacy, but they were often curt and ungenerous with their time and money. Conservatives, who looked upon our ideas with suspicion, nevertheless were quite willing to talk with us about them, not to mention offering us glasses of water, inviting us onto their porches and into their homes, and otherwise treating us with courtesy and respect.

The candidate himself mused to me one day, as we sat on a curb together, "If I'm ever hit by a car, I sure as hell hope that the next guy to come along will be a conservative." I asked him why. "Simple. A liberal will blame the unsafe conditions of the highways, blame budget cuts and keep driving. A conservative will get out of his car and help."

Empirical Research

That was quite a concession for him to make, and at the time I thought it unwarranted. But I remembered it years later when I was serving as a vestryman for my Episcopal church and became privy to information about the stewardship commitments of my fellow parishioners. I knew all these people intimately, and yet I was stunned by the pattern that I saw: The most vocal, liberal and politically oriented members of the parish, even if they were in positions of leadership, gave almost nothing, while the most hidebound conservatives, even if they were unhappy with what was going on, gave much.

These two anecdotes convey, in a nutshell, the chief insight of "Who Really Cares." The book's thesis is offered not as a sermon or platitude -- telling people what they ought to be doing -- but as a work of skillful and intensive empirical research, revealing what people are doing already. Our most pervasive cultural assumptions about the generosity of liberals and the stinginess of...
conservatives turn out to be almost completely wrong.

You have heard it said a thousand times before: The social sciences even at their best do nothing but restate the obvious in obscure language. There could be no more powerful refutation of that complacent libel than this lucidly written, carefully distilled and persuasively cogent work, a tidy time-bomb of a book whose findings will, if they are taken to heart, transform much of what we thought we knew about charity and the social good in America, with rippling effects on our views about taxes, education, poverty, foreign aid, marriage, family, religion and politics.

If Mr. Brooks is right, our era’s common sense of the matter -- that the political left is more compassionate than the political right, and that America is a remarkably ungenerous nation by world standards -- is demonstrably inaccurate. In fact, Sen. John Edwards's repeated claim that there are "two Americas" turns out to be correct but misstated: The line of separation runs most saliently not between the haves and have-nots but between the gives and the give-nots, between those Americans who respond to social needs with their own money and time and those who do not.

Mr. Brooks speaks here with the authority of a liberal who has been mugged by the data. "These are not the sorts of conclusions I ever thought I would reach," he notes, referring to his assumptions when he started examining charitable behavior 10 years ago. He fully expected to find confirmation at every turn that political liberals "cared more about others than conservatives did." But his empirical findings simply refused to comply with his expectations. Re-running analyses, gathering new data, double-checking for technical error -- nothing changed the results. In the end, he admits, "I had no option but to change my views."

By consulting a wide range of metrics, ranging from rates of charitable giving to hours of volunteer work donated, Mr. Brooks concludes that four distinct forces appear to have primary responsibility for making people behave charitably: religion, skepticism about the government's role in economic life, strong families and personal entrepreneurship. Those Americans who have all four, or at least three, are much more likely to behave charitably than those who do not.

A National Debate

The correlations are strong and unmistakable. For example, people who attend houses of worship regularly are 25% more likely to give and 23% more likely to volunteer, and the religious give away four times the amounts of money that the secular do. Working families without welfare support give three times as much to charity as do welfare families with the same total income. Conservative households give 30% more to charity than liberal households. Redistributionist liberals give about a fourth of what redistributionist skeptics give. And perhaps most interesting of all, in states in which George W. Bush got more than 60% of the 2004 vote, charitable giving averaged 3.5% of income, as compared with states in which Mr. Bush got less than 40% of the vote, in which the giving averaged a mere 1.9% of income. So much for the idea that red states are red in tooth and claw.

Thus can social science challenge even our most entrenched ideas, those "obvious" truths that have been repeated so many times as to be rendered nearly impregnable but that distort our understanding and hinder our path forward. There will of course be many readers (and many more nonreaders) of Mr. Brooks's book who will dismiss it on its face, and there will be fierce efforts
mounted to discredit his analysis and data. Let them come. "Who Really Cares" should serve to change the public discussion dramatically. With any luck, it will be for our decade what Charles Murray's "Losing Ground" was for the 1980s (challenging the disincentive logic of welfare) or what Michael Harrington's "The Other America" was for the 1960s (highlighting the persistence of poverty amid affluence) -- the text at the center of a constructive national debate.

One can hope that this debate will refresh our patterns of social thought by reintroducing some very old ideas: the importance of giving as one of the central activities of a free people and the profoundly spiritual paradox that giving is itself the ultimate source of our greatest wealth and happiness. Mr. Brooks is modest about his work's philosophical claims, but they are not hard to draw out. There is a dynamic and unmechanistic understanding of human life undergirding his vision of things, one that puts paid to all our simplistic zero-sum schemes. As a character in John Bunyan's "A Pilgrim's Progress" put it: "A man there was, tho' some did count him mad / the more he cast away, the more he had." Needless to say, he was not talking about paying higher taxes.

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