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The Meaning of Ideology in America

The state of ideology in America is contentious. We cannot agree whether the United States is predominantly a nation of the left, of the right, or of the center. We cannot agree even whether it is reasonable to characterize American politics in terms of left and right. Fifty years after the masterful undertaking of Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960) we still do not know how to characterize American ideology.

We care about ideology in considerable measure because it bears on something about which we care even more, election to office. Elections should decide whose claims should be honored. If the United States really is a nation of the right, then the party of the right should win most national elections. It does not. Nor of course does the party of the left fare any better. Alternation in electoral success does not necessarily make us a nation of the center. And despite the vagaries in ideological thinking at the individual level highlighted by Converse (1964) and others, it is not as simple as dismissing the American public as "nonideological," either.

Further, public ideology bears – or at least in standard democratic theory, should bear – on public policy outcomes. If the public wants policy to move in a particular ideological direction, it should be able to use the instruments of electoral control to place into office policymakers who will be more likely carry out its wishes. And policymakers, if they care about either representing public will or being reelected, should listen. But this again presupposes that the public can send clear and consistent ideological signals, that it can know whether it wants policy to move to the "left" or to the "right" and can communicate its desires to policymakers. We know from decades of research that it is not entirely clear that it can

meet even these very basic demands that representative democracy places on it.

In this volume, we work to understand the nature of ideology in the American mass public. Our wish for this volume is not so much to have the final word on the subject, which is clearly impossible. What we would like to achieve is to have most of the words that follow ours at least comprehend the conundrum over ideological *symbols* and ideological *preferences* that will be our central theme. For a very large proportion of what is written, particularly in the popular media, is at variance with sets of facts that have long been known, but rarely appreciated. We wish to show that American mass ideology has two conceptions, often existing quite independently of one another in the minds of citizens and performing quite different functions in the political system. Understanding the dualistic nature of political ideology, and shedding light on its implications, is the subject of what is to come.

1.1 THE CONFLICT BETWEEN LIBERALISM AND CONSERVATISM

The language of ideology is itself contentious, and a product as much of social forces and political strategy as of anything stable or immutable. But we have little choice but to embrace it, to write about liberalism and conservatism as understood in everyday politics. These are the terms in which real political actors, politicians, journalists, citizen activists, and even the mass public speak.

"Liberal," "liberalism," "conservative," "conservatism": Few conversations about politics in the United States can avoid at some point using these words. The big picture of American politics is often a struggle between liberal and conservative sentiments over symbols, over policy, over even culture. But what do the words mean? We must at the outset concede confusion and ambiguity. The meanings of the terms themselves, even among elites and political sophisticates, are not immutable. And many citizens clearly bring different connotations to the terms than we do.

There is, however, a reality defined by usage. When political actors are publicly labeled – by themselves or by others – with these terms, then their particular constellations of views on the issues of the day become the reality. If, for example, Barack Obama is the nation's most visible "liberal," then what Obama says and does becomes the definition of liberalism in practice. When conservatives talk about the true meaning of conservatism in this era, they often turn to the words and deeds of the

former president Ronald Reagan as a guidepost. So all is not subjective. The words cannot mean whatever we want them to mean. There has to be a core of shared cultural connotation in order to permit sensible conversation.

There is also a time dimension to meaning. As issues come and go and political agendas reshape, the core defining issues of ideological discourse will change. Change is rarely radical and rarely abrupt, but it is nonetheless the case that emphases change. But, too, there is continuity. It is by and large the same liberals arguing with the same conservatives over the new issues. So that continuity limits the possibility of rapid change and usually ensures that old connotations and issues survive the transition to the new.

1.1.1 American Liberalism

We turn now to the business of defining what is meant by liberal and conservative, trying not to be creative or comprehensive, but rather to summarize, as succinctly as possible, the culturally standard views. Our desire here is to lay out a set of beliefs that is common – but not necessarily universal – to actors who call themselves liberals or conservatives. This is something less abstract than philosophy because our concern is the real politics of the street. But we try here for a little more perspective than the stump speech, to draw out the doctrines that are relatively timeless rather than the themes that work for the moment.

Equality of opportunity is a core component of liberalism. The idea is that success in life's endeavors ought to result from intelligence, determination, discipline, and hard work, and not from the circumstances of one's birth. America, like all other societies, has a class system that tends to limit equality of opportunity in real life circumstances. Although this system is far from being frozen or having its upper levels impenetrable, life's achievements and one's place in this system are strongly predictable from the circumstances of birth. The playing field slants in the direction of the wealth and status of one's parents. Equality of opportunity does not exist but is a goal toward which liberalism constantly strives.

Government is the instrument through which the uneven playing field can be leveled. Thus liberals support public policies that redistribute income from rich to poor, and they support policies such as public schools that provide the tools by which equality might be achieved. Liberals believe that government ought to act in the economy in a variety of ways, to permit collective bargaining, to ensure a minimum wage, to

guarantee that benefits such as old age pensions and health care insurance are available to all.

Liberals believe that a market economy, whatever its virtues in the efficient creation of prosperity, is a beast that needs the firm hand of government to tame it. They also wish to prevent those who have obtained a monopoly of economic resources from enriching themselves unduly at the society's expense.

There is also the issue of government as regulator, the notion that left to their own devices, corporate interests will concentrate power to avoid competition, producing bad social outcomes. Government's role is to regulate the economic environment to prevent such abuses. Also there are situations where some of the costs of production are externalities, passed on to society, rather than paid for by the consumer or producer of the product. Examples include the regulation of industrial pollution or other economic activities that create social harm as a by-product of profit seeking.

American liberals have never embraced the idea of nationalizing industries that are currently private, as their European counterparts did. But, with some exceptions, they have usually opposed efforts to privatize current government activities.

Part of government's job is to establish standards. There is no advantage to driving on the left- or the right-hand side of the road, for example, but there is a huge advantage in having a rule that dictates *which* side. Such regulation benefits all and is not controversial. But beyond this, liberals also believe in regulation – within limits – of business. Rejecting the "unseen hand," or the inherent equilibrating virtue of the market, they believe that private economic power, left unchecked, will be used in ways harmful to the social order. Mindful that the economist's abstraction of a free market, a market in which no buyer or seller is large enough to affect the market, does not in fact exist in the United States, they are ready to check the market distortions that arise from the economic power of a small number of dominant buyers or sellers. And in financial markets they support regulation designed to prevent insiders from using their greater knowledge to exploit outsiders.

In the social sphere, liberals advocate freedom from intrusion on private decisions. Government, in particular, ought not act as enforcer of doctrines that have their origin in religion. Not alone in belief in equality under law, liberals have nevertheless been more ready to use the tools of government to attain that equality. They are more zealous about protecting the rights of disadvantaged groups such as African Americans, women, and homosexuals. That often puts them at odds with the

institutions, such as organized religion, that sustain the traditional order and resist change.

1.1.2 Conservatism

On most matters, conservatives believe that citizens, families, and communities, not the federal government, are the driving forces behind successful, thriving societies. Conservatives question both the moral imperative and the practical ability of government to remediate social problems and correct market failures, instead believing that private citizens, operating without the encumbrances of government constraints, are more effective in motivating growth, innovation, and opportunity. Conservatives are comparably less concerned about equality of economic outcomes than they are about long-term improvements in standard of living provided by economic growth.

While conservatives believe broadly in equal opportunity, they typically take the view (as in the title of Milton and Rose Friedman's classic book, *Free to Choose*) that expanding market freedom and providing the ability to choose one's own economic path are comparably more important, and ultimately more prosperous for all citizens, than government-based efforts to reduce income differences (Friedman & Friedman 1990). These types of attitudes extend to views on how "opportunity" is best provided. Conservatives typically view the private provision of social benefits, perhaps encouraged by public policy (e.g., through the form of school vouchers or tax credits to provide for one's own income security), as more desirable than government-controlled efforts in support of the same goals.

Conservatives strongly oppose government-based efforts to equalize economic outcomes, typically supporting non-redistributive tax policies and opposing programs (such as extended welfare benefits) that are perceived to confer benefits to citizens who have not earned them. Conservatives generally believe that the problems of the underprivileged are best addressed by charity and private social responsibility and support organizations (especially faith-based organizations) that work to address those problems.

Most conservatives cede an active role for the government in some arenas. They believe that government has a responsibility to provide an environment for safe, effective transactions among participants in the marketplace and to work to expand market freedoms. Government should help to enforce private property rights and private contracts and should

work to promote free trade and market economies both domestically and abroad.[1]

Beyond this, however, conservatives typically advocate a limited role in regulating market activity. Free markets, whatever excesses they might have, are seen as the single greatest pathway to long-run economic growth and prosperity, and government intervention in them stifles both innovation and the ability of a citizenry to allocate resources in a way that it sees fit. Thus policies designed to regulate the functioning of markets, or to provide protections to some types of actors (e.g., hourly workers) within the marketplace, are seen as undesirable. Mainstream conservatives do not see markets as perfect but do believe that in most cases, government-based antidotes to market imperfections are worse than the disease.

When it comes to cultural matters, there is substantially greater diversity of opinion. The modern brand of conservatism, at least of the post-Reagan era, typically believes in a strong government role in promoting traditional values and enforcing social order. These conservatives believe that social, religious, and cultural institutions have developed into their current state because of the wishes and desires of citizens and thus reflect a society's roots and core values. They believe that such institutions provide norms of behavior and social interaction that allow societies to function effectively. They are thus skeptical of challenges (especially government-based ones) to traditional social order, particularly those that challenge traditional religious perspectives or seek to diminish the role of religion in the public sphere.

Other conservatives believe that social and cultural freedoms are analogues to market freedoms, and that it is not the government's job to regulate the private behavior of consenting adults. The former view has defined American ideological "conservatism" in recent decades, but the latter remains strong and enduring, particularly among affluent or intellectual conservatives.

1.1.3 A Brief History of the Debate

Liberalism

Both the words "liberal" and "conservative" stretch quite far back in American history. But the historical usage of the words was so different

[1] It is perhaps indicative of the confusion behind the usage of ideological language that such expansion of market freedoms, typically advocated by free-market conservatives, is often discussed as trade or economic "liberalization."

as to be almost unrecognizable. At the time of the American Revolution the words basically connoted attitudes toward the old institutions, monarchy and established church. Liberals opposed the old institutions and conservatives supported them. Such a debate continued for a century or more in Europe, where liberals championed a republican form of government and conservatives favored restoration of the monarchy and the aristocracy. But the American Revolution virtually eliminated any idea of monarchy, aristocracy, or state religion, so that it is not much exaggeration to say that the United States had only liberals in its early history.

We know the term "liberal" has a very long history, but with a quite different connotation from its current usage – as support for freedom *from* government intervention in all matters. Prior to the 1930s, the label was used rarely, if at all, by mainstream politicians of any political persuasion in the United States. So how did a program of activist government intervention in the economy become "liberalism"? The answer, at least in large part, lies in the strategic political considerations of Franklin D. Roosevelt. We know that his prepresidential views were strongly shaped by the "progressivism" of his illustrious ancestor Theodore. He took "progressive" to mean a propensity to action, that when problems arose, it was government's obligation to identify them and act decisively to resolve them.

Thus when FDR assumed the presidency, he did what came naturally in fashioning an intensive effort by the national government to involve itself deeply in a broken American economy. The doctrine, from his campaign slogan, was "The New Deal." And people who were part of that program, or supported it, became "New Dealers." Roosevelt was in search of a term for this program, one that would embed it in American traditions – even though it was a departure from tradition in almost every regard – and one that stayed well clear of the "isms" that were ominously gaining force on the European stage at the time. Because the Democratic Party brand was itself in fairly high disregard at the time, he also needed a label that would help to attract the vote of otherwise sympathetic citizens, particularly Republicans, who dare not vote for a candidate who labels himself as a "Democrat" (Rotunda 1986).

FDR hit upon "liberal" for its positive association with freedom and for its absence of any link with the fascism, socialism, and communism that were threatening and unpopular in American opinion. And thus a novel term for a belief in activist government involvement in the economy, and activist particularly in support of those most in need, became part of the American lexicon. Roosevelt called himself, his ideas, and his

programs "liberal," which he contrasted to the views of their opponents, "conservative."

We have FDR's words from a 1938 "fireside chat" where he discusses the words themselves:

> In the coming primaries in all parties, there will be many clashes between two schools of thought, generally classified as liberal and conservative. Roughly speaking, the liberal school of thought recognizes that the new conditions throughout the world call for new remedies.
>
> Those of us in America who hold to this school of thought, insist that these new remedies can be adopted and successfully maintained in this country under our present form of government if we use government as an instrument of cooperation to provide these remedies. We believe that we can solve our problems through continuing effort, through democratic processes instead of Fascism or Communism. . . .
>
> Be it clearly understood, however, that when I use the word "liberal," I mean the believer in progressive principles of democratic, representative government and not the wild man who, in effect, leans in the direction of Communism, for that is just as dangerous as Fascism.
>
> The opposing or conservative school of thought, as a general proposition, does not recognize the need for Government itself to step in and take action to meet these new problems. It believes that individual initiative and private philanthropy will solve them – that we ought to repeal many of the things we have done and go back, for instance, to the old gold standard, or stop all this business of old age pensions and unemployment insurance, or repeal the Securities and Exchange Act, or let monopolies thrive unchecked – return, in effect, to the kind of Government we had in the twenties. . . . (Fireside Chat, June 24, 1938)[2]

The meaning of liberalism as a policy stance has broadened, but not fundamentally changed, since Roosevelt. FDR, whose support base included millions of racially conservative southerners, carefully avoided too obviously taking sides on the central issue of southern politics. But with the politics of the 1960s racial equality would begin to be included as a central value of liberals. And later still liberals would embrace expanding equality to other traditionally marginalized social groups, as well as the government regulation aspect of environmentalism. But the liberalism of Barack Obama's time is not terribly different from that of Franklin Roosevelt's.

Conservatism

America itself had to be old before "conservative" could come to mean support for the old order. And thus the usage comes and goes after the Civil War. It pops up again in the 1920s, when the policies of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover were characterized as conservative with

[2] From the American Presidency Project, americanpresidency.org.

part of its modern connotation, meaning then government of minimal size and scope. This label was not embraced by those to whom it was attached, however. Hoover, among others, argued that his views more fully embraced the ideals of classical "liberalism" by privileging citizens over government and private action over government coercion. Hoover argued, in fact, that his views, not Roosevelt's, should be the ones labeled "liberal" (Hoover 1934). The "conservative" label was first used in full force by supporters of FDR and the New Deal, as a way to help them stake clearly their claim to the "liberal" label and clearly distinguish their views from those of their opponents (Rotunda 1986).

The labels stuck, however, and conservatism suffered a long period as the minority view in American politics. Reeling from the Great Depression and the New Deal that it engendered, conservatism as a movement went into the background, only to be revived as quite another doctrine, opposition to communism (both foreign and domestic) in the 1950s. Conservatives of that era feared the Soviet Union and then communist China and also feared the prospect that American institutions were riddled with hidden communists, ready to subvert America.

The beginnings of the modern conservative movement can be traced to the presidential candidacy of Barry Goldwater in 1964, in which the most visible platform was Goldwater's book, *The Conscience of a Conservative*. Goldwater refocused conservatism on domestic affairs, beginning the first coherent attack on the welfare state legacy of Franklin Roosevelt. And on the issue of the moment, civil rights for African Americans, Goldwater for the first time defined opposition to government promotion of civil rights as an extension of conservative ideas.[3]

The philosophy of modern-day conservatism has its roots in the politics of Ronald Reagan, who capitalized on the tarnished image of Jimmy Carter, the cold war, and the perceived failure of government-based solutions to the economic and social malaise of the late 1970s, to reinvigorate "conservatism" as the label of individual and market freedom. Reagan's speech from the 1980 Republican National Convention helped to crystallize images of the "new" brand of ideological conservatism as that which promoted individual freedom over government power:

> "Trust me" government asks that we concentrate our hopes and dreams on one man; that we trust him to do what's best for us. My view of government places

[3] "Liberal" and "conservative" had long had a racial connotation in the South, but liberalism on race was a distinctly minority position among the dominant white population, and conservatism was almost the exclusive preserve of the Dixiecrats of the time.

trust not in one person or one party, but in those values that transcend persons and parties. The trust is where it belongs – in the people. . . .

Work and family are at the center of our lives; the foundation of our dignity as a free people. When we deprive people of what they have earned, or take away their jobs, we destroy their dignity and undermine their families. We cannot support our families unless there are jobs, and we cannot have jobs unless people have both money to invest and the faith to invest it. These are concepts that stem from an economic system that for more than 200 years has helped us master a continent, create a previously undreamed of prosperity for our people, and has fed millions of others around the globe. That system will continue to serve us in the future if our government will stop ignoring the basic values on which it was built and stop betraying the trust and good will of the American workers who keep it going.[4]

One further ingredient, the emergence of the religious right as a central player in conservative politics, then added the final piece to the definition of modern conservatism.[5]

1.2 THE TWO FACES OF IDEOLOGY IN AMERICAN POLITICS

The politically engaged reader has certainly found much that is familiar in these fairly simple accounts of ideological positions. Liberals, by and large, support the expansion of government power where necessary to provide equal opportunity and remediate social injustice. Conservatives, by and large, support economic freedom and traditional patterns of social order. This is clearly true at the level of political elites, where issue and ideological positions are relatively stable and well defined and are as ideologically polarized as they have been at any time in recent decades (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal 2006; Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope 2004). But at the level of the individual citizen, the nature of ideology is more complicated.

We know that many citizens know and care little about politics, so we expect that preferences are not as neatly organized, or ideologically coherent, for most people as they are for the political elite. But we will argue that there is also something systematically distinct, and fundamentally disconnected, about the nature of American mass ideology. The

[4] Speech transcript obtained from the National Center for Public Policy Research: www.nationalcenter.org.

[5] See Adams 1997 and Layman and Carsey 2002 for discussions of the evolution of religious and culturally traditional perspective to the principles of modern conservatism.