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The Liberal Conservative Myth and Political Science

> I remember once being much amused at seeing two partially intoxicated men engage in a fight with their great-coats on, which fight, after a long, and rather harmless contest, ended in each having fought himself out of his own coat, and into that of the other. If the two leading parties of this day are really identical with the two in the days of Jefferson and Adams, they have performed about the same feat as the two drunken men.
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> –Abraham Lincoln, April 6, 1859

1 INTRODUCTION

On the eve of the American Civil War, a committee of Boston Republicans sent a letter to Abraham Lincoln inviting him to speak at an upcoming celebration in honor of Thomas Jefferson's birthday. In his reply, Lincoln noted the irony of this situation given that Lincoln's newly formed Republican Party supposedly descended from the Federalist Party of John Adams, whose greatest strength had been in Boston and the Northeast, and their Democratic opponents supposedly descended from the Jeffersonian Party, whose greatest strength had been in the South. Lincoln then went on to relate the parable quoted above.

What Lincoln wisely noticed, but what many partisans and ideologues tend to forget, is that party positions and ideologies often switch places over time. Many partisans are embarrassed by party ideology change – perhaps they think it indicates a lack of seriousness, a lack of sincerity, or a lack of integrity – and so they often insist that their party has always held the same correct principles and positions. Furthermore, they insist

that their opponents have always espoused the same wrong ideas and issue positions.

In addition to partisanship, our tendency to view the past anachronistically also causes us to forget how parties used to speak and act differently than they do today. For example, in the first half of the GOP's history, the party typically called for higher taxes, more federal spending, and greater government intervention in the economy to regulate large corporations and help those in need.[1] Likewise, in the first half of the Democratic Party's history, it typically called for lower taxes, less federal spending, and free markets (Gerring 1998). Thus, in the 1932 presidential campaign, Franklin Roosevelt criticized the Herbert Hoover administration for being "committed to the idea that we ought to center control of everything in Washington as rapidly as possible ... I regard reduction in Federal spending as one of the most important issues of this campaign. In my opinion it is the most direct and effective contribution that Government can make to business" (F. Roosevelt 1932). Because the parties' positions and ideologies with regard to government intervention in the economy switched places in the 1930s, it is tempting to mistakenly think that the Democratic Party has always advocated increased government spending and economic intervention while the Republican Party has always advocated *laissez-faire* economics.

The two parties have not only changed their minds with regard to government spending, but also with regard to foreign policy, taxes (Burns 1997), women's rights (Wolbrecht 2000), racial politics (Carmines and Stimson 1989), abortion (Adams 1997), and military spending (Fordham 2007). The two major parties have switched positions – often multiple times – on virtually every significant, enduring public policy issue in American history. Furthermore, the parties have not only changed their issues positions, but they have also changed the systems of ideas they articulate that bundle those issue positions together. In other words, they have changed their ideologies.

In the following sections, this chapter will explain why political scientists, in general, fundamentally misunderstand ideology and overlook party ideology evolution, and I will then suggest a methodological

[1] For a description of how the Republican Party founded the welfare state in America, see Skocpol (1992). For a description of how Theodore Roosevelt returned the GOP to being "the radical progressive party of the Nation again," see chapter 10 of Theodore Roosevelt's autobiography (T. Roosevelt 1913) and chapter 6 of *The Politics Presidents Make* (Skowronek 1997).

approach that can improve our understanding of how party ideologies develop. The greatest source of confusion concerning ideology is something I call the "Liberal Conservative Myth," which I explain and illustrate in Sections 2 through 5. In place of this misleading approach, in Section 6, I recommend that political scientists treat ideologies to a historical institutional analysis. Looking at party ideologies this way allows us to see their dynamic character – something Lincoln understood almost two centuries ago.

2 THE LIBERAL CONSERVATIVE MYTH

In addition to partisanship and anachronism, another reason we tend to underestimate how much party ideologies change over time is the Liberal Conservative Myth (LCM). This is the mistaken view held by many people that political history can be meaningfully described as the movement of individuals and groups on an ideological spatial spectrum frozen in time. This spatial spectrum consists of static ideological dimensions that run from "liberal" to "conservative," or "left" to "right," and whose meanings are fixed and unchanging. Thus, if one party has always been "liberal" or on the "left," and another party has always been "conservative" or on the "right," then we can conclude that the two parties' ideologies have been relatively static over long stretches of time. This is a mistaken view of political history because, over time, the very meanings of "liberalism" and "conservatism" ("left" and "right") themselves are evolving and can hide significant party reversals.

For example, what was said in the previous section about changes in Democratic and Republican Party ideologies can also be said of "liberal" and "conservative" political ideologies. In the 1930s, not only did Democratic Party ideology change to accommodate the New Deal, but the very meaning and content of "liberalism" itself changed to accommodate interventionist economic policy. In the nineteenth century, liberalism was defined by free market ideology: limited government, lower taxes, little government spending on social programs, and free trade. During the 1930s and 1940s, liberalism came to be defined by active government intervention in the economy, higher taxes, and increased government spending on social programs (Milkis 1993, 49). There were, of course, traditional free marketers that continued to insist from the 1930s through 1950s that they were the true "liberals," but very few people paid attention to, or believed, them (Forcey 1961, xiii–xiv).

The meaning of "liberalism" in popular discourse radically changed whether the old liberals liked it or not.[2]

Like economic "liberalism" and "conservatism," foreign policy "liberalism" and "conservatism" have seen similar transformations. In the 1930s and 1940s conservatism was defined by isolationism, from the 1960s through the 1980s conservatism meant hawkishness on foreign policy, and in the 1990s it returned to being critical of foreign military adventures before, in the 2000s, it was once again defined by the idea of spreading democracy internationally through military force. During the Obama administration, anti-interventionists became increasingly influential within conservatism – so much so that conservatives nominated Donald Trump, with his isolationist rhetoric, as the GOP nominee in 2016.[3]

Similarly, from the late 1930s to the early 1960s, liberalism was defined by an interventionist foreign policy that sought to involve the United States in conflicts in Europe, Korea, and Vietnam. From the late 1960s through the 1980s, it was defined by a dovish foreign policy that called for America to "come home." In the 1990s it defended military interventions abroad, and in the 2000s it returned to criticizing American imperialism.

The same kind of changes to liberalism and conservatism can be noted about almost every issue area in American politics – whether it is foreign policy, taxes, spending, civil rights, or international trade. No matter how many, or which, ideological dimensions an analyst chooses to use, the meanings of liberalism and conservatism are constantly evolving. As a result, any discussion of a voter, politician, party, or country moving left or right (or up or down or diagonal) on an ideological spatial spectrum must be accompanied by a detailed description of what that dynamic spectrum means at different times. To do this, of course, makes a spatial spectrum cumbersome to use and it soon loses its value as an analytical tool. The value of using ideological spectra to chart historical change is dependent on the assumption that the dimensions of a spectrum have fixed meanings frozen in time. If this assumption were true, then the statement that a person or a group became more or less "conservative" or "liberal" would contain meaningful information. Such a statement

[2] These old liberals eventually adopted the term "classical liberal" to distinguish themselves from the "new liberals."

[3] Whether President Trump governs according to the noninterventionist rhetoric on which he campaigned is a separate question (V. Lewis 2017).

would signal a host of inferences that can be drawn about how a particular person or group changed their attitudes about dozens of issues. Unfortunately, this assumption is not true. On nearly every major political issue, conservative and liberal – left and right – have, at some points in time, evolved to mean the opposite of what they meant at other points in time. Thus, statements about individuals or groups becoming more or less liberal or conservative tend to confuse more than they clarify.

3 THE LIBERAL CONSERVATIVE MYTH AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

Although it is a problem in many fields of social science, the Liberal Conservative Myth is particularly problematic for political science because ideology is one of the most prevalent analytical concepts in the discipline. As Frances Lee has documented, almost half of all major political science journal articles, and over 80 percent of articles on Congress, refer to ideology (Lee 2009, 29–30). As Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson have convincingly shown, the "master theory" of American political science claims that ideology is what drives the voting behavior of ordinary voters in the electorate, members of Congress, presidents, bureaucrats, and judges – and ultimately drives the most significant political outcomes. The Downsian spatial model of "ideological positioning" has formed the basic intellectual framework of "almost a half a century of leading political scientists" (Hacker and Pierson 2014, 643). However, if we fundamentally misunderstand what ideology is, and what it does, then an entire superstructure of political science research built on that mistaken conception of ideology is seriously flawed.

The dominant conception of ideology underpinning contemporary political science claims that the preference points of all political actors can be mapped onto an ideological spatial spectrum, and that each dimension of this space (the number of dimensions varies depending on the model employed) runs from "liberal" to "conservative." In the neo-institutional version of this conceptualization, these potentially evolving ideological preference points, interacting with a potentially evolving institutional environment, determine the important political outcomes we observe over time. The main problem with this approach is that in claiming that the preference points of political actors can become more or less "liberal" or "conservative" over time, scholars do not recognize that the very meanings of "liberal" and "conservative" also change over that same time period. The fact that these ideological constructs are

subject to constant transformation renders these spatial models mostly useless for measuring the ideological movement of political actors and groups.

For example, the political phenomena that have captured the American public's imagination over the past few decades have been partisan fighting, polarization, gridlock, and dysfunction. The most common explanation for this political warfare between "red" and "blue" America has been ideology. Journalists and political scientists alike increasingly point to how the two major parties have become more ideologically homogenous and extreme. Liberals have sorted themselves into the Democratic Party and conservatives have sorted themselves into the Republican Party (Layman and Carsey 2002, Carsey and Layman 2006, Levendusky 2009, Fiorina 2013). At the same time, the Democratic Party has moved to the "left" on the liberal-conservative spectrum, and the Republican Party has moved, even farther, to the "right" (Hacker and Pierson 2005, McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006, Pierson and Skocpol 2007, Poole and Rosenthal 2007, Abramowitz 2010, Mann and Ornstein 2012, Hare and Poole 2014). Studies of these changes in the ideological positioning of the two parties have filled the pages of political science journals and books in recent years.[4] The first claim, "party sorting," is straightforward and compelling. However, the second claim, "ideological polarization," is deeply problematic.

If the meaning and content of the ideological poles of a spatial spectrum ("left" and "right") are evolving, then claims of polarization become confusing. Such claims may help us recognize increasing ideological homogeneity within the two major parties (as DW-NOMINATE scores may indicate), but they tell us nothing about the content of that ideological homogeneity: nothing about the actual ideas and policy positions articulated by the two major parties. We may learn the content of the two parties' ideologies from analyzing the ideas that partisans articulate in everyday discourse – and many of the works I just cited do a good job of documenting this – but we do not learn the content of the two parties' ideologies by observing that they are "liberal" or "conservative" because the meanings of "liberalism" and "conservatism" are in constant flux.

For the past eight decades or so, virtually whatever the Democratic Party does is termed "liberal" and whatever the Republican Party does is

[4] The focus on party polarization has become so great that it was a central object of study in a recent American Political Science Association Task Force (Barber and McCarty 2013).

termed "conservative."[5] Thus, changes in the parties themselves are helping to drive changes in the meanings of the ideological poles of "liberalism" and "conservatism." In this situation, claims about party polarization simply become tautological.

For example, if the Republican Party moves toward free trade principles, as it did in the 1960s and 1970s, then we are told that this is evidence of a move toward "right-wing" libertarianism. If, on the other hand, the Republican Party moves away from free trade, as it has recently, then we are told that this is evidence of a move toward "right-wing" nationalism. If the Democratic Party moves toward free trade, then we are told that this is evidence of a move toward "left-wing" internationalism. If, on the other hand, the Democratic Party moves away from free trade, then we are told that this is evidence of a move toward "left-wing" laborism.

If the Republican Party moves toward an interventionist foreign policy, as it did during the Bush administration, then we are told that this is evidence of a move toward "right-wing" hawkishness. Conversely, if the Republican Party moves away from an interventionist foreign policy, as it did during the Clinton and Obama administrations, we are told that this is evidence of a move toward "right-wing" isolationism. If the Democratic Party moves toward an interventionist foreign policy, as it during the Clinton administration, then we are told that this is evidence of a move toward "left-wing" internationalism. If, however, the Democratic Party moves away from interventionist foreign policy, as it did during the Bush administration, we are told that this is evidence of a move toward "left-wing" dovishness.

If the Republican Party moves toward embracing tax cuts, as it did in the 1970s and 1980s, we are told that this is evidence of a move toward "right-wing" libertarianism. If, on the other hand, the Republican Party moves away from tax cuts, as it did during the Kennedy administration, we are told that this is evidence of a move toward "right-wing" budget hawkishness.[6] If the Democratic Party moves toward embracing tax cuts, as it did in the 1960s, we are told that this is evidence of a move toward "left-wing" Keynesianism. Conversely, if the Democratic Party moves away from tax cuts, as it did during the 1980s, we are told that this is evidence of a move toward "left-wing" liberalism.

[5] Democrats who vote with, or support, Republicans are called "conservative Democrats" and Republicans who vote with, or support, Democrats are called "liberal Republicans."

[6] "Mr. Conservative" Barry Goldwater, for example, argued that the Kennedy tax cuts were "dangerously inflationary" (Donovan 1964, 112).

Whatever the Republican Party does (even if it is the opposite of what Republicans did previously) is described as "conservative," and whatever the Democratic Party does (even if it is the opposite of what Democrats did previously) is described as "liberal." Thus, claims that the Democratic Party moved to the "left," or that the Republican Party moved to the "right" are not helpful because they are tautological. In reality, what is happening is that the Democratic and Republican parties (in particular, their leaders in the White House) are constantly redefining what "liberalism" and "conservatism" mean. Thus, claims about ideological movement to the "left" or the "right" over long stretches of time are nonsensical. This is just one of the ways that the Liberal Conservative Myth infects our political science scholarship.

4 WHY DW-NOMINATE CANNOT MEASURE PARTY IDEOLOGY DEVELOPMENT

To illustrate this point in more detail, this section will focus on the problems that party voting approaches face in trying to measure party ideology development. This is the most common way in which scholars rely upon the Liberal Conservative Myth. Political scientists typically try to measure party ideology by using Congressional roll call scaling applications, which posit that ideological positions on a liberal-conservative spectrum (consisting of however many dimensions) determine the roll call voting behavior of a party's legislators. While the following critique applies to any measure of party ideology that proceeds in this way, the most widely used measure is the DW-NOMINATE scaling application (Carroll et al. 2015), and so I will focus on this well-known example in order to illustrate the conceptual problems we face.

In deriving their index of scores, the authors of DW-NOMINATE code millions of roll call votes cast by thousands of MCs over hundreds of years. Given the mountain of data they collect, they cannot take the time to describe the content of these millions of votes. They concede that they are merely using the term "ideology" as "shorthand" to describe the tendency in voting behavior of MCs, but using this "shorthand" is problematic for several reasons.

First of all, it inevitably leads those who use the scores – political scientists and journalists alike – to explain the voting behavior of MCs in terms of "liberalism" and "conservatism" (i.e., in terms of "ideology"),

even though ideology is not always what determines voting behavior.[7] Sophisticated analysts do point out that ideology is only one of multiple factors that determine a legislator's preference point and vote choice (Lee 2009, Barber and McCarty 2013). Nonetheless, even if we recognize that vote chioces are only partially determined by ideology, we still cannot coherently talk about the preference points of politicians or parties moving through n-dimensional space over time if those preference points are based, even if only partially, on ideologies that are assumed to be static but are in reality dynamic.[8] For example, several critics have pointed out that NOMINATE is unclear about how much the scores represent partisanship and how much they represent ideology, and Poole and Rosenthal, themselves, admit that their DW-NOMINATE scores measure both "loyalty to a political party and loyalty to an ideology" (Lee 2016).[9] However, these criticisms and admissions overlook the endogeneity problem associated with conceptualizing NOMINATE scores as partly a measure of partisanship and partly a measure of ideology. Not only are NOMINATE scores an unclear mix of both ideology and loyalty to a party, but (as this book will show) it is also true that loyalty to a party *causes change in* the meaning and content of ideologies like liberalism and conservatism.

Secondly, and more importantly, roll call scaling applications like DW-NOMINATE are problematic because they are based on the Liberal Conservative Myth. Given the dynamic character of ideology, when analyzing the roll call scores produced by DW-NOMINATE, it remains unclear what ideas, bound together in what structure, are constraining MC voting behavior in the form of ideology at different times. It is unclear what it means to say, for example, that a politician or party in one decade and a politician or party in another decade had the same DW-NOMINATE score and, thus, the same ideological

[7] Poole and Rosenthal themselves talk this way (2007, 3).

[8] In addition to the problems that arise from the fact that ideology is dynamic, the problem is likely compounded by whatever other factors we might posit as determining ideal spatial preference points because these other factors – like partisanship or constituent interests – are *also dynamic*. That is, the preference content of things like partisanship (the pressures that the Democratic and Republican parties place on party members in Congress) and constituent interests (the pressures that constituents place on their representatives) change over time, just like the preference content of "liberalism" and "conservatism."

[9] See also Noel (2016).

constraint. A closer analysis of political history reveals that identical ideological scores are often given to MCs and parties with opposite issue positions.

For example, on the liberal side of the spectrum, twentieth-century senators "Cotton" Ed Smith (D-SC, 1909–1944), Henry "Scoop" Jackson (D-WA, 1953–1983), and Ron Wyden (D-OR, 1996–present) all had, according to DW-NOMINATE, the same liberal ideal preference point (–0.3), but the ideological worldview of each was significantly different. Smith was a racist demagogue who opposed the New Deal, Jackson was a "neoconservative" who supported both the Great Society and the Vietnam War, and Wyden is a "progressive liberal" who opposes racism, has sought to reform entitlement spending, and opposes militarism.[10] As we can see, what it meant to be a "liberal" MC in the 1930s was very different from what it meant to be a "liberal" MC in the 1970s, and both are very different from what it means to be a "liberal" MC today. Thus, it makes no sense to say that the Democratic Party has become more "liberal" since the 1940s (or the 1970s or the 1990s) because it is unclear what the party is moving "more" toward? More toward Senator Smith (more racist and more demagogic)? More toward Senator Jackson (more hawkish and more in favor of the welfare state)? More toward Senator Wyden (more committed to entitlement reform and more opposed to militarism)? We may know what we mean when we say "more liberal" from studying other sources (by reading party platforms, candidate speeches, or survey results), but we do not learn this information from DW-NOMINATE.

The foregoing illustration of the problem with DW-NOMINATE is not solved by disaggregating the scores of those senators onto multiple dimensions. The problem does not go away because the ideological content of each dimension – regardless of how many are used – are all subject to change over time.[11] For example, the meanings of "liberal

[10] Smith's inclusion as a "liberal" is not surprising. In the first half of the twentieth century, the most "liberal" members of Congress, according to DW-NOMINATE, tended to be Southerners opposed to federal government intervention in the economy.

[11] For example, Miller and Schofield (2003) insightfully point out that intraparty tensions on different ideological dimensions – economic policy and social policy – help drive changes in the demographic and ideological content of political parties over time. However, to the extent that Miller and Schofield believe that the meanings of liberal and conservative economic policy, and liberal and conservative social policy, are static, they cannot meaningfully measure party ideology change through their static, two-dimensional, ideological space.