

Voting Behavior

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In the January/February 2010 edition of Atlantic Monthly, James Fallows declared that the U.S. political system is dysfunctional. Unless we fix it, he said, we will either have a new Constitution, or a coup. He rules out both as unthinkable, and argues that we will fix the system. The past election brought many new members to Congress who are dedicated to returning “power to the people” and “constitutional government.” The coming months will reveal what the fix is to be. What was the signal sent by “We the People” in that election?

Introduction.

In this short essay, I will summarize what I consider to be some of the contaminating psychological variables that stand in the way of “fixing” the dysfunctional political system that Fallows decries. The first part of the discussion will be a summary of what political pundits have discovered in their surveys. The second part will delve into some more fundamental psychological variables that seek to shed more light on why people vote the way they do. In the last portion, I will try to identify what underlying psychological dynamics shape the ideological differences between the two major political parties. If these variables are the source of our dysfunctional system, what can be done to fix the problem? At the heart of the problem, it seems to me, is the nature of different belief systems regarding what is a just society and the role of government in creating that just society. In that regard, I have asked that each of you read the essay “How Do We Know What We Know,” which is on the OLLI website.

(Caveat: this is a new endeavor for me and I would like to make it clear that this essay and the class in general are designed to be heuristic—to elicit discussion. Therefore, I am not posting this paper on my website because I don’t believe it is ready for the public at large.)

It is safe to say that the success of the democratic form of government depends on an informed electorate, because in the long run, we the people decide what we want our nation to be. In a sense, the public gets the government they request. Many of the Founders were doubtful of the ability of the average person to make intelligent decisions; they reflected this doubt by limiting the voting privileges to what could be described as an elite group of white, adult male property owners. Moreover, they limited the direct voting for national government candidates to the House of Representatives. Senators and the President were selected by intermediate electors. As our process has been amended, more power has been given to the people. Is this good or bad? One skeptic, H. L. Mencken, had this to say about the process: “As democracy is perfected, the office of President represents more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their hearts desire at long last and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron.”

We don’t need to adopt the cynicism of Mencken to know that our current system of electing our officials is far from perfect or that the U.S. political system is dysfunctional. The

coming months promise to be very interesting, given that many new members of Congress are dedicated to “constitutional government.” In spite of the theatrics of reading the Constitution on the floor of the House, the real test will be how different ideologies shape the interpretation of the document. (In the end, the Supreme Court will decide what the Constitution means). What are these conflicting ideologies?

In op-ed article on 16 January 2011 of the Washington Post, “A Congress that reasserts its power,” George Will, provides a good summary of the essence of this divide. Will asserts that Conservatives believe in small government, which the Founders intended. Liberal Courts have allowed executive aggrandizement, first by FDR and then by his “acolyte, LBJ,” to ignore the intent of those Founders. The current conservative movement is a reaction to those liberal policies. The last two paragraphs sum the Conservative ideology:

“Americans are exceptionally committed to limited government because they are exceptionally confident of social mobility through personal striving. And they are exceptionally immune to a distinctively modern pessimism: It holds that individuals are powerless to assert their autonomy against society's vast impersonal forces, so people must become wards of government, which supposedly is the locus and engine of society's creativity.

“Two years into Barack Obama's presidency, we now know what he meant about ‘hope’ and ‘change’ - he and other progressives hope to change our national character. Three weeks into his presidency, Newsweek, unhinged by adoration of him and allowing its wishes to father its thoughts, announced that ‘we are all socialists now’ and that America ‘is moving toward a modern European state.’ The electorate emphatically disagreed and created the 112th Congress, with its exceptionally important agenda.”

The second article, from the [January/February 2011](#) edition of [Foreign Affairs](#), contains a Review Essay, “Why the Rich Are Getting Richer” by Robert C. Lieberman, a professor of Political science and Public Affairs at Columbia University. I encourage you to read the entire article. The following passages summarize his conclusions:

“The dramatic growth of inequality, then, is the result not of the “natural” workings of the market but of four decades' worth of deliberate political choices. Hacker and Pierson amass a great deal of evidence for this proposition, which leads them to the crux of their argument: that not just the U.S. economy but also the entire U.S. political system has devolved into a winner-take-all sport. They portray American politics not as a democratic game of majority rule but rather as a field of “organized combat” -- a struggle to the death among competing organized groups seeking to influence the policymaking process. Moreover, they suggest, business and the wealthy have all but vanquished the middle class and have thus been able to dominate policymaking for the better part of 40 years with little opposition.” P. 3

“American conservatives, increasingly empowered by effective organization and lavish funding from their patrons in the business community, began to actively resist the politics of pluralist accommodation. Rather than accepting the basic

contours of the New Deal and the Great Society and seeking to adjust them step by incremental step, conservatives assumed a newly confrontational posture and turned their efforts toward dismantling the legacies of Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson.” P.4

The third article focuses on why voters vote what appears to be against their economic self-interests. A group of psychologists conducted a study in 2008 in an effort to discover why working class and rural Americans usually vote for pro-business Republicans when their economic interests would seem better served by Democratic policies. The following excerpts summarize some of their conclusions (Keep in mind that most psychologists are liberals, so keep that in mind. However, I believe their observations are generally descriptive—as they apply to economic issues. As I will discuss later, there are issues other than economic that influence voting behavior.)

“In several large Internet surveys, my collaborators Jesse Graham, Brian Nosek and I have found that people who call themselves strongly liberal endorse statements related to the harm/care and fairness/reciprocity foundations, and they largely reject statements related to in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity. People who call themselves strongly conservative, in contrast, endorse statements related to all five foundations more or less equally. (You can test yourself at www.YourMorals.org.) We think of the moral mind as being like an audio equalizer, with five slider switches for different parts of the moral spectrum. Democrats generally use a much smaller part of the spectrum than do Republicans. The resulting music may sound beautiful to other Democrats, but it sounds thin and incomplete to many of the swing voters that left the party in the 1980s, and whom the Democrats must recapture if they want to produce a lasting political realignment.

“In *The Political Brain*, Drew Westen points out that the Republicans have become the party of the sacred, appropriating not just the issues of God, faith, and religion, but also the sacred symbols of the nation such as the Flag and the military. The Democrats, in the process, have become the party of the profane -- of secular life and material interests. Democrats often seem to think of voters as consumers; they rely on polls to choose a set of policy positions that will convince 51% of the electorate to buy. Most Democrats don't understand that politics is more like religion than it is like shopping.” (Edge, “What Makes People Vote Republican? Jonathan Haidt, 10/16/08, p. 5.).

It should be clear that the Democratic Party has, since the FDR era, pursued a more “Progressive” agenda. This has enlarged the role of government in a wide variety of ways. I don't need to summarize the New Deal agenda, which was a social revolution. LBJ and his “Great Society” agenda were captured by this statement in one of his speeches:

“I see a day ahead with a united nation, divided neither by class nor by section nor by color, knowing no South or north, no East or West, but just one great America, free of malice and free of hate, and loving thy neighbor as thyself. I see America as a family that takes care of all of its members in time of adversity ... I see our national

as a free and generous land with its people bound together by common ties of confidence and affection, and common aspirations toward duty and purpose.”

I suggest that the central contest between the Republicans and Democrats is to determine the role of the Federal Government. This paper attempts to understand why the proponents of these two versions of America believe the way they do. As the reader will see, I believe it is based on different beliefs about how much government should be involved in maintaining the welfare of individuals (in the broader sense of the term, this is “socialism”). As a simple yardstick, I believe we can look at the budget advocated by the two parties. The Republican leadership argues that the percentage of our GDP allocated to the Federal Government should be limited to 18%. Based on the current GDP (about \$15T), the 2011 budget would be \$2.7T. While the Democrats have not specified a given percentage, my estimate is that their agenda would require 23% of GDP (\$3.45T). It is interesting to note that the Presidential Commission Co-chairs (Bowles and Simpson) recommended 21% and the other bi-partisan group headed by Alice Rivlin and Pete Dominici recommended 23%. These are sharply different concepts of what we want the Federal Government to do. As you will see below, the American voters favor the Republican concept of small government—in theory. When it comes to what services the voters want the Federal Government to provide, they favor the Democratic agenda. This leads to deficit spending and the accumulation of debt. This is compounded in a recession, when tax revenues are reduced while spending continues. For example, the revenues for 2010 were only 14% of GDP while spending was about 24%, leading to a deficit of \$1.6T. How much, and where the money goes, tells us a lot about the ideologies of the two parties.

Survey Data.

Let me begin with some general propositions about voter behavior that we can glean from the efforts of pollsters and political pundits. While the validity of these measures depend heavily on statistical analysis, polls and demographic data can provide a rough picture of why people vote the way they do.

Individual economic welfare. The most obvious factor in voting is that people are motivated by their economic welfare—it’s the economy stupid! When the economy is lagging, the public wants to “throw the bums out.” Reagan lost 26 House seats in 1982 and his approval rating was lower than Obama’s is at the same point of their presidency. But Reagan’s tax cuts were extremely popular even though they contributed to huge deficits. Voters also vote against taxes—of any kind. GHW Bush promised, “Read my lips, no new taxes.” After taking office, he raised taxes and was denied a second term, arguably because of that act. In his first budget, Clinton raised taxes—without one single Republican vote, and lost both the House and Senate in 1994. The current railing against deficits was set aside when the Bush Tax cuts were extended two years. Will they ever be allowed to expire?

Short-term goals. Voters are motivated by short-term rather than long-term, strategic goals; this is an inherent weakness in the democratic form of government. A classic example is the problem of global warming. In the political arena, efforts to deal with the problem are confronted with the tradeoff between the immediate impact of costs and jobs versus the long-term consequences of doing nothing. (I will discuss the issue of scientific evidence later in this

essay). As Gregory Burns, director of the Center for Neuropolicy at Emory University told Al Gore “—the standard approach to goad the public action on climate change—which is to warn, warn, warn of the dire damage that a warming planet could cause to future generations and to life as we know it—would ‘never work’ because human beings are ‘completely present-tense oriented’ as a function of their brain wiring. The long-term future, it seems, just doesn’t matter all that much to us.” (“The Politics of the Brain”, Atlantic Journal, July 2010, p. 16).

Simple answers. Most of the problems facing the nation are complex; voters want simple answers that serve their immediate needs. The causes of the current economic recession are complex and will take time to correct. Voters demand immediate relief, as witnessed last November. Macro economics is beyond the scope of understanding for most voters; they only know what the impact is on their personal lives. How many voters know the difference between neo classical economic theory and Keynesian economics?

Single issues. Some issues are so important to some voters that they will vote on that single issue, e.g. abortion, same-sex marriage, gun control, religion, regardless of other issues. As I will argue below, the single-issue voter is not usually faced with an either/or choice; candidates often offer a package of issues that appeal to a general ideology.

Candidate Persona. In the age of mass media, particularly television, voters are heavily influenced by the physical appearance and manner of speaking of candidates. Advisors carefully craft behavior and messages that respond to “market research.” One constant in the message is the claim that the candidate does not respond to polls. In the midst of the presidential primary several years ago, former Senator Bob Kerry called a press conference to announce that he was quitting the race, explaining that the contest was not about issues, but a choreographed theater. Successful candidates usually spend years developing their “message” based on market research.

Emotional factors. Voting behavior is determined to a large extent on feelings rather than a rational analysis of the issues. Candidates use hot-button slogans to appeal to these emotions and emphasize glittering generalities, both pro and con. Unfortunately, too much of this rhetoric is in the form of negative attacks, both on individuals and institutions. This can be dangerous to individuals and national solidarity. Constant degradation of the “government” has seriously undermined trust and confidence in our governmental institutions at all levels. This has impeded rational discourse on issues.

Race. No Democratic presidential candidate has won a majority of White votes since the Civil Rights legislation in the LBJ era. Obama got 10% of the White vote in Alabama.

Dominant Values in American Society

Let me summarize what I see as some of the dominant values in American society that impact on voting behavior. Research indicates that while people espouse these values in theory, they value specific programs that conflict with theory.

- A. **Rugged individualism.** The country was born in an environment—physical and culturally—that emphasized self-reliance and individual initiative. Missing was the role of government in assisting in distributive justice. In a sense, everyone was on her/his own. While circumstances have changed considerably as the society has become more interdependent, the culture, at least in theory, has endured. A survey in the sixties of fifty countries measured the individualistic-communitarian continuum. At the head of the list of individualism was the United States, with England second. Large urban areas, where life is more interdependent, reflects a more communitarian

- culture, while rural areas and sparsely populated areas, remain highly individualistic. It should not come as a surprise that “Red” and “Blue” states reflect these differences.
- B. Belief in American Exceptionalism.** The belief that America is an exceptional country that is destined to lead the world in the march toward enlightened political, economic, and human justice is deeply engrained in our psyche. Any suggestion that our foreign policy is flawed is quickly denounced as a “blame America first” attitude bordering on treason. Some argue that this leads us to pursue a “Pax America” foreign policy that attempts to make the world over in our image. In a recent op-ed piece, Henry Kissinger argued that the belief in “American exceptionalism” is an obstacle to world peace. In his book, Washington Rules, Andrew Bacevich argues that this attitude condemns us to endless wars such as Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. This demands increasingly large military forces and spending. Economic and political correlates are discussed below.
- C. Small Government.** Another feature of our early history and a rugged individualism was the innate fear of a powerful government. Settlers had lived under oppressive governments in Europe and were distrustful of any attempt to create similar institutions here. The “Bill of Rights” was designed to ensure individual freedom and privacy. Conservatives argue for a narrow interpretation of the tenth amendment. The demand for “States’ Rights” is a manifestation of the disdain for the national government. This battle still rages. Governor Rick Perry is perhaps the most vocal Republican leader on this issue. “Small government” is especially aimed at the national government.
- D. Distrust of government.** Consider the current polls regarding trust and confidence in our government institutions. If we have no trust in our government, can we endure? If we do not trust the judgment of our elected officials, where do we turn for guidance? “Throwing the bums out” every two or four years doesn’t seem to solve the problem. More on this below.
- E. Free markets.** “Free enterprise” is next to godliness in our society. Although we have not had laissez-faire capitalism for nearly a century, the concept still has political appeal. This element of conservative ideology carries over into our foreign policy, which leads to our goal of forcing it on the rest of the world.
- F. Democracy.** Our political form of government, along with free markets, is undoubtedly the “end of history” as far as debate about ideology goes—according to some neo-conservatives.
- G. Authoritarian.** In spite of our claim to be a culture that encourages individuals to “think for themselves,” we derive most of our opinions from opinion formers who may or may not be either informed or honest.
- H. Religion.** While fundamentalists more often vote on single issues, the mainstream religions promote diversity of thought. Catholics are generally conservative on social issues, but liberal on economic matters. Protestant Fundamentalists tend to be conservative on both social and economic issues and represent a powerful voting bloc for Republicans.
- I. Guns.** I simply don’t know how to discuss this issue.
- J. Low taxes.** Raising taxes is the third rail of politics; candidates recommend taxes at their peril. The average European country levies taxes to provide their governments (All levels) the ability to provide 49% of the GDP. We have provided revenues to all

levels (County, State, and Federal) for 35-38% of our GDP. For the last three decades, we have allowed the Federal government to spend about 20.7% of GDP; but revenues have been limited to about 18%. The gap has been through deficit spending and accumulated debt. Dealing with this gap is at the heart of the political debate. Republicans argue that the solution lies in reducing spending (to 18% of GDP), not raising taxes, while Democrats argue for raising taxes rather than cutting spending.

K. Rational Man. It seems to me that much of our belief on rugged individualism, democracy, and free markets is based on the assumption that people are rational beings and that they will make rational choices regarding their welfare. This leads to the belief that if given the choice, they will plan for their old age, health care, etc. In fact, this concept is the basic principle of classical economics. It is closely related to the concept of “free will,” which I will discuss below.

Nature of Belief Systems.

My principal goal in this series of classes is to focus on factors that explain deeper, enduring differences in voting patterns. In this regard, the essay, “How Do We Know What We Know,” (click on www.nsijohns.com and go to the Domestic file to read this essay) summarizes some literature focused on the nature of our belief systems in general. I encourage you to read that essay carefully, but the academic nature may be too much for some of you. So let me give you the gist of it.

The essay describes an interactive process between individuals and their environment and how these two variables determine how individuals view the world. The sociological perspective (Shibutani) describes how key social groups deeply influence beliefs; the psychological perspective (Rokeach) describes key personality variables that influence how individuals interpret their environment. This is a complex interactive process, of course. In this essay, I will apply that process to the voting behavior in the current political process.

People develop belief systems that provide cognitive maps to understanding a complex world that is difficult to understand. Most events are outside their area of expertise and personal experience, so they look to authoritative sources to provide answers. Some of this is due to intellectual laziness, but more often than not it results in a search for certainty in a world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA). Once they solidify a set of beliefs, or ideology, some people guard against any evidence that might contradict those beliefs. They turn to media sources that reinforce their ideology (Fox News, Washington Times, and The National Review for conservatives and MSNBC, NY Times, and the Nation for liberals). Such selective behavior has been labeled “cerebral hygiene” by an ancient sociologist whose name I have forgotten. These persons can be labeled “Ideologues” and close their minds to new ways of thinking. They are the secular counterparts to religious fundamentalists. According to Rokeach in his *Open and Closed Mind* (1950), the extremes of the political spectrum share these characteristics. In a March 2011 article in *Mother Jones*, Chris Mooney asserts that “Since political beliefs are rooted in emotions, facts are often irrelevant.” This applies to true believers, liberal and conservative.

Another psychological phenomenon that is similar to cerebral hygiene is a form of “cognitive dissonance.” Cognitive dissonance is mental tension that results from an encounter with evidence that challenges deeply-held beliefs, either secular or religious. One may react in two different ways to this conflict: 1) rationally assess the conflict and reject the evidence if it is invalid or incorporate it into one’s ideology if it is valid; or 2) ignore valid evidence that

challenges the ideology and harden the ideological system. The latter reaction is that of the True Believer/Ideologue, who keeps digging when he has dug himself into an intellectual hole. Often, this is a personality that has a weak ego that cannot handle the notion that he has made a mistake.

The dilemma is illustrated by Plato's allegory of the cave. A person that only knows the world of his life experiences—perhaps a cloistered intellectual environment—is faced with a new world if he ventures out of the cave. He can retreat to the cave and refuse to accept that new experience or he can suffer the slings and arrows associated with enlightenment. Ideological rigidity is equivalent to refusing to leave Plato's cave. It gives comfort for those who seek certainty in a messy world. Simplistic talking points provide easy solutions that reinforce ideology. For ideologues, complexity is “paradise lost” in Milton's concept. More flexible individuals assimilate new data and “regain paradise” in a new form. Some recent research indicates that ideologues dig in their heels when faced with empirical data and solidify their basic (cave) beliefs.

As political partisanship has intensified in the United States, another psychological phenomenon operates to solidify ideologies: **groupthink**. This is a well-established psychological principle that explains a lot of group behavior. Association with those of a like mind reinforces one's beliefs and “party discipline” pressures one to conform. While members of a party may differ on a number of issues, e.g., social and economic issues, party discipline maintains a voting block. Recent actions by the Tea Party have intensified this pressure. Once one has yielded to this pressure, there is a reluctance to admit that going along is for political advantage.

Dealing with the Unknown. When I taught at the National Defense University (NDU) many years ago, one of our tasks was to transition military officers from a field-command mindset, where problems were somewhat circumscribed, to positions of responsibility that require strategic decision-making on issues where there is a great deal of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA). Eighty five percent of NDU students arrive with graduate degrees; they are highly intelligent. But they have not been faced with analyzing complex national issues that impact on the security of the nation. A textbook, Presidential Decision-making, by Alexander George, described impediments to rational decision-making. Many of these “contaminating variables” are present in voters' decision-making.

The critical issues that face our nation—economic, social, military, foreign policy—are beyond the comprehension of the average voter. How many people are knowledgeable about macro-economics; know the difference between supply-side and demand-side economic policy? Most people cannot tell you the difference between the national deficit and the national debt. The unknown is endless. Most voters do not have the background to understand a rational explanation of these issues, nor do they have the time and interest to try. This problem is especially important as the United States transitions to an age where we can no longer dictate to the world what the international system will look like—economically, politically, and culturally.

So what do most voters do to understand how to vote? The first thing that politicians learn is that the message must be packaged into short clips that are catchy and focused on the needs of their target audience, first and foremost the economic welfare of the voter. “It's the economy stupid” is golden advice to contestants. There are other issues, of course, and messages must be tailored to the specific audience. Regardless of the issue, the focus must be on short-term goals. What if one wishes to sway voters to support a long-term issue involving VUCA, such as global warming? Or the national debt? Few voters have the knowledge to understand the complexity and therefore cede decision-making to some authority. Hopefully the choice of

source would include empirical data, but ideology often wins out over facts. The global warming debate is a classic example. Why do most liberals cite scientific evidence while most conservatives debunk it as a “Hoax?” (Twenty of Twenty one Republican Senate candidates took this position. Several of those also reject the evidence for evolution). Recently, Romney said he believed there is global warming; Rush Limbaugh pronounced his candidacy dead.

Opinion formers. Few voters are equipped to deal with the VUCA characteristics of national issues, so they turn to what they consider authoritative sources for answers. Many choose talk-show hosts who have few credentials on subject matter, but are good at throwing red meat to true believers—“the base.” This is an example of cerebral hygiene.

Current Dominant Political Ideologies.

“Ideologies” are mental maps that are useful for giving meaning to a wide range of discrete events; that is, they are designed to give some coherence to VUCA. The most general ideologies of concern to the political debate today are “conservative and liberal.” While these are not “pure types,” and the boundaries are vague, I believe they are useful for our purposes. As you read the following, assess the political advantage for conservatives and liberals in light of the dominant values discussed above.

In my attempt to get a better understanding about the underlying personality attributes that can explain the patterns of beliefs that seem to go in clusters based on whether one is “conservative” or “liberal,” I look for personality traits that explain such consistency in voting behavior. What accounts for the high correlation of those who identify themselves as Conservatives and Republicans regarding gun rights, right to life, same-sex marriage, big government, unions, taxes, belief in the “magic of the market place” to determine social justice, the death penalty, hawkish foreign policy, etc.? The same question might be asked about the cluster of beliefs among those who identify themselves as liberals and Democrats on the same issues, but more often than not the answers are directly opposite the conservative position. Is there some unifying theory of human behavior that explains these clusters?

Obviously, the separation between conservatives/Republicans and liberals/ Democrats is not a single dimension; many in both groups are economic conservatives and social liberals. But in general the voting behavior is fairly consistent in party affiliation. Therefore, I am addressing the “base” of these two groups. There are some personality variables that characterize voters regardless of political persuasion; I will first address those traits and in the latter part of this essay I will turn to the factors that seem to differentiate the far ends of the conservative/liberal continuum.

Much of the explanation of voter behavior is based on slogans and stereotyping, e.g., “hard-hearted” conservatives or “bleeding heart” liberals. On the face of it, these two terms seem to have some validity when applied to crime, affirmative action, government entitlement programs, etc. Based on my study of psychology, I have tried to look for fundamental personality characteristics that are relatively stable that would explain those patterns of behavior in a scientific way. During my studies in the 50s, I encountered a typology, “tough-minded” and “tender-minded” personalities developed by a British psychologist, Hans Eysenck. I used that typology for my master’s thesis. I have recently used that hypothesis to see how it explains the behavior of American voters. In small discussions groups over the past few years, I have tried to understand why my friends consistently take a conservative or liberal stance on issues.

In general, “conservatives” seem to be rather unsympathetic to the plight of the poor, unemployed, criminals, etc. and minimize mitigating factors. “Liberals” are more sympathetic to

the poor, unemployed, criminals. (They look for mitigating factors to explain, and perhaps exonerate, behavior). While the “tough-minded/tender-minded” typology seems to explain some of the variance, I’m still searching for a more general theory. “Tough-minded” people insist that individuals be held accountable for their own welfare. Each individual has an equal opportunity in our society and if they are willing to work hard, they will succeed (see George Will’s comment). It is a “free choice.” Liberals argue that it is not a level playing field; people are born with differing abilities and differ in their life experiences. We must take these differences into account when distributing justice and the government has a role in this distribution. Liberals argue that empirical evidence shows that most individuals will not have the discipline to save for retirement, buy health insurance, etc. Conservatives argue otherwise; it is the welfare state that causes individuals to avoid responsibility and, if people don’t assume the responsibility, they must be made to pay the consequences. Likewise, conservatives argue, people out of work are responsible for finding jobs; unemployment payments keep them from looking for a job. Are the different views a reflection of ideological lenses that filter reality?

What follows is heavy stuff, so bear with me.

Underlying Psychological Factors That Affect Ideology.

The July 2010 edition of the National Journal suggested a possible theory to explain the basis of a tough-minded (conservative) approach to human behavior. The cover story, “The Politics of the Brain” suggests that cutting-edge neuroscience could fling a political wrecking ball at liberal and conservative dogma on many public policy issues. The notion of personal responsibility lies at the heart of the theory, as explained in this passage:

“Consider conservatives’ enshrinement of the notion of personal responsibility—a totemic object of worship in their ideological constellation, from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush, in modern political times. Sorry, but neuroscience is finding that personal responsibility may not be the lodestar that conservatives think it is.

The scientific chain of logic goes like this: Personal responsibility hinges on the assumption that people have free will, defined as the ability to make considered choices about their conduct. This is a bedrock concept in Judeo-Christian theology, which couches free will as the freedom to choose between good and evil, between doing the right thing and acting sinfully.”

There is probably no scientific concept more controversial than “free will.” Not only does it conflict with “common sense,” it encounters emotional religious beliefs, as cited by the Journal article. Nonetheless, let me address conventional wisdom and make a logical case for what is often called “psychic determinism.” Follow my argument carefully and be prepared to rebut it in class. In essence, this concept rests on the assumption that the basic scientific laws of cause and effect that govern the physical world applies to human behavior.

Common sense, and scientific research, tells us that the way people think and behave is shaped by forces that begin at conception, forces largely beyond the control of the individual. Each person inherits a set of genes that determine both intellectual and emotional traits that set them apart (other than identical twins) and these traits circumscribe personality development. Hereditary qualities are similar to the hard wiring of computers. While we may like the term “all

men (and women) are created equal,” this is demonstrably untrue. We start out life with biological (physical and mental) by hereditary advantages and disadvantages. Moreover, these hereditary biological attributes are shaped from the beginning by environmental factors largely beyond the individual’s control. The fetus is impacted by a multitude of stimuli that determine how the hereditary predispositions will develop. The mother’s dietary habits, smoking and drinking habits, exercise—even the playing of music while pregnant—have been shown to affect the personality of the individual.

Newborns are thrust into environments that differ drastically. Some parents are warm and caring; others are cold and uncaring. How much this affects future development is immeasurable. As a child grows, it is exposed to both intellectual and emotional experiences that shape its reaction to the cultural world. Beliefs about what is right or wrong in terms of religion, political ideology, justice, personal responsibility, etc. are systematically formed. I believe we can all agree that these environmental factors are largely beyond the control of the individual. Some people are fortunate to have a rich culture that prepares them to succeed in life; others suffer from a poverty of culture that limits their development.

One may argue that people are not passive objects to environmental forces; rather, they can “choose” how to react. Those who make this argument often cite the case of an individual who rises above deplorable surroundings and reaches great heights of achievement. Generalizing from a small sample of anecdotes is logically dishonest. Not all environmental factors are detectable; moreover, individuals differ in intellectual and emotional traits that they have inherited and that have been shaped by events preceding the moment when they first “choose” to react to a given situation. How much “freedom” a person has is open to philosophical speculation. Many reputable scientists reject the notion of “free will;” rather, they accept the notion that mental behavior follows the same principles of cause and effect that govern the physical world. The term used is “psychic determinism.” (This not the same as “predestination,” which is a religious concept)

I believe we can agree that humans are born with varying degrees of intellectual and emotional qualities; these are determined by parental genes. The individual has no responsibility for his (I will use the masculine form for simplicities sake) hereditary package. I also believe we can all agree that the combination of physical and mental qualities determine how the individual will response to the real-world sensory inputs that come early in life (actually, research indicates that fetuses react in different ways while still in uterus). If we can agree that after birth the initial responses to sensory input are determined by heredity, let us explore the question of when an individual exercises “free will” in “choosing” to react one way or another in a given situation.

At whatever age or circumstance in one’s life—point X—we decide to hold an individual “responsible” for his first “free” decision, logically we need to identify input other than heredity or past experience though the five senses that influences the decision. What logical sense does it make to establish an “age of reason” that can be used to establish moral accountability when the first choice (point X) by definition has been determined by inputs beyond the control of the individual? Is there some transcendental force that provides the input? If so, how is the individual responsible? If there is no third force, does it make logical sense to posit some internal process that is independent of heredity and past inputs?

Acceptance of complete psychic determinism (or lack of free will) is unacceptable to many people, even if it is supported by logic. It undermines the basic premise of most religions and raises questions about accountability in everyday behavior. For the sake of argument let us reject the absolute version of determinism and address the question of “partial determinism.”

Given the variations of genetic makeup and life circumstances, can we say that there are degrees of freedom? Everyday observation tells us that the game of life is not a level playing field. People are born with different levels of intelligence, physical attribute, and into different environmental conditions. Assume individual “A” is born with an innate level of intellectual capacity that will measure an IQ of 70 on a standardized test. His parents have little formal education; there is no intellectual stimulation in the home; the parents instill no strong moral values; he has no access to pre-school; he struggles in school and drops out; and he finds it hard to get employment. Compare that to individual “B” born with an IQ of 160; of educated parents who provide intellectual stimulation; instill strong moral values and a work ethic; pre-school education is provided; he excels in school and easily finds employment. It is clearly not a level playing field. The role of government in ameliorating the injustice is another matter; what is that role? Conservatives and liberals differ on the answer.

Add to the variables identified above: race; sex; religion; and ethnicity. Any objective analysis would find it difficult to conclude that the two individuals have the same degree of “free will” to make tough choices that involve good and bad outcomes as defined by society. Some will argue that yes, but life is not fair and individuals must play the hand they are dealt. A book by a sociologist (Herbert Spencer) in the 19th Century argued for a public policy of “Social Darwinism,” that is, survival of the fittest. He suggested that it is beneficial to weed out the weak in order that the human species could evolve into a hardier species (The Supreme Court, in *Lochner v. New York*, 1905, cited that book as justification for the decision denying the State of New York the right to regulate working conditions). Since we are concerned here with current public policy, let us see how such an analytical framework can be applied in a practical manner in such areas as criminal behavior, economic activities, and the role of government in establishing “distributive justice.” For purposes of this essay, my hypothesis is that conservatives are less likely to consider life circumstances as mitigating factors in public policy.

In regard to criminal justice, we have long recognized the differences in life circumstances by considering “mitigating circumstances.” In general conservatives want to hold people accountable regardless of backgrounds. The recent execution of a woman for murder in Virginia is a case in point; she fits the “A” personality fairly well, with an IQ of 70, which is borderline mentally incompetent. She was the first woman executed in Virginia in almost a century. She asked two men to kill her husband and step son so she could collect insurance. The evidence indicated she was manipulated by one of the men, who was her lover. The killers got life imprisonment. Liberals decried the execution; conservatives generally applauded it.

The death penalty is very controversial and in some ways the perfect issue to illustrate how conservatives and liberals look at “free will,” or shades thereof. The U.S. is one of the few democracies that allow the death penalty, with the decision left to the States. The States that allow it are overwhelmingly “Red” States i.e., conservative. What is the justification for the death penalty? Is it a deterrent, is it for retribution, is it for the cathartic effect, or some combination of the three?

Those who take mitigating circumstances into account when dispensing punishment are in effect accepting a lesser degree of individual responsibility than implied by 100% free will. This is frequently labeled as “soft on crime;” and can be a kiss of death politically. When presidential candidate Michael Dukakis expressed the view that he was against the death penalty even if someone murdered his wife, his poll numbers dropped precipitously. The voting public, especially conservatives, want leaders who are “tough on crime.”

Where does one draw the line in accepting mitigating circumstances without losing social control? Consider the sociological study some fifty years ago that identified ten factors that are correlated to teen-age crime (the figures I give are for illustration only because I have not dug up the study). Factors such as single parent, mother a prostitute, living in poverty, etc. each had a significant correlation. Using a statistical tool called factor analysis, the researchers were able to identify which permutations and combinations of these factors would lead to criminal behavior. For example, they found that if a teen had 7 of these in his life he would have a 60% probability of a criminal file. If he had ten factors, there was a 95% probability. Also consider that today 59% of federal prisoners and 75% of State prisoners are high school dropouts. The chain of causal factors is clear. Since there are an infinite number of variables in one's environment, it is impossible to account for all inputs to one's behavior. For example, an individual that had ten factors and still was free of crime may have had a teacher become a significant person that countered the unfavorable factors.

In formulating policy to deal with undesirable behavior, whether it is crime, unemployment, drug abuse, welfare dependency, school dropouts, etc., what is the alternative to holding the social miscreants personally responsible for their conduct? Liberals tend to focus on environmental factors and argue for social programs such as better housing, pre-school opportunities, counseling, affirmative action, etc. In other words, let's focus on the circumstances that "caused" the undesirable behavior. Many of these policies are labeled "welfare programs," especially if the minority population has a higher percentage of recipients. Conservatives tend to focus on holding the individual responsible for his choice of behavior. This view has led the U.S. to have the largest prison population in the world. Unemployment benefits are viewed as encouraging individuals to stay on welfare rather than find a job. The "Welfare State" breeds a culture of dependency that is passed from generation-to-generation. It is best to leave it to the "market place" to correct these kinds of problems, even if it is brutal in its outcomes.

One can make arguments for both approaches to public policy; it is not all black-and-white. Providing good housing and economic support does not translate easily to eradicating the "poverty of culture." While basic needs are essential, they are not sufficient. Motivating individuals to pull themselves up by their bootstraps is an essential component of public policy. It is a matter of emphasis, and it seems to me that extreme conservatives often err in direction of leaving it all to the market place. In the case of civil rights legislation, some conservatives still believe the government should not force private hotels and restaurants to serve African Americans; rather, that should be left to the market place. Robert Bork was rejected for a seat on the Supreme Court for advocating that policy. Many Republicans and conservative Democrats from the South fought the 1960s Civil Rights Act using the same argument. Newly-elected Senator Rand Paul takes the Bork position.

Adam Smith is the economic guru of conservatives who espouse the "magic of the market place." His Wealth of Nations (1776) is their bible. Smith also wrote A Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759), in which he said, "The disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and the powerful...[is] the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments." Perhaps conservatives should spend some time reading the earlier work. When I showed some unidentified excerpts from it to my students at the National Defense University in the 1980s, they attributed them to Karl Marx.

The degree to which one leaves it to the "market place" to correct social problems is critical in identifying where one falls on the conservative/ liberal continuum. The history of

“progressive government” has been one of expanding the role of government in providing an economic “safety net” for the disadvantaged. Conservatives have argued for a “free market” as the best approach to ensure justice while liberals have argued for government intervention. Social Security, Medicare, Minimum Wage laws, workplace safety (OSHA), and the 2010 Health Reform Act are examples of such intervention. Most of these policies have been under Democratic Presidents (Teddy Roosevelt and Richard Nixon were exceptions). The reader can find several essays on this topic in my personal website cited above, www.nsiijohns.com

Politicians are sensitive to the danger of being labeled as callous toward the unfortunate; hence the claim to be a “compassionate conservative.” Likewise, one must not be labeled a “bleeding heart liberal,” as I cited in the case of Dukakis. Bill Clinton fought the label by declaring “the era of big government is over,” and later, “welfare as we know it is over.” In the 22 October 2010 edition of The Week, this was the Quote of the week:

“In American politics, Republicans routinely speak in broad themes and tend to blur the details, while Democrats typically ignore broad themes and focus on details. Republicans, for example, speak constantly of ‘liberty’ and ‘freedom’ and couch practically all their initiatives—tax cuts, deregulation, and so forth—within these large categories. Democrats, on the other hand, talk more about specific programs and policies and steer clear of big themes. There is a reason for this: Republican themes, like ‘liberty, are popular, while Republican policies often are not; and Democratic themes (‘community,’ ‘compassion,’ ‘justice’) are less popular, while many specific Democratic programs—Social Security, Medicare, even (in many polls) putting a price on carbon emissions—have majority support.” Michael Tomasky in The New York Review of Books

These broad themes give the Republicans the advantage in theory. When specific programs such as Social Security and Medicare are the focus, Democrats win. Witness the recent “Ryan Budget” and the specific issue of Medicare. The Tea Party has capitalized on that knowledge; a survey by the Washington Post reported that the top five words used by Tea Party members to describe themselves were: patriotism, constitutionalism, freedom, liberty, and grass roots. (24 October 2010, p. A9). This reminds me of the advice given in a textbook I used in a 1948 class “Public Opinion and Propaganda,” to wit, “to win an election, wrap yourself in the American Flag, stand on the Constitution, and quote the Bible.” (Public Opinion and Propaganda, Leonard Doob, 1948).

Summary.

There are clear substantive differences between the two major parties as I have tried to describe in this paper. It seems to me that the central issue facing us in the immediate future is what we want the government (particularly the Federal Government) role to be. As I stated earlier, a yardstick we can use to estimate the answer is how much resources we allocate to the government. In regard to the Federal Government, should it be the 18%, 21%, or 23% ? Even in terms of Washington budgets, a \$750B difference in the annual federal budget is real money. Simplistic slogans using glittering generalities cloud the issue. Do voters understand the consequences when they vote for these concepts of the

government role in their lives? I don't think so! Did the 2010 election signal a return to the pre-New Deal era of a Spartan government? Or was it the Economy stupid?"

One of the most disturbing factors in the body politic today is the emotional rhetoric based on negativism in general and specifically the anger and hate targeting both individuals and institutions. You are not only wrong if you disagree with me—you are evil, unpatriotic, and unworthy of trust. Why do political candidates and elected officials use these techniques that are dysfunctional to an effective democratic process? The answer is simple: these techniques work to get one elected. There is a label for candidates who refuse to use negativity and vitriol: losers!

We are left with the only logical conclusion regarding blame for our dysfunctional system—it is “We the People.” The tragedy in Arizona contains a lesson, but what is that lesson? It immediately provided material for partisan rhetoric. I suggest that the violence reflects a disdain for government in general. Our political system thrives on bashing “the government.” It is the bread and butter of such movements as the “Politics of Rage” practiced by George Wallace, to a lesser degree by Pat Buchanan, and by some political figures today. The leftists practiced it in the 60s, albeit without the umbrella of a political label. When public trust and confidence is lost, can we endure? As Sissela Bok put it:

“...Trust is a social good to be protected just as much as the air we breathe or the water we drink. When it is damaged, the community as a whole suffers; and when it is destroyed, societies falter and collapse.

...Trust and integrity are precious resources, easily squandered, hard to regain...”

Lying, 1978

If we are to return to a civil and rational political discourse that is essential for our form of government, we must develop a rational dialogue to educate voters to a degree that they know what they are voting for and the policy consequences of those choices. I have no magic solution for this problem. The formula that calls for extensive government services and low taxes is a recipe for gridlock. This dilemma may come to a head within the next few weeks, but certainly in the coming years. The voters will choose, but I'm not confident that, for reasons discussed in this paper, they will make a rational decision.

For those of you who wish to soar up the ladder of generality, I encourage you to follow the political turmoil that is taking place around the world. As I write this, there are articles about the turmoil in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria—and excerpts from an interview with the President of China, where he (Hu) explains why China will keep a tight control on political behavior while they modernize. Both articles focus on the U.S. emphasis on pluralistic democracy. President Hu rejects it as a model for China. I suggest you follow these events with the question in mind—is our form of pluralistic democracy appropriate to today's challenges? Assume that we genuinely believe our economic and political systems are the best for everyone, does this justify a “Pax Americana” foreign policy that tries to enforce it on others?

