

Political Ideologies as Perceptual Filters

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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 current election may determine to a large degree whether the system is beyond repair. Will the voters be able to rationally choose what kind of nation they want? And, will the new administration be able to claim the legitimacy needed to govern?

Introduction.

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. 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, 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 make the decision. What are these conflicting ideologies? **Understanding them is a prerequisite to studying the Constitution.**

The Nature of Beliefs and Ideologies.

People develop belief systems that provide mental maps that make sense of 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. How many people understand macro economics; the difference between “supply-side” and “demand-side” economics; the difference between Keynesian and Laissez-faire economics? Some of this lack of understanding 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). Most people have a need for closure in their beliefs. Similar to the search for answers to what life is all about—where most people turn to religious authorities and “divine revelation—people who look

for answers in the secular realm turn to what they consider to be authoritative sources. On economic and political matters, where do they turn?

Most people inherit the political ideologies of their parents, similar to the way they adopt the religious affiliations of their parents. Education, it is of the right sort that emphasizes critical thought, opens doors to new ideas, but as we shall see in the discussion below, accepting new ideas can be stressful. Therefore, the tendency is to turn to sources that reinforce what they already believe. In addition to the leaders of their party affiliation, Conservatives turn to Fox News, Washington Times, and The National Review. Liberals turn to MSNBC, NY Times, and the Nation. 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. Their beliefs and ideologies are “The Truth.” 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. Thus, we have the makings of a polarized electorate and political gridlock that create the conditions described by James Fallows. Unless we correct this condition, he says, we are in trouble.

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. The easy path is to retreat to the comfort of the cave. Ideological rigidity is equivalent to 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 militarily.

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 that support the notion of global warming 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). What accounts for this discrepancy?

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 concerning the political debate today are the terms “conservative and liberal.” While these are not “pure types,” and the boundaries are vague, I believe they are useful for our purposes. 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. **These differences are closely correlated to how one interprets the Constitution.**

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. 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 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. 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. Therefore, the government must take a paternalistic view and mandate such behavior. 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?

As we approach the study of the Constitution, I ask that each participant open his or her mind to different views. Recognize that each of us has firm convictions based on our particular ideology. Look for empirical evidence where it is applicable; don’t seek the comfort of “cerebral hygiene.” In our classroom discussion, try to engage in dialogue rather than debate (Enclosure).

Enclosure

Debate vs. Dialogue*

Debate

Assuming there is a right answer;
and you have it.

Combative; participants try to
prove the other side wrong.

Its about winning.

Listening to find flaws and make
counter-arguments

Defending assumptions as truth.

Critiquing the other side's position

Defending one's own views against
those of others

Searching for flaws and weaknesses
In other positions

Seeking a conclusion or vote that
ratifies your position

Dialogue

Assuming that many people
have pieces of the answer
and that together you can
craft a solution.

Collaborative; participants
work together toward common
understanding.

Its about exploring common
ground.

Listening to understand, find
meaning and agreement

Revealing assumptions for
re-evaluation

Re-examining all positions

Admitting that others' views
may improve one's own.

Searching for strengths and
value in other positions.

Discovering new options, not
seeking closure

ADVOCACY

INQUIRY

* Synthesized and adapted from work of The Public Conversations Project, National Study Circles Resources, The Common Enterprise, and Mark Gerzon, Mediators Foundation and [The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook](#), by Peter Senge.

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