

4.7 Ideologies of Political Parties

Explain how the ideologies of the two major parties shape policy disputes.

Believe it or not Americans are not divided on everything. The extreme partisan rift that appears to characterize our political system today does not quite tell the whole story. We all share, to some extent, an agreed upon political culture. American political culture is comprised of a set of collective values. We all at least have heard of or are committed to some concept of an American Dream. Autonomous achievement is valued here. Success is a derivative of hard work, not some sort of government hand out. We value egalitarianism, equality. No one class of persons is deserving of dignity over another. The freedom to make our own decisions combined with the assurance of being treated equally is at the bedrock of American society. These values make up our unique American political culture. But do not confuse them with our distinct set of political ideologies. Culturally we have much in common. It is our ideologies that separate us.

The experts tell us, at least those calling themselves political scientists, that both well thought out and heart-felt ideologies should not be trivialized or downplayed. In the highly influential book *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) the authors posited the following claim: "Ideologies have for different individuals, different degrees of appeal, a matter that depends upon the individual's needs and the degree to which these needs are being satisfied or frustrated." What we both believe and perceive to be true matters, in fact it matters a lot. Our political ideology is not rooted in random experience and/or psychology. Rather, our political views reflect in no small way our individual essence.

John T. Jost, notable political psychologist, has asserted that "ideology" is a shared system of beliefs "about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved." Jost suggested that ideology "offers a sense of certainty, predictability, and control; a sense of safety, security, and reassurance; and a sense of identity, belongingness, and shared reality." It is the "how" we achieve this that separates us politically. Ideologies are less malleable. Ideological rigidity makes it difficult to compromise. Ideology is what often makes our political process a zero-sum game. Our two major political parties, Democrats and Republicans, represent our different political ideologies.

The Democratic Party is generally influenced by liberal ideology. Liberals value change. They are open to different experiences. Political scientists have found liberals to view society to be more like a caring family. Thus, the role of government is to assure greater fairness, equality and moral justice. Liberals often see government as the solution, the adult in the room, to help solve societal ills. The Democratic Party offers those who hold to a liberal ideology a home, candidates to vote for, and a promise of a government that will fight for these ideals.

The Republican Party, conversely, is generally influenced by conservative ideology. Conservatives value stability. They put an emphasis on maintaining traditions. Conservatives generally support the status quo. Change for change sake is silly. Government is seen less as a solution and more as a problem. Conservatives characterize government not as a loving parent but more as an authoritarian obstruction to free markets. The Republican Party offers those who hold to a conservative ideology a home, candidates to vote for, and a promise of a government that will fight for these ideals.

When assessing American culture there is much that we can agree on. This is not the case when assessing our political ideologies. Rooted in a political system that values independence, free speech, and freedom to believe and worship without government interference, our ideological

divisions should not come as a surprise. Nor should we imagine it should be any different. In no small way it has been our ideological differences that have from the very beginning defined America's greatest quality. We are made up of a dynamic population of free thinkers who act in concert with like-minded individuals to achieve the type of society that they want to live in. It is the freedom to act upon our respective ideologies that make our political institutions strong. The ideologies of our two major parties shape our political disputes. Such divisions should not be derided but applauded. **Widely held political ideologies shape policy debates and choices in American policies.**