

4.10 Ideology and Social Policy

Explain how political ideologies vary on the role of government in addressing social issues. Explain how different ideologies impact policy on social issues.

“We the people” form and act upon our political beliefs in a variety of ways. Our demographic inheritance plays an important part in our political socialization. Gender, ethnicity, religious heritage, region and socio-economic status go a long way in explaining why we think about politics the way that we do. Zip code helps to dictate our destiny. Yet there are other factors. Life experiences provide cleavages to what would otherwise be expected political opinions. Certain topics mobilize our attention. We galvanize around hot button issues. Nevertheless we should not underestimate the role played by influential heuristics.

Frugal in nature, heuristics provide “all the information that is required” by way of a short cut. Heuristic devices allow relatively uninformed individuals to act both rationally and confidently. They are political cues that inform our political beliefs. Heuristics help us participate in the political process without having to exert too much effort. Heuristics come in a variety of forms. We take our cues from trusted leaders and elites. Polls help us sort out what to think and believe. Most importantly, however, we find political short cuts in the labels that we use. Political labels serve as short cuts for every day citizens. Party identification continues to be one of the most important factors in determining our political behavior. In this section we will look at the major political labels and explain briefly what each suggests inside the political arena.

Conservative ideologies have differing views on the role of government in addressing social issues. The Republican Party represents conservatives in our government. Conservatives tend to look back. They are fond of the glory days of the past. Conservatives tend to hold traditional moral values. They approve of government intervention when upholding these values. For instance, conservatives push the Republican Party to advocate against abortion, drug use and sexual promiscuity. They do not, however, welcome government interference in private business affairs. Conservatives speak loudly about market forces and the free flow of capital. Republican policies support small business and lower taxes. The role of government should be limited. On the right side of the political spectrum you find conservatives who are supported by the Republican Party.

Liberal ideologies have differing views on the role of government in addressing social issues. The Democratic Party represents liberals in our government. Liberals tend to look forward. Rather than relying upon old ideas, they favor policy experimentation. This attitude affects their values. They oppose government intervention when it comes to private choices. For instance, liberals push the Democratic Party to maintain a women’s right to choose an abortion and to approve of same sex marriage. Liberals do, however, advocate government intervention when it comes to the economy. Often liberal Democrats are characterized as “the tax and spend” party. Liberals encourage a robust and active government to address societal injustices. Democrats favor policies that redistribute wealth across the economic base.

Communitarian ideologies have differing views on the role of government in addressing social issues. Those who espouse communitarianism share a kinship with Chartists and Democratic Socialists. Relatively small in number, communitarians stress our social connection over individual liberty. Communitarians stress civil society as the ultimate end of government. Emboldened to preserve a healthy society, communitarian governments are called upon to protect an egalitarian

public sphere. Often this involves the absence of private property and the elimination of elite privileges. Necessitating big government, communitarianism usually requires reconciling the tensions between dominion and subordination. The state or community possesses dominion over all while the individual subordinates self-interest to the public good. No major political party serves as a perfect home to communitarians.

Libertarian ideologies have differing views on the role of government in addressing social issues. Libertarian political beliefs can be seen in stark contrast to communitarians. Whereas communitarians prioritize equality, the primary objective of libertarians is individual freedom. The best way to maximize freedom is to minimize government intervention. Their party platform would say, "No one is forced to sacrifice his or her values for the benefit of others." Laissez-faire capitalism is preferred. Libertarians generally advocate for a minimalist state. Everyday citizens are empowered to make the primary decisions in life for themselves. In this way they act like market conservatives when speaking of their economics and liberals when they advocate for the legalization of marijuana. No major political party serves as a perfect home to libertarians.

Policy trends concerning the level of government involvement in social issues reflect the success of conservative and liberal perspectives. Both the Republicans and Democrats, respectively, have built broad coalitions that attract large groups of both advocates and voters. As an effective heuristic, Republicans attract conservatives while Democrats attract liberals. Our political institutions, made up of primarily conservatives and liberals, reinforce these types. Furthermore cues from elites in the media and elsewhere also strengthen the efficacy of these political ideologies and labels. Polls do the same. Though political beliefs in the United States take on many different forms, issues and ideas the vast majority of our citizens can be categorized as either conservatives or liberals, Republicans or Democrats.

Conservative ideology, as championed by the Republican Party, has found policy success when advocating for such social issues as pro-life, law and order, school improvements and welfare reform. Conservatives have found the Supreme Court to be an ally in their attempts to limit a women's choice to have an abortion. In such cases as *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992) the U.S. Supreme Court upheld certain state policies that legislated certain abortion restrictions unless they imposed "an undue burden" on women. School choice and voucher programs have been upheld in court cases like *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* (2002). Policy-making is complex. There are winners and losers. At certain times conservatives find themselves on the winning side.

But then again liberals win also. Liberal ideology, as championed by the Democratic Party, has found policy success when advocating for such social issues as environmentalism, same-sex marriage, LGBT rights and neutralizing the War on Drugs. In the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) a plurality of justices ruled in favor of the constitutionality of differing state recognitions concerning marriage. In particular, the court recognized the legitimacy of same-sex marriage. Policy-making is never beanbag. Our ideological differences make certain that for every issue there are organized groups arguing both for and against. Liberals can often find reasons to be optimistic. Many of their cherished social issues have found advocates both at the national level and at the state level.

Our revolutionary spirit, what some have called our "national character," is rooted in ideas and practices that predate not only our own time but also the American war for independence. A government "of the people, by the people and for the people" is more than a Lincoln cliché. The first three words to our national constitution, "we the people," is our Siren Song. Irresistibly, popular sovereignty defines our representative democracy. Even though we have always valued

diversity here, we have ultimately agreed that our political systems have the goal to protect our freedoms, to promote the general welfare and to keep us safe. In this unit we explored how these shared political beliefs, values and norms are preserved, processed and protected. We discovered that **citizens' beliefs about government are shaped by the intersection of demographics, political culture, and dynamic social change. Widely held political ideologies shape policy debates and choices in American politics.**