

# POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES



# AND POLITICAL PARTIES



# IN AMERICA

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# I

## Introduction

### *Distilling Their Frenzy from Some Academic Scribbler*

The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.

*John Maynard Keynes*  
“*The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*” 1936

First, the shaping of belief systems of any range into apparently logical wholes that are credible to large numbers of people is an act of creative synthesis characteristic of only a miniscule proportion of any population. Second, to the extent that multiple idea-elements of a belief system are socially diffused from such creative sources, they tend to be diffused as “packages,” which consumers come to see as “natural” wholes, for they are presented in such terms (“If you believe this, then you will also believe that, for it follows in such-and-such ways”).

*Philip Converse*  
“*The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics*” 1964

Herbert Croly was not a man of action.

Croly’s life was spent thinking. In 1909, Croly published *The Promise of American Life*, in which he argued, in short, that a strong central government might intervene in the economy in ways that could improve the lot of disadvantaged citizens. This was a novel argument at the time, because many who saw themselves as on the side of disadvantaged farmers and workers had believed that government interventions usually helped business owners. It was an argument embraced by neither the Democrats nor the Republicans.

William F. Buckley was also not a man of action. In 1951, Buckley published *God and Man at Yale*, in which he argued that the curriculum at Yale University, and by extension the country at large, was being radically reworked



by academics whose values were at odds with those of the Yale alumni. Specifically, these professors were undermining market individualism and religious faith. Buckley's arguments, too, were not entirely embraced by either of the major political parties of his time.

Today, a century after Croly and a half-century after Buckley, these arguments are not only familiar; they are central to partisan conflict. Democrats agree with Croly that the government can and should be used to help the least well-off, through guaranteeing collective bargaining rights of union workers, ensuring more expansive health care, or creating a social safety net. Republicans, on the other hand, agree with Buckley both about the importance of the free market and religion and about the role of liberal intellectuals in squelching those values.

Croly and Buckley were men of ideas. It took the Democratic and Republican parties to put their ideas into action. How this happens is the principal subject of this book.

This book argues that ideology and party are independent things. Both are ways of organizing coalitions, telling political actors who is their ally and who is their enemy. But they do so in different ways. Ideology is created by "academic scribblers" and other men of ideas, whose "creative synthesis" ties policy ideas into packages that we come to know as liberal or conservative or by some other name.

When those ideological packages become well organized, they can define a political coalition that can reshape political-party coalitions. Political parties are coalitions of interests, but they need not be the same coalitions defined by ideologies. The latter half of the twentieth century represents just such a case. The ideological divide between liberals and conservatives was not reflected in the partisan divide between Republicans and Democrats. The ideologies proscribed different coalitions than the parties did. As such, liberal and conservative activists pressured both parties to be more reflective of their ideological coalitions. In that case, after much conflict, the ideological coalition won out.

Although hardly the only important actors in that process, Herbert Croly and William F. Buckley are illustrative of many of the dynamics, and worth spending a little more time with.

### **Herbert Croly and *The New Republic*: Jeffersonian Ends with Hamiltonian Means**

Croly was hardly the first liberal, or the first progressive. But he stands at a point where the largely disjointed progressive movement began to coalesce around a set of policy directions that eventually evolved into modern American liberalism. Much of that development was mapped by his work in *The Promise of American Life*. Croly's book begins by describing a long-standing debate in U.S. political thought about the scope and nature of the central government that Croly traced to the conflict between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander

Hamilton. Hamilton envisioned the United States as a dynamic new country with a powerful economy, and he felt the central government needed to incubate its growth. That meant a large government, creating institutions such as a central bank and funding public works with tariffs on trade. This approach came to be one of the common threads in the platforms of the Federalists, and later the Whigs and Republicans.

Jefferson disagreed. He was concerned that these efforts tended to favor the powerful and wealthy, especially those in the central cities, at the expense of poorer farmers and other workers. Tariffs made it harder for farmers to sell to foreign markets, and a central bank shifted power away from local banks. Jefferson favored democracy and particularly the inclusion of those whose voices were missing from the halls of economic power. Jefferson's views came to be associated with the Jeffersonian Democrat-Republicans and later the Democratic Party.

The debate between Hamilton and Jefferson was about many things, of course. One issue was democracy and equality, and another was the size of government. Hamilton wanted to use the central government to improve the country. He had a vision of a dynamic U.S. economy, but that vision required the development of institutions to cultivate the U.S. business elite. Jefferson, on the other hand, was concerned that a strong central government would only improve the country for those who were already in power.

Croly argued that this relationship between government and the powerful need not be the case. The ends of equality and democracy that Jefferson advocated could be and had been threatened by a strong central government, but government activism could also be used in the service of those ends. A powerful government could be the ally of freedom and equality, and so should be embraced, not feared.

This is an example of what Converse referred to as creative synthesis. Croly is taking two ideas that for many did not go together – government intervention and the interests of the less well-off – and explaining why they should go together. Importantly, Croly did more than just talk about abstract principles. His argument was rooted at the level of big ideas – democracy and the size of government – but he also went on to clarify what those big ideas meant for specific government action. He drew the line from principles to policy. For instance, Croly argues in favor of a minimum wage and other labor restrictions. He arrives at his position on that policy question by first considering the status of the working class, and from that deriving the need for labor unions to be recognized and bargained with, and from there to the specifics about a minimum wage. (e.g., pp. 385–398). In short, he connected the dots between abstract principles and the issues of his day.

Croly's position is widely held today by liberals in the United States. But it was not so supported, even for progressives, at the end of the nineteenth century. At the same time, while Croly was among the first to articulate the importance of large-scale government intervention on behalf of the less fortunate, he

was not the only one. Croly was building on the work of many other political thinkers – notably Lester Ward and Josiah Royce – as well as interacting with his own contemporaries. He was part of a conversation about political goals that mapped abstract ideas to specific policy prescriptions.

One thing that Croly can be credited with, however, is popularizing those ideas. *The Promise of American Life* was no *Harry Potter*, but it was popular. It got the attention of then-former president, Theodore Roosevelt, who sought out Croly's policy advice (Levy 1985). The New Nationalism, the platform for Roosevelt's 1912 third-party bid for the presidency, drew heavily from *The Promise of American Life*.

More importantly, however, Croly and like-minded Progressives founded *The New Republic*, a journal of opinion that gave Progressives a place to focus their energies. Croly assembled an editorial team that included Walter Weyl and Walter Lippmann. Although Croly saw himself as the "philosopher" of the publication, it was clear that it would be the voices of many who would help sort out what the progressive movement really stood for, and what policy goals it would attempt to achieve. Progressivism had its advocates outside (and before) *The New Republic* as well, of course. Their collective output shaped the "platform" of the movement, without ever holding a vote on any plank or calling a convention. The result was a publication that would, quite explicitly, "provide guidance to the progressive movement" (Levy 1985, p. 191).

*The New Republic* reflected a desire to influence politics, and Croly's relationship with Roosevelt was important. At the same time, Croly was no politician – his loyalty was not to any party, but to Progressivism itself. The movement's – and Croly's – relationship with Woodrow Wilson is telling. It anticipates the modern polarizing tensions between liberals and conservative activists on the one hand and politicians who are insufficiently pure on the other.

When Roosevelt lost the 1912 election, splitting the Republican vote with William Howard Taft and giving the victory to Woodrow Wilson, many Progressives were wary. Wilson's platform in the election, dubbed the New Freedom, pointed away from the New Nationalism. Wilson found some progressive ideas appealing, but he was not the progressive that Roosevelt was. But after Wilson won, progressives worked with the new president anyway, rather than fighting to replace him, and they were successful in getting Wilson to adopt many progressive policies. Croly eventually joined other progressives in backing Wilson for reelection in 1916, but it was never about the man. Their support was always contingent on his support for their policy goals. When Wilson wrote in 1914 that the New Freedom had been a success, implying that the major social problems that progressives sought to cure might have been alleviated, it angered progressives who thought much more work had to be done. Croly wrote a bitter editorial in *The New Republic*, accusing Wilson of being only superficially committed to progressivism (Link 1954).

Croly's accusation cuts to the heart of this book. Elected politicians seek to build coalitions to win elections and pass legislation. This is hard work. It is



made even harder by their need to please their constituents. But the constituents they most need to please are people like Croly – or, more importantly, the many activists who agreed with Croly, who have strong ideological beliefs about policies. Those activists make up the labor force of the political party, and they will not work for a party with which they do not agree.

The path of influence from Croly's ideas to Wilson's actions will be taken up in subsequent chapters. What is important is that Croly – along with the others at *The New Republic* and still other progressive outlets – organized a platform of their own, independently of the Republican and Democratic parties. That platform had advocates. It eventually evolved into liberalism, and from there it reshaped the platform of the Democratic Party.

This collective platform was never the beliefs of only one man. Focusing on Croly is illustrative, but the others who inspired Croly and were inspired by him mattered as well. Indeed, one of the most central elements of the liberal platform that slowly emerged in the decades following the creation of *The New Republic* was the pro-civil rights position of liberals on race. This was a position that Croly himself did not share; he was at best indifferent on racial inequality and was no advocate for civil rights, something that came to be central to the liberal position.

The collective liberal platform, as it evolved, reorganized political cleavages. It also brought to the forefront a number of policy positions that were simply never on the agenda. Those proposals developed opponents, however, and it did not take long for those opponents to become ideologically organized as well.

### William F. Buckley and the *National Review*: Standing Athwart History Yelling Stop

Buckley rose to prominence much more quickly than did Croly. His breakthrough book, *God and Man at Yale*, was based on his own experience as an undergraduate at Yale University, and published just a year after he graduated with honors. The book represents a creative synthesis of its own. The argument is not, specifically, about the country as a whole, but about the curriculum at one private university. Buckley argues that the lessons being taught at Yale are far from what most Yale alumni would believe or expect. Economics and social science professors at Yale opposed what Buckley calls “individualism,” in particular a free market economy. Anthropology professors treated major religions as indistinguishable from primitive mythologies. These lessons were disgraceful, in Buckley's argument, not only because they are incorrect, but also because the Yale alumni, whose donations pay the salaries of those professors, would also view them as incorrect.

One might interpret this argument as having a radical relativist character: whatever Yale alumni think, Yale should teach. But the argument is not meant to be taken that way. Rather, the wisdom of the market and the value

of religion are known to be true by most reasonable people, but in the halls of higher education, the next generation of leaders is being taught something that is false. All because no one is watching.

Buckley thought it was time for more people to be paying attention. Conservatives, in his terms, needed to be “standing athwart history, yelling stop” (*National Review* 1955). But if Buckley was going to fight the future, he and other conservatives had to choose which elements of the past needed to be protected and which did not. That was their creative synthesis.

In parallel to *The New Republic*, their work would be done in the *National Review*. As with Croly’s journal, the *National Review* was designed to work out what an ideology stood for. This was an assignment taken seriously by Buckley and his colleagues at the magazine, including Frank Meyer and Whittaker Chambers. The brand of conservatism that the *National Review* advocated was termed fusionism, because it was meant to be a fusion of all the various strands of conservatism – economic, traditionalist, and so forth – bringing them under one banner. This conservatism was about free markets and traditional social order, and those who emphasized part of that tradition were fine, so long as they did not reject the others. A central goal was to focus on the differences between conservatives and the New Deal liberal movement that had evolved out of progressivism, and where possible, not focus on those doctrinal differences within the movement (Nash 1996).

This does not mean, however, that conservatism was a big tent, or that there was no internal disagreement. Important issues had to be resolved. The movement stood for something, and those who did not agree on the major elements were to be cast out. The first such apostate was Peter Viereck, whose view of conservatism was a moderate position, far from the views of Buckley and the others at the *National Review*.

Many early conservatives also resisted the work of Ayn Rand, now an intellectual star of conservatism (Nash 1996, pp. 143–145). Rand’s problem was her atheism. Although conservatives could find much to like in Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*, its enthusiastic rejection of religion, and the attitudes toward society that came along with it, were too much to bear. The *National Review* published critical reviews by Whittaker Chambers and Garry Wills, with Wills arguing that Rand’s philosophy was actually liberal. At the same time, other conservatives, such as Russell Kirk, defended Rand.

Of course, it is possible for different conservatives to take different positions on atheism, and hence on Rand. But the controversy of Rand resolved itself in a way in which her economic, small-government arguments were accepted, while the atheist elements were at least ignored and often explicitly rejected. Some modern libertarians are consistently socially liberal, but a great many tend to also oppose abortion and be practicing Christians.

As with progressivism and liberalism, conservatism was not the position of just one man. Buckley disagreed with much that has come to define conservatism. He favored legalization of drugs and was far from the anti-intellectualism



that characterized the Joseph McCarthy elements of conservatism at the time and that characterize elements of the movement today.

But no one conservative defines conservatism. What matters is the aggregate assembly of principles and policy positions; that collection defines a coalition. More than just making the case for small government in some contexts and the importance of religion in others, the conservative movement stitched together a set of positions. Just like progressives and liberals did.

## The Coalition Merchants

I call the creators and advocates of these coalitions the coalition merchants because as much as they offer well-reasoned arguments about individual policy positions, they also offer the entire package. Ideological movements are about more than getting a single interest advanced – for example, achieving universal health care access or eliminating the federal reserve. Rather, they are about an agenda that spans social and economic issues, foreign and domestic policy. That is the primary argument of this book.

This argument takes several steps. The first is simply that ideology and party are independent forces that nevertheless do similar things. The second is that understanding the distinctive character of ideology requires us to look for systematic evidence outside of the usual places, where we observe party conflict. The third is that ideology, like a party coalition, is dynamic. What an ideology prescribes is argued over and can change over time. Finally, ideology and party coalitions may influence one another. In particular, there is strong evidence that the present parties in the United States have adopted coalitions defined over the past several generations by ideological thinkers.

## *Ideology is Distinct from Party*

Ideologies and parties tell you who is on your side and who is not. They tell you what position you should take on a host of policy questions. But they do so in different ways. Ideology is built around a set of abstract principles. Those principles might be organized in novel and potentially inconsistent ways. As we saw with conservatism and Ayn Rand, those who support those principles will contest just how those principles are to be applied. No doubt human failings, prejudices, and motivated reasoning shape those contests, but that creative synthesis of ideas and policy creates ideologies.

Those ideologies might be tightly related to political parties, but they need not be. The development of the progressive and conservative ideologies described earlier in the chapter occurred independently of the major parties. Parties, too, define enemies and allies and proscribe policy positions, but parties respond to different incentives and fill different needs. Parties need to construct coalitions that can win elections. That makes for strange bedfellows. Ideologies tie issues together, but they are more free to reject valuable allies who do not share important principles.

This perspective is at odds with at least much of the literature on ideology. Anthony Downs (1957), for instance, describes ideology as the rationalization of the platform of a political party (see also Schwartz 1989). The party develops a platform designed to woo voters, and then ideology is constructed to sell that platform to voters, or perhaps to make it easier to understand.

The view of ideology as a rationalization of a party's platform has a hard time explaining the ideological diversity within both parties in the middle of the twentieth century and even today. It is not possible to talk about the conservative coalition, which united Southern Democrats with Republicans, without acknowledging that party and ideology can diverge. Blue Dog Democrats and especially Rockefeller Republicans are becoming endangered species, but an endangered species is not a mythological one.

The trouble is that it can be hard to disentangle party and ideology. The first task is to be serious about what they mean theoretically, which is the first task of this book.

### *To Measure Ideology, We Need to Look Systematically at Ideologues*

For that reason, this book develops a new dataset of the political opinions of pundits and other opinion writers in U.S. history. The data are collected from leading political publications, and coded for the writers' positions on the issues they raise. This allows us to compare the patterns among their political positions with similar data on the positions taken by politicians, in particular the roll-call records of members of Congress.

The measure developed in this book mirrors ideology measures used on Congress, such as NOMINATE scores. Those measures use roll-call votes to infer the ideological locations of the voting Members of Congress.<sup>1</sup> The results from my measure are quite different. In particular, the ideological left-right dimension emerges in the mid-twentieth century among pundits, at a time when significant social and particularly racial issues crosscut the party coalitions.

The key here is patterns, not individuals. If we take a particular policy idea – such as, say, racial desegregation – we should always be able to find an apparent early antecedent, who surely had some role in the development and eventual influence of the idea. But that is not the exercise of this book. We do not want to find the first person who thought that racial equality was a good idea; we want to find the many people who collectively first linked racial equality to government intervention on behalf of the working class, such that the two ideas were tied together in an ideology.

If we find that the pattern of changes is different among pundits than among legislators, that finding would be at odds with another treatment of ideology.

<sup>1</sup> NOMINATE scores assume votes are determined by an unobserved ideological score for each member. The method infers the score by looking at the pattern of votes. Those who take what is inferred to be the liberal position on votes are taken to be more liberal than those who take the opposite position. For more, see Chapter 5 in this volume and Poole and Rosenthal (1997).

Scholars often treat ideology as an exogenous organizing principle that is the same for all actors. But these patterns may not be exogenous; they are likely determined by the actors being measured. If so, then those patterns need not be the same for every group of actors. What goes with what for politicians may not be the same as what goes with what for intellectuals.

### *Ideology is Dynamic*

What it means to be “left” and “right” has changed over the course of U.S. history.<sup>2</sup> Again, most notably, key elements of modern liberal-conservative division over race developed over the course of the twentieth century. This is important, because we tend to attribute ideology to some sort of immutable principles or psychological predispositions, and in turn imagine that ideology itself is somehow fundamental. Principles and predispositions surely do affect how ideologies are adopted and even evolve, but that does not mean that the current arrangement of policy preferences is either fixed or inherent. Again, this finding would be at odds with the literature on ideology, which treats it as exogenous and perhaps more fundamental than other issues. But if ideology changes, then we need to examine how it changes, and why.

### *Ideology can Shape Party Coalitions*

What happens when two ways of organizing politics try to organize it in different ways? Today, Democratic policies tend to be liberal policies, and Republican policies tend to be conservative policies. Most differences stem from attempts by party politicians to moderate to win electoral conflict or achieve legislative compromise. But historically, ideologies have diverged widely from party platforms. The New Deal Democratic platform differed significantly from liberals who came to support civil rights, and the Republican Party platform at that time was far less conservative than it is today.

The party coalitions today match the ideological divisions that emerged before the 1950s. This sequence alone suggests that ideology shaped the party coalitions. Analysis in this book attempts to establish that a liberal-conservative dimension emerged by 1950 that rivaled the existing Democratic-Republican dimension in congressional voting. Over the course of the following decades, the party division reoriented itself to match the ideological dimension that had emerged earlier.

This approach builds on, but also diverges from, the literature on party change. Many scholars argue that party platforms are driven by changes in the preferences of party activists (e.g., Miller and Schofield 2007; Aldrich 1995). This book agrees, but what determines what activists want? If ideology is an exogenous, natural organizing principle, then it is sufficient to say that activists

<sup>2</sup> It can also vary from country to country. Certainly the use of liberal and conservative in the United States is very different from that of other countries. This book focuses on the United States and so employs liberal and conservative in their U.S. usage throughout.



are more extreme than parties. But if ideology is changing, then ideology is itself something that needs attention. Activists do not simply reorient the parties in a common space; they reshape that space. Understanding the independent role of ideology helps clarify that dynamic.

These four main claims are components of the argument developed over the course of this book. Chapter 2 argues more completely that ideologies and parties are separate ways of organizing politics. I develop a theory of parties and ideologies as coalitions, and then outline the ways in which the two organizations might influence one another. Parties and ideology will each influence the other, but I claim that ideological coalitions, when well developed, are more likely to successfully press themselves on partisans than the other way around.

Chapter 3 provides more detail about the mechanisms that cause ideologues to form coalitions. I outline a way in which creative synthesis might occur, and then offer some evidence for that mechanism. Intellectuals, trying to reach correct philosophical principles, will nevertheless be biased by their material interests and psychological predispositions. Their resulting beliefs will thus tie together those with compatible biases.

Chapter 4 presents a measure of ideology applicable to academic scribblers and describes ideology as it emerges from their work. I use an original dataset of the opinions of political thinkers in political journals from 1850 to 1990, drawn at twenty-year intervals, and explore the patterns among those positions, looking for evidence of ideology. What we find is that a unidimensional ideology emerges as an organizing principle among intellectuals beginning in the early decades of the 1900s and has solidified by the 1950s. The political opinions of pundits become increasingly structured over time, until they are strongly structured in the last several decades.

Chapter 5 compares the development among intellectuals with the apparent ideological structure of Congress. The modern ideology that has emerged by 1950 is adopted by Congress by the 1990s. In the 1950s to 1960s, politics in the United States is widely viewed as disrupted by racial policies that crosscut the dominant party division. I show that it is not just race that crosscut the party divisions, but ideology more broadly, including foreign policy issues and even many economic issues. Ideology organized a conflict between liberals and conservatives that was not represented by the party system, but slowly the parties realigned to match that division. Race is an important element, but not the only one.

The standards for causal inference in social science are, thankfully, increasing. It will be hard to show that the ideological coalition caused the partisan one. There is no identification strategy for the influence of ideology on parties, as both permeate politics throughout the United States. We can establish temporal order, and we can also delve into the mechanisms as best we can to show that ideology organized the preferences of political actors before the parties followed. Chapter 6 goes into more detail on several cases in the development of

modern ideology, especially the dominant crosscutting issue of this century: civil rights. But modern ideology is not simply about the absorption of race into the primary ideological cleavage; other issues are also increasingly related to one another through ideology in this period.

Chapter 7 considers the role of ideology in polarization. If ideology among pundits is a recent development, the period since the 1980s is perhaps the first in U.S. history in which the parties are divided by dominant ideologies that were organized independently of political parties and have the power to enforce their positions in those parties.

Chapter 8 concludes by considering the implications of a richer understanding of ideology for a variety of areas of political science and calling for a more integrated and self-conscious study of ideology within the discipline.