Ideology in America

CHRISTOPHER ELLIS
Bucknell University

JAMES A. STIMSON
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

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Preface

The Ohio ballot of 2004 featured a vote on an amendment banning gay marriage. It passed by a large margin. And the same was true in Arkansas, in Georgia, in Mississippi, in Montana, in North Dakota, in Oklahoma, and in Utah. All of these states, most conservative leaning, had ballot measures, and all were lopsided victories for the anti side of the gay marriage debate. The average vote was about 70% for the ban, 30% against.

There was never a large prospect that legal gay marriage was imminent in these states. The bigger story was the possible impact on the election for the president of the United States. The theory was that the ballot measures would mobilize large numbers of culturally conservative usual nonvoters to make a rare trip to the polls and then incidentally vote for George W. Bush, whose campaign was tightly linked to the opposition to gay marriage.

The ballot measures did coincide with increased turnout, particularly in more culturally conservative areas. And in Ohio, critical to Bush's Electoral College victory and won with a margin of just over a hundred thousand votes, the increased conservative turnout might have been enough to put Bush over the edge. Whether or not decisive, the popular narrative of the election in the weeks-long postmortem left an indelible impression that appeal to cultural conservatism in the United States was, as it had been many times before, a formula for Republican electoral success.

Bush wasted no time translating his victory into a proposal for governing. "Let me put it to you this way," he said; "I earned capital in the campaign, political capital, and now I intend to spend it. It is my style."

And then the president set about turning his campaign promise for private accounts in the Social Security system into legislation. The Bush proposal would direct some proportion of the payroll tax contributions of younger workers into private, self-managed accounts, with the presumption that much of the investment would be in stocks with a higher return than the government bond investments of the Social Security system. The new program would dismantle, or at least greatly change, the system of government-financed income security for the elderly in place since the New Deal.

The complication of the proposal was that the Social Security system, as designed, was a system of intergenerational transfer. The current contributions of younger workers, that is, were already dedicated to the retirement support of the generation of their parents and grandparents. Thus the issue was not merely whether to replace a government-held account with a private one but also how to finance the current and future generations of recipients when the money they would require would be redirected into private accounts.

The proposal contemplated borrowing the additional money, a matter of trillions of dollars, when the federal deficit was already growing out of control. Since the demography of the baby boom already had the Social Security system in a deficit in 20 years or so, when the amounts paid out would exceed the amounts coming in, that additional financing was widely seen as a threat to the existing system. Supporters of the current Social Security system worried, and not without reason, that when the debt came due and younger workers were well started with private accounts, the reckoning would involve major cuts to traditional Social Security benefits to balance the books.[1]

As the proposal wound its way to Capitol Hill, the public weighed in. In polls, but perhaps more importantly in personal comments to members of Congress, very large numbers of actual and potential recipients voiced concern that the Bush proposal was a threat to the future of Social Security. The public, it was clear, was in no mood for experimentation. It had been living with the existing system for almost 70 years, liked it, and wanted it to continue unchanged in the future. In an uncertain world, Social Security was a rock, something that could be counted upon.

[1] Bush offered the assurance that the promises of Social Security would always be kept. But since the financial crisis to the system loomed a good decade at least after he would have left office, that was a promise that he was powerless to keep.

As members heard that outpouring, doubts began to arise. "Political capital" or not, Republicans began to become nervous that establishing private accounts would be seen as opposed to the continuation of Social Security, long famous as the "third rail of American politics." It became clear that such a proposal would likely have Republicans going it alone, with no Democratic support. And although the votes of Democrats were not needed, the political cover of bipartisanship was.

Thus the messages going back to the White House from Capitol Hill began to replace enthusiasm with reserve, reserve with caution, and, eventually, caution with fear. Republicans had heard approving responses when they characterized the Social Security system as "bankrupt." But now, as they proposed to change it, the message of public opinion become starkly supportive of the status quo.

Congressional Republicans were looking for a way out. It was provided to them by Senator Charles Grassley of Iowa, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee. Grassley read the tea leaves of public sentiment and declared that he found so little support for the Bush proposal that he declined even to schedule hearings on the bill. It was going to die anyhow, but that was the final whimper of Bush's most important policy proposal.

But the failure of Bush's plan to overhaul Social Security was more than about a simple misreading of how much "capital" Bush had indeed earned by appealing to a culturally conservative electorate. As it turns out, the role that gay marriage played in shaping the 2004 results was probably misread, too. Although the public was clearly uneasy about homosexual relations and was willing (particularly in culturally conservative states) to express its support for "traditional marriage" at the ballot box, it was uneasy – and was growing more so – about the possibility of providing government a means to regulate gay and lesbian unions out of existence entirely.

And despite the fact that "moral values" famously topped the list as the most important problem facing the nation in 2004 exit polls, "values" turned out to be only a small part of what voters, particularly swing voters, were thinking about in the election.[2] There is also precious little evidence that "values" voters turned out in higher rates in 2004 than in elections prior. Bush's victory was in all likelihood much more a result of a fairly good economy – and some residual "rally around the flag" enthusiasm following September 11 and the invasion of Iraq – than it was about these sorts of cultural concerns.

[2] See Hillygus and Shields 2005 for a thorough discussion of this point.

So, which nation are we? Are we the one that holds dear cherished symbols of marriage, family, and tradition and resists real or perceived efforts to encroach on these symbols? Or the one that so strongly supports Social Security as a government benefit for retirement that it would not hear of any conservative experiments in lessening the government role, even by a relatively popular newly reelected president?

The theme of this book is that we are both Americas, the one that reveres the symbols of tradition and the one that fervently supports a redistributive pension system for seniors. We are one and the same, a symbolically conservative nation that honors tradition, distrusts novelty, and embraces the conservative label – and an operationally liberal nation that has made Social Security one of the most popular government programs ever created.

Our story here of gay marriage and a failed proposal to change the retirement system is just an illustration. Symbolic conservatism is much more than marriage. And it is much more than – fundamentally different from – culturally conservative politics as defined by the religious right. It is respect for basic values: hard work, striving, caution, prudence, family, tradition, God, citizenship, and the American flag. And the ranks of Americans who cherish these values is no fringe activist minority; it is the mainstream of American culture. It is also not explicitly political, except in the sense that strategic political elites have tried to make it so. It is woven into the fabric of how ordinary citizens live their lives.

And for the other side, operational liberalism, Social Security is also no exception. Most Americans like most government programs. Most of the time, on average, we want government to do more and spend more. It is no accident that we have created the programs of the welfare state. They were created – and are sustained – by massive public support.

Our plan of attack is to tell both stories, of why Americans predominantly identify as conservatives, when at the same time supporting a liberal government role in a wide range of particular circumstances. We will not try to resolve the conflict between them. We will embrace it as the right story of what America is: both liberal and conservative.

Clearly many Americans, authors and most potential readers included, are not both liberal and conservative. The political class, of which we are jointly members with our readers, lines up symbols to match policy, or the reverse. That fact can make us forget that many citizens do not do so. This group is a very large proportion of the electorate and, so far as we can tell, always has been. We will give these people sustained attention, trying to understand why the default ideological identification of America

seems to be "conservative," while the default attitude toward government programs is support for more.

BACKGROUND

The research of which this book is the product originated when we were both at the University of North Carolina. The discovery of conservative symbolic dominance is as easy as looking at the most recent question on liberal and conservative self-identification. The appreciation of operational liberalism was a more subtle and gradual process. It began with initial work on the study of public policy mood (Stimson 1991). One cannot compile all of the survey questions on domestic policy issues without eventually noticing that liberal responses to such queries consistently outnumber conservative ones.

The conflict between symbolic conservatism and operational liberalism is developed more fully in *Tides of Consent* (Stimson 2004). There the group to be called "conflicted conservatives" was first observed in a treatment of a small section of one chapter. But that chapter ends more in a question mark than a conclusion. It left us both struck by the idea that contradiction was more normal in American politics than it was aberrant. We determined somehow to get to the bottom of that. This book is the product of about six years of joint effort toward that end.

Our first conception is that the problem for our research was to explain why so many people could simultaneously embrace conservative symbols and liberal policy preferences. And we have done that, particularly in Chapters 6 and 7. But along the way we decided that it was not as simple as one large, but nonetheless deviant, group – that understanding American ideology more generally would be a necessary step along the way. That is what we have endeavored to do.

We are ourselves a bit conflicted. The two authors are on opposite sides of political debates as often as not. When we write about liberals and conservatives, it is not like a cowboy movie in which the good guys wear white hats and the bad guys black. We are likely to disagree over who should wear which hat. But we share a scientific commitment to getting the theory and facts right, which makes working together easy, fun, and profitable.

And if one of us is right and the other one wrong, it is probably not going to be decided who is which in the pages of this book.

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The Meaning of Ideology in America

The state of ideology in America is contentious. We cannot agree whether the United States is predominantly a nation of the left, of the right, or of the center. We cannot agree even whether it is reasonable to characterize American politics in terms of left and right. Fifty years after the masterful undertaking of Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960) we still do not know how to characterize American ideology.

We care about ideology in considerable measure because it bears on something about which we care even more, election to office. Elections should decide whose claims should be honored. If the United States really is a nation of the right, then the party of the right should win most national elections. It does not. Nor of course does the party of the left fare any better. Alternation in electoral success does not necessarily make us a nation of the center. And despite the vagaries in ideological thinking at the individual level highlighted by Converse (1964) and others, it is not as simple as dismissing the American public as "nonideological," either.

Further, public ideology bears – or at least in standard democratic theory, should bear – on public policy outcomes. If the public wants policy to move in a particular ideological direction, it should be able to use the instruments of electoral control to place into office policymakers who will be more likely carry out its wishes. And policymakers, if they care about either representing public will or being reelected, should listen. But this again presupposes that the public can send clear and consistent ideological signals, that it can know whether it wants policy to move to the "left" or to the "right" and can communicate its desires to policymakers. We know from decades of research that it is not entirely clear that it can

meet even these very basic demands that representative democracy places on it.

In this volume, we work to understand the nature of ideology in the American mass public. Our wish for this volume is not so much to have the final word on the subject, which is clearly impossible. What we would like to achieve is to have most of the words that follow ours at least comprehend the conundrum over ideological *symbols* and ideological *preferences* that will be our central theme. For a very large proportion of what is written, particularly in the popular media, is at variance with sets of facts that have long been known, but rarely appreciated. We wish to show that American mass ideology has two conceptions, often existing quite independently of one another in the minds of citizens and performing quite different functions in the political system. Understanding the dualistic nature of political ideology, and shedding light on its implications, is the subject of what is to come.

1.1 THE CONFLICT BETWEEN LIBERALISM AND CONSERVATISM

The language of ideology is itself contentious, and a product as much of social forces and political strategy as of anything stable or immutable. But we have little choice but to embrace it, to write about liberalism and conservatism as understood in everyday politics. These are the terms in which real political actors, politicians, journalists, citizen activists, and even the mass public speak.

"Liberal," "liberalism," "conservative," "conservatism": Few conversations about politics in the United States can avoid at some point using these words. The big picture of American politics is often a struggle between liberal and conservative sentiments over symbols, over policy, over even culture. But what do the words mean? We must at the outset concede confusion and ambiguity. The meanings of the terms themselves, even among elites and political sophisticates, are not immutable. And many citizens clearly bring different connotations to the terms than we do.

There is, however, a reality defined by usage. When political actors are publicly labeled – by themselves or by others – with these terms, then their particular constellations of views on the issues of the day become the reality. If, for example, Barack Obama is the nation's most visible "liberal," then what Obama says and does becomes the definition of liberalism in practice. When conservatives talk about the true meaning of conservatism in this era, they often turn to the words and deeds of the

former president Ronald Reagan as a guidepost. So all is not subjective. The words cannot mean whatever we want them to mean. There has to be a core of shared cultural connotation in order to permit sensible conversation.

There is also a time dimension to meaning. As issues come and go and political agendas reshape, the core defining issues of ideological discourse will change. Change is rarely radical and rarely abrupt, but it is nonetheless the case that emphases change. But, too, there is continuity. It is by and large the same liberals arguing with the same conservatives over the new issues. So that continuity limits the possibility of rapid change and usually ensures that old connotations and issues survive the transition to the new.

1.1.1 American Liberalism

We turn now to the business of defining what is meant by liberal and conservative, trying not to be creative or comprehensive, but rather to summarize, as succinctly as possible, the culturally standard views. Our desire here is to lay out a set of beliefs that is common – but not necessarily universal – to actors who call themselves liberals or conservatives. This is something less abstract than philosophy because our concern is the real politics of the street. But we try here for a little more perspective than the stump speech, to draw out the doctrines that are relatively timeless rather than the themes that work for the moment.

Equality of opportunity is a core component of liberalism. The idea is that success in life's endeavors ought to result from intelligence, determination, discipline, and hard work, and not from the circumstances of one's birth. America, like all other societies, has a class system that tends to limit equality of opportunity in real life circumstances. Although this system is far from being frozen or having its upper levels impenetrable, life's achievements and one's place in this system are strongly predictable from the circumstances of birth. The playing field slants in the direction of the wealth and status of one's parents. Equality of opportunity does not exist but is a goal toward which liberalism constantly strives.

Government is the instrument through which the uneven playing field can be leveled. Thus liberals support public policies that redistribute income from rich to poor, and they support policies such as public schools that provide the tools by which equality might be achieved. Liberals believe that government ought to act in the economy in a variety of ways, to permit collective bargaining, to ensure a minimum wage, to

guarantee that benefits such as old age pensions and health care insurance are available to all.

Liberals believe that a market economy, whatever its virtues in the efficient creation of prosperity, is a beast that needs the firm hand of government to tame it. They also wish to prevent those who have obtained a monopoly of economic resources from enriching themselves unduly at the society's expense.

There is also the issue of government as regulator, the notion that left to their own devices, corporate interests will concentrate power to avoid competition, producing bad social outcomes. Government's role is to regulate the economic environment to prevent such abuses. Also there are situations where some of the costs of production are externalities, passed on to society, rather than paid for by the consumer or producer of the product. Examples include the regulation of industrial pollution or other economic activities that create social harm as a by-product of profit seeking.

American liberals have never embraced the idea of nationalizing industries that are currently private, as their European counterparts did. But, with some exceptions, they have usually opposed efforts to privatize current government activities.

Part of government's job is to establish standards. There is no advantage to driving on the left- or the right-hand side of the road, for example, but there is a huge advantage in having a rule that dictates *which* side. Such regulation benefits all and is not controversial. But beyond this, liberals also believe in regulation – within limits – of business. Rejecting the "unseen hand," or the inherent equilibrating virtue of the market, they believe that private economic power, left unchecked, will be used in ways harmful to the social order. Mindful that the economist's abstraction of a free market, a market in which no buyer or seller is large enough to affect the market, does not in fact exist in the United States, they are ready to check the market distortions that arise from the economic power of a small number of dominant buyers or sellers. And in financial markets they support regulation designed to prevent insiders from using their greater knowledge to exploit outsiders.

In the social sphere, liberals advocate freedom from intrusion on private decisions. Government, in particular, ought not act as enforcer of doctrines that have their origin in religion. Not alone in belief in equality under law, liberals have nevertheless been more ready to use the tools of government to attain that equality. They are more zealous about protecting the rights of disadvantaged groups such as African Americans, women, and homosexuals. That often puts them at odds with the

institutions, such as organized religion, that sustain the traditional order and resist change.

1.1.2 Conservatism

On most matters, conservatives believe that citizens, families, and communities, not the federal government, are the driving forces behind successful, thriving societies. Conservatives question both the moral imperative and the practical ability of government to remediate social problems and correct market failures, instead believing that private citizens, operating without the encumbrances of government constraints, are more effective in motivating growth, innovation, and opportunity. Conservatives are comparably less concerned about equality of economic outcomes than they are about long-term improvements in standard of living provided by economic growth.

While conservatives believe broadly in equal opportunity, they typically take the view (as in the title of Milton and Rose Friedman's classic book, *Free to Choose*) that expanding market freedom and providing the ability to choose one's own economic path are comparably more important, and ultimately more prosperous for all citizens, than government-based efforts to reduce income differences (Friedman & Friedman 1990). These types of attitudes extend to views on how "opportunity" is best provided. Conservatives typically view the private provision of social benefits, perhaps encouraged by public policy (e.g., through the form of school vouchers or tax credits to provide for one's own income security), as more desirable than government-controlled efforts in support of the same goals.

Conservatives strongly oppose government-based efforts to equalize economic outcomes, typically supporting non-redistributive tax policies and opposing programs (such as extended welfare benefits) that are perceived to confer benefits to citizens who have not earned them. Conservatives generally believe that the problems of the underprivileged are best addressed by charity and private social responsibility and support organizations (especially faith-based organizations) that work to address those problems.

Most conservatives cede an active role for the government in some arenas. They believe that government has a responsibility to provide an environment for safe, effective transactions among participants in the marketplace and to work to expand market freedoms. Government should help to enforce private property rights and private contracts and should

work to promote free trade and market economies both domestically and abroad.[1]

Beyond this, however, conservatives typically advocate a limited role in regulating market activity. Free markets, whatever excesses they might have, are seen as the single greatest pathway to long-run economic growth and prosperity, and government intervention in them stifles both innovation and the ability of a citizenry to allocate resources in a way that it sees fit. Thus policies designed to regulate the functioning of markets, or to provide protections to some types of actors (e.g., hourly workers) within the marketplace, are seen as undesirable. Mainstream conservatives do not see markets as perfect but do believe that in most cases, government-based antidotes to market imperfections are worse than the disease.

When it comes to cultural matters, there is substantially greater diversity of opinion. The modern brand of conservatism, at least of the post-Reagan era, typically believes in a strong government role in promoting traditional values and enforcing social order. These conservatives believe that social, religious, and cultural institutions have developed into their current state because of the wishes and desires of citizens and thus reflect a society's roots and core values. They believe that such institutions provide norms of behavior and social interaction that allow societies to function effectively. They are thus skeptical of challenges (especially government-based ones) to traditional social order, particularly those that challenge traditional religious perspectives or seek to diminish the role of religion in the public sphere.

Other conservatives believe that social and cultural freedoms are analogues to market freedoms, and that it is not the government's job to regulate the private behavior of consenting adults. The former view has defined American ideological "conservatism" in recent decades, but the latter remains strong and enduring, particularly among affluent or intellectual conservatives.

1.1.3 A Brief History of the Debate

Liberalism

Both the words "liberal" and "conservative" stretch quite far back in American history. But the historical usage of the words was so different

[1] It is perhaps indicative of the confusion behind the usage of ideological language that such expansion of market freedoms, typically advocated by free-market conservatives, is often discussed as trade or economic "liberalization."

as to be almost unrecognizable. At the time of the American Revolution the words basically connoted attitudes toward the old institutions, monarchy and established church. Liberals opposed the old institutions and conservatives supported them. Such a debate continued for a century or more in Europe, where liberals championed a republican form of government and conservatives favored restoration of the monarchy and the aristocracy. But the American Revolution virtually eliminated any idea of monarchy, aristocracy, or state religion, so that it is not much exaggeration to say that the United States had only liberals in its early history.

We know the term "liberal" has a very long history, but with a quite different connotation from its current usage – as support for freedom *from* government intervention in all matters. Prior to the 1930s, the label was used rarely, if at all, by mainstream politicians of any political persuasion in the United States. So how did a program of activist government intervention in the economy become "liberalism"? The answer, at least in large part, lies in the strategic political considerations of Franklin D. Roosevelt. We know that his prepresidential views were strongly shaped by the "progressivism" of his illustrious ancestor Theodore. He took "progressive" to mean a propensity to action, that when problems arose, it was government's obligation to identify them and act decisively to resolve them.

Thus when FDR assumed the presidency, he did what came naturally in fashioning an intensive effort by the national government to involve itself deeply in a broken American economy. The doctrine, from his campaign slogan, was "The New Deal." And people who were part of that program, or supported it, became "New Dealers." Roosevelt was in search of a term for this program, one that would embed it in American traditions – even though it was a departure from tradition in almost every regard – and one that stayed well clear of the "isms" that were ominously gaining force on the European stage at the time. Because the Democratic Party brand was itself in fairly high disregard at the time, he also needed a label that would help to attract the vote of otherwise sympathetic citizens, particularly Republicans, who dare not vote for a candidate who labels himself as a "Democrat" (Rotunda 1986).

FDR hit upon "liberal" for its positive association with freedom and for its absence of any link with the fascism, socialism, and communism that were threatening and unpopular in American opinion. And thus a novel term for a belief in activist government involvement in the economy, and activist particularly in support of those most in need, became part of the American lexicon. Roosevelt called himself, his ideas, and his

programs "liberal," which he contrasted to the views of their opponents, "conservative."

We have FDR's words from a 1938 "fireside chat" where he discusses the words themselves:

> In the coming primaries in all parties, there will be many clashes between two schools of thought, generally classified as liberal and conservative. Roughly speaking, the liberal school of thought recognizes that the new conditions throughout the world call for new remedies.
>
> Those of us in America who hold to this school of thought, insist that these new remedies can be adopted and successfully maintained in this country under our present form of government if we use government as an instrument of cooperation to provide these remedies. We believe that we can solve our problems through continuing effort, through democratic processes instead of Fascism or Communism. . . .
>
> Be it clearly understood, however, that when I use the word "liberal," I mean the believer in progressive principles of democratic, representative government and not the wild man who, in effect, leans in the direction of Communism, for that is just as dangerous as Fascism.
>
> The opposing or conservative school of thought, as a general proposition, does not recognize the need for Government itself to step in and take action to meet these new problems. It believes that individual initiative and private philanthropy will solve them – that we ought to repeal many of the things we have done and go back, for instance, to the old gold standard, or stop all this business of old age pensions and unemployment insurance, or repeal the Securities and Exchange Act, or let monopolies thrive unchecked – return, in effect, to the kind of Government we had in the twenties. . . . (Fireside Chat, June 24, 1938)[2]

The meaning of liberalism as a policy stance has broadened, but not fundamentally changed, since Roosevelt. FDR, whose support base included millions of racially conservative southerners, carefully avoided too obviously taking sides on the central issue of southern politics. But with the politics of the 1960s racial equality would begin to be included as a central value of liberals. And later still liberals would embrace expanding equality to other traditionally marginalized social groups, as well as the government regulation aspect of environmentalism. But the liberalism of Barack Obama's time is not terribly different from that of Franklin Roosevelt's.

Conservatism

America itself had to be old before "conservative" could come to mean support for the old order. And thus the usage comes and goes after the Civil War. It pops up again in the 1920s, when the policies of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover were characterized as conservative with

[2] From the American Presidency Project, americanpresidency.org.

part of its modern connotation, meaning then government of minimal size and scope. This label was not embraced by those to whom it was attached, however. Hoover, among others, argued that his views more fully embraced the ideals of classical "liberalism" by privileging citizens over government and private action over government coercion. Hoover argued, in fact, that his views, not Roosevelt's, should be the ones labeled "liberal" (Hoover 1934). The "conservative" label was first used in full force by supporters of FDR and the New Deal, as a way to help them stake clearly their claim to the "liberal" label and clearly distinguish their views from those of their opponents (Rotunda 1986).

The labels stuck, however, and conservatism suffered a long period as the minority view in American politics. Reeling from the Great Depression and the New Deal that it engendered, conservatism as a movement went into the background, only to be revived as quite another doctrine, opposition to communism (both foreign and domestic) in the 1950s. Conservatives of that era feared the Soviet Union and then communist China and also feared the prospect that American institutions were riddled with hidden communists, ready to subvert America.

The beginnings of the modern conservative movement can be traced to the presidential candidacy of Barry Goldwater in 1964, in which the most visible platform was Goldwater's book, *The Conscience of a Conservative*. Goldwater refocused conservatism on domestic affairs, beginning the first coherent attack on the welfare state legacy of Franklin Roosevelt. And on the issue of the moment, civil rights for African Americans, Goldwater for the first time defined opposition to government promotion of civil rights as an extension of conservative ideas.[3]

The philosophy of modern-day conservatism has its roots in the politics of Ronald Reagan, who capitalized on the tarnished image of Jimmy Carter, the cold war, and the perceived failure of government-based solutions to the economic and social malaise of the late 1970s, to reinvigorate "conservatism" as the label of individual and market freedom. Reagan's speech from the 1980 Republican National Convention helped to crystallize images of the "new" brand of ideological conservatism as that which promoted individual freedom over government power:

> "Trust me" government asks that we concentrate our hopes and dreams on one man; that we trust him to do what's best for us. My view of government places

[3] "Liberal" and "conservative" had long had a racial connotation in the South, but liberalism on race was a distinctly minority position among the dominant white population, and conservatism was almost the exclusive preserve of the Dixiecrats of the time.

trust not in one person or one party, but in those values that transcend persons and parties. The trust is where it belongs – in the people. . . .

Work and family are at the center of our lives; the foundation of our dignity as a free people. When we deprive people of what they have earned, or take away their jobs, we destroy their dignity and undermine their families. We cannot support our families unless there are jobs, and we cannot have jobs unless people have both money to invest and the faith to invest it. These are concepts that stem from an economic system that for more than 200 years has helped us master a continent, create a previously undreamed of prosperity for our people, and has fed millions of others around the globe. That system will continue to serve us in the future if our government will stop ignoring the basic values on which it was built and stop betraying the trust and good will of the American workers who keep it going.[4]

One further ingredient, the emergence of the religious right as a central player in conservative politics, then added the final piece to the definition of modern conservatism.[5]

1.2 THE TWO FACES OF IDEOLOGY IN AMERICAN POLITICS

The politically engaged reader has certainly found much that is familiar in these fairly simple accounts of ideological positions. Liberals, by and large, support the expansion of government power where necessary to provide equal opportunity and remediate social injustice. Conservatives, by and large, support economic freedom and traditional patterns of social order. This is clearly true at the level of political elites, where issue and ideological positions are relatively stable and well defined and are as ideologically polarized as they have been at any time in recent decades (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal 2006; Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope 2004). But at the level of the individual citizen, the nature of ideology is more complicated.

We know that many citizens know and care little about politics, so we expect that preferences are not as neatly organized, or ideologically coherent, for most people as they are for the political elite. But we will argue that there is also something systematically distinct, and fundamentally disconnected, about the nature of American mass ideology. The

[4] Speech transcript obtained from the National Center for Public Policy Research: www.nationalcenter.org.

[5] See Adams 1997 and Layman and Carsey 2002 for discussions of the evolution of religious and culturally traditional perspective to the principles of modern conservatism.

disconnect is between how the public thinks of itself with respect to two different conceptions of "ideology": *symbolic* and *operational*.

Symbolic ideology is a representation of how citizens think about themselves: whether they consider their views to be liberal, conservative, moderate, or something else. Operational ideology is grounded more explicitly in concrete decisions, what citizens think the government should or should not be doing with respect to important matters of public policy. At the elite level, of course, these are largely one and the same: Policymakers who are readily identifiable as conservatives tend to support some version of the "conservative" philosophy that we have outlined previously, and the same is true for liberals. But for citizens, it is another matter entirely.

The central theme of this book is that the United States is a nation of both the left and the right. We shall see that Americans, on average, have a strong affection for the symbols of conservatism. They like the word "conservative." They like to apply the word to themselves (in matters of politics and elsewhere). And they tend to like parties and candidates better when they are associated with conservatism. We shall characterize this tendency as "symbolic conservatism."

But when we examine the concrete views of Americans for questions of public policy, we shall find a similar (on average) affinity for solutions of the left. Facing a choice between a larger government that takes on more responsibilities, spends more, and taxes more and the opposite, smaller government with less spending and lower taxes, Americans on average choose more and bigger over less and smaller.[6] We shall characterize this tendency as "operational liberalism."

We are not the first to make this observation. Writing in 1967, Free and Cantril noted, "The discrepancy between symbolic conservatism and operational liberalism is . . . so marked as to be almost schizoid, . . . " So the observation that symbolic and operational attitudes are in conflict is venerable, if not very much appreciated.

The task that lies before us in this book is to work through the evidence on this point, to study its macroimplications, and, finally, to explain why both conservative symbols and liberal policy choices are jointly so appealing to so many Americans. Having both symbolically conservative

[6] The reader should take seriously our frequent qualification "on average." The patterns we observe are net pluralities of sentiment. Such statements as we make here would be obvious falsehoods if taken as universals.

and operationally liberal pluralities implies that a large number of Americans must cling to conservative symbols while advocating liberal policies. We shall locate these particular people and try to explain why they can embrace such conflicting attitudes.

1.3 PLAN OF THE BOOK

In what follows, we attempt to come to grips with the liberalism and conservatism in the American mass public. As we will see, understanding how the public conceives of itself ideologically is not as simple as describing which of the two ideological boxes we have described here is a better fit. At a minimum, we must come to grips with the fact that the American public holds, and acts on, two separate conceptions of ideology, one operational and one symbolic.

We begin by understanding the two conceptions of ideology separately. Chapters 2 and 3 introduce the concept of operational ideology. We first provide an overview of what we mean by operational ideology, and the myriad ways that scholars have worked to measure and understand it. We also attempt to understand the extent of operational liberalism in the American public and provide an explanation for why citizens, in the main, prefer liberal to conservative policy solutions. Operational ideology is necessarily a messy concept, and we use Chapter 2 to introduce readers to the mess. In Chapter 3, we work toward making more sense of the concept (and the data), looking beyond individual survey questions to understand how the public structures its operational preferences, both cross-sectionally and over time.

In Chapter 4, we deal with the symbolic side of ideology, how individual citizens (and the public as a whole) think of themselves in ideological terms. We grapple with the meaning of the ideological labels themselves and delve into the history of the meaning and relative popularity of the terms, working toward an understanding of the historical roots and evolving nature of the terms themselves.

The next three chapters work to understand the microfoundations of the paradox that is at the core of the book: that the public is at the same time operationally liberal and symbolically conservative. Chapter 5 lays the groundwork for this analysis, exploring the extent of individual-level disconnect between operational and symbolic ideology. Chapters 6 and 7 get to the heart of the matter, offering general explanations for the preponderance of conservative self-identification, but liberal preferences. Chapter 6 explores the role that lifestyle and religious factors have in

shaping self-identification, positing that at least for some, political conservatism is an identification formed well outside – and, in many cases, not even connected to – preferences on the issues that constitute the core of American political conflict. Chapter 7 addresses linkages between citizens and political elites, positing that "conflicted conservatism," the holding of conservative identifications but liberal preferences, is not necessarily a contradiction at all, but instead a natural result of the way that political conflict is framed by policymakers and the mass media.

Finally, Chapter 8 works to draw the book together, addressing the implications of this operational-symbolic conflict for understanding American policy dynamics and the nature of political discourse in the United States. Our explanations of the operational-symbolic disconnect raise more questions for democratic theory than they answer; here we suggest some ways to conceptualize what the paradox means for democratic politics, and some ways that future work might be able to push our understanding forward.