

## CHAPTER 1

# Agendas in Action

MITT ROMNEY WAS DEFEATED BY SELF-INTEREST. Not his own, but the self-interested voting of poor minorities and those meddling kids.

At least that's how he saw things in the week after his 2012 election loss to the incumbent, President Barack Obama. On a conference call with disappointed fund-raisers and donors, Romney offered his post-game analysis: "What the president's campaign did was focus on certain members of his base coalition, give them extraordinary financial gifts from the government, and then work very aggressively to turn them out to vote, and that strategy worked."

Romney and his strategists listed the policy gifts and the beneficiaries. Obama bestowed "amnesty" on certain young immigrants by executive order, a move that "was obviously very, very popular with Hispanic voters." The president passed Obamacare, "which basically is ten thousand dollars a family," a good price for the votes of poorer Americans. As for those meddling kids, they got to stay on their parents' health insurance plans, received cuts in student-loan interest rates, and got "free contraceptives," something that was "very big with young, college-aged women." Romney's summary: "It's a proven political strategy, which is give a bunch of money to a group and, guess what, they'll vote for you."

Romney surely could have added other "gifts" to his list. In the spring of 2012, not long before Obama issued his new directive for young immigrants, he announced his support for same-sex marriage, something that, along with his administration's earlier repeal of the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy, pleased another solid Democratic group, gays and lesbians. The Obama administration's support for General Motors and Chrysler probably improved his standing with union workers and

Michiganders. His support of payroll tax cuts and extended unemployment benefits particularly helped poorer people struggling through the Great Recession. His appointment of a Jewish woman and also of a “wise Latina” to the Supreme Court showed his support for abortion-rights and civil-rights policies so popular with feminists and lefty Ivy Leaguers.

Liberal columnist Clarence Page, among others, responded to Romney’s “gifts” analysis with the inevitable charge of hypocrisy: “That President Obama sure is a clever fellow, giving so many Americans what they want. I wonder why that notion apparently didn’t appeal to Romney? Oh, right. It did. He promised seniors, for example, that he’d restore President Obama’s \$716 billion in Medicare cuts. . . . Romney looked like Santa Claus to upper-income earners with his promises to protect them from Obama’s proposed income tax hikes. He also promised Wall Street that he would roll back the Dodd-Frank financial regulations that were legislated to rein in the abuses that led to the 2008 financial crash.”<sup>1</sup>

From the right, in a piece for the libertarian website *reason.com*, Ira Stoll condemned such hypocrisy charges as further hypocrisy: “[T]here’s a double standard at work. When reporters suggest that donors to *Republican* causes are motivated by self-interested desire to keep their taxes low and their businesses unhampered by environmental or labor regulations, *that’s* groundbreaking investigative journalism. . . . Yet when Romney suggests that *Democratic* voters might have been motivated by self-interest, his comments are condemned.”<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps more peculiarly, even some of Romney’s supposed Republican allies were as critical as his political opponents. Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal said: “If we want people to like us, we have to like them first. And you don’t start to like people by insulting them and saying their votes were bought.” Even Newt Gingrich called Romney’s comments “nuts.”

In certain respects, these strong reactions from both left and right might seem surprising. Elected officials’ job, after all, is to advocate policies, and different policies usually work in favor of some people’s interests and against others’. The major supporters and opponents of different policies frequently include those most helped or most hurt by the policies. Immigrants tend to prefer immigrant-friendly policies. Lesbians

and gays tend to prefer LGBT-friendly policies. Poorer people tend to prefer robust government assistance with health care. Students tend to prefer lower college costs. Those on birth control tend to prefer cheaper birth control. Rich people tend to prefer lower taxes on rich people. Wall Street executives tend to prefer relaxed financial regulation. *Of course* the respective campaigns emphasized how their favored policies would help people. *Of course* different policies appeal to some but not to others. That's sort of the point of elections.

Indeed, as Stoll noted, the hubbub over Romney's comments calls to mind journalist Michael Kinsley's fitting observation: "A gaffe is when a politician tells the truth—some obvious truth he isn't supposed to say."<sup>3</sup> Romney's "gifts" phrasing may have betrayed an unseemly bitterness over his recent loss, but his comments were largely on target: Campaigns try to turn out different groups of voters based on the particular policies those voters favor, and, often, the policies voters favor have a lot to do with their interests. Why is it such a big deal to say this out loud?

In this book, our goal is to explain why people hold the political positions that they do—why, that is, different people hold different views on areas like immigration, government spending on health care and the poor, same-sex marriage, abortion, and so on. A large part of the answer will be found in the kind of (unpopular) explanation Romney offered: it's about people's interests. Identifying where people's interests lie is, in some cases, pretty easy. Sure, as Romney pointed out, people who have less money have an interest in the state moving money from the richer to the poorer.

However, in other cases, while the key issue is still interests, identifying how particular policies advance people's interests can be trickier. Are some people really better (or worse) off under different policy regimes about "cultural" issues surrounding sex and religion? As we'll see, the answer is "yes," and once we figure out who is better off under which regime, we'll have gone a long way to figuring out who favors, and who opposes, different policies.

Looking for where people's interests lie will lead us to many of the familiar demographic features political analysts and pollsters have been looking at for decades. It will lead us to some lesser-known features as well.

By the time we're done, we hope to have provided an explanation—or, at least, a big part of the explanation—for people's political issue positions across the American spectrum. Along the way we'll also explore some key features of the modern coalitional alignments of the parties, and the perplexing reality that it's taboo to talk truthfully about the fact that politicians try to appeal to voters' interests.

To do all that, however, we have to take a careful look at data.

A lot of data.

## Slicing and Dicing

As election night unfolded, NBC's Chuck Todd, analyzing incoming returns and exit polls, expressed the emerging conventional wisdom on Obama's impending victory: "The story of this election is demographics. The Republican party has not kept up with the changing face of America. . . . It's the growth of the Hispanic communities in various places. . . . [T]hey look like core Democratic voters tonight. Again, the story of this election is going to be demographics when all is said and done. The Obama campaign was right. . . . They built a campaign for the twenty-first century America. The Republican party has some serious soul-searching to do when you look at these numbers."<sup>4</sup>

Looking at the numbers isn't just for the pros anymore. On election night, the public has access to huge amounts of information from exit polls. Anyone with an Internet connection and a hint of interest in politics can get online and follow along as the commentators slice and dice a deluge of demographic data.

Overall, Obama won 51% of the popular vote to Romney's 47% (with the other 2% going to third-party candidates)—a 4-point win for Obama. But this 4-point margin masks wildly lopsided demographic splits revealed by the exit polls.

By far the biggest deal in American party politics these days is the difference in voting patterns by race and ethnicity.<sup>5</sup> Obama won African Americans by 87 points. Obama won Latinos and Asians by around 45 points. Romney won whites by 20 points.

Another fundamental set of differences involves religion. Romney may have won whites overall by 20 points, but Obama won Jews by 39 points and whites with no religious affiliation by 32 points. Romney cleaned up with his fellow Mormons, winning them by 57 points. Romney also won white Protestants by 39 points and white Catholics by 19 points. Across racial groups, Romney won those who go to church more than once a week by 27 points and weekly churchgoers by 17 points; Obama won people who never go to church by 28 points.

Lesbians, gays, and bisexuals were also huge Obama supporters, favoring the president by 54 points. In fact, according to the exit polls, had the election only included heterosexual voters, the popular vote would have been pretty close to a tie.

Obama took big cities by 40 points (these populations, after all, contain lots of minorities, lots of less religious whites, and relatively more lesbians, gays, and bisexuals). Romney won rural areas by 24 points (these populations, after all, contain lots of white, heterosexual Christians).

Poorer people tended to support Obama and richer people tended to support Romney. For example, Obama won those with incomes under \$30,000 by 28 points while Romney won those with incomes above \$100,000 by 10 points. These income results obviously relate in part to racial differences, with minorities typically being poorer than whites.

On education, the story starts off in a way that looks consistent with the income differences we just saw: Obama won among those without high school diplomas by 29 points. Those in the middle were pretty evenly distributed, with Obama barely eking out people with high school diplomas but not bachelor's degrees and Romney winning those with bachelor's degrees but not graduate degrees. But then there's a noticeable outlier: Obama, not Romney, won among the most educated group (those with graduate degrees) by 13 points. By the end of the book, we'll see why—why, that is, high income tends to lead to Republican support while high education tends to lead to Democratic support—but it'll take a while to put the pieces together.

The marriage gap shows up: Obama won unmarried people by 27 points; Romney won married people by 14 points. The age gap shows up, too: Obama won young adults (ages eighteen to twenty-nine) by

23 points; Romney won seniors (ages sixty-five and higher) by 12 points. And, of course, the gender gap: Obama won women by 11 points; Romney won men by 7 points.

These last differences, though, aren't in the same ballpark as those we started with for race, religion, and sexual orientation.<sup>6</sup> In fact, despite persistent media talk of the liberalness of young people, note this nugget from the 2012 exit polls: *If the election had only involved white voters between ages eighteen and twenty-nine, Romney would have won by 7 points.*

Political professionals think of voters in terms of coalitions, the key point being that members of various demographic groups tend to respond in different ways to different issues.<sup>7</sup> Groups such as whites with no religious affiliation and African Americans may vote mostly for Democrats, but this doesn't mean they share the same policy views or have the same issue priorities. For example, 70% of whites with no religious affiliation support the Supreme Court's ban on school prayer; only 26% of African Americans agree.<sup>8</sup> When it comes to government spending on African Americans, in contrast, while 73% of African Americans think there should be higher spending, only 30% of whites with no religious affiliation agree. These two groups have different reasons for voting for Democrats.

With ever increasing, data-driven sophistication, political professionals analyze not "the public," generally, but (increasingly smaller) *segments* of the public. Sasha Issenberg's book, *The Victory Lab*, provides a fascinating glimpse into the modern development of "micro-targeting" and other efforts to group the voting population into coherent clusters with shared policy concerns. In his 2004 book, *The Two Americas*, veteran Democratic pollster Stan Greenberg described in detail more than twenty overlapping demographic categories, some solidly in the Republican coalition, some solidly in the Democratic coalition, and some up for grabs. The book was a detailed example of demographic political analysis, flowing from various demographic features, to groups' different policy priorities and positions, to party allegiances and voting patterns that ultimately reflect demographic-driven coalitions of diverse policy preferences.

In discussing Latino Americans, for instance, Greenberg stated that they have tended to be attracted to Democrats because of shared support

for civil rights for immigrants and policies providing greater economic security for people with lower incomes. In other words, the Democratic pollster in 2004 gave practically the same analysis as the Republican candidate in 2012, who described on his postelection conference call how Latinos had been wooed by Democrats primarily through Obama’s “amnesty” efforts and the economic subsidies in Obamacare. Romney wasn’t, then, out on a political limb; he was expressing a widely held view of pollsters and strategists in both parties.

Sometimes the demographic labels of pollsters make their way into the public’s political conversation. Often the focus is on various groups of swing voters—soccer moms, office-park dads, Walmart moms, NASCAR dads, and a host of others. Our own approach will be to look closely at how and why different demographic features relate to different kinds of political issues. Someone who goes to church regularly, for example, is likely to be more conservative on abortion and related lifestyle issues, but how much people go to church doesn’t have much at all to do with being conservative on immigration or affirmative action or Social Security. Once we’ve seen how and why different demographic features relate to different issue opinions, we’ll get into the real slicing and dicing, breaking up the public into lots of different groups with various collections of views. This will lead to an expanded perspective on the variety of modern political positions.

### The Bichromatic Rainbow

Sometimes it can seem that there’s little need for the demographic obsessions of political professionals who target specific “messages” to narrow groups. Aren’t there really just two big groups—liberals/Democrats on one side and conservatives/Republicans on the other—and, thus, really just two big “messages”? Comedian Jon Stewart and the team behind *The Daily Show* put it this way in *America (The Book)*: “Each party has a platform, a *prix fixe* menu of beliefs making up its worldview. The candidate can choose one of the two platforms, but remember—no substitutions. For example, do you support universal healthcare? Then you must also want a ban on assault weapons. Pro-limited government?

Congratulations, you are also anti-abortion. Luckily, all human opinion falls neatly into one of the two clearly defined camps. Thus, the two-party system elegantly reflects the bichromatic rainbow that is American political thought.”<sup>9</sup>

These remarks were made with tongue firmly placed in cheek, of course. But a number of other very smart people have made essentially the same point without any hint of humor. Economist Bryan Caplan in his book, *The Myth of the Rational Voter*, asserted (with his tongue in its usual non-cheeky place): “There are countless issues that people care about, from gun control and abortion to government spending and the environment. . . . If you know a person’s position on one, you can predict his views on the rest to a surprising degree. In formal statistical terms, political opinions look one-dimensional. They boil down roughly to one big opinion, plus random noise.”<sup>10</sup> In a *New York Times* online opinion piece, psychologist and linguist Steven Pinker made similar claims: “Why, if you know a person’s position on gay marriage, can you predict that he or she will want to increase the military budget and decrease the tax rate . . . ? [There may] be coherent mindsets beneath the diverse opinions that hang together in right-wing and left-wing belief systems. Political philosophers have long known that the ideologies are rooted in different conceptions of human nature—a conflict of visions so fundamental as to align opinions on dozens of issues that would seem to have nothing in common.”<sup>11</sup> Caplan and Pinker didn’t just make this stuff up; plenty of political scientists have stated that people typically show a general left-right coherence in their policy views.<sup>12</sup>

In the course of the 2012 campaign, in response to complaints about a misleading ad attacking Obama over welfare, Romney’s chief pollster, Neil Newhouse, said: “We’re not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact-checkers.” But for social scientists like us, fact-checking is what it’s all about. So, when it comes to liberal-conservative coherence among the general public, what are the facts? Do Americans really take their political positions from a *prix fixe* menu, or is it more like a buffet?

Let’s consider two items from the U.S. General Social Survey (GSS), a large database on Americans’ lives and politics that we will rely on heavily throughout the book. One item asks whether the person agrees that homosexual couples should have the right to marry; potential answers



range from strongly agree to strongly disagree, and the respondent can also indicate that they don't have an opinion one way or another. Answers to this question correlate strongly with answers to the question of whether people view themselves as "liberal" or "conservative" overall. (Throughout the book, we're using the terms "liberal" and "conservative" in the way that politically aware contemporary Americans typically use them.)<sup>13</sup> The other item asks whether the person thinks that government should do something to reduce income differences between rich and poor, or whether the person thinks that government should not concern itself with income differences; here, the respondent can give a response leaning heavily one way or the other and can also land in the middle, indicating weak or mixed opinions. Answers to this question have a big correlation with answers to the question of whether people generally prefer Republicans or Democrats.

If we take the assertions from Caplan and Pinker (not to mention Stewart) seriously, we should be able to take people's views on one of these issues and know their views on the other issue. People who favor same-sex marriage should generally favor government reduction of income differences. People who are opposed to government reduction of income differences should generally be opposed to same-sex marriage.

The data are decidedly less tidy. In the GSS sample over the past ten years, 21% of people were liberal on both same-sex marriage and government reduction of income differences, 19% were conservative on both, 18% were conservative on marriage but liberal on income, 12% were liberal on marriage but conservative on income, and the other 30% had in-the-middle responses on one or both items. In other words, around 40% of the public were either consistently liberal or consistently conservative on these two items, around 30% had mismatched views (liberal on one and conservative on the other), and around 30% expressed no opinion one way or the other on at least one of these issues.

Pinker asserted that if you know a person's views on same-sex marriage you will also know their views on redistributive issues. In fact, though, most people aren't so accommodating. In the GSS data, people who support same-sex marriage have a 50% chance of wanting government to reduce income differences, a 20% chance of being in the middle, and a 30% chance of opposing income redistribution. On the other side,

people who oppose same-sex marriage have a 42% chance of opposing income redistribution, a 17% chance of being in the middle, and a 41% chance of supporting it.

One possible reason that Pinker and Caplan overstate the liberal-conservative coherence of public opinion is that it fits their own experience (and, in fact, ours as well). That is, liberal-conservative coherence is more common among some groups than others, and the group where it is most common is that of people like us—white voters with bachelor’s degrees.<sup>14</sup> Even among this group, however, only around 50% land either consistently liberal or consistently conservative on same-sex marriage and income redistribution (as opposed to a mere 40% of the general public, as we noted above). White voters with bachelor’s degrees, while probably a tremendously high percentage of the people Pinker, Caplan, and we hang out with, constitute only around 20% of American adults. The other 80% are not of European ancestry, or don’t have bachelor’s degrees, or don’t vote.

Roughly 40% of American adults have two but not three of these features—white voters without bachelor’s degrees, African American voters with bachelor’s degrees, and so on. The other 40% have one or none of these features, and among them, *liberal-conservative coherence is fundamentally absent*—about a third land either consistently liberal or consistently conservative on same-sex marriage and income redistribution, about a third have mismatched views, and the other third hold neutral opinions on one or both issues. Among these individuals, that is, one learns *exactly nothing* about a person’s view on one issue by learning their view on the other. Caplan and Pinker may have phrased their conclusions in terms of *people*, but these conclusions hold primarily for *people like them (and us)*.

Crucially, we’ve been talking about only two issues here—same-sex marriage and government income redistribution. If we add others—affirmative action, immigration, abortion, health care, Social Security, and so on—simple views of liberal-conservative coherence fall apart even further. Now, it is true that certain subsets of these issues do hang together pretty tightly. If you know someone’s view on same-sex marriage, for example, you’ve got a good shot at guessing their view on abortion. If you know someone’s view on government income redistribi-

bution, you've got a good shot at guessing their view on government support for health care (which typically involves, after all, some kind of economic redistribution). But things break down when one strays too far in issue domains. Occasionally, indeed, the safest bets involve ideological mismatch. Americans who want to reduce immigration levels (a "conservative" position) are actually more rather than less likely to want to increase funding for Social Security (a "liberal" position). Americans who support affirmative action for women (a "liberal" position) are more rather than less likely to think that the Supreme Court should allow school prayer (a "conservative" position).

There may be only two significant political *parties* in the United States (Democratic and Republican) and two or three frequently discussed ideological *labels* (liberal, conservative, and perhaps libertarian), but people defy simple categories, holding every possible combination of views on various issues.

Even for people with high levels of liberal-conservative coherence, the kinds of demographic properties we described earlier when looking at exit polls often drive the overall skew to the left or to the right. We'll take a close look later at Ivy League graduates, for example, and see that their overall liberalism or conservatism relates strongly to things like race, sexual orientation, gender, religion, and income.

The demographics are especially interesting because they often provide better insight into what causes what. No one would believe, for instance, that being a liberal or a Democrat can cause whites to become African Americans, or heterosexuals to become homosexuals, or men to become women. It also seems a stretch to say that a liberal ideology frequently causes people to abandon Christianity in favor of Judaism or agnosticism, or causes people to be poorer rather than richer. There may be some connections like these—people committed to income equality choosing nonprofit jobs over Wall Street positions, for example—but it would be nuts (as Gingrich might say) to suppose that the connections between demographics and politics are *mostly* or even largely a matter of people adjusting demographics to political ideologies. When one sees political patterns relating to demographics, then, one can rule out at least some of the possible causal pathways. The arrow doesn't lead from ideology to demographics, at least most of the time.

In this book, our main questions are the *why* questions. We are psychologists, not political professionals. When analyzing political opinions, our job differs from those seeking to maximize vote-getting. Political professionals are usually satisfied when they identify *that* connections exist between demographics and policy preferences, using this information to help candidates and marketers craft specific messages to woo specific voters and get them to the polls. Our job is to go a step deeper.

Our conclusion will sound familiar to political professionals and commentators who are used to thinking in terms of complex issue combinations that are driven by different demographic features, but we'll provide a fresh focus on the interests driving these connections. We'll look at how people tend to support policies that are in the interests of themselves, their families, their friends, and their social networks. We'll look at how people tend to support coalitions that work to advance their own policy preferences. And, yes, we'll look at how the demographic features typical of political targeting (race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, income, education, etc.) are often key signs of diverse underlying interests that drive different issue positions.

We'll take it step by step, looking at a few different areas of political conflict, tracing people's competing interests, identifying demographic features that relate to those interests. These efforts will produce a small number of essential insights that highlight the major connections. Then, using these lessons, we'll see how to combine them to produce more complex pictures of different groups.

We'll supply some of the tools needed to keep up with modern politics. We'll provide some insights to make pretty good guesses about why, in a given campaign, a politician might run different ads in different markets and highlight different themes in speeches to different interest groups. On election night, when commentators pore over exit polls and talk about Latinos, white churchgoers, college-educated women, or a host of other groups, our discussions will illuminate what's really driving the differences. As the parties consider how to alter their positions to attract new voters—something that Republicans wrestled with on the subject of immigration after the 2012 election—the lessons of later chapters will show many ways in which these changes would help

with some specific groups of voters while inevitably hurting the party's chances with other specific groups of voters.

## Ignoring Some Usual Suspects

Our approach resonates well with that of some political scientists, particularly those with closer ties to the concrete world of political professionals. In contrast, our approach runs counter to that of others, especially those that take a more abstract approach.

For many political scientists, interests aren't very interesting and demographics are mere "controls" in statistical models, items to be brushed over as the more central determinants of political views are revealed. Often these central factors include ideologies, values, political personality items, and other "symbolic" foundations of the political mind. Our perspective, however, includes some very deep worries about these analyses.

To see one of our key worries, consider parties—not political parties, but party parties, where lots of people get together, mix, mingle, listen to music, nibble on snacks, have a few drinks, and so forth. Some people really like parties while other people don't. Why is that? Ask an undergraduate who has recently taken an intro psychology course, and they might give an answer that sounds pretty smart: It's because some people are extraverts and others are introverts.

But consider a follow-up question: How does one know that some people are extraverts and others are introverts? The answer, it turns out, is that people are asked a series of questions that often includes questions about . . . whether they like parties. Here are a few questions measuring extraversion and introversion from one of the most popular scales used by psychologists:

- Do you enjoy meeting new people?
- Can you usually let yourself go and enjoy yourself at a lively party?
- Can you easily get some life into a rather dull party?
- Do you like mixing with people?
- Can you get a party going?

Psychologists call people who answer “yes” to these kinds of questions “extraverts” and call people who answer “no” to these questions “introverts.”

So what does it mean, then, to say that someone enjoys parties *because* they’re an extravert? Personality psychologists often think of extraversion/introversion as an underlying trait that is doing the causing. But one has to be careful when it comes to actually studying these things. It’s easy to slip into empirical results that boil down to simple circularity. Some people enjoy parties because they are extraverts, which we know they are because they enjoy parties. If we label people who answer “yes” to those questions above “party-likers,” then the circularity becomes even more transparent: Why do some people like parties? Well, it’s because they’re party-likers.

The pattern is common in social science: Think of something one wants to explain (e.g., why some people are more outgoing than others); give people a set of survey questions that measures the very thing one wants to explain (e.g., a set of items about whether they’re outgoing); give survey-takers’ answers to those questions a name (e.g., extraversion); and then claim to have solved the puzzle (e.g., some people are outgoing because they’re extraverts). It’s such a common pattern, surely it deserves a name of its own. We’ll call it: Direct Explanation Renaming Psychology Syndrome, or *DERP Syndrome* for short.

Examples abound across the social sciences, and are often particularly transparent when it comes to politics. In a 2002 article in the journal *Political Psychology*, for example, the authors wanted to explain why some people oppose government spending to assist African Americans, why some people think it’s not the government’s job to guarantee equal opportunity for different racial groups, why some people think minority groups should help themselves rather than having the government help them, and why some people oppose race-based affirmative action.<sup>15</sup> It’s an interesting set of issues. So what’s the answer?

The answer, according to the authors, is that the main explanation for conservative racial policy attitudes is found in *symbolic racism*. But now ask the follow-up question: How does one know whether someone suffers from symbolic racism? The answer here is classic DERP Syn-

drome. One knows that someone suffers from symbolic racism because the person answered survey questions generally indicating that they oppose efforts and rationales underlying minority advancing policies. Specifically, to measure “symbolic racism,” the study had people answer the following questions, some of which were simple statements with which survey-takers could agree or disagree:

- Some say that black leaders have been trying to push too fast. Others feel that they haven’t pushed fast enough. What do you think?
- How much of the racial tension that exists in the United States today do you think blacks are responsible for creating?
- How much discrimination against blacks do you feel there is in the United States today, limiting their chances to get ahead?
- It’s really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites.
- Irish, Italian, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same.
- Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class.
- Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve.
- Over the past few years, blacks have gotten more economically than they deserve.

Is it any wonder that “symbolic racism” is such a strong “explanation” of “racial policy preferences”? Literally translated, the claim is: The reason many people oppose efforts to advance racial equality is that they think, for example, that minorities should work their way up, that black leaders have been trying to push too fast, and that blacks have gotten more economically than they deserve. In short, people oppose these efforts because they oppose these efforts.

There are lots of other examples. A popular explanation for why people tend to oppose equality for women, gays and lesbians, and religious minorities is *right-wing authoritarianism*.<sup>16</sup> How does one know if someone has a bad case of right-wing authoritarianism? One asks them whether they agree or disagree with items like:

- Women should have to promise to obey their husbands when they get married.
- Gays and lesbians are just as healthy and moral as anybody else.
- Atheists and others who have rebelled against the established religions are no doubt every bit as good and virtuous as those who attend church regularly.
- Everyone should have their own lifestyle, religious beliefs, and sexual preferences, even if it makes them different from everyone else.
- A “woman’s place” should be wherever she wants to be. The days when women are submissive to their husbands and social conventions belong strictly in the past.
- Homosexuals and feminists should be praised for being brave enough to defy “traditional family values.”

Here’s the Twitter version of explaining discriminatory views by citing right-wing authoritarianism: Some people oppose equality for women, gays, and religious minorities because they oppose equality for women, gays, and religious minorities. #DERPSyndrome.

When political scientists point to political “personality” features or “symbolic” predispositions or “values” as explanations for policy preferences, there’s often an underlying DERPishness that leads back to the starting point. One asks questions about why people favor different policies. The answers are that it’s because they favor those policies, or because they think it would be better if those policies prevailed, or because they approve of the people who advocate those policies. And it’s back to square one.

We should note that we of course don’t object to all uses of symbolic racism or right-wing authoritarianism (or egalitarianism, or social dominance orientation, or moral traditionalism, or countless other similar political measures). Such measures reflect people’s differing policy views in important areas and could be used to investigate the ways in which such policy views influence, for example, voters’ choices among candidates. Our objections involving DERP Syndrome arise when these measures are used to predict policy views that are basically the same as those in the measures themselves. Our main goal in this book is to



better understand the sources of competing views in widely contested policy areas, and it doesn't advance the ball to learn, for example, that people who oppose income redistribution oppose income redistribution, or that people who support meritocracy support meritocracy, or that people who favor the moral condemnation of promiscuity favor the moral condemnation of promiscuity. We hope to provide more informative accounts of these kinds of political positions.

Other items that are often used to explain particular issue opinions are political party preferences and ideological labels. One asks questions about why people favor different policies. One is told that whether people favor Democrats or Republicans correlates with their policy views. One is told that whether people say they're liberal or conservative correlates with their policy views. And one is told, in the end, that a big *cause* of having a left-leaning policy view in a given area is being a Democrat and being liberal.<sup>17</sup>

Party preferences, liberal/conservative labels, and DERPish variables are often cast as causes of particular policy views because of an important assumption: When it comes to political views, people go from general to specific, from broad "ideological commitments" and "party identifications" and slightly more generally worded DERPish measures to the particulars of individual policies.<sup>18</sup> Yet the opposite could well be true. It could be the case, for example, that many people choose to call themselves "liberal" or "conservative" (or "libertarian" or something else or none of the above) based on a kind of summation of their particular policy views.<sup>19</sup> It could be that many people prefer either Democrats or Republicans *because* they favor the policies of one or the other party.<sup>20</sup> It could be that many people endorse general kinds of "value" items (e.g., "it would be better if people were more equal") in large part *because* they have in mind some specific areas (race, sexual orientation, income, etc.) that make the general language appealing.<sup>21</sup>

Nonetheless, it's clear that, having picked a political party, people use that partisan preference to interpret all kinds of information. People favoring a party tend to view the economy as doing better when their party is in power, tend to worry less about foreign military action when their party calls the shots, and so on.<sup>22</sup> Further, when presented with policies that are vague or complex or unfamiliar, knowing that one's favored

party is behind the policy goes a long way in helping people to make quick judgments about whether they think the policy is a good idea.<sup>23</sup>

In these ways, we don't doubt that preferring a party and giving oneself an ideological label exert some causal influence on political opinions. A key question, though, is what causes the party preferences and ideological labels in the first place. On this question, our view is that it probably has a lot to do with people's preexisting positions on many of the central policy fights that we examine in this book.

For example, someone might be drawn to the Republican party primarily because of its stances on tax-and-spend policies, and then, once there, might be more likely to support fellow coalition members by providing answers to questions about other issues the person doesn't care or know as much about in ways that lean more to the right than the answers might otherwise. But, in this example, the party affiliation itself was an effect (rather than a cause) of the person's views on another set of issues (i.e., tax-and-spend policies).

All this causal presumption and DERPish question begging might be intellectually harmless if researchers simply pointed to these kinds of correlations and said, You know, these sure are big correlations. Fine. But they go further, frequently, and say, And other things that are not so big (like demographic features) are basically irrelevant. This is like noting a really big correlation between the height of identical twins and then saying: Taller twins are taller *because* they have taller twins, and, now that we know that, we can ignore the less interesting fact that taller twins *also have taller parents*.

Our preference is to largely ignore DERPish and other causally presumptuous "higher-level" variables, even though they are among the usual suspects political researchers turn to in accounting for policy opinion differences. Given that we're trying to understand the sources of diverse opinions on various well-known policy fights, we don't want to rely on items that often have big *correlations* with policy views, but are arguably not big *causes* of the kinds of commonly discussed policy views we examine in this book.<sup>24</sup>

Instead, we favor collections of demographic variables that offer a more secure basis on which to propose (in a noncircular way) *why* things turn out the way they do. Again, it's typically the case with demographic features (such as race, gender, education, sexual orientation, income,

etc.) that one can make pretty plausible guesses that correlations with political opinions really do involve causation flowing (through various direct and indirect routes) from demographics to politics. To echo our earlier comments, no one would entertain the notion that being opposed to income redistribution could turn racial minorities with lower incomes into rich, white men; when we find that rich, white men are especially likely to have conservative views on income redistribution, then, it's pretty unproblematic to conclude that there's something about the rich, white maleness that's somehow doing the causing (again, through various direct and indirect routes).

Further, there's no real DERP Syndrome problem when it comes to demographic correlates of political issue opinions. For example, when we find atheists strongly opposing discrimination against atheists, it might be *obvious* why they would do that—it's out of self-defense—but it's not DERPish. We're not asking people whether they favor policies reducing discrimination against atheists and using that to "explain" why they favor policies reducing discrimination against atheists. We're looking at whether their real-life interests are advanced by reducing such discrimination (whether they would admit this or not), and pointing out something that, weirdly, many political discussions simply ignore: It turns out that lots of people who oppose discrimination against atheists are the kinds of people whose lives would be worse off if other people discriminated against atheists.

We're looking for where the rubber of policy opinions meets the road of everyday life. We don't view people as fundamentally philosophical but as social animals driven by practical concerns. When we clear away the questionable variables and just look for connections between lives and policy views—a project that dominates most of the later chapters in this book—we will find them.

## Where We're Headed

Our main goals in the pages that follow are to understand how everyday interests drive public opinion when it comes to some widely debated issues, how members of different demographic groups pick and choose mixtures of liberal and conservative views across these different issues,

and how members of these different groups with their idiosyncratic positions end up favoring one political party or the other. By the end we'll be engaged in a pretty sophisticated political exercise, dividing a quirky public into a number of coherent groups with complex contrasts in their political opinions. But the core themes in this cacophony are really rather simple. When we take it one note at a time, the melodies won't be hard to spot.

We've divided the book into four parts, covering political minds, political issues, political coalitions, and political challenges. In the remainder of this first part, on political minds, we look at some key ways in which psychological research sheds light on how people arrive at and defend their political positions. Chapter 2 addresses the question of what it means for something to advance a person's interests. The big lesson here is that the academic view of "self-interest" often sees things through a too narrow economic lens, as though most of what people care about comes down to immediate monetary payoffs. We widen this view by using the latest theory and research to consider other fundamental social goals (including those involving social status and sex lives) and stress how people's everyday goals involve family members, friends, and wider social networks.

Chapter 3 uses psychological research to explain the surprising ways in which human minds divide up their many jobs. A key conclusion of this research is that, while people often pursue their interests, part of this pursuit occurs through self-deceptive efforts to portray one's own preferences and actions as not so much about one's interests, but about one's competent and generous character. Human minds engage in ongoing spin control, with consciousness being generally clueless about the nature of the game. This division of labor helps explain, for example, why people in political disagreements tend to see themselves and their allies as reasonable and kind while seeing their opponents as stupid, greedy, and mean. One result, as with the reactions to Romney's postelection conference call, is that it becomes *insulting* to say accurate but not-nice-sounding things about other people's motives, the sorts of things people tend only to point out about their opponents rather than themselves. Our discussion here relies on a broad range of psychological material, including a book by one of your authors, Kurzban, *Why Everyone (Else)*

*Is a Hypocrite* (a book that, without a hint of self-interest, of course, we recommend highly).

In part II, we move to political issues. Chapter 4 focuses on issues relating to premarital sex, pornography, abortion, birth control, and marijuana legalization. This chapter draws heavily from some of the major threads in our own research efforts over the last decade or so, which have focused on people's sexual and reproductive lives, the competing interests that arise from different lifestyles, the competitive nature of moral conflict, and how these themes explain people's positions on issues like abortion and marijuana legalization. Our studies focus on the underlying strategic interests at work in moral conflict over lifestyles. What look to others like "cultural" or "religious" issues look to us like the manifestation of interests, albeit cleverly disguised.

In chapter 5, we move to a different set of issues, those involving group-based policies (relating to same-sex marriage, school prayer, immigration, affirmative action, and others). We examine the ways in which these kinds of fights don't just pit a minority group against a majority group, but involve wider issues over "meritocracy" and over what kinds of factors should matter in determining social advantages.

In chapter 6, we turn to our third and final set of issues, those relating to income redistribution and spending on entitlements and social safety nets. Here, most people have a pretty good sense that poorer people tend to be more liberal on these issues and wealthier people more conservative. We expand on this theme, looking at other ways in which demographic features relate to differing interests.

In short, part II of the book provides the demographic building blocks and the interest-based rationales behind them. We'll rely mostly on American data, but we'll see in broad strokes that the basic connections between demographic features and specific policy areas hold up worldwide.

With the building blocks in place, in part III, on political coalitions, we'll see how complex amalgams of interests produce varieties of people with shades of political color well beyond Jon Stewart's bichromatic rainbow. We'll find distinct clusters of demographics and see how they tend to favor the Republican or Democratic coalitions. These demographic groups, while distinct, will not be arbitrary, but rather they will

follow a logic grounded in everyday interests across the different sets of issues we will have explored in earlier chapters. In this way, part II will provide the building blocks for the analysis we construct in part III.

In part IV, we'll wrap up, exploring how far an interest-based perspective can take us while acknowledging that it can't take us the entire way. To be clear, we don't want to oversell our perspective. We think we can shed substantial new light on diverse political positions, but any such explanation of politics is limited because people are incredibly complex. For every two or three people who look typical in some facet of their issues opinions, there's probably one who doesn't. We are engaged in social science, not biography. We deal in generalities, typicalities, and averages, and there are always exceptions. Further, while we cover many important areas of modern political disagreement, there are some we've left out, and we'll discuss those.

This is a book on politics but it is not a political book. We're not trying to figure out how candidates can win elections. We're not trying to argue that people who share our own policy objectives are good and right while our opponents are bad and wrong. In this we depart from a well-worn path. Most writing on politics carries a clear underlying message about the righteousness of some set of policy positions that just happen to be strongly favored by the authors and the audience. Compared with such pleasing endeavors, our premise—that interests are key in understanding different positions on different issues—will probably feel like a kind of political attack to partisans on all sides. The best we can say is that we've worked hard to give a perspective that stands up to the facts.

In the end, the hardest part of understanding people's political opinions isn't the complexity of the material—this stuff is hard, but, taking it one step at a time, it's not *that* hard. Instead, the hardest part of understanding these opinions is *quieting one's own noisy biases long enough to hear the real themes being played*. We're going to make the case that minds are built for results, to advance their own everyday interests. But part of people's results-oriented agenda involves making themselves and others on their side look good and making their opponents look bad. We argue that all sides are in an important sense doing the same thing—advancing competing interests—in a way that doesn't naturally lead

to one side looking better than the other. But minds are built to resist such accounts, to latch on to more satisfying alternatives that rescue the moral privilege of one's own positions.

Still, we're not saying that people shouldn't favor their own side in political competitions. It's what democracy is about, for better or for worse. Speaking for ourselves, for example, there's nothing about our analyses in this book that has changed who we, your authors, vote for—we have policy preferences typical of our demographic group and will continue to support candidates who represent our views.

In this book, we're scratching a different itch. Our intention is not to advocate, but to understand and explain political positions. Along the way, we'll needle our own policy friends as much as our own policy opponents. As a reader, one has to make choices—is it worth it to try to put aside one's own comforting stories (for a moment, anyway) and simply try to figure out what's going on, even if the resulting portrait isn't particularly flattering to anyone?