

KENNETH M. DOLBEARE ■ LINDA J. MEDCALF

Shaping the
AMERICAN
New Politics
IDEOLOGIES
of the 1990s
TODAY

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S E C O N D E D I T I O N

AMERICAN IDEOLOGIES TODAY

SHAPING THE NEW POLITICS OF THE 1990s

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The Evergreen State College

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Shaping the New Politics of the 1990s

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PREFACE

This is a basic book about American politics and government. The political values and beliefs that have sustained and given direction to American political institutions and practices for generations are changing in fundamental ways, because the world has changed. American politics and government are being reshaped by these changes.

But neither scholars nor participants yet have been able to define what is happening or where we are heading. One reason is that we are in the very midst of a major economic, social, and political transformation, with only outmoded concepts and obsolete labels for our political thinking. The distinguished political scientist Robert Dahl offers this sweeping characterization:

The most powerful ideologies of our age all suffer from having acquired their shape and substance in the 18th and 19th centuries, or very much earlier, before the world in which we live had come fully into view. They are like medieval maps of the world, charming but dangerous for navigating unfamiliar seas. . . . Liberalism, conservatism, capitalism, socialism, Marxism, corporatism, anarchism, even democratic ideas, all face a world that in its form and thrust confounds the crucial assumptions, requirements, descriptions, predictions, hopes, or prescriptions they express.¹

In 1991 the scholar-journalist E. J. Dionne published a much-noted book, *Why Americans Hate Politics*², which blamed the “false choices” of outmoded ideologies for the growing American distaste for politics. Dionne flatly declares:

The categories that have dominated our thinking for so long are utterly irrelevant to the new world we face. Most of the problems of our political life can be traced to the failure of the dominant ideologies of American public life, liberalism and conservatism. . . . to hold ideologies responsible for our troubles is . . . a way of saying that ideas matter, and that ideas, badly formulated, interpreted and used, can lead us astray.³

This book is an attempt to analyze what is happening to American political ideas, why, and what difference it makes for American politics. Although our focus is on what these changes mean for the future, we must first understand how we got where we are. No country can shake off well-established values and beliefs and start entirely afresh. The United States is certainly no exception in this respect. The political premises, goals, and

programs now taking shape may be the equivalent of a whole new generation of ideologies, but they build on a base of the old.

For these reasons, we grant as large a role to history as to any other way of understanding the ideas that we explore. Although we employ everyday American meanings for such terms as *liberal* and *conservative* in the text (with explanations), we recount their classical origins and evolution in a historical glossary. Our emphasis, however, is on the substance of the emerging ideologies, as put forward by their leading authors and spokespersons. That is, we try to let the reader judge each of the competing American belief systems on the basis of its own merit.

In this second edition, we have found it necessary to make extensive revisions and significant additions in order to follow the development of American ideologies into the 1990s. We have also sought to make our analysis accessible to beginning students of American political ideas through a thematic organization and a continuing focus on the impact of ideas on our politics.

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PART I

**IDEOLOGY AND
POLITICS IN THE
UNITED STATES**

CHAPTER 1

AMERICAN IDEOLOGIES: THEIR ORIGINS AND IMPORTANCE

Every person alive goes through life with *some* mental images and expectations—whether fully formed or fragmentary—about how the world is and should be organized. The images come from often unexamined assumptions, values, and notions about what is good or bad, right or wrong, natural or inevitable. That collection of images, expectations, values, and assumptions constitutes an *ideology*. An ideology simplifies, organizes, evaluates, and gives meaning to what otherwise would be a very confusing world. Particularly in times of uncertainty and change, some people cling desperately to old values, images, and expectations while others reach eagerly for new ones. Americans are no exception to this rule.

In other words, ideology is pervasive. Often it is unrecognized as such, because it is so deeply embedded in people's lives and so widely employed in everyday life that it is misunderstood as reality. Sometimes it serves to unite people to seek changes in their world. For both these reasons, ideology is a crucial factor in politics. American politics is no exception to this rule either. Indeed, the United States today is a huge laboratory in which various ideologies, some unrecognized but most quite explicit, are contending for the opportunity to shape our future.

To understand American politics one must understand what Americans *think*—about themselves, their world, and their future—and *why* they think that way. Of course, depending on their cultural background, life experiences, and current policy preferences, Americans espouse different ideologies. This book is an attempt to understand the rich variety of American ideologies today and where they may be taking the United States tomorrow.

We start with brief descriptions of the nature and sources of ideology. Then we explore the ways in which ideologies link up with American politics.

THE NATURE OF IDEOLOGY

An ideology is a more or less coherent set of values, beliefs, and hopes (and sometimes fears) about how the world *does* and *should* work. This set of images and expectations operates as a kind of map in people's minds,

telling them what they are seeing and how to understand and interpret what is happening. Because it rests on deeply rooted values and often unconscious assumptions, an ideology also provides cues for judgment about whether something is good or bad.

An ideology thus affects perception, understanding, *and* evaluation. We see a "fact" in a certain way, fit it into a context of meaning, and evaluate it as good or bad—all in terms of the ideology we hold. In effect, ideology intervenes between so-called objective conditions and events and the people who see and evaluate them. It is a socially generated and transmitted screen, or lens, through which people view themselves and their social world.

Ideology may be understood and analyzed at two distinct levels. The most *fundamental*, or *core*, level is that of basic values and assumptions. In the United States people share six core values to a very great extent—at least in the abstract. These core values are individualism, property, contracts and law, freedom, equality, and democracy.

These values are so important to the understanding of all American ideologies that we devote the entire next chapter to describing and analyzing them. There we shall see that although the values themselves are strongly held and widely shared, Americans differ about how they should be defined and what the priorities should be among them. These differences have been and still are at the heart of much of the ideological conflict in American politics.

Ideology may also be analyzed at an *applied* level of concepts, definitions, images, expectations, beliefs, and cues for action. All of these are grounded in the core values and extend from them to connect with the world of perceived reality. They make up a more or less integrated whole, or a *system* of (related) beliefs, by which a person organizes and interprets reality without conscious effort. Whether they are accurate or inaccurate portrayals of reality does not matter; what is important is that they operate to give shape and meaning to what is perceived "out there" in the world.

Ideologies are more distinctive at the applied level, because the process of translating "reality" into terms that fit into people's real-life situations tends to emphasize what is different rather than what is shared. All Americans do not have the same cultural backgrounds, life experiences, or present advantages and preferences. To the extent that these factors have shaped people's beliefs and expectations, therefore, their ideologies will differ from those of others.

These differences often take regular, repeated, or patterned forms, such that a distinctive (ideological) view of the world comes into being among many people at roughly the same time. After decades, the differences in ideologies get larger. Despite the fact that all share the same fundamental values, at least in the abstract, they have sharp differences about how those values should be defined or applied.

At the outer limits of ideology lies the activity of taking positions on issues of the day. A person's position on an issue may or may not have anything to do with his or her ideology. One may be *for* a particular policy for several very different reasons; some of those reasons might stem from ideology, and some not. Moreover, people of very different ideologies may be on the same side of any given issue; there is not always a liberal or conservative position on every issue. Thus, it is vital to understand that positions on issues do not *necessarily* connect to ideology, although clearly sometimes they do. Sorting out the relationship between ideology and issue positions is a major part of our analytical task.

Finally, ideologies do not just organize and interpret the world for people. They also serve as guides to action, as a means of self-expression, and as the "glue" that holds social groups together. Ideology is a powerful means of social control and is deliberately used as such in every society, the United States included. The particular ideology conveyed is the one preferred by those who have the power and influence to decide what is taught. For example, the reverence urged for the Constitution is a form of ideological indoctrination. It teaches people what to think and why and that the document is right and good, in ways that foreclose independent critical analysis.

THE SOURCES OF IDEOLOGY

There are a great many sources of ideology, some quite obvious and some much less so. They share the task of inculcating the elements of the dominant ideology. In the United States such sources seem particularly powerful and successful. However, their success is not constant or comprehensive. Some people develop ideologies that differ from the dominant one. How people acquire and change ideologies is one of the key questions of political analysis. In this section we shall identify some of the major sources of ideology and speculate about how ideology is developed or changed.

Probably the two most important sources of ideology are the history and culture of the society. Values and ideas that have worked in the past and have become symbols of the nation and its greatness have an imposing longevity. In the United States the values associated with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are almost impregnable. They are givens. If they are challenged, the challenge is one of redefinition within the most limited range that will meet current needs.

As may be expected, history, culture, and most other sources of ideology as well stress the rightness and goodness of things as they are. The United States is celebrated as the embodiment of (good) American values, which in turn are presented as universal and inevitable—in tune with human nature and the aspirations of people everywhere. Of course, some

people benefit by this spirited defense of the status quo and have an interest in seeing that it is continued; others do not but are not always aware of the power of ideology.

History not only determines the givens with which the present is confronted and the apparent range of the possible, but also teaches that some alternatives are unworkable, undesirable, or utterly unacceptable. In the United States, for example, individualism and private property are virtually unquestionable values; capitalism and religion are close seconds. In contrast, Marxist socialism is beyond serious discussion.

Culture has many subtle effects as well. The meanings of concepts and words, buried in the everyday language that people use, can carry ideology across generations. Even colors carry ideological meanings. Black, red, and white all have different meanings, for example. Music, folklore, art, and literature all reflect and transmit dominant values from the past and suggest the range of socially acceptable beliefs and expectations. Most of all, the way of thinking that is characteristic of a society sets limits to what people can think *about*. In the United States, for example, it is far easier to think about tangible, demonstrable "things" than about what might happen if today's conditions were to change markedly.

History and culture provide the background, but the educational system and the mass media are the contemporary vehicles for inculcating the ideology. In the United States compulsory public education has long been a means of indoctrinating people (particularly immigrants) in proper American middle-class values and beliefs. Textbooks and teachers are carefully screened to assure orthodoxy and adherence to conventional interpretations.

The mass media repeat versions of the same basic images of the world, values, and benevolent interpretations of things American. Consider, for example, the ideology in one standard plot: a white American military hero struggles against overwhelming odds, often employing miraculous technology to destroy the enemy, who usually appears to be of a different race and infected with communist ideology. For more mundane examples, one has only to identify the values and assumptions that shape any TV news broadcast.

The teaching of ideology occurs in many other equally unobtrusive but effective ways. Events are interpreted by the media or seen by the public in ways that confirm or (much less frequently) question the dominant ideology. Sometimes an event is so dramatic that it carries an interpretation of its own. The Great Depression of the 1930s, for example, sent a message to many people that the American economic system did not work any longer—and had the effect of reshaping ideologies.

Similarly, a large popular movement or a major public policy may draw forth a new or revised ideology in support. The Populists of the 1890s initially rallied around a specific program of reform, for example, and when they were unsuccessful, many adherents ended up a decade or so later as Progressives or Socialists. Anticommunism and the cold war with

the Soviet Union served as central components of conservative ideology for several years after World War II. More recently, the abortion issue played a major role in the rise of the New Right.

In short, a number of continuing culture-teaching sources and many more obviously political factors are at work to communicate ideology to people. How the individual integrates these messages with other aspects of his or her life, however, is more problematic than any simple communication-acceptance model would suggest.

As youngsters, children acquire basic political values and beliefs from their families and schools; often it may seem that there is no end to the public school effort to teach the propriety, inevitability, and utility of all things American. But for some children, the conditions of everyday life effectively deny these benevolent interpretations. Others go through experiences that cause them to question what they earlier accepted. Sustained deprivation and dramatic events often are necessary before large numbers of people break away from a dominant ideology.

In general, once inculcated, ideology tends to resist change. We cling to the familiar, in part, because a whole web of other beliefs—or even our basic identity—may depend on maintaining established ideologies. Changing conditions may cause ideologies to adapt so as not to lose their adherents. However, despite the power of the dominant ideology and all the forces that hold people to it, the fact is that many people develop different and often directly challenging ideologies. When and why there are shifts from one ideology to another or change in a given ideology are vitally important questions in politics.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IDEOLOGY IN AMERICAN POLITICS

Ideology fulfills many functions within a society. Ideology drives political action, mobilizes people, explains and justifies what elites have done—or it rallies the opposition, offering new ways of seeing and doing in politics—or it tells people to withdraw and wait passively for others to decide on the future directions of the society. In other words, ideology shapes politics and in turn is shaped by it. Ideology justifies what has happened in politics, and from it movements are organized in support of new alternatives. No ideology, no politics.

Some eras in the history of a country are more important than others. Social, economic, political, and cultural changes occasionally converge and reshape the way a society understands itself and sets its future course. In such periods, both the dominant ideology and newly developing ideologies that challenge its dominance undergo substantial change, struggle for impact in politics, and seek to shape the future in their preferred image.

Our premise is that the United States is in the midst of just such a period of significant change—perhaps as fundamental as any in our history—which began in the mid-1960s and has yet to run its course. Our ideologies, both the dominant liberalism and its many challengers, are in a process of reconstruction that will drive our politics in yet-unrecognized directions. This new political context and the potential for ideological reconstruction require some further comment.

The New Context of American Politics

The context of American politics is being reshaped by rapid changes in global ecology, economic relations, and political alignments. The scope of air and water pollution, the depletion of finite resources, and the threat to life posed by the continuing deterioration of the natural environment have given environmental issues unprecedented prominence. These factors fundamentally challenge long-established assumptions about the imperative of economic growth.

Economically, the United States has declined in several key measures, and a growing number of other nations are outperforming us in international competitiveness. The American economy appears to be in an unprecedented and dangerous situation, lending a new urgency to finding solutions. The apparent end of the cold war removed a long-standing threat and calls into question the military expenditures and world policing role that shaped U.S. government structure and policies for half a century.

At the same time, continuing trends in domestic conditions are changing the fundamental givens of American politics and raising wholly new issues to compelling stature. The U.S. government, for example, has run up a huge new debt, with deficits looming for years ahead. The economy seems unable to support the investment needed to cope with today's social problems. Millions of blue-collar manufacturing jobs disappeared, some replaced with high technology positions but more with lower-paid service-sector jobs. Declining real wages and sustained underemployment have, for the first time, become characteristic of the aging U.S. economy.

The largest cities have become predominantly nonwhite, with serious housing needs, declining quality of public education, and high crime rates. Racial polarization heightened while the nation appeared to retreat from the gains of the civil rights era. Related to these last two trends, the population moved steadily west and south during the last four decades, changing the political weight of states and regions. Education and health care are increasingly recognized as vital but unserved long-term needs. The lack of capability, hope, and purpose among a near majority of Americans casts a brooding cloud over the whole political context.

Perhaps the most salient change in American politics was the rupture of the long-standing Democratic party coalition. The New Deal, Harry Truman's Fair Deal, and even Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, were