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An Introduction to Ideologies

BIG

in American Politics

IDEAS

R. MARK TILLER

The St. Martin's Resource Library in Political Science

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**An Introduction to
Ideologies
in American Politics**

R. Mark Tiller

Houston Community College



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PREFACE

Why study ideology? It is hard to imagine another subject as important as ideology. At the individual level, it is at the root of almost everything uniquely human—our dreams, our ethics, our security, our fears, our relationships, and our pursuit of happiness. On a social scale, it is about ideas that change the world.

Nonetheless, ideology is one of the more difficult subjects to teach, for a variety of reasons. Some students initially think ideology is “just theory” and therefore irrelevant to their everyday lives. Many students find ideology a difficult subject because it requires a great deal of critical thought rather than memorization and repetition. Studying ideology may frustrate others because it arouses strong feelings and challenges deeply held convictions. Both students and teachers find it difficult to be entirely objective about a subject that is inherently subjective. Because introductory government or political science textbooks must cover so many topics, they typically devote only one chapter to ideology—there simply isn’t enough space in a textbook for a more lengthy discussion. Unfortunately, most books about ideology are too difficult for the average reader and assume a great deal of prior knowledge.

However, these difficulties do not excuse the educator and the student from studying such an important subject. Ideology cannot be avoided in the study of government. Consider how often terms like *liberal*, *elitist*, *authoritarian*, *communist*, *democrat*, and *nationalist* are used in the press and elsewhere. In fact, quite often the terms are misused and mean different things to different people. This alone is reason enough to study ideology more carefully so that we may share a common vocabulary and enjoy a more meaningful discussion. *Big Ideas: An Introduction to Ideologies in American Politics* is an attempt to overcome some of these challenges. With it, I hope to help bridge the gap between scholarly works on ideology and political science textbooks.

Ideology is a complex subject with its own vocabulary. It is not an irrelevant subject of eighteenth-century writers. Great philosophical debates, which are critical to our lives today, are still raging among intellectuals. The conclusions they reach are shaped by the accumulated ideological thought of past centuries. These conclusions shape our modern world, determining policies about issues such as gun control, taxation, privacy rights, and so on. Indeed, modern political battles are rooted in a history of ideological debate. Unfortunately, such debates are largely incomprehensible to most of us. The primary goal of this text is to give the student a window into this important subject. I have tried to

write it in common English and have assumed little prior knowledge of ideology. Of course, readers who are already well versed in the subject may find it overly simplistic.

TO THE INSTRUCTOR

Educational texts about ideology are typically organized historically, beginning with the classical Mediterranean or seventeenth-century European ideology. Although this approach has an obvious appeal, too often students become overwhelmed with concepts and unfamiliar terms about an era that is obscure to their experiences. This text instead begins with the ideological concepts that are most important to the study of contemporary American politics (liberal and conservative). Part One is organized thematically, or conceptually; it defines the social, political, and economic ideological concepts that will be used in the second part of the text. Part Two is a historically ordered discussion of the great ideological movements of the last three hundred years.

For nine years, I have used a previous version of this text as a supplement to traditional political science texts in my introductory government course. I find it most useful when it is married to a beginning unit on the U.S. Constitution. My students read Part One first, Chapters 6 and 7 while studying the Constitution, and the remainder of the text after studying the Constitution. This approach helps the students appreciate that the Constitution was not written in a vacuum, and it allows them to compare the American constitutional system to the values and experiences of other countries. This text has also been used in comparative politics courses.

TO THE STUDENT

The organization of this text may seem odd to some readers, because frequently it returns to ideas or themes discussed in previous chapters. Occasionally it also briefly mentions something to come in a later chapter. Such disorder is to some degree inescapable, because to fully understand one ideological concept it is necessary to understand others. This presents the dilemma of where to begin. Therefore the reader is encouraged to look backward as needed. Throughout the reading, there are names of famous ideological thinkers, dates, historical examples, statistics, and so on. These are not unimportant, but they are provided primarily to aid in your comprehension of ideology. It is my opinion that

study of the ideological concepts themselves is much more useful than memorization of the examples and names associated with them.

Each chapter ends with a few key terms and study questions. These terms and questions are not the only ideas of importance in the chapter. However, they can serve as a good test of your comprehension. You may wish to write essay-form answers in response to the study questions. As for the key terms, define them in your own words without copying from the text or a dictionary. If you cannot explain them in your own words, you probably need to study them again. Also, don't stop with a simple definition: explain the relevance of each term. Discuss how each relates to other terms and concepts. Give examples. Note the origins of the terms. This kind of study will give you a superior understanding of ideology.

CONCLUSION

Some people believe that the participation of the people in politics is critical to the well-being of our country. One commonly hears the assertion: "We need to get the people involved in the process. If only the people became more informed and assertive . . . if only they voted . . . if only they demanded good government of their representatives."

Others consider the apathy of the mass public to be a blessing. They argue that the majority of the public will never educate themselves enough to make a constructive contribution. In this view, many of our problems are caused precisely because politicians try too hard to cater to the unwise and selfish demands of those who become marginally politically active.

Both of these positions have some merit. My own opinion is that if the public is going to participate in political debates, it is incumbent on educators and students to do everything we can to make that participation meaningful. If we are going to insist on democracy, we should at least know what democracy means!

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R. Mark Tiller

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PART ONE

Ideologies

There are literally hundreds of words that distinguish variations of ideological thought, many of which overlap. To complicate matters even more, there are many interpretations for each ideology. Fierce arguments rage between philosophers (even of the same ideology) over the true meaning of their ideology. Part One tries to unravel each of the basic ideological terms.

In Chapter 1, the concept of *ideology* itself is discussed. Chapter 2 explains the modern-day usage of the terms *liberalism* and *conservatism* (and *left* and *right*) in great detail. These terms are probably the most important ideological concepts.

The left-to-right spectrum is one way by which ideological concepts can be classified. Another is by subject. Most ideologies are *primarily* concerned with one of three subjects:

- social systems (how people relate to each other)
- political systems (the power relationship between the people and their government)
- economic systems (the control of wealth, property, and production).

These issues overlap, so it is quite arbitrary to divide them; but in the interest of simplification they are herein treated separately in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, concerning (respectively) *social ideologies*, *political ideologies*, and *economic ideologies*.

WHAT IS IDEOLOGY?

The root of the term **ideology** comes from the Greek word *ide*, which means “idea” or “image.” In modern usage ideology is a **system** of ideas, or a vision, of how life should be organized—socially, politically, and economically. One might also include religious ideology in this classification scheme, although this is not our topic. In fact, philosophers began to commonly use the term *ideology* during the French Revolution to refer to the revolutionaries’ view (as opposed to the Catholic Church’s view) of how society should be organized.

To repeat, ideology is a **system** of ideas—not just random, disassociated thoughts but a complex, or web, of interlocking ideas, concepts, theories, and perceptions. These ideas support and add to one another. Ideologies are not right or wrong; they cannot be proved or disproved. Taken as a whole, an ideology presents a powerful logical and/or emotional argument for a particular course of action. Individuals who are attracted to an ideology are called **ideologues**. Although the term *ideologue* has a somewhat negative connotation in the United States today, it simply means a person who believes in and is motivated by ideology.

Ideologies have many functions. They provide standards by which people can evaluate right and wrong. They also may be considered as theories, for predictive purposes. Ideologues think that ideology explains the past, helps them understand the present, and allows them to anticipate what will come in the future. In addition, ideologies may be used

to consider ideals and help people set goals toward reaching those ideals. More actively, ideologies often suggest methods that are appropriate to meet such goals, and solutions to perceived problems. Finally, ideologies provide a rallying call to action, which organizes people into groups—by which participants define themselves and judge who is an enemy and who is a friend. For some ideologues, ideology becomes a critical part of their identity. This explains why it is so difficult for such people to critically examine their own values and consider new ones.

Ideologies may also be used by political leaders and others to propagandize and manipulate people. In such cases, ideology may be employed as a facade to cloak the political ambitions of individuals or groups. Through ideological control of education, government, business, culture, and so on, rulers control the agenda and make alternatives to their policies simply unthinkable. By indoctrinating the public with the “correct” way to think, they stifle opposition and serious debate. Such ideological policing is easy to spot in undemocratic countries. Yet, Americans are also subject to this phenomenon, although it occurs in much more subtle forms.

All people—including Americans—undergo **political socialization**, that is, the process by which political views are acquired. This process of lifelong learning (and relearning) helps determine which ideologies attract our attention. It begins during childhood, as parents and school-teachers teach reverence for patriotic historical events, myths, and symbols and tell idealistic stories of heroic leaders and role models. It continues via friends and peer groups such as interest groups, political parties, and churches. In the current information age, the media plays an increasingly large role in socialization. Of course, as the previous paragraph implies, this political socialization can be heavily controlled by political leaders in pursuit of their own agendas, through the use of ideological propaganda via the media. The power of the American media to promote ideological values through symbolism and entertainment is especially great, although it is not focused in a single ideological direction or for a particular purpose as in countries with controlled sources of information. Ideological constraints on public policy making in the United States may be just as effective, but they are not imposed conspiratorially by a ruling class.

It should be noted that leaders, too, are bound by their people’s dominant ideological values. Ideas that have been previously condemned as alien are ruled out before they can even be considered. In fact, even when a new proposal is *not* ideologically alien to a country, its opponents generally try to portray it as such. Political victories often depend on which side successfully frames the issue in terms of the dominant ideologies of the country.

Consider the debate over health-care reform. As President Clinton's health-care reform proposal neared completion in late 1993, proponents of universal coverage (health insurance for all) tried to portray the issue in terms of *equality and fairness*. Former senator Harris Wofford (D-Pennsylvania) suggested, "If all criminals are guaranteed the right to lawyers, then certainly all citizens deserve a right to doctors." Opponents of universal coverage labeled the Clinton health-care plan *socialist*. They tried instead to focus attention on the role of government in the plan and the tax burden on private businesses. Of course, in the United States equality and fairness are positive ideological values, whereas socialism and taxation are negative. The adoption or rejection of Clinton's plan probably depended most on which ideological framework was more popularly accepted by the people and their representatives. Objectively, one could take issue with each of the arguments: all Americans already get health care, because if they do not have insurance they will be admitted for treatment in publicly-owned hospital emergency rooms or charity clinics. The real issue is whether this is the most cost-efficient manner by which to provide that service. Furthermore, as former senator Bob Dole (R-Kansas) pointed out, the overwhelming majority of Americans already consider their health care to be the best in the world. As for "socialism" and taxation, the government's role in the Clinton plan was minimal in comparison to that of most of our allies' health-care systems, as well as in comparison plans offered by congressional liberals. Americans already pay for the burden of indigent health care at the state and local level, so the primary effect would have been to redistribute the tax burden rather than increase it. If successful, reform could even reduce the cost of health care. However, such arguments probably had less to do with the ultimate failure of the Clinton plan than did the success of his opponents in controlling the ideological debate. After all, ideological values are much easier to evaluate than complicated arguments about tax rates and pharmaceutical regulations, since most citizens already possess opinions about ideology, for better or worse.

In 1995, Clinton was able to turn the ideological tables regarding Medicare, a health insurance entitlement for Social Security beneficiaries. The newly elected Republican majority in Congress proposed a seven-year plan to cut \$270 billion from the projected costs of Medicare. By pointing out that the Republicans also proposed a \$245 billion tax cut that would disproportionately benefit the wealthy, Clinton was able to resurrect the theme of equality and fairness. The Republicans insisted that their tax cuts would be paid for by other reductions in spending, and that under their plan, the average annual spending per Medicare recipient would rise from \$4,800 to \$6,700. They took opinion polls and held strategy sessions to debate alternative words to be used instead of *cut*,

finally settling on *improve*, *protect*, and *preserve* (Medicare). Clinton and congressional Democrats noted that in order to provide merely the current level of services, Medicare spending would have to rise to \$8,000 per recipient, owing to the high inflation rate of medical costs; therefore the Republican plan was clearly a *cut*—moreover, a cut from vulnerable Medicare recipients “to pay for a tax break for the wealthy.” This argument resonates with Americans’ ideological preference for fairness and equality.

As the new Congress met in early 1997, there was no agreement on how Medicare costs should be controlled, although politicians of all stripes agree that it must be somehow restructured, generally through encouragement of managed care and health maintenance organizations. (Compared to the contentious debate over Social Security and Medicaid, there is great consensus in principle.) In fact, both sides agree that much of the Medicare savings should come at the expense of wealthy Medicare beneficiaries, who would be required to pay higher premiums. In early 1996, the Republicans lowered their proposed cuts to \$168 billion, much closer to the president’s proposal of \$118 billion. So why did the public mistrust the congressional Republicans’ effort to “improve, protect, and preserve” Medicare? It probably is *not* because the public had a clear understanding of the difference between the president’s and the Republicans’ proposals, and how each would reform Medicare spending. The public understood the Medicare debate no more than it understood the debate about Clinton’s health insurance proposal. Rather, the mistrust was more likely owing to the powerful ideological appeal of the president’s argument for fairness and equality. The Republicans had arguments to support their proposals, but not much of an ideological basis from which to present them.

The preceding discussion is not meant to suggest that the American public is consciously ideological. In fact, rather than seeking ideologues to govern them, most Americans say they prefer nonideological approaches to government. Yet the devotion of Republicans for Ronald Reagan and the devotion of Democrats for Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy suggests otherwise. Although these men were controversial figures, no one can doubt the strength of their leadership and vision. Ideologues believe that a solid ideological foundation is essential to great leadership and decision making. For a president—who must translate complex ideas to the mass public, and whose success often depends on his ability to rally and motivate the public—ideology is indispensable.

“It is easy to build a philosophy—it doesn’t have to run.”

—Charles Kettering

Those who are less ideological often label themselves **problem-solvers** or **pragmatists**, implying they are more practical than theoretical. Problem-solvers accuse ideologues of being wedded to their defunct theories and failed methods of the past. They purport to be free of ideological restraints and blinders; they tend to emphasize “practical methods” and “whatever works.” After all, they claim, the world’s most influential ideologies today originated hundreds of years ago, in very different societies with very different problems. Compared to Ronald Reagan, both George Bush and Bill Clinton are problem-solvers. They have devoted their lives to public service and policy study. Both are arguably harder working and more intellectually capable than Reagan was. However, their support has been shallow and relatively unenthusiastic. Bush’s lack of appreciation for the continual questions about his long-term goals and values became evident when in a moment of frustration he awkwardly referred to the issue as “the vision thing.” Likewise Clinton, who calls himself a “New Democrat” (implying a willingness to rethink his party’s ideology), is continually accused of waffling on the issues and standing for nothing. Both men have been accused by their own supporters of compromising too much.

“When you don’t know where you’re going, any gust of wind will get you there.”

—Unknown

Ideologues argue that many ideological controversies are not specific to a particular time—that many questions put forth by philosophers two thousand years ago are just as relevant today. Furthermore, those who have no ideological perspective to guide themselves have a haphazard or random way of understanding what should and should not be changed, and they usually make short-term “Band-Aid” solutions to long-term problems.

Still others believe that both sides in the preceding argument are correct. Ideology *is* indispensable to politics, they argue. However, all societies should constantly reevaluate their intellectual foundations, revising outdated and counterproductive ideologies when appropriate. According to this line of thinking, because societies are made up of individual people, individuals must be open-minded enough to reconsider their ideological values. This is especially important in light of the fact that the ideological positions themselves are not frozen in time and place. Ideology and ideologues are not static but dynamic—frequently changing and adapting to the present environment because of dramatic events, controversial issues, political campaigns, popular leaders, and a variety of other socializing influences.