

Morgan Marietta

A Citizen's Guide to American Ideology

Other words visible in the cloud include: public, family, defense, differences, nature, control, future, competing, military, government, question, language, rights, positions, power, means, problem, social, system, values, identity, faith, life, gender, common, beliefs, worldview, tradition, immigration, law, war, group, America, thought, liberal, action, human, welfare, order, policy, liberalism, women, respect, men, answers, state, society, good, just, focus, politics, conservatism, oppression, institutions, grounded, freedom, liberty, religion, issues, perspective, tolerance, conservative, preferences, community, time, movement, Republican.

Conservatism and Liberalism
in Contemporary Politics

CITIZEN GUIDES TO
POLITICS & PUBLIC AFFAIRS

ROUTLEDGE

A CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO AMERICAN IDEOLOGY

Conservatism and Liberalism in
Contemporary Politics



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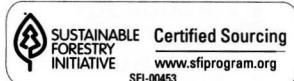
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A CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO AMERICAN IDEOLOGY

Conservatives and Liberals often resort to cartoon images of the opposing ideology, relying on broadly defined caricatures to illustrate their opposition. To help us get past these stereotypes, this short, punchy book explains the two dominant political ideologies in America today, providing a thorough and fair analysis of each as well as insight into their respective branches.

To help us understand the differences between the two contrasting ideologies, Morgan Marietta employs an innovative metaphor of a tree—growth from ideological roots to a core value, expanding into a problem that creates the competing branches of the ideology. This approach suggests a clear way to explain and compare the two ideologies in an effort to enhance democratic debate.

A Citizen's Guide to American Ideology is a brief, non-technical, and conversational overview of one of the most important means of understanding political rhetoric and policy debates in America today.

Morgan Marietta is Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Georgia.

CITIZEN GUIDES TO POLITICS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Morgan Marietta and Bert Rockman, Series Editors

Each book in this series is framed around a significant but not well-understood subject that is integral to citizens'—both students and the general public—full understanding of politics and participation in public affairs. In accessible language, these titles provide readers with the tools for understanding the root issues in political life. Individual volumes are brief and engaging, written in short, readable chapters without extensive citations or footnoting. Together they are part of an essential library to equip us all for fuller engagement with the issues of our times.

TITLES IN THE SERIES

**A Citizen's Guide to American Ideology:
Conservatism and Liberalism in Contemporary Politics**

Morgan Marietta

FOR MY STUDENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book originated in lectures given to my students at Colgate University, Bates College, Hamilton College, and the University of Georgia, and more importantly in the discussions that followed with many sharp minds testing their own perspectives on American politics. The book is dedicated to students of our national conversation, in and beyond university classes.

Many thanks are due to Michael Kerns at Routledge Press, who supported this series and its goal of speaking to a broad audience about essential political questions. My friend and colleague Bert Rockman was also instrumental in making the series possible.

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INTRODUCTION

Too Common and Too Rare

If you ask many liberals what conservatives are, they will say “mean people.” Liberals are nice people who want to help others, and conservatives are selfish and uncaring. From the other perspective, many conservatives define liberalism as simply being foolish. Liberals are idealistic souls who have no clear grasp of the harsher realities of the world, both domestic and foreign. A line I’ve heard many times is that if you are a conservative while young, you have no heart, but if you are still a liberal by the time you are old, you have no brain. If one bought into these views, it would present a difficult choice: would you rather be mean or foolish? Hard to say. Better to understand the two worldviews accurately so we can embrace or reject them for what they truly are rather than resort to cartoon images.

The purpose of this brief book is to explain American ideology. What is conservatism and what is liberalism? This is not meant to be an intellectual history of the two movements, or an academic account of the various strains of ideological thought over time and in different nations, but instead simply a discussion of citizen politics in contemporary America. The goal is to describe what it means to be conservative or liberal in the present day from the perspective of a politically interested citizen. When we identify what it means to hold an ideology in our current politics, it becomes clear that most Americans do not have one. They are not fully fledged liberals or conservatives, and do not offer these complete worldviews with their ready-made responses to current events. Often an individual citizen’s values lean to the conservative side or tend to be more liberal, but this is very different from holding a full political ideology.

From the perspective of many citizens, ideology is far too common. Our political elites and media personalities discuss ideology (and are driven by it) routinely. We hear the rhetoric of liberalism versus conservatism in regard

to almost any issue, when discussed by almost any commentator. Many of our citizens would prefer a less ideological politics. They often react negatively to the ideologies of our public debates because their own beliefs are not ideological. But from the perspective of our political elites, whether in government, media, or academics, ideology is far too rare. Many believe that being non-ideological is the same as being uninformed or even irresponsible. They see their ideology as natural and virtuous, and look down on non-ideologues, or in other words, most citizens. Those citizens often see ideologues as odd or extreme and do not trust them. It is normal and unremarkable for Americans to hold values or opinions that are conservative in some senses and liberal in others, but to our leadership class this seems strange and wrong-headed. One of the important observations about ideology in America is that our political elites have it in spades, while most of our citizens are not guided by the same ideas that motivate our leaders. From these different perspectives, ideology is seen as either too far common or far too rare. This creates serious problems for communication between citizens and politicians, and makes it difficult for the public to keep track of what our leaders are up to.

So what are the liberal or conservative ideologies that drive our political elites? The first thing to note is that it is not a single dimension, which is how American ideology is usually discussed. There is no meaningful left-right continuum because conservatism and liberalism are not opposites. Instead they are two distinct worldviews that emphasize different assumptions about how the world works, different core values, and very different visions of a good society. This is the heart of a political ideology: a constellation of values and assumptions that organize a comprehensive view of how to improve our society. These assumptions and values and future visions are not really opposites. The competing worldviews create different core questions about how we ought to act. Conservatism and liberalism are not different answers to the same question, but pose different questions altogether. It is not the case that the central question of conservatism is answered differently by liberals. Instead, liberals do even see it as a meaningful question. The same is true in the reverse. Liberalism poses a question that is of little concern to conservatives. Each worldview does not understand the other a great deal of the time, which explains why liberals and conservatives often talk past each other without engaging in the same conversation. It also explains why members of each group have trouble describing their opponents accurately. Most true ideologues cannot express what the other camp believes without employing terms of insult, except by assuming it is the opposite of their beliefs, which is not at all accurate.

A second crucial note about ideology is that conservatism is not one thing, but has several distinct branches that sometimes conflict with each other. Liberalism is also internally divided. This might sound as if the two ideologies are the same in this sense, both being divided into competing factions, but again the real situation is not as it is often described. Conservatism is divided into branches that reflect different answers to the core question of the ideology, but they often overlap and can be compatible as well as competitive. Liberalism is divided in a different way that is often a zero-sum form of competition. The different answers to the core question of liberalism are competitive rather than cooperative, creating a deeper form of division within that ideology.

The following chapters summarize the conservative and liberal worldviews, and then compare the two ideologies. The book makes three central points. The most important is that conservatism and liberalism do not form a single dimension or continuum. Instead they are distinct worldviews grounded in competing core values and premises about reality, which lead to different questions and proposed answers for our society. Conservative concerns focus on the Glue Problem, or how to maintain a free and decent society given the forces of threat and decline, while liberalism focuses on the Oppression Problem, or which group in society deserves our attention and support in order to achieve equality. Conservatism centers on *protecting* society, while liberalism focuses on *perfecting* society.

The second point is that each ideology has competing branches. The answers to the two worldviews' core questions divide the ideologies into different types of conservatives and types of liberals, depending on how they believe the glue problem should be answered, or which social group is most oppressed and deserving of support. However, the branches are more cooperative on the conservative side and competitive among liberals.

The final point is that full-blown ideologies are the province of political elites, compared to the less complex political values of ordinary citizens. This creates a meaningful distance between electoral politics and public policy decisions. It distorts the nature of representation in our political system, and limits the communication between elites and normal citizens.

While ideology is pervasive in our political conversation, it is rarely understood even by the political elites who hold one worldview but cannot explain the other. The following chapters attempt to clarify these competing ideologies, written for citizens who are either one, or neither one, but wish to understand both.

AN IDEOLOGY TREE

Sometimes it is best to begin defining something by what it isn't. This is especially true if a common misconception muddies the waters. From the time Americans began to conduct surveys on public opinion, attitudes about policy proposals have been the central focus. The idea was that democracy is about following the will of the people, so the key is knowing what citizens think about each proposed policy change. There is always a left and a right side, and people who are consistently on the right are conservatives, and the ones who line up on the left are liberals. Citizens have political stances, and ideology is a simple matter of which side of the policy debates they are on. The problem is that *both of these assumptions are wrong*. Most citizens do not have stable policy opinions about most issues. They are concerned more about their daily lives than following policy debates, so most have not really thought about and decided where they stand on the majority of issues. The second assumption—that ideology is the combination of these policy preferences—is also false, because issue positions do not lead to ideology, but the reverse. Ideology is what makes people hold consistent issue positions. Policy preferences don't cause ideology; ideology causes policy preferences.

Fifty years ago a professor named Phil Converse wrote a paper that changed how we understand American ideology. The mythology about the paper is that it went around to the major academic journals, all of which refused to publish it because the reviewers thought it couldn't possibly be right. It eventually appeared as a famous chapter in a relatively obscure book. Converse looked at the evidence from the public opinion surveys that had been growing in number over the previous decade, and realized that most citizens did not have consistent opinions from one year to the next. When asked about current issues, they would not admit ignorance, but just make something up. Perhaps even more important was his discovery that, along with lacking policy views, most citizens did not have an identifiable ideology. Only 10 to 15 percent

of Americans were in any way ideological, and most of the rest had trouble explaining what conservatism and liberalism were.¹

The reason this paper was almost never published is that it reflects a reality exactly the opposite of the assumptions of most people in government and the academic world. From the perspective of ideological people who took politics seriously in their daily lives, it was unthinkable that other Americans did not follow politics, or have ready policy opinions, and fulfill their role in the academic understanding of democratic theory. But all of the collective evidence since that time indicates that Converse was correct, then and still today.

The lack of a constraining ideology in large part explains the lack of stable policy preferences, as those are often the *result* of an ideology rather than a building block of one. Few people work out in detail their policy positions on a broad range of issues, which would take a tremendous amount of reading and effort. Even if they did, this process would be unlikely to result in positions that were all conservative or all liberal. It is the reverse process—determining an ideology first—that results in liberal or conservative positions across the board, once the ideology gives us a shortcut to how we should see individual issues. It is the ideology that controls the policy views, rather than the opposite. Once we see that most Americans do not have a hardcore ideology, it follows that they would tend to not have hardline policy views either.

Academics who study public opinion have accepted that most citizens and voters are not ideological, but they have not gotten over their disappointment. For professionals in polling, this led to a dilemma that still plagues the entire industry of public opinion studies: if democracy is about following the policy choices of the majority, how can it work if citizens do not have informed policy preferences? A good question, which is still at the heart of arguments over American democracy among academics.² We can't solve that problem here, but one possible answer is that democracy is not about policy preferences after all. In other words, we started by looking for the wrong thing. Democracy is about the core values of citizens, and making sure that our leaders share those values. The central question is the shifting balance in our competing value divisions:

- Do we believe that individuals are responsible for themselves or that society is responsible for the welfare of all of our citizens?
- Do we believe in a more secular or religious public culture?
- Do we accept that military force is a necessary feature of international affairs or believe that we should employ force only as an absolute last resort?

AN IDEOLOGY TREE

- Should we shun involvement in the affairs of other nations or accept the responsibilities of a superpower to improve conditions overseas and advance our values?
- Should we make a commitment to the environment and the survival of other species as an end in itself or give priority to other interests and commitments?
- Should we embrace traditional roles between men and women, husbands and wives, parents and children, or be open to new understandings and social arrangements?

These questions of core value commitments are at the heart of our politics. In order to see their role in American ideology, we have to discuss the different forms of belief that citizens hold. One description that may be both simple and accurate is an ideology tree.

An Ideology Tree

The right metaphor may be the key to explaining something. It is the best image that matches the topic. For example, ideology resembles a tree. It has

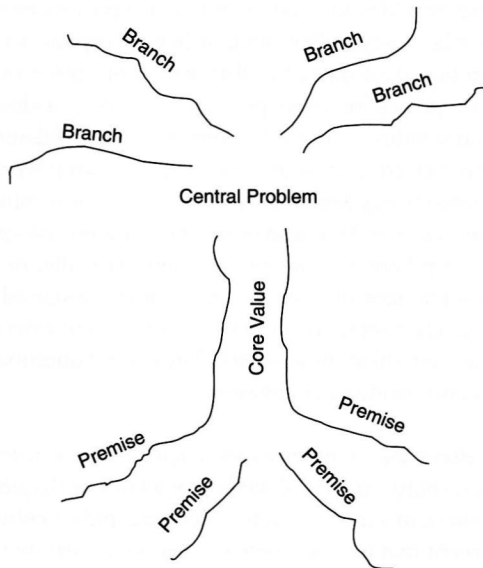


Figure 1.1 An Ideology Tree

roots, or foundations, that lead to a trunk, or the main argument. Those create a central question or problem that limits the height of the tree. At that point there are different answers, which lead to the branches or competing factions within the ideology. Conservatism and liberalism are both like this, but have different foundations and distinct core values, which lead to different central questions and then competing answers, or the branches of the ideology.

An ideology tree grows from different kinds of beliefs that create a unified worldview. The two key forms of belief that define an ideology are *values* and *premises*. The first are statements about how the world *should* work; the second are observations about how the world *does* work. Statements of desirable principle and immutable practice—of goals and realities—these are the roots of ideology.

Values

Values are difficult to define, but we can begin with the observation that *values need no justification, but we can justify nothing without them*. All of our political judgments of right or wrong, better or worse, rely on values. They are “not means to ends, but ultimate ends, ends in themselves.”³ Among the competing priorities for a good society, values are standing judgments of which ones are better. For example, do we believe that tradition is good and a source of stability, or do we embrace new social arrangements that challenge the old status quo, like gay marriage? This is not the same question as what we would ban or enforce, but what in our hearts do we feel is *better*? Should we publicly respect military people and their service, or should we wish for a different world that does not require military force and shift admiration to nonviolent protestors? Again the question is less about specific policies and more about what we admire.

Another way of thinking of values is that they are the *backstops* of our decisions. If we ask someone to explain a political position, and then press them to justify that reason, and continue in this fashion, the point at which they can go no further is a value. At some point we arrive at a statement that it feels silly to justify. We reach the baseline position that human life is good, or that you desire individual freedom, or that more equality is better. These are the things that seem obvious to you, needing no justification. They are simply true. They are the core of our belief system, and we are attached to them at a gut level. Hence, values—the most reduced form of justification—can only be believed rather than justified.