Political Ideology: Crash Course Government and Politics #35

Crash Course: U.S. Government and Politics
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(PBS Intro)

Hi, I'm Craig, and this is Crash Course Government and Politics. And today, we're gonna get personal. Not personal in the sense that I'm gonna tell you I'm a bed wetter cause I'm not...gonna tell you that.

We're gonna talk about people's personal political views and where they come from. This is what political scientists sometimes call Political Socialization.

But before we get into the forces that help create our political outlooks, we should probably define what political ideologies look like in America.

(Intro)

In America, there are a number of ways people characterize themselves politically. Typically, they identify with a political party, although as we'll see when we talk more about parties, this has become less likely over time.

And although there's a lot of overlap between political party and political ideology, there's not 100% correspondence between the two.

But there is 100% overlap between my fist and this eagle's beak! Politics.

So, now I should probably say what I mean by political ideology. Basically, I'm talking about whether you identify as liberal or conservative or libertarian or socialist or anarchist or nihilist or craigist - people who just love me. I'm one of those.

You're probably familiar with the idea that liberals are on the left, and conservatives are on the right. And this can be a helpful shorthand, but what political views do these terms represent?

Let's go to the Clone Zone! What? The Clone Zone - it's right here now? I'll just...I'll leave then. This way? I'll go this way.

Taking a cue from anti-federalists, American conservatives believe that a large government poses a threat to individual liberty, and we prefer our national government to be as small as possible. (Scoffs)

We have this in common with libertarians. There are some basic functions like national defense that government can best take care of. But especially since the New Deal, our government has taken on too much. What government we need is best handled by states and localities.

For the most part, American conservatives believe in the free market and that it will provide the greatest economic opportunity and benefit to the greatest number of people.

American conservatives usually support a strong defense. This is one place where we generally don't think spending should be cut. Most other programs, the things that fall under discretionary spending, can and should be left up to the private sector. And this will allow the government to reduce its spending.

Lower spending, in turn, will mean lower taxes. Ahh, delicious lower taxes.

This means that we don't like flag burning, and we favor prayer in schools because these reflect traditional religious and patriotic values.

Just like the eagle. I love the eagle. You're my friend. (Kisses eagle)

Many conservatives, as strong adherents to religious faiths, are against abortion. But I'd say there's a greater diversity in conservative views on social issues than on economic ones.

The social sphere is where we differ significantly from our libertarian friends who don't see any role for government in people's personal lives. This means that libertarians often support things like marijuana legalization that more traditional conservatives do not support.

If there's one value that American conservatives privilege above others, it's liberty. America is a country of freedom, and in most cases, government is more of a threat to liberty than a protector of it.

And I'm out. (Kisses hand and touches eagle's head)

Not bad conservative clone. But bad, here's why.

Sometimes liberals in the U.S. are called New Deal Liberals because the policies that we support grew out of the New Deal. And lately, a number of us are trying to re-brand ourselves as progressives although this is a little tricky given that, historically, progressives and liberals aren't the same thing.

In general, American liberals believe that government can help solve problems, and a bigger government, like a glorious soaring eagle can solve bigger problems and more of them. (Kisses eagle)

We support government intervention in the economy, both in the form of regulations and higher taxes, especially when that intervention benefits historically marginalized groups like minorities, women, and the poor.

We like to the government step in on behalf of consumers and to protect the environment because in general, we don't trust that the free market will be fair to everyone.

We know that protection of the environment, aiding the poor, and expanding civil liberties all cost money, so we usually favor a progressive tax system with higher taxes on the wealthy and corporations.

Although not all American liberals are anti-business, as a rule we don't have a lot of faith that big businesses have the average American's best interest at heart, and so we prefer to see them regulated.

Although we still see national defense as important, most American liberals feel that the country spends more than enough on the military and that the defense budget should be cut, leaving more money for necessary social programs.

In the debate over guns or butter, we like butter. Although we're also fine with the government telling us not to eat so much of it.

If conservatives value liberty, we liberals cherish equality as their primary political virtue, and we see government as a necessary agent in promoting equality. (Kisses hand and pats eagle's head)

We're equals, me and that eagle.

Thanks clones. So, for the most part, this is what most American liberals and conservatives believe, and these are the basic foundations upon which they build their political opinions.

But where do they come from? (Punches eagle and eagle tumbles to the floor)

Political scientists sometimes refer to the process by which individuals establish their personal political ideologies as political socialization. And they have identified four main agents that contribute to our political identities.

Let's go to the Thought Bubble!

The first and most important source of our politics is family. This makes a lot of sense since kids either want to emulate their parents or reject their ideas. And parents are usually the first people that express political opinions to kids.

As I suggested, family can influence your political outlook in negative and positive ways. If you respect your parents and admire them, it's likely you will adopt their political ideology.

On the other hand, adopting an opposing political view can be a form of rebellion.

Still, for the most part, liberal parents breed liberal children, and conservative parents create new generations of conservatives.

The second major influence on political ideology is social groups, which in this case, refer to one's race, gender, religion, or ethnicity. Obviously, these are generalizations, but certain groups tend to fall predictably into liberal or conservative camps.

African Americans and Jewish people are among the most liberal Americans while white Catholics tend to be conservative. Latinos are an interesting case because many identify as Catholic, but they tend to be more liberal politically.

One of the reasons that many use to explain why African Americans and Latinos tend to be liberals is that these groups are disproportionately poor and receive a significant share of government benefits.

To this way of thinking, economic self interest is a prime determiner of where one stands politically, and it also explains why white conservatives, especially those who are wealthy, favor policies of lower taxes and less government intervention.

One problem with this purely self interested view of political ideology though is that there is a large number of low income, low wealth white voters who also do or would gain from more government benefits. But they tend to be conservative.

In other words, be careful when you try to define a person's politics by looking at their bank account.

Gender also tends to be statistically significant in terms of political ideology. The gender gap refers to the fact that women tend to be more liberal overall than men. This is especially true on the issue of national defense where they tend to favor spending reductions rather than increases.

Thanks Thought Bubble.

The third agent of political socialization in the U.S. is education, namely the primary and secondary school system.

This is the most formal way that our political views are shaped since almost all American students take at least one year of American history, and many states require courses in civics.

In these courses, students learn about political values like liberty and equality and may come to align themselves with a liberal or conservative view.

And maybe you're watching me in one of these classes right now...

Conservatives tend to think that American schools and textbooks skew towards a liberal outlook, but this might be because most public school teachers are members of unions, and teachers' union membership correlates highly with a liberal viewpoint.

Whether or not most teachers and textbooks are liberal, it's a bit of a leap to assume that most students will automatically adopt the ideology of their teachers.

Education does relate to political ideology in at least one measurable way though. In that the higher the level of education one attains, the more likely one is to profess liberal views on issues such as women's rights or abortion.

On the other hand, higher education levels also correlate with more conservative views on issues like government support of national health insurance or affirmative action programs to help African Americans.

So, as with many things we look at, things aren't so clear cut, and it's important to have some kind of data to back up our generalizations.

One final agent of political socialization are the political conditions one lives through. Example - if you grew up during the Great Depression and saw FDR's New Deal programs benefit you and your family, it's likely that you'd develop and maintain pro-government, liberal views.

If you came of age during the Reagan era, when popular politicians were singing the praises of self-reliance and calling government the problem rather than the solution, it's likely that you'd develop conservative political views.

It remains to be seen whether people who form their political identities during the Great Recession will be liberal or conservative. But don't worry - pollsters are busy trying to figure it out.

So there you have a very broad outline of what the words conservative and liberal mean in American politics and some of the factors that turn people into liberals or conservatives.

More than probably anything I've said in this series, these are generalizations that you need to look at critically. This doesn't mean that if you find someone or if you are someone who doesn't fit either description 100%, that we're completely wrong, only that political ideologies are complex and change over time.

But we need to understand the outlines of these generalities because they get used all the time in our discussions of American politics. In fact, it would be hard to talk about politics without them.

Thanks for watching - see you next time.

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Crash Course was made with the help of all these political ideologues.

Thanks for watching!