

Inaugural Lecture
The Politics of Belief and U.S. Health Care Reform
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Thank you all, very much, for coming today. I would like also to thank Professor Bowles and his colleagues for inviting me to spend Michaelmas Term at RAI; the Master and his colleagues who have made me feel very welcome at Balliol; and especially Rivington and Joan Winant, who created the opportunity for the community of scholars interested in American Government at Oxford to host visiting faculty through the Winant professorship each year. There is no place I would rather be at this time.

My goal today is to give you some interesting ideas that you might use in thinking about American government. Health care reform is, for this purpose, a useful case study. Yet I will not talk only about that conflict. I also will not pretend to fully explain the politics of health care reform in the U.S.. I could make many other caveats but that should do for going on with.

My subject is the beliefs that inform the positions that people take when they act in politics. In my first draft I wrote two pages about why I prefer the word “beliefs” to “ideas” or “notions” or “ideologies” or attitudes. But lets skip that. By the “politics of belief,” I mean the ways in which political action is influenced by what the actors

¹ This is the text as written for the talk that was delivered. I made a few off-the-cuff remarks during the talk, and dropped a few of the prepared sentences, so it is not identical to the recorded version. In addition, for this text I have added information about the sources mentioned in the talk, and a couple of others. This might be of use to graduate students in particular. I apologize for not having the page numbers for quotes; this talk was adapted in part from drafts of previous talks in which, being talks, I did not have the page numbers.

believe about the world and their own places in it. In this talk I will emphasize two aspects.

First and mainly, I will talk about the ideological divide in U.S. politics. This helps explain both the depth of disagreement and the harsh tone of disagreement; I will argue, for example, that there was no possibility of substantive compromise between the parties.

Compromise there would be, but not between the parties. Compromise was WITHIN the Democratic party. So, second, I will talk about the key actors in the debate, the swing legislators. I will call them conservative democrats, or conservadems. Their constituencies are not quite the same as those represented by the official “Blue Dog” Democratic caucus in the House of Representatives, but the Blue Dog group’s stated concerns were broadly echoed by the swing legislators in both House and Senate. The swing votes were Democrats mostly from more rural constituencies, largely in the South or sparsely populated Midwestern states. I cannot explain why each individual legislator voted the way she or he did. But I hope I can show how these legislators fit into the ideological divide and how their dilemmas shaped the legislation.

I will also say a little about the role of beliefs within expert communities. There are certain aspects of the law and debate that can be partly explained by the dynamics of belief within policy communities. But this is a topic that will be discussed at much greater length when we hold a conference here on November 11– 12, and I will only mention it briefly today.

I hope that, when I finish, you will think I offered some useful ideas for further analysis of further conflicts.

American Political Ideologies

So lets begin with the most basic point. The health care debate was not about the “size” or “reach” of government, in spite of all the rhetoric that said it was. The American Republican party is not, on the whole, against all government activism. The debate was about what government will touch, not how far it can reach.

As has been pointed out many times, the Republican coalition may seem, in terms of anti-government rhetoric, inconsistent: Republicans seem to want (mostly) to regulate the bedroom but not the market. But the Democratic coalition is, mostly, equally inconsistent: Democrats want to regulate the market but not the bedroom. This inconsistency, however, is quite consistent and persistent: the very language of American “liberalism” vs. “conservatism” suggests that the moral deregulators are the market regulators, and that has been true since the New Deal Era.

I want to emphasize that, at the individual level, there is a lot of variation and lack of what some of the great scholars of public opinion called ideological “constraint.”² But, in general, such constraint as exists is not usually organized around deductions that policies about gun control or market regulation or capital punishment or abortion should proceed from principles about size of government. There ARE people who consistently want smaller government. They’re called libertarians. There ARE people

² A classic discussion in these terms is Converse 1964.

who, at least until recently, have wanted government to ban abortion AND the death penalty AND nuclear war AND spend on social programs. They were called the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. The U.S. has neither a significant libertarian nor Catholic political party. The Democrats and Republicans are coalitions organized around a different cleavage.

What other scholars have called “deep core beliefs”³ are not specific views about specific policies. They are attitudes about the world that can be called up, consciously or subconsciously, for reference when people are prompted to form an opinion about a policy.⁴ The division between the parties in the U.S., in terms of beliefs, is best explained by disagreement about the following core questions.

What explains differences in peoples’ fates?

Why do some people do well and others not?

Is this just or unjust?

These are essentially questions of religion or moral philosophy.

It may seem obvious that religion or moral philosophy is a key aspect of the party system now. Many of you have seen data about how a person’s sect and rate of attendance at religious services correlate with voting behavior. Basically, white protestants vote for Republicans more than do white catholics, who vote Republican more than Jews do; within each group those who attend services more often vote

³ For a good discussion of the differences among levels of belief, see Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999.

⁴ A prominent discussion of beliefs as attitudes that can be called up when people are prompted to express opinions on political questions, as distinguished from having pre-existing opinions on those questions, is Zaller 1992.

Republican more than those who do not; and the “**unchurched**” are particularly less likely to vote Republican. But I think the underlying cleavage reflected in these correlations between voting and demographics has been around for a very long time.

The cleavage has become more visible in recent years, as conservative white protestants in the South have abandoned their historical but ideologically inconsistent allegiance to the Democratic party. But it has existed throughout U.S. history.

The conservative position says that peoples’ fate depends on their own virtue. In this view good people are rewarded by a just God, and bad people are punished, in THIS world. It is a very simplified version of what Max Weber called the Protestant Ethic. Its adherents divide the world into the good and the bad, the innocent and the guilty. As Eric Foner described this view, in his classic history of political attitudes leading up to the Civil War, “each man had an occupation to which he was divinely appointed... The pursuit of wealth thus became a way of serving God on earth, and labor... was transmuted into a religious value, a Christian duty.”

From the Protestant Ethic standpoint, it is perfectly logical to regulate the bedroom but not the market. Regulating the bedroom makes people more moral; being more moral helps them succeed in the market; success in the market demonstrates morality; the market is a place where virtue is rewarded.

This explains, for example, why opposition to abortion is a conservative cause. Since when are the Republicans the people who want the state to interfere to help the children and the helpless, and the Democrats the party that doesn’t care? What

explains positions on abortion? The answer is somewhat different for the Catholic hierarchy. But, for most conservatives, the abortion issue is not about life. It's about *innocent* life. It is consistent to oppose abortion and support the death penalty. Innocent lives can't be taken, guilty lives certainly can. Abortion is also about consequences. If abortion is legal, then people who misbehave, who have sex irresponsibly, can avoid consequences. Worse yet, they avoid consequences by killing innocents.

It is also consistent to support the death penalty but oppose gun control. The death penalty is OK because it serves the recipients right. Gun control restricts people who have done nothing wrong: in this view, "guns don't kill people, people kill people." From a protestant ethic perspective, it is logical to be against government handouts to the poor and oppose gun control (seemingly anti-government-activism), and to be for capital punishment and banning abortion (which both call for a stronger state).

The Protestant Ethic view came to the U.S. on the Mayflower, literally. Jim Morone, who has investigated the divide from a different perspective but come to much the same conclusion as I have, calls it the Puritan view.

The alternative position says that people are basically good. All human beings are god's creatures; all are in some way precious. This view resists concluding that some people are just plain evil, or that some people are especially good and therefore deserve special rewards.

I can give you two names for the view that has historically been the counterweight to the puritan or Protestant Ethic worldview. One is the name Christian conservatives give it: secular humanism. “Secular” because it deemphasizes God, and “humanist” because it emphasizes humanity rather than God. In the 1790s, the proper term might have been “deism.” Thomas Jefferson was a deist, and would likely be called a secular humanist today.

But the view that is less disposed to explain peoples’ fates by their virtue also can be derived from an explicitly religious tradition, the Social Gospel. The social gospel views says all humans are god’s creatures, and what we owe to God is to take care of them.

In either view, if peoples’ virtue does not determine their fates, what does? They depend at least in part on luck or the system; each explains why bad things happen to good people or good things sometimes happen to bad people.

In his fine book, *Hellfire Nation*, Jim Morone traces the history of the conflict between what he calls the puritan and social gospel views. I want to emphasize that opposition to the protestant ethic view can come from perspectives that are not explicitly religious as well. But that alternative view is represented very well in his description of Social gospel thinking. He writes that it,

“shifts the focus from individual sinners to an unjust system.”

Hence,

“the causal arrow runs in precisely the opposite direction: the economic system, race prejudice, underprivilege, and social stress put pressure on people. If

these people behave badly... it is largely because social and economic forces have pushed them into a tough corner.”

And so, Jim argues, the solution is always something like,

“fix the system and give every American a fair chance to prosper; don’t blame those who fall by the wayside: we all share a common duty to help the disadvantaged.” (Morone 2005)

Jim developed his version of this argument in a book about public health; and anyone who has spent any time in a School of Public Health will recognize this worldview.

In this view, government is needed to give the unfortunate a hand. But regulation of the bedroom is unnecessary, because these views don’t divide the world into acts that are clean and unclean. There are crimes, of course, but they involve doing bad things to other people – and so violating their special humanity. The market, however, needs regulating because it is a system: it is not automatically fair, there is a lot of luck, and a lot of unjustified inequality of result.

Abortion in this view is not desirable. But, especially in the secular humanist version, human progress is about getting control of your fate, so it doesn’t depend on luck, such as whether you happen to get pregnant. People are basically moral and should be allowed to make their own choices. What choice could be more important than whether to become a mother? *When there is not a visible other person*, so it’s possible to say there is only one life, then the individual should be left, as a morally trustworthy person, to make that most important choice.

In the case of capital punishment, the secular humanist view would question whether it's possible to call someone so evil that they should be killed, and also whether it's possible to have a system that makes those judgments fairly and accurately.

We see the division also in how the parties talk about "rights." President Bush couldn't open his mouth without saying something about "freedom" or "liberty," but he was not exactly a member of the American Civil Liberties Union. Then again, with all the talk about "rights" from liberals and Democrats, they were not especially exercised about the Supreme Court giving governments wide discretion to use eminent domain to take peoples' property. If you think of "liberals" conventionally defined, you don't hear them talk about **property rights** very much at all. In contrast, one has to suspect that American conservatives care far more about property rights than any other kind.

From a Protestant Ethic perspective, property is proof of virtue. For government to take it away is unfair and unjust. Progressive income taxes undo God's rewards. From a secular humanist or social gospel perspective, all individuals need freedom to speak, to worship, to participate in politics, to be whole human beings. But having a LOT of property is not so important. The big problem would be to have too little. Franklin Delano Roosevelt said one of the Four Freedoms was "Freedom from Want," not "Freedom to Keep Anything You Can Get."

The basic division between two world views is supported by both material interests and processes of socialization, and stretches back to the origins of the party system. I'm not saying there have been no secular humanist and social gospel Republicans, or protestant ethic Democrats. There have. The issue of slavery scrambled allegiances

before the Civil War, and the War itself scrambled some allegiances afterwards. Moreover, attitudes towards the economic system require a diagnosis of the system, and industrialization confused both parties for a very long time.

But if anyone wants to believe that divisions on religious or quasi-religious lines are something new, they should consider the party system of the Jacksonian era, from 1829 to the Civil War. The two main parties, Jackson's Democrats and the Whigs of Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, both accused the other of being anti-democratic and promoting "privilege" at the expense of "freedom" and "the people." Which did not, therefore, distinguish the parties from each other. What did distinguish them should look very familiar.

Here is how Lee Benson described the divisions in his study of the State of New York:

"the period between 1825 and 1850 was notable for bitter and widespread conflicts between adherents of orthodox religion and of 'popular freethought' (that is, men either indifferent or hostile to institutionalized religion based upon 'divine revelation and overruling Providence.')

... the evidence points so unmistakably in one direction that we must conclude that the Whigs were the 'religious party' and the Democrats the 'free thought party.'"

Whiggism affiliated with the Anti-Masonic movement, and the Masons had a strong secular humanist bent. The Jacksonians blasted the Anti-Masons for bigotry and intolerance. Joseph Blau reports that,

“next to Jackson himself, the greatest popular hero of the Jacksonians was Colonel Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky, conqueror of Tecumseh, who as Senator introduced bill after bill for the abolition of imprisonment for debt, but won the nomination for the vice presidency by his report denying the petitions of many orthodox groups that transportation of the mails should be halted on Sunday.”

We might note that it would be hard to find an issue that posed the relationship between virtue and economic success better than the issue of imprisonment for debt.

In New York, the communities with many churches that were well-attended were the communities that voted Whig – unless the churches were Catholic! Tocqueville and many others remarked on the religiosity of areas where, though he did not put it that way, the Whigs were strong. But in the South and in some of the central parts of the country, it was a different story. This was the America of Paul Bunyan and Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett and Sam Houston. As William Faulkner put it, “no community was going to interfere with anyone’s morals so long as the amoralized practiced somewhere else.”

The swing voters were the Scotch-Irish of the middle states, like Pennsylvania. They were Presbyterian so had strong Protestant roots. They were also touchy, prone to resent power and appreciative of their whisky. They resented puritan attempts to impose values but were more “respectable” than the southerners. Robert Kelley concluded that,

“The cultural confrontation between Whigs and Democrats ran across the entire spectrum of national life. Andrew Jackson, the son of Scotch-Irish immigrants, received the classic epithets which Englishmen traditionally threw at Scotch-Irishmen: that he was a violent barbarian, a drunkard, and a crude immoral Person... The Whigs, calling themselves the party of law and order, consistently blamed all violence on the ethnic minorities. They tried hard to deny the vote to immigrants.”

He adds that,

“In order to reform the aliens, they campaigned regularly for temperance and Sabbath laws. The Democrats, on their side, called the Whigs church-and-state fanatics, welcomed non-English immigrants, and demanded personal liberty in moral behavior.”

As one might expect, the Catholics therefore became Democrats! The Catholics in turn were a key reason why the Scotch-Irish split. In the Midwest the Ulstermen tended to be Democrats because they saw the puritans as the enemy. But in the presence of their historic blood enemy, the Irish Catholics, as in New York, the Ulstermen tended to ally with the Yankees and be Whigs. Identity CAN trump ideology, though the two forces are often mutually supportive.

Social and Economic Bases of Division

These views have remained the basic dividing line in U.S. national politics for about 200 years. They persist in part because they map fairly well to social groups, so that group and material interests fit the worldviews.

Farmers provide a good example of material interests. In his classic history of the pre-Civil War era, Roy Nicholls explained that southern planters had views that fit with the Democratic position in part because when you're a cotton farmer luck really does control your fate: your crop and its price depend on the weather where you farm AND the weather halfway around the world where the other cotton is grown. In fact, throughout American history you can see that farmers who had relatively secure crops, like in much of Ohio, have tended to be Republican; while farmers whose fates depended more on the luck of the weather or other conditions – such as grain farmers in the upper Midwest, or cotton farmers – trended Democratic.

In general, the worldview that says people are rich because they are virtuous is more attractive to people with more money, just as the view that poverty depends on luck or the system is more attractive to people with less money. So self-interest helps stabilize the division; but the fact that it has other bases explains why pure class conflict does not explain the party structure. Similarly, the dominant Protestants have long been suspicious of outsiders, as part of distinguishing the clean and virtuous from the unclean and sinful. As Morone shows, this is the dark side of some public health movements. Immigrants throughout American history have long been attracted, therefore, to the less religious and so less exclusive party, the Democrats.

In short, the Democrats have always been the party of the outsiders and the Republicans the party of the insiders, the dominant faith. But the Protestant ethic side has also often felt threatened, that its country is being taken away from it, and has reacted with the pain and desperation of this real or imagined loss.

“Wait a minute,” I can imagine some of you objecting. “Weren’t the Jacksonians opposed to government activism in the economy, and didn’t the Whigs support government interference? How did the economic positions reverse, and how does that fit your story?”

The first thing to say is, the economic positions were not quite so clear in the Jacksonian era. Democrats objected to FEDERAL activism, but in the case of New York, for example, that was because their state had already built the Erie Canal; they had no problems with STATE governments engaging in economic development.

Moreover, and this is a general point about the politics of economics in the United States, you should not separate attitudes towards government spending from how government raised revenue. The dominant economic issue of the 19th century was the tariff. Tariffs could be justified or at least rationalized in a puritan framework as promoting “labor” or, literally, industry. But, to the Democrats, they looked like government interfering to make the system less fair to their constituents. The two parties only shifted positions on government spending after the income tax – which took a much bigger bite from wealthy people – replaced the tariff as the federal government’s main revenue source. Conservatives could then believe that government activism was based on confiscating the fruit of virtue.

To put this another way, attitudes about the economy have a clearer instrumental dimension, and so could be changed, though very slowly. But the protestant ethic side has always managed to rationalize its position as based on individual virtue; while the

opposition has frequently argued that some aspect of the system – whether it be Biddle’s Bank or the tariff or corporate trusts or the bond market – was unfair and rigged to favor the rich over everybody else.

During much of the period of industrialization, neither worldview told people what to do. The sources of power were a bit too raw to make all Republicans happy with the idea that the great trusts were “virtuous”; at the same time, it was hard for Democrats to understand how the “system” worked and should be fixed. Major movements expressed views that arguably fit the division here. Prohibition, for example, fit very well with the Protestant Ethic, and the Populist movement with the social gospel. But it wasn’t until the Great Depression that the two parties sorted themselves out – in the North.

At that point, the Democrats saw too much pain for too many people: it became impossible to maintain that “the system” would be fair to people so long as the Government stayed out of the way. On the other side, Andrew Mellon, Secretary of the Treasury, spoke in very moralistic terms about how the Depression was a chance to purge immoral excesses. In the New Deal political system, then, the Republicans leaned towards saying that losers deserve to lose, winners to win, and activist government interferes with natural justice; the Democrats concluded that the economic system just wasn’t that fair and government had to balance the scales.

In practice, therefore, government policies that are believed to favor the most economically successful citizens are seen by them as favoring virtue; those that favor less successful citizens are seen by them as favoring fairness and correcting the

system. What changed between 1865 and 1935 was not the moral economy but ideas about who was favored by government action; and that had something to do with both the sources of revenue and the power structure within the actual economy. But those views are not as deeply entrenched as the underlying moral dimension.

The moral dimension is based in core aspects of socialization that may be political but are also pre-political. This means that developments within the religious sphere, in particular, can influence partisan attachments.

During the civil rights movement the northern “mainline” Protestant churches that, through their view of the Protestant ethic, had opposed slavery for reasons Eric Foner explains; and that strongly supported civil rights; became less reliable supporters of the Republican party. This was partly because of Republican choices such as nominating Barry Goldwater for President. But it also reflected a change in clerical leanings over time. It appears that their clergy, at least, have become more liberal as a social gospel theology has become more important in the divinity schools, and as notions of sin and damnation have become less important. The paradigmatic example of this trend is the transformation, over centuries, of Cotton Mather’s Congregationalists into the United Church of Christ.

There is certainly a big difference between the preaching in the big Protestant congregations in places like Cleveland Heights and Shaker Heights Ohio, and the preaching in the big and small Baptist and other fundamentalist churches in many other parts of the country. In the latter, theology puts far more emphasis on a protestant ethic, sin-and-damnation view. As Morone put it, “the Puritan idea burst

out of New England and spread across America thanks to the purest puritans, the Baptists.”

This is **one** reason why the partisan realignment that followed the Civil Rights movement, with southern whites moving into the Republican party where they belonged as a matter of ideology, did not simply wipe out the Democrats. It was partly offset by a move among northern Protestants in the other direction, as their own religions deemphasized the conservative view. Growing secularism among nominal Protestants is another factor. So is increasing education; particularly people with graduate school education may be more comfortable with system thinking than with moralistic thinking, and we certainly see that there is now a bend in the association of education with voting behavior. The most-educated people now trend Democratic.

None of this means that most white northern protestants are Democrats. They're not, in part because they're not members of the United Church of Christ, either. But the downplaying of an emphasis on sin within mainline denominations, I suggest, was one factor in a major shift of the party system in the north, so that the most reliably Democratic states now are states that used to be reliably Republican. New England symbolizes this transformation.

What I have presented here is not a perfect schema. But I think this explains why the two party coalitions are quite stable in their supposedly inconsistent positions about the size of government. The moral or philosophical divide that I'm emphasizing has the advantage of being easily linked to socialization processes that could explain

division. It fits very well with the concept that there are deep core beliefs that people access to make sense of the world, not always consciously.

The partisan division is clearer now than it has been for many decades, because southerners who are very conservative no longer call themselves Democrats. But the congressional cross-party conservative coalition, as it once was, itself shows that the ideological division we see today has existed all along.

I will say a bit more about the South in a bit. But I should introduce one modification.

There are actually THREE explanations of peoples' fates that are relevant to American politics.

The first is that what happens to people depends on their own virtue. The second is that what happens to them is largely due to luck or the system. The third says that, in particular, **bad** things are caused by **bad other people**.

This is the view of both left- and right-wing populism. But there **are** both left- and right-wing versions, and they differ on the dimension I've already described. Right-wing populism blames bad outsiders, who aren't "real Americans" – immigrants, racial minorities, sometimes intellectuals. Left-wing populism blames bad insiders, the winners who rig the system – bankers, Wall Street, the railroads and, in health care, insurance companies. Sometimes these populisms arise relatively independently, but sometimes they are promoted by politicians and advocates who are hope to use anger

for their own ends. The various red scares are good examples, but Roosevelt's critique of "economic royalists" is another.

Thus one of the interesting questions in American politics is whether the non-populist leaders on each side of the ideological divide will try to gin up the kind of populist fervor that supports their side. At the level of political elites this is not necessarily an easy judgment, as some tend to fear that populism will get out of hand. Moreover, right-wing populism and left-wing populism both threaten what many would view as the core constitutional and social order. Each can threaten constitutional rights, and each can threaten social peace. And left-wing populism is particularly dangerous if you, as a political leader, worry that you need confidence in "the markets" to get a good economy.

Ideology and Health Care Reform

Having said all that, I want to draw conclusions about the ideological divide in the U.S. at present, and some of its implications for health care reform.

First, we need to understand why National Health Insurance is an issue in the United States at all. Here, what I'm suggesting is a version of Frank Castles' interpretation of welfare state variations: the American right wing is very different from the right wing in most other rich democracies. Anthony King and others have made the same point. The American Right's fundamental ideology is hostile to the concept of social solidarity as understood either by a Catholic Right or what I guess can be called a Bismarckian Right. In Europe, redistribution can be seen as a way to stabilize society; for American

conservatives, redistribution is morally wrong except if it takes the form of voluntary charity.

But I want to emphasize that, even though King and others are right to point to the common rhetoric of distrust of government, that in itself is not sufficient to explain the battle over national health insurance. If distrust of government were determinative, the battle wouldn't occur in the first place. In European terms, distaste for **solidarity** is at least as important as distrust of government. If the issue were simply distrust of government, then some form of the Democrats' efforts to maneuver around the problem, which I will mention below, would be more effective.

There obviously are other reasons why the U.S. never adopted national health insurance before 2010 – and still has not, by the way. The groups that are favored by the American conservative ideology do, of course, have political resources. Political structure makes it easier to block change in the U.S. than in other systems – though we sure do enact a lot of laws. But I think it's fair to say that American conservatism has long been more opposed to redistribution than conservatism is in other countries; and the moral dimension helps explain why.

Second, this speaks to the question of whether there could ever be a bipartisan bill. Presidents Clinton and Obama both sought rhetoric and program designs that would reduce ideological objections. Obama, for example, spoke about a system based on individual responsibility; Clinton talked about protecting Americans who “worked hard and play by the rules.” Obama sought to adapt a plan that was supported by a Republican Governor in Massachusetts; that disturbed existing arrangements as little

as possible; and that used methods which, twenty years before, had been much promoted by some Republican politicians. In this he mirrored Clinton, who sought a “third way” – sorry, I know that term may touch a sensitive nerve here -- that would not be “big government” but, instead, would be modeled on what business interests thought they did: managing and competing.

It didn't work any better for Obama than for Clinton. The reason, I think, is that the conservative objection to national health insurance is not instrumental.⁵ Instruments that seem more “market-oriented” still require large amounts of redistribution. I do not want to claim the opposition was entirely principled. Far from it. But, in spite of the rhetoric, it wasn't about “big government” either. Many of the same Republicans had voted for President Bush's Medicare expansion, though grudgingly. The difference is, the Medicare expansion was sold to Republicans in Congress as a way to make people more responsible for their own medical fates, by moving the entire Medicare system towards a voucher design. In contrast, there was no denying that the health reform effort of the past two years would subsidize some people with money taken from other, more successful and so by definition more responsible people.

I think the underlying ideological divide also helps explain the passionate depth of opposition. Here, identity politics and populism get wrapped up in the story: if there ever has been a President who looks like an un-American outsider, a threat to the Protestant Ethic “real Americans” (as they see it), it is Barack Hussein Obama. Of course this was partly ginned up as part of the campaign habits of the current

⁵ I should clarify that there IS a lot of self-interest involved, for some conservatives. So “instrumental” isn't quite the word I mean. I was trying to say that it is not a matter of support or opposition to government as an instrument.

Republican machinery. But it would not work if those beliefs did not exist, ready to be activated. There seems to have been a ferocious and disproportionate sense of potential loss, and of moral violation. That can't be explained by simple self-interest calculations – especially since many states where opposition was strongest are net winners from the bill.

You might be expecting me to argue that the Republican leadership was much more willing to raise and effective at promoting it's kind of populism than the Democrats were. I think that might well be true, but I'm sure conservatives would disagree, and view the whole reform enterprise as an example of left-wing bashing of business at its worst. I guess it's fair to say that, whatever the efforts made by both sides, the Republicans were more effective. This was possible in part because Obama was a natural target for right-wing populism – black with a muslim name AND from Harvard! And the Obama administration chose to negotiate with drug companies and insurers rather than, until the end, attacking the insurers. They never went after the drug companies. I think targeting the insurers at the end did help rally the Democrats, but they did not manage to do the obvious and crucial thing, which is to identify their partisan rivals, the Republicans, with the unpopular group, businesses who were ripping off the public.

This hesitancy on the part of the administration, I suspect, was part of its wider approach to business interests, based on concerns about confidence and economic recovery. But, if you believe the Republicans did better at playing the populist card, that means one side was fighting with more of its weapons.

Given the depth of disagreement, which is about morality rather than size of government; it is and always will be futile to imagine there is some technical design that will be a satisfactory compromise.

So why is there ever compromise? Because compromise normally does not result from a deal between the polarized bases of the parties. Compromises are defined by what is acceptable to the swing legislators and voters who are not committed to one view or the other.

Muddling Through the Muddled Middle

This brings us to the master question in American legislative politics when the Democrats control Congress: What does the right wing of the Democratic party want? For convenience, I'll call them "conservadems" A commentary I just wrote describes the health reform process as "muddling through the muddled middle"⁶

Each legislator has her own unique blend of experiences, values, and pressures. A few may best be explained by quite personal psychological profiles – Senator Lieberman comes to mind. But the core swing votes on this and many other issues cluster around a fairly common set of views and constituency pressures.

Conservadems

⁶ The commentary will be one of many in a forthcoming special issue of the *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*.

I have been puzzling over conservative Democrats since the 1981, as I have observed their behavior in battles over the federal budget. They are not Republicans, though some of them might have fit in the Republican party of Richard Nixon or even Bob Dole. They tend to have more rural constituencies. Many come from the South or, in the case of Senators, from sparsely populated states like Nebraska or North Dakota or Montana. Some of these states and districts are more generally conservative than others, of course. But, in general, their representatives should be expected to be less liberal than those who represent larger cities, or who represent populations that are more highly educated and less religious, as in many wealthier suburbs.

I know generalization is dangerous but it's what I'm doing today, so I'll continue. The hard-edge of conservative opposition to government intervention in the economy does not fit so well with a lot of rural districts. Even in the heyday of the conservative coalition of southern Democrats with Republicans, many of those conservative Democrats saw the federal government as a tool to improve their local economies. I interviewed some of them when I did my research on the appropriations committees. We should also remember that not all of the people in the South – or for that matter the plains states – are religious; that scotch-irish prickliness still is represented. But it's especially clear that the idea that government intervention in the economy prevents virtue from being rewarded is not quite so realistic in constituencies that depend on the vast array of Department of Agriculture programs, and irrigation programs, and power subsidies, and other federal interventions.

It can be dangerous to take politicians' public statements at face value. But, at a minimum, they represent some combination of what politicians believe and what they

think they need to say, which means what they think their constituents want to hear. If you look at the Blue Dog coalition website; or the websites of members of the coalition; or statements made by other legislators who are not reliable liberals; you will find they take positions and express opinions that fit the ways their districts differ either from more liberal or more conservative constituencies.

Current conservative Democrats believe there is a role for government other than national defense and regulating behavior. They want to balance the budget, not just shrink it to nothingness.

They believe rural areas, in particular, need help; and I think it's fair to say that most of them – like most Americans – have felt that the federal government should help people who could not afford health insurance.

But they do not view private business as the enemy, or even as the problem. They want government to help private enterprise and so, in their view, help their constituencies. They do not take an oppositional stance towards business per se, and certainly not towards local business elites – such as the local insurance company or agents or for-profit hospital or wealthy doctors.

They or at least their districts also tend towards less reflective patriotism. If you're getting the idea that I don't think these people and their districts fit real well with the secular humanist or social gospel view, you're right. But the current Republican party has moved so far to the puritan position that few of these legislators would fit in with the GOP, either.

This is particularly true because conservative Democrats, in general, care very much about the federal budget. I've never been sure why, but I have to believe it's real because even in the early 1980s it was these legislators who seemed most willing to sacrifice other policies – including policies they cared about, such as a strong national defense – to the Great God Budget Balance.⁷ Unlike most Republicans, they care about balance itself, not simply shrinking the size of the federal government. To most Republicans, the deficit is simply an indicator of excess spending; to conservaDems, it is a problem in and of itself, which can be addressed by tax increases, even though they don't like that, as well as by spending cuts.

So they are not Republicans on the budget. But they also are not liberals. I think this is related to the distinction between moralistic and systemic thinking. For whatever reason, the kind of systemic logic on which Keynes is based – that what looks responsible for individuals is not sensible for the system as a whole – is not accepted as easily by conservative Democrats or their constituents. They seem more inclined than other Democrats to see unbalanced budgets as a violation of responsibility, **identifying the government with an individual**. Whatever the reason, their concern about budget deficits is the single position the Blue Dogs emphasize most in describing their purpose: “fiscal responsibility” is their core stated belief, and it is sometimes stated as “fiscal conservatism.”

The official Blue Dogs also emphasize continually their search for “bipartisan” solutions. Many politicians pretend to want bipartisanship; I think conservadems really

⁷ There is a rather extensive account of the period in White and Wildavsky 1991

do want it because they believe it could protect them in districts that could swing either way. In this the official Blue Dog position mirrors the behavior of Senators Baucus and Conrad, who delayed action on health care in the Senate Finance Committee as they searched for bipartisan agreement with Senator Grassley that hardly anyone else thought was remotely possible.

The Obama administration's campaign to expand health insurance coverage put conservadems in an impossible policy quandary. In the real world, success on some of their preferences required failure on others. At the same time, however, it put them in an impossible political situation. On the one hand, they could vote against the effort, and make themselves look like members of an inept governing party that couldn't deliver. On the other hand, they could vote for the reform, and make themselves look like supporters of a bill that was easily characterized as out of touch with their districts' preferences.

Conservative Democrats' positions in the health care reform debate of 2009–10 fit their core preferences – and fears. In fact, more conservative Democrats' positions were defined as much by what they **didn't** want as what they **did** want. Although legislation is rarely explained this way, it might be the norm, once the pressure to “do something” is maximized during agenda-setting. If voters worry more about losses than gains; and if legislators take positions based in part on whether they feel they can explain a position in response to criticisms; then both legislators' personal policy preferences and political calculations should weight negative preferences (“not that”) more strongly than positive preferences (“yes, that”). This should be especially true of

more vulnerable legislators. So, in the debate over expanding health insurance in the United States, what did the swing legislators want, and want to avoid?

In this debate, first, the Blue Dogs tended to say that there WAS a health insurance problem, that SHOULD be addressed. But their highest priority was controlling costs, not expanding access. Cost control was important, they argued, to “get the nation’s fiscal house back in order” – which means they were also even more interested in controlling the costs of government insurance that already existed than in controlling costs that were not yet on the government’s budget.

But how can costs be controlled? Representing districts where patriotism was highly valued, they were **not** going to promote any policy that was justified as doing what other countries did – even though the best evidence for some policies is that they have worked in other countries. So it is not surprising that Blue Dogs emphasized creating a “uniquely American system” that would be built on “competition within the marketplace.”

They strongly objected to the core liberal proposal to create a “public plan,” linked to the existing Medicare insurance for the elderly and disabled, which would compete with private insurers. Done right, the public plan would have cost less because the rates it paid for services would be similar to those paid by Medicare, which pays less than private insurers do, usually. This issue was at the heart of the debate within the Democratic coalition.

It turns out that the Congressional Budget Office, called the CBO for short, would not say that a uniquely American system of competition would control costs, while it WOULD say that a public insurance plan linked to Medicare rates could have significant savings. Yet conservative Democrats insisted on either eliminating the public plan outright or neutering it by eliminating any power it might have to piggyback on Medicare to gain savings. And then, once that power was eliminated, they opposed the public plan on the grounds that it didn't save money! Hence the conservadems' core position about policy means, eliminating or neutering the public plan, contradicted their core position about policy ends, controlling costs.

Yet you have to look at this from their perspective. The public plan was a clear example of government acting by attacking the private sector, not by trying to help develop it. The public plan was an attempt to either coerce insurers into behaving differently, or drive them out of business. It would have saved money by lowering payments to doctors and hospitals, which are exactly the kind of local elites and local industries that conservadems think the government should help DEVELOP.

Moreover, this is a situation where the "experts" and their beliefs were relevant. The health policy establishment has generated a massive literature about the variations in cost among communities. One of the core observations is that, in a lot of rural areas, health spending per capita is much lower than in other areas – yet, in theory, health results are as good as in less expensive areas. All sorts of eminent people, such as Obama's Budget Director, Peter Orszag, were arguing that if costs could be reduced to the level of the supposedly more efficient communities, lots of money would be saved.

There was a lot wrong with this elite belief, but in any event the representatives of the supposedly more efficient communities drew a conclusion that the experts didn't intend them to draw. They interpreted the lower costs in their areas as, "we're getting ripped off by Medicare." Medicare was paying their doctors and hospitals too little, even though they were doing as good a job as the docs in the more expensive places! So this meant that the last thing these legislators wanted to do was extend Medicare rates to a larger part of the market!

Although CBO didn't believe it, the expert community, with a few uninfluential exceptions such as myself, also largely endorsed some arguments that were especially attractive to legislators who wanted government to do good without directly challenging private power. Many of these measures were endorsed in the 2008 campaign by both Obama and McCain, so could be viewed as bipartisan. The administration and its experts pushed these arguments hard, they are all over the journals, and they did provide a rationale for conservative Democrats – and other Democrats -- to say they were doing what could be done on costs. There is nothing about the ideological divide that says, for example, that "prevention" shouldn't save money. There are both secular humanist and puritan versions of prevention arguments. Unfortunately CBO is right, and nobody knows how to make either the conservative or liberal approaches to prevention save money, but that's another matter.

In the end the only REAL cost control in the bill for insurance other than Medicare is an excise tax on high-cost health plans. This was called the "Cadillac tax," based on a false impression that plans were more expensive because they had luxury benefits.

The details are a topic for the conference in November. For our purposes, it's worth noting that this tax on supposedly excessive employer-sponsored health plans could be justified by individual responsibility logic: that excessive coverage created a "moral hazard" of excessive care. This is the core conservative position about health care costs in the United States. But it was also broadly endorsed by many supposedly liberal economists who detest the employer-sponsored system on many grounds, and who claim that the tax break which helps employers pay for health insurance is regressive and an inefficient system.

Therefore the "Cadillac tax" looked like a "bipartisan" cost control approach, and it was strongly promoted by not only major editorial boards but Senator Baucus.

Conservadems also were likely attracted to this tax on self-interest grounds, as the effects would likely be mostly in other peoples' constituencies.

After much grumbling, enough conservadems to pass a bill supported increased taxes on high income people. But Senate conservative Democrats in particular pushed for an approach that obtained these increases partly through the Medicare tax, so could be viewed as improving budget responsibility by improving the condition of the Medicare trust funds.

The bill also was financed in part by projected reductions in Medicare spending. These are to be gained by strengthening Medicare's internal cost controls. It may seem contradictory that conservative Democrats who voted for the bill also, in most cases, opposed extending those same cost controls to insurance received by other

beneficiaries, by opposing the public plan. It IS contradictory if you think the issue is how to control costs.

BUT: Again, it made sense given conservative Democrats' concerns. Increasing controls **within** Medicare provided a different political and policy cost-benefit ratio than would have resulted from extending Medicare's cost controls to non-Medicare insurance. Because the federal government would only pay part of the costs of coverage for the newly insured, the pain to providers from extending Medicare prices to the new insurance would be greater than the savings for the government. **All** the savings from greater restraint within Medicare, however, would improve the government's fiscal position. In addition, conservadems were used to strengthening Medicare regulations to meet budget targets; it's one of the major instruments used in budget packages.

I'm not saying the conservadems' calculation made political sense; I'm only saying it fit their pattern. Because conservadems care so much about the federal budget, they were emphasized reducing costs to the federal budget. They did not support measures that would have directly helped employers or individuals control the costs of insurance that they purchase but that is not on the government budget. They might have been better off taking a more populist approach and saying they were saving money for their voters. But we should not assume that I know their districts better than they do.

Conclusion

I've spoken about two aspects of political beliefs in America. I think the first part, the differences between the two parties, is probably easier to remember and understand. It may even seem obvious, once stated the way I did.

Yet many arguments give the impression that the political divide is or should be about government activism per se, and view the attitudes towards the bedroom and market as puzzling or unstable. I think there IS less acceptance of discretion by officers of the State, even on the left, in the U.S. than in many other countries. That has major effects on how the government does its business, as James Q. Wilson has brilliantly described. American politicians rarely, as Anthony King argued, speak directly in favor of things like state ownership.

But the various U.S. governments are not exactly quiescent, and the very fact that we Americans have continual fights about what governments will do shows that there is nothing like a consensus. I have suggested a way to think about the core ideological cleavage in the United States. It helps explain the partisan divide on health care, but on other issues as well. In particular, it suggests why a coalition that includes both so-called Christian and economic conservatism would not moderate either view. The leadership of such a coalition might well be those who truly believe in both views – and that is a coherent and literally self-righteous position.

The story of the conservative Democrats is messier than the story about underlying divisions. This is because their beliefs and situations are messier. I hope to have suggested a few things you might find useful. First, they really ARE in the middle, ARE conflicted, and that is not a comfortable position to be in. Second, the health care

reform effort HAD to endanger them. Thus it was a far greater political gamble than seems to have been appreciated at the time. You can say, and I might, that this is what majorities are for – to be risked in order to change the world. But, once one appreciates the depth of passion for the protestant ethic worldview, and the near-impossibility of getting bipartisan “cover,” it should be obvious that, in electoral terms, a positive vote was likely to be particularly hard for the swing legislators to explain in their swing districts.

The Democratic leadership’s trump card, all along, was the fact that many Democrats believed that, in 1994, failing to pass any legislation just made the situation worse. They got all the criticism for trying PLUS looked inept and weak for failing. So swing legislators could believe that, once the President had trapped them by raising insurance expansion so high on the agenda, they might as well vote for something that might do some people some good.

As a tactic, I guess it worked. From the perspective of mainstream Democrats, the bill is extremely flawed but much, much better than the status quo. As a strategy, I’m not so sure. There are lots of reasons why the election is shaping up as an historic disaster for the Democrats. A lot of those conflicted Democrats are going to get replaced by conservatives who will be filled with puritan fervor. The health reform debate will be one reason conservadems lose; and the legislators who replace them will be very, very different.

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