

## **The Political Divide and its History**

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It is a pleasure to be here today and welcome you to Case Western Reserve University. I hope you have a great time today, enjoying seeing friends and meeting new ones, and arguing about politics.

Arguing is good; it can make people think more clearly, and even lead to new ideas. In the legal system, we assume that an adversary system, with each side making its best case, helps a neutral party discover truth.

Your debates today should be fun, because they are essentially a game. Each of you should be able to take either side, and nobody is hurt by the conclusion. Instead, your audience should all gain by seeing the arguments made on each side and comparing them, and you all should know more after a debate than you knew before.

Arguing in actual politics can also be good, especially if it is done in a way that allows the audience, such as voters, to learn about those who are debating, such as candidates. But I think you all know it doesn't always turn out that way.

You probably also know that most people don't like "politics," they think it's bad, and one of the things they don't like is that "politics" connotes people arguing, people fighting with each other, people disagreeing; and, by the way, people manipulating each other to get an advantage.

I think most Americans think we ought to all agree. This is what Jim Morone, in a great book, called *The Democratic Wish*: the dream that, if the "people" only decided, the "people" would find the common good, without divisions, because what's good for all is obvious.

An America without divisions would be a mended America. An America in which divisions are healing would be a “mending” America. So the title of this conference refers, obliquely, to this desire for unity. The logical question then is why we don’t have unity; why the national fabric has been torn, and needs to be mended.

The answer is, what’s good for all, in fact, what’s good in principle, is not obvious.

That is why I will be talking about American political ideology today. There are a lot of other things people argue about. Some arguments aren’t about principle at all. They’re about pure material interest, or group identity – maybe fancied up and justified with claims about principle, but that’s just a disguise or rationalization. But I will argue that there is a basic division about values and how the world works that has divided Americans throughout our history.

I hope that what I say today will convince you of two things.

First, disagreement is inevitable. The basic division in American politics is based on deep beliefs about values, about religion, and about the fate of individuals in this world. People have to disagree about such things.

Second, both sides are right, and wrong. Each view is true, some of the time. So, if you are on one side, you should respect the other. That doesn’t mean you have to respect everyone on the other side. It’s good to *start out* respecting, but some people *earn* the opposite.



So this is a talk about ideology, and the first thing I want to show is that standard ideas about American ideology don’t make much sense.

For instance, some people argue that the big difference between the parties is their beliefs about the “size of government.”

25 years ago my advisor in grad school, Aaron Wildavsky, told me that the Republican coalition was unstable because its economic position was for less government but the social conservatives wanted MORE government regulation. He voted for Reagan anyway. Meanwhile left-wing grad

students told me the same. How could people who did not want to regulate the market stay allied with people who wanted to regulate the bedroom?

Good question, but of course my left-wing friends wanted to regulate markets but let people do whatever they wanted in the bedroom. They were no more consistent than the conservatives.

Well, it's 25 years later and both parties are still inconsistent. In fact, they've been inconsistent for a lot longer than that.

Lets take another puzzle. Why is opposition to abortion the CONSERVATIVE position?

You might think that people who wanted to spend more money on education, and avoid spending on war, and abolish the death penalty, would be the people who would see abortion as murder and want to prevent it. 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?

In fact, neither party is consistently pro- or anti-government. There ARE people who consistently want smaller government. They're called libertarians, and they don't get many votes. There ARE people who, at least until recently, have wanted government to ban abortion AND the death penalty AND nuclear war, AND to spend on social programs. They're called the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

It appears that MOST people are in the inconsistent position. And that should tell you that the usual approach is looking at the wrong question.

The parties don't have consistent views about size of government because that's not the question that divides the parties.

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To me, the basic question that divides the parties is what explains differences in peoples' fates. Why do some people do well and others not? Is this just or unjust?

That is basically a religious question, and answers divide on religious lines.

It has now become conventional wisdom to argue that religion is important in American politics. Both a person's sect and how often they attend religious services have been strongly related to choice in recent elections. White Protestants are more Republican than Catholics, and members of either group who attend church often voted for President Bush in 2004 more than those who attend less. So:

Protestant weekly or more:	70-29 (16%)
Protestant less often:	56-43 (15%)
Catholic weekly or more:	56-43 (11%)
Catholic less often:	49-50 (14%)
All others:	40-59 (39%)

But why would religion matter? And is this something new?

It's not new, though it has become more visible of late. There is a basic ideological cleavage that can be traced throughout American history. It involves one of the basic questions about life: what explains what happens to people in their lives?

One position says that peoples' fates depend on their own virtue. In this view good people are rewarded by a just God, and bad people are punished, in THIS world.

This 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. Its roots go deep in American history, to the Puritans and Calvinist theology. 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; *and being more moral helps them succeed in the market*. The market is a place where virtue is rewarded.

And it is logical to be against government handouts to the poor but also oppose abortion. The abortion issue is not about life. It's about

INNOCENT life. INNOCENT lives can't be taken, guilty lives certainly can. And abortion is also about consequences. If abortion is legal, then people who misbehave, who have sex irresponsibly, do not face consequences. To put this more gently, in nature one of the consequences of sex may be children; people should not be able to avoid that, and they CERTAINLY should not be able to avoid it by taking the life of the innocent being, God's being, who they may have thoughtlessly created. Because opposition to abortion is about innocence and consequences, it is totally consistent to be both against abortion and for the death penalty.

The Protestant Ethic view came over on the Mayflower, literally.

So what is the opposing view?

The opposing view 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, or two versions of, the view that has historically been the counterweight to the Protestant Ethic view. One is the name its current opponents give it: secular humanism. To fundamentalists "humanism" is bad, and is part of "secular" because it means saying human beings are more important than God, putting human beings in God's place. But to others, humanism means belief in and caring for humanity; and secular is good because it says humanity should not be divided by religious creeds.

This other name for the view that opposes the Protestant Ethic is more explicitly religious: the protestant ethic is opposed by the social gospel. The social gospel view says all humans are god's creatures, and what we owe to God is to take care of them. It is what the Lord told Amos and Isaiah to preach to the Jews, and is much of the message that Jesus brought to the world.

Whether we call it secular humanism or the social gospel, the view that human beings are basically good, all God's creatures, militates against dividing into the good and the bad, the blessed and the cursed. But then, in that view, what explains different fates?

As Jim Morone argues in another great book, called *Hellfire Nation*, “Social gospel thinking shifts the focus from individual sinners to an unjust system.” So ,”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 social gospel solution always is 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.”

In this view, different fates are due to luck or the system. The world isn’t always fair. Some people are born with fewer opportunities than others, and need a helping hand. Government is needed to protect people against bad luck or to fix unfair systems.

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 exactly 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 so should be allowed to make 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. The bad luck of an unwanted pregnancy should not be allowed to ruin someone’s life (and the life of an unwanted child is also not likely to be too great).

In one view unwanted pregnancy is bad luck; in the other it is the consequence of immoral choices. In one, people should be given an escape valve; in the other, they should not be allowed to add an even greater sin to the original immoral behavior.

Another example of the two world views is “rights.”

President Bush continually talks about “freedom” and “liberty.” But he doesn’t exactly like the American Civil Liberties Union.

Then again, with all the talk about “rights” from liberals and Democrats, they don’t seem to be too 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.

I’m putting this too strongly, but the direction of the difference is clear. One side talks about rights but doesn’t seem to care much about property rights. The other talks about freedom but seems to really mean freedom to use your property as you see fit – in other words, property rights and not a lot else.

The difference in part reflects the fact that Republicans, on average, have more property than Democrats. But it’s more than that. 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 fundamental. The big problem would be to have too little. Franklin Delano Roosevelt said one of the “Four Freedoms” was “Freedom from Want.” Neither secular humanists nor believers in the social gospel assume that God meant the rich to be rich; at best, believers in the social gospel may say that if God made some people rich he also meant for them to give back to the poor and the needy.

In short, the divisions within American political ideology ARE NOT about the size of government, or about “freedom.” Both parties are inconsistent about that. They want government to do some things but not others. They care more about some freedoms or rights than others. Instead, the difference is basically religious: the difference between a protestant ethic view, for Republicans, and the secular humanist or social gospel view, for Democrats. The difference isn’t religion per se, because the social gospel is a religious view. Jimmy Carter is a prime example of it. So was Dr. King.

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I think that is clearly the key difference now. You can see it in all the public opinion data that shows people who don’t attend church being

overwhelmingly Democrats, people who attend services weekly being overwhelmingly Republican, and also differences among creeds, with reform Jews – the social gospel group par excellence – being heavily Democratic, and fundamentalist protestants heavily Republican. I'll explain Catholics being in the middle in the question period, if you'd like.

But the difference has been basic throughout our history.

I'm not saying there haven't been secular humanist and social gospel Republicans, or Protestant ethic Democrats. There have. The issue of slavery especially scrambled allegiances both just before and then long after the Civil War. In Eric Foner's terms, wealth generated by SLAVE labor could not be justified; from the perspective of northern abolitionist protestants, southern plantation owners were *not* doing their Christian duty of labor.

But I think Thomas Jefferson would be a Democrat today because he was a secular humanist. And John Adams would be a Republican because he was basically a Protestant Ethic person.

Jim Morone, traces what he calls the puritan view vs. the Social Gospel view through the history of American reform movements. He writes that,

“The Puritan approach focuses on dangerous sinners lurking in our society.” So, he adds, “the policy problem turns... to protecting us from them.” This is the view in campaigns against substance abuse from the rise of the temperance movement in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, to Prohibition, to the current “war on drugs.”

As Morone explains, in many cases throughout our history, “the same general pattern recurs. Some dangerous personal behavior... threatens the community. The questionable behavior is often associated with some group. Moral politics triggers vibrant stereotypes: Irish drink, Italian immigrants have too many babies, Muslims are terrorists, and black people commit almost every possible sin.”

Looking at the history of public health crusades, Jim points out that social reformers like Jane Addams argued that poverty caused drunkenness and prostitution, not the other way around. Franklin Delano Roosevelt campaigned for Social Security explicitly in Social Gospel terms. And in

New Dealers' hands, after the obvious failure of prohibition, "excess drinking turned from sin to illness: dry pledges and national prohibition gave way to treatment and education." Morone argues that the social gospel view reached its "high tide" – well, so far for sure – in the southern Civil Rights movement and the Great Society of Lyndon Baines Johnson.

I think all this is true, but it goes back further.

In graduate school I studied the Jacksonian era, from 1829 to the Civil War. Jackson's victory ended a period with no clear party boundaries – sometimes called the "Era of Good Feelings" – and basically created the modern party apparatus and two-party system. Jackson had captured the old Democratic-Republican party created by Jefferson and Madison; the Federalist party of Hamilton and Adams had died; and so a new party, the Whigs, arose to oppose Jackson.

Each party used the same rhetoric about democracy, claiming to promote equality and accusing its opponent of supporting privilege. The Democrats called the Whigs the "aristocratic" heirs of discredited federalism, while the Whigs argued that "King Andrew" had set himself above the law. The inconsistency of slavery was mainly resolved, for a while, by choosing not to see blacks as part of the fully human community.

As conservatives eagerly point out today, Andrew Jackson was against government activism on the economy. But this was based on a view of the system. Jacksonian Democrats thought the economy worked pretty well, and government could only inject favoritism into the system, using some people's money to favor others. This division between the parties DID shift, a hundred years later, with the New Deal. But I would argue that's because the world shifted, the economy changed and so the instrumental judgment about opportunities changed. Moreover, at the STATE level the balance of attitudes about government activism was not nearly so consistent as at the federal level; even in the Jacksonian era. New York state Democrats objected to federal spending on internal improvements because their state had already built the Erie Canal. An activist *state* government was just fine with them.

The division that WAS quite consistent, even 175 years ago, involved non-economic issues. As Lee Benson writes about New York State,

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.”

Looking beyond New York state, Joseph Blau points out 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.”

Whiggism affiliated with the Anti-Masonic movement, and the Masons of course were secular humanists. The Jacksonians blasted the AntiMasons for bigotry and intolerance. Jackson was a duelist who married a divorcee, Johnson lived in sin with a black mistress, Whigs were scandalized and Democrats didn’t care. The Democrats opposed Sunday laws, opposed demands to open public assemblies with prayer, and Jackson refused to act against Georgia for imprisoning missionaries to the Cherokees.

In a state like New York, the communities with many churches that were well-attended were the communities that voted Whig – except, of course, if the churches were Catholic! When Alexis De Tocqueville visited America he remarked on the religiosity, on the quiet on Sundays in New England and other northern areas. But in the South and in some of the central parts of the country, as Tocqueville and many others noted, it was a different story.

This was the America of Paul Bunyan and Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett and Sam Houston – real and mythical heroes, and very inadequate puritans. As William Faulkner put it, in the frontier communities, “no community was going to interfere with anyone’s morals so long as the amoralized practiced somewhere else.” These were the areas where the Democrats were strong.

The swing group was the Scotch-Irish of the middle states, like Pennsylvania. They were Presbyterian so with strong Protestant roots, but

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 writes 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.”

And, Kelley adds,

“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.”

Roman Catholics, of course, he adds, “were close political allies of the anticlericals and free-thinkers on the Jacksonian side, for only a strict separation between Church and state would keep the Puritans from imposing their ways on Catholics.”

This ideological division didn't entirely determine politics because there were still group enmities and material interests, as there are today. In the Midwest the Ulstermen tended to be Democrats because they saw the puritans as the enemy; in New York, where their historic blood enemy, the Irish Catholics, were present, the Ulstermen allied with the Yankees and tended to be Whigs.

In his classic history of the pre-Civil war era Roy Nicholls explains 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: what happens depends on the weather where you farm AND the weather halfway around the world where other cotton is being 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 depend more on inconsistent weather – like wheat farmers in the upper Midwest, or cotton growers – have trended Democratic.

And that brings me to an important point. These ideologies have been maintained over time in part because the two basic explanations, the two basic views, do jibe with different peoples' conditions.

The worldview that says rich people are rich because they're virtuous is based on certain religious attitudes. But it also is particularly 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.

Similarly, the dominant Protestants have long been suspicious of outsiders; worries that immigrants would dilute American virtue have been particularly strong among the more religious protestants. So opposition to immigration has been particularly strong in areas where that kind of Protestantism was strongest, and immigrants basically throughout our history have therefore been attracted to the less religious, less exclusive party, the Democrats.

In a fundamental way, then, the Democrats have always been the party of the outsiders and the Republicans the party of the insiders, of the dominant faith. But the Protestant ethic side has also often felt threatened, in eras such as the early 1920s, the McCarthy era, and now.

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*In short, the Democratic party and the successor to the Whig party, the modern Republicans, occupy the same religious positions as they have throughout American history. The essentially religious attitude, about individual fates and virtue, is much more central than any rhetoric about freedom or liberty or the size of government.*

But the world *can* change, leaving people confused about how their views should apply. That's what happened on economics.

The industrial revolution confused both parties. They both split over Progressive-era initiatives, because neither's instincts fit the new world. They didn't figure out their new positions until the Depression. The Democrats saw too much pain on too many people; it became impossible to maintain that "the system" would be fair to people so long as government stayed out of the way. On the other side, Andrew Mellon, Secretary of the

Treasury for Coolidge and Hoover, spoke in very moralistic terms about the events, seemingly seeing the Depression as a chance to purge immoral excesses.

So the change in views about economics actually fits my argument. Democrats decided only the government could overcome the economic system's random bad luck; Republicans decided the losers must deserve to lose, and activist government would just interfere.

We have also seen a switch in the parties' geographic bases. The south, once home of the antipuritan democratic party attitudes, is now the center of Christian conservative Republicanism. The north, once the home of the protestant ethic world view, is now the base of the democrats. Just look at any presidential election map.

Part of this is due to northerners moving south – what one of my teachers, the late Nelson Polsby, called the air conditioning theory of American political change. The Civil Rights movement, and President Nixon's "southern strategy" in response, also led southern whites who already were conservative to shift into the party where they had belonged for many years, but that they had resisted joining because of the hard feelings left over from the Civil War.

But during the civil rights movement the northern churches that, through their view of the Protestant ethic, had opposed slavery; and that also provided much of the backing for the civil rights movement; became less reliable supporters of the Republican Party as the Republicans chose to pick up both southern and northern ethnic votes instead. And these northern mainline Protestant churches changed further over time. While white mainline Protestants still lean Republican, as best I can tell the churches have strong liberal leanings because the social gospel has become more important to their theology, and notions of sin and damnation much less important. I suggest you walk into any one of a number of the very large protestant churches in Cleveland Heights or Shaker Heights to test my hypothesis.

Moreover, there IS a rising tide of secularism. Although the United States is by far the most religious country in the industrialized world, popular culture HAS in many ways trended in a secular humanist direction. So the Christian

conservatives have good reason to feel threatened, and have mobilized in response.

That mobilization has been particularly strong in the South, where the growth of fundamentalist or evangelical churches has been based far more on a protestant ethic, sin-and-damnation view than on social gospel preaching. As Morone puts it, “the Puritan idea burst out of New England and spread across America thanks to the purest puritans, the Baptists.”

A lot of social processes have been going on, but the upshot is that the religious profiles of the country have changed in ways that have moved the center of gravity for the more protestant ethic, moralistic religious view from the north to the south. So the regions have changed, but to my mind the basic division is remarkably similar to the 1830s.

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So who’s right?

Both views are often true. People’s fates depend on BOTH their own behavior and the world around them; on both their virtue and their luck or the system. That, of course, is why both views persist.

Why are people poor? Some more because they’re screw-ups, some because of bad luck or the system, and some both.

Why are people rich? Some because they’re smart and capable, and some because they were lucky enough to be born well.

Is alcoholism a disease or a result of bad behavior? Yes.

Even in foreign policy the basic division can be seen.

Conservatives tend to think that America is special, America is especially virtuous. And so our role is either to change the world, to reform it and make it more like us, OR, sometimes, to get away from the rest of the world so it will not pollute us. That’s the protestant ethic position, based on ideas about morality, about America being, in President Reagan’s words – but taken by him, I think, from John Winthrop -- the “city on the hill”.

Liberals tend to think that everybody is good, all people are children of the same God, we shouldn't impose our values on others but we should help everybody – the social gospel view of foreign policy.

As actual foreign policies, each of these can seem like a caricature. I personally think this is a case where both world views are wrong, instead of both having some truth. I pray that we have leaders who are closer to what I call “realists.” But sometimes we don't. And you might agree that the foreign policy instincts of the two parties do seem to fit the basic division.

Returning to social policy, I'd like to end with a divisive issue similar to abortion. The death penalty fits deep notions of justice – but it appears to be very hard to administer fairly. There is no good death penalty system; people could die because of bad luck in the legal system; so what should we do? Should we still allow people who do horrible, terrible, disgusting things to live? Well, the social gospel view would say, who are we to put ourselves in the place of God? But which God? The God of mercy, or the God of wrath?

We could go through more issues. But I think you'd agree that there are principled reasons to take opposite sides of many issues, and that each ideology has strong points.

I think you would also agree that this kind of division is not going to be easy to mend.

In fact it can't be mended. But we can respect each other, and recognize that each side has its merits. I hope you will do that today, and throughout everything you do in politics.

### **A Note on Sources:**

This talk is adapted from a previous talk, and I apologize for the fact that I do not write talks with footnotes. If you are interested in sources, you can find the following:

**Exit Poll Data** may be found at:

<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/states/US/P/00/epolls.0.html>

The quotes are from the following works. Note that I actually quoted Jim Morone's public health argument from an article, rather than from *Hellfire Nation*.

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