

A Solution to Fishkin's Trilemma

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Abstract

James S. Fishkin has argued that three important tenets of American liberalism are at odds. These tenets include the autonomy of the family, equality of opportunity and selection on the basis of merit. According to Fishkin, in practice it is possible to maintain any two, but not a third tenet simultaneously. Fishkin's response to this problem is a sequential remedy whereby alternative policies are fashioned to alternate support of each tenet at different times. While this approach might temporarily resolve the systemic tensions within liberalism and provide a basis for legitimizing governmental authority, it may not accurately portray how the tenets themselves are generally regarded. This paper posits that, at the individual level, Americans regard some of these tenets more highly than others and that such orderings may be used to identify left and right in the context of American politics. Such orderings may be related to a person's economic position, which may change over time. To the extent that political parties represent competing ideological positions, aggregate shifts in adherence to one or another tenets may help explain aggregate shifts in partisan allegiances and the policies derived from those commitments.

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INTRODUCTION

American politics is usually characterized as non-ideological. The overwhelming scholarly consensus is that a broad agreement on liberal democratic principles, experimentation and pragmatism are the major attributes of the ideological climate in the United States.¹ One might say that Americans are philosophically unsophisticated in their political orientations, and unaware of many of the problems inherent to liberal values.²

Such characterizations can be traced to some of the earliest writings on the subject. For example, Alexis De Tocqueville wrote that, "I think no country in the civilized world is less attention paid to philosophy than in the United States."³ Moreover, De Tocqueville noted that Americans tended to be more occupied with private affairs than people in Europe. This description fits well into other accounts of Americans being individualistic, self-interested, and pragmatic. Unfortunately, because ideological controversies have not been considered an important feature of American politics, many characterizations of ideological differences in American politics rely on conceptually empty or blurred perceptions of the kinds of ideological distinctions which may exist in a liberal society.

¹ The two most prominent works on this subject are Louis Hartz, The Liberal Tradition in America (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955); and Richard Hofstadter, Liberalism in America (New York: Vintage Books, 1958).

² This has been recognized in many public opinion studies. Although there is scholarly debate concerning the validity of the conclusion that Americans are becoming more ideologically sophisticated than they had been during the 1950s. See Herbert B. Asher, "Voting Behavior Research in the 1980s: an Examination of Some Old and New Problem Areas," in The State of the Discipline, Ada Finifter, ed., (Washington, D.C.: American Political Science Association, 1983). According to Robert Dahl, "Most citizens are unlikely to be highly competent social theorists or political philosophers." [See Robert A. Dahl, Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy: Autonomy vs. Control, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982),160.]

³ Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, ed. Phillips Bradley, Vol. I, pt.2 ch. 10 (New York: Knopf, 1945), 3.

To provide an analytically coherent specification of the left-right dimension in American liberalism, this paper presents "solutions" to the trilemma posed by James S. Fishkin. These solutions of this three-horned problem provide a conceptually coherent description of left and right within the peculiar, sometimes paradoxical, confines of liberal values.

AMERICANS: IDEOLOGY AND PRINCIPLES

The left-right or liberal-conservative continuum is familiar to journalists, historians and political scientists. Indeed, it is part of our everyday political vocabulary. Moreover, empirical research suggests that the public understands the terminology of an ideological continuum arrayed from left to right. The practice of using left-right terminology to describe the political orientations dates from the French Revolution, and remains a popular way of describing politics.

The concept of a left-right continuum appears to have some degree of validity across cultural and political boundaries. Upon gathering responses to survey questions, Giacomo Sani and Giovanni Sartori note that:

As it stands, our evidence only says that, in all the countries under consideration, samples of respondents are willing and apparently able to locate themselves on a left-right continuum in satisfactory percentages (67.6 is the lowest percentage of responses in the Eight-nation Study, and a surprisingly high one considering that it is the U.S.). The important underlying questions are, first, what is the cross-cultural travelling capacity of the left-right imagery; and, second, how do we reckon with their inevitable, context-based relativity? Cross-cultural equivalence is a general problem of all comparative analyses; yet we seem to be better off —on travelling grounds - with 'left - right' than with 'liberal - conservative'. As to the issue of relativity - how right is 'right' - it should be clear that in our analysis the problem is minimized by the fact that the primary concern is the comparison of groups of partisans within their respective countries. Thus, no assumption needs to be made about equivalence of the left - right scale in different countries.⁴

Sani and Sartori succinctly state the essential problem of using the left right continuum. That is "it's context-based relativity." The fundamental problem is defining what it means to be left or right. Because this approach to classifying political attitudes has been widely used, and empirical

⁴ Giacomo Sani and Giovanni Sartori, "Polarization, Fragmentation and Competition in Western Democracies," Western European Party Systems, ed. Hans Daalder and Peter Mair (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983), 309.

studies indicate that the continuum has meaning to a large proportion of the population, it is a valuable enterprise to inspect the meaning of left and right in the context of liberal values.

Parties of the left are often described as advocates of "progressive," social programs and adherents of social change. Parties of the right are characterized as being less sensitive to the issue of inequality and generally opposed to social change. There is a widespread perception that these leanings are a matter of degree, where those parties at the extremes are considered radical as opposed to more moderate, or even centrist parties.

Perceptions of the political landscape frequently lack conceptual specificity. For this reason, it is advisable to inspect the more cogently articulated philosophical ground latent in scholarly interpretations of the left-right dimension. The problem of defining the parameters of the left-right spectrum has been approached using a variety of methods. Some studies define the limits of the ideological spectrum in terms of the most extreme positions taken by political actors. This approach assumes a kind of connectedness which may or may not be present. Likewise, interpretations of platforms (where items fall on statistically generated dimensions using factor analysis) rely on concepts which are analytically prior to the analysis, but are frequently unspecified.⁵ This is generally accomplished by identifying those groups who are perceived to hold positions at the outer limits. Thus communists are usually juxtaposed to nationalistic parties with anti-communist, and perhaps clerical or capitalistic connections. Intermediate positions are identified between these extremes.

⁵ See Ian Budge, David Robertson, and Derek Hearl, eds. Ideology, Strategy and Party Change: Spatial Analyses of Post-War Election Programmes in Nineteen Democracies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. Cf. Ian Budge and Richard I. Hofferbert. "Mandates and Policy Outputs: U.S. Party Platforms and Federal Expenditures." American Political Science Review 84 no.1 (March 1990): 111-31; Francis Castles and Peter Mair, "Left-Right Political Scales: Some 'Expert' Judgements," European Journal of Political Research, 12 (1984): 73-88.

Alternatively, ideological intentions are sometimes measured in survey research by correlations among responses to questions regarding political issues.⁶ However, an underlying dimensionality is intelligible only if one posits a mental connectedness between items such that if a position is taken on issue X, then the "logical" or "rational" position on issue Y follows. Without such a postulate, the presence or absence of dimensions lacks any ideological intent, or "rationality" broadly defined. Intent may be conceived in terms of an intelligible choice among alternatives ideological possibilities. The explanation of being to the left or to the right within liberalism is limited by the conceivable possibilities within liberalism. In a sense, the "rationality" of taking the position is not clearly evident without an explanation of how issues or items are related to one another.⁷

Approaches to defining an ideological continuum which rely on correlations among survey responses assume a kind of conscious connectedness which may or may not be present between the ends of the spectrum. Interpretations of party platforms, where items fall on statistically generated dimensions using factor analysis, or studies using expert judgements, rely on concepts which are analytically prior to the interpretation of the placement of those groups.⁸ Alternatively, many studies of public opinion include questions asking respondents to place themselves on a

⁶ See Angus Campbell, et al., The American Voter, (New York: Wiley, 1960), see especially Ch. 10; Norman H. Nie, Sidney Verba, and John R. Petrocik, The Changing American Voter, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

⁷ One of the requirements of rational choice is that individuals conceive of potential alternatives as being connected, thus are able to order their preferences for alternative transitively. See William H. Riker and Peter C. Ordeshook, An Introduction to Positive Political Theory, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1973), 16-9.

⁸ See Budge, Robertson, and Hearl, eds. Ideology, Strategy and Party Change; Ian Budge and Richard I. Hofferbert, "Mandates and Policy Outputs: U.S. Party Platforms and Federal Expenditures," American Political Science Review 84 no.1 (March 1990): 111-31; Keith Poole and R. Steven Daniels, "Ideology, Party and Voting in the U.S. Congress, 1959-1980," American Political Science Review 79 (March 1985): 373-99; Kenneth Korford, "Dimensions in Congressional Voting," American Political Science Review 83 (1989): 949-62; Castles and Mair, "Left-Right Political Scales;" Michael John Morgan, "The Modelling of Governmental Coalition Formation: A Policy Based Approach with Interval Measurement," Ph.D. diss., (University of Michigan, 1976).

left-right or liberal conservative continuum.⁹ Frequently, the criteria for such interpretations or judgements are poorly defined or completely unspecified.

Giacomo Sani and Giovanni Sartori have described the content of the left-right continuum as being in the "social equality/social change domain."¹⁰ Both aspects, or dimensions are plainly evident in European ideological controversies, but become more obscure in the comparatively limited ideological space of American politics.

By comparison to most European democracies, ideological differences in the United States are considered to be relatively minute. These perceptions are frequently expressed in spatial descriptions which note the depth and degree of ideological differences. In cross-national studies political groups on a left-right continuum are often characterized as being moderate or radical in their adherence to ideological positions.¹¹

In the context of European politics, ideologies frequently have specific historical intentions. Marxists, who are generally acknowledged as occupying the ideological positions furthest to the left are explicitly concerned with the process of historical development, while conservatives, who tend to be backward looking, are keenly aware of social change from an historical standpoint which notes tradition as being embedded in the historical identity of the community. Both extremes include an inseparable historical dimension as part of what constitutes their ideology.

In the context of American liberalism, left and right are typically framed more abstractly, in terms of attitudes toward economic and social freedoms. In contrast to the more organic perspectives of continental political philosophies, American liberalism does not view politics from

⁹ See Nie, Verba, and Petrocik. The Changing American Voter; Sani and Sartori, "Polarization, Fragmentation and Competition;" Hans Daalder, "The Dutch Party System: From Segmentation to Polarization- And Then?" chap. in Party Systems in Denmark, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Belgium, ed. Hans Daalder (London: Frances Pinter, 1987).

¹⁰ Sani and Sartori, "Polarization, Fragmentation and Competition."

¹¹ For a good overview, see Castles and Mair, "Left-Right Political Scales."

the perspective of a collective, or holistic social entity, with particular concrete features. Instead, liberalism is atomistic, with a "faceless" individual posited prior to society. Such an individual is posited to have the ability to form moral opinions, or preferences and to calculate or choose between those alternative opinions through the use of reason. It is the preservation of the freedom to exercise these capacities which is the focus of liberal thought.¹² Whether contrived in contractarian, Kantian, or utilitarian idioms, it is the definition of individual rights, in terms of principle, which is central to the liberal mind.¹³

"Social change" in the case of liberalism does not include the kind of historical frame of reference which one might find in the context of continental European ideologies. Because liberalism is grounded in notions of justice expressed in the idiom of principles, which do not lend themselves to contingencies or exception of an historical nature, there is no historical dimension related to "social change," *per se*, in the liberal ideology as there is in Marxist or classical conservative thought.¹⁴

For liberalism, social change is relevant only insofar as such changes are made in accordance to timeless moral principles. Principles are not necessarily designed to maintain a particular socio-political end-state, but are used to correct society so that it operates according to

¹² To exhaustively define all the elements of every variety of liberal thought is beyond the scope of this paper. Liberalism is interpreted here as being a family of individualistic political philosophies which hold that the highest virtues include the impartial application of impartial principles of a timeless nature. For a succinct exposition of this interpretation of liberal thought see Alasdair MacIntyre, "Is Patriotism a Virtue," (Lindley Lecture Series, The University of Kansas, 1984) 5-11.

¹³ For a concise comparison of prominent liberal thinkers, see Michael J. Sandel, ed., Liberalism and Its Critics, (New York: New York University Press, 1984).

¹⁴ For an excellent treatment of the issue of historical objectives in ideological thought, see Karl Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 229-39, *passim*. Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, The Use and Abuse of History, trans. Adrian Collins (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957).

impartial (and perhaps democratic) standards.¹⁵ These ideas are related to individuals, not classes, cultures or traditions. In contrast to socialist movements, which generally seek some kind of end-state objective, set in the context of historical societal change, or conservatism, which is bound to historical experience as expressed in the traditions of a community, liberalism floats in the realm of ideas.¹⁶ In this sense, liberalism is also ahistorical.¹⁷ Thus, the sense in which Sani and Sartori might intend to use the expression "social change," as an historically grounded dimension, is not directly relevant to liberalism. Liberalism may respond to historical conditions, but the principles themselves are historically static. This aspect of liberalism is expressed in a variety of ways.

According to Alasdair MacIntyre, the kind of liberalism which Americans inherited from the Enlightenment had been developed in opposition to traditions, from which "reason" was seen as a means of escape. Many of the prominent liberal thinkers of the Enlightenment viewed reason as a means of overcoming, or at least clarifying the misunderstandings which traditions had

¹⁵ Faith in a "hidden hand" or similar mechanism such as John Stuart Mill's "marketplace of ideas" does not diminish the limitation of principle to means instead of ends. Equality of condition has not had widespread appeal in the United States. Equal opportunity does not mean equality of condition, but refers to access to means not access to results.

¹⁶ See Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia, 219-29; Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in Michael J. Sandel, ed. Liberalism and Its Critics, 15-36; Rawls, A Theory of Justice; Ronald Dworkin, "Liberalism," in Sandel, ed. Liberalism and Its Critics, 60-79. Though not exhaustive, the opinions of these scholars are representative of liberal concerns.

¹⁷ The realization of a "fair" society is a constant struggle for liberals. But there is also a hope that the "fair" society will have increased material payoffs as well, such that "progress," in liberal terms, is limited to general adherence to liberal principles and general economic prosperity. A "hidden hand" of some kind seems to be a consistent feature in liberal thought [see Willmoore Kendall, "The 'Open Society' and Its Fallacies," American Political Science Review 54 (December, 1960): 972-79.]

This does not claim that a "better future," is not part of liberal aspirations. However, liberalism does not include any "ideal state" toward which we should strive, other than the consistent application of enlightened principles of fairness and perhaps general prosperity.

previously embodied. But in essence, the liberal position is anti-traditional and lays claim to a kind of knowledge which is not historically contingent.¹⁸

In an "ideal type" of liberal society, a member of a racial or ethnic minority is treated as a "person" (i.e. individual), not as a human being situated in an ethnic culture, a set of traditions, or an history which is morally relevant. This impartiality between claims diminishes the historical significance of having such an identity, which is by liberal standards, morally irrelevant and therefore not a reasonable justification for making political claims to justice. Judgements made solely on the basis of having such an identity epitomize what liberal morality rejects. An inheritance is simply not considered morally relevant to an individual's merit.

Past discrimination is relevant only insofar one's present life's chances are diminished because of a situation which *might* be grounded in historical accidents. If these patterns persist, then there *might* be grounds for remedial government intervention. The question for liberals is whether an identifiable group of individuals is *being* treated unfairly, not "what is the nature of this or that historical claim?"¹⁹ By comparison, such a claim might be crucial to determining the legitimacy of political claim for classical conservatives; and similar considerations constitute an essential element in a Marxian worldview.

Possessing an identity, which may be constituted as an historical connection with the past, is as irrelevant for liberals as whether a person is tall or short. It is precisely because such an identity is morally irrelevant that using identities based on historical antecedents as criteria for decisions is unwarranted and therefore deemed "unfair."

¹⁸ See Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue, Second Edition, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981; "Is Patriotism a Virtue:" and Which Justice. Whose Rationality, University of Notre Dame Press, 1987.

¹⁹ Even historically accepted judicial precedents must adhere to principle in the liberal conception of justice: see Ronald Dworkin, Taking Rights Seriously, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 110-115.

Having a particular identity, whether in terms of sex, race, ethnicity or culture, is not morally relevant.²⁰ It is not a justification for political claims; nor is it a justification for discrimination in a liberal society. For liberals, such an identity neither diminishes nor enhances a person's rights. Such a claim is quintessentially irrelevant. Nevertheless, one has the right to express that identity, while the rest of us have the right, and perhaps even the obligation, to ignore that expression in making decisions regarding that person's participation in the political economy.²¹ Justice, and claims to justice, in a liberal society are legitimate insofar as they adhere to the standards of impartiality, an impartiality which extends to all "accidental" characteristics, including historical antecedents, which also entails a blindness to historically grounded identities. In its perfected form, the liberal society is a collection of morally androgenous, nameless, faceless, colorless, and ethnically indistinguishable individuals who exist in the political economy as holders of "rights" to freedoms and impartial treatment.²²

What is missing in the liberal tradition is an interpretive vision of history. Without such a vision, there is no historical aim against which to estimate a policy's relation to the present state of affairs. In sum, liberalism lacks historical intention. For this reason, Sani and Sartori's "social change," dimension does not apply to liberalism in the same sense that it might apply to classical conservatives or Marxists for whom history is a fundamental concern. Therefore, a proper characterization of left and right in liberalism must rely on the nature of liberalism itself, on the notions of "rights" and "principles" which concern the liberal mind.

For these reasons the left-right dimension must be revised to "travel" to the United States. Conceptually, only the question of equality is relevant, because historically grounded social change

²⁰ See Rawls, A Theory of Justice, for one of the most lucid expressions of this position.

²¹ See Dahl, Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy, 100-2. Cf. Rawls, Theory of Justice, regarding the "veil of ignorance" as a paradigm for moral deliberation.

²² The liberal virtue of impartiality also requires that the liberal be tolerant of competing conceptions of the "good," and between competing conceptions what constitutes "the good life." For excellent treatments of this issue, see MacIntyre, "Is Patriotism a Virtue?" and Willmoore Kendall, "The 'Open Society' and Its Fallacies."

per se is not an essential component of American liberalism, but a product of a more fundamental concern with adherence to timeless principle.

PRINCIPLES OF FREEDOM AND EQUALITY IN THE LIBERAL MIND

For liberals, conceptions of what constitutes left and right must be framed in terms of what it means to be a liberal; and for liberals, principles or "rights," are the only valid expressions of their ideology.²³ Thus, any left versus right dimension within liberalism must refer to some principle or liberal tenet. To define how principles may be used to explain the liberal ideological spectrum it is necessary to consider the tensions within liberalism.

One of the central problems in liberal philosophy is the formulation of mutually consistent principles. And among the most difficult of the intellectual problems for liberals is to resolve the tension between freedom and equality, to define the limits of freedom and equality.

One of the claims to legitimacy in a liberal state is that individual rights are protected. In Lockean terms, this includes the right to express one's creative powers through the accumulation of property in building an "estate." More commonly known as property rights, individual freedom includes the freedom to dispose of one's property as one sees fit. This constitutes one of the central features of a liberal society. The protection of this "right;" however, contributes to the development of inequality, another prized liberal value.

Notions of equality play equally important roles in defining liberalism. Impartiality requires that access to political and economic opportunities be made without the application of morally irrelevant criteria. Such notions find expression in many different ways, though the most

²³ To use Wittgenstein's expression, liberalism constitutes a "language game," with its own rules, internal to liberalism, which do not directly relate to the historical intention of Marxism or classical conservatism. As Kierkegaard, almost anticipating the later Wittgenstein, put it, "The mode of apprehension of the truth is precisely the truth. It is therefore untrue to answer a question in a medium in which the question cannot arise. [Soren Kierkegaard, Robert Bretal, ed., A Kierkegaard Anthology, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 227-8.]

notable instances involve those debates surrounding civil rights, equal protection, representation, etc.

In the absence of historical intention, attitudes regarding principles political, social and economic equality are pivotal in defining where one stands within the rather truncated spectrum of liberal ideology. Juxtaposed to the concept of equality is the concept of freedom. While both values are generally accepted, in the abstract, particularized interpretations of these principles do not guarantee a consensus when those principles are framed in specific terms.²⁴ The American version of liberalism is particularly troubled with restrictions to personal freedom.

Americans are well known for their suspicion of power and strong attachment to the principle of limited government. The idea of limited government is closely related to the span of control individuals are provided in living their lives. Both positive and negative conceptions of freedom have evolved from debates within the liberal tradition. Freedom has been construed as both "freedom to act," and "freedom from" certain kinds of restrictions. The liberal conception of a limited government is very closely tied to the belief that a strong, powerful government will restrict the span of activities in which individuals may engage without regulation.

FISHKIN'S TRILEMMA

James S. Fishkin has noted that three widely shared liberal tenets pose a trilemma, whereby unstable sequential solutions may be constructed on an *ad hoc* basis, but not simultaneously.²⁵ The three horns of his trilemma are the principles of equality of opportunity, the autonomy of the family (in its allocations of resources), and selection on the basis of merit.

²⁴ See James W. Prothro and Charles M. Grigg, "Fundamental Principles of Democracy: Bases of Agreement and Disagreement," Journal of Politics, 22 no.2 (1960):276-294; Cf. Willmoore Kendall, "The 'Open Society' and Its Fallacies."

²⁵ See James S. Fishkin, Justice, Equal Opportunity, and the Family, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

Fishkin traces the practical tensions between principles in liberalism by using the family as the basic unit. He argues that, in practice, it is the family rather than the individual which constitutes the fundamental social unit in a liberal society. Inequalities arise from the differences which are "inherited" from familial lineage. Yet it is within the context of the family where the individual freedoms espoused by liberals are exercised. Thus, it is the family's autonomy, not merely individual autonomy, which is the foundation for developing the kinds of tensions which trouble the liberal mind. Government intervention in resolving these tensions may interfere with the practical maintenance of each of the tenets Fishkin identifies.

Taxation, for the purpose of redistribution, restricts the autonomy of the family, by taking a share of its resources and allocating those resources for public use. Likewise, regulation of family choices, such as busing, constitute another restriction on the autonomy of the family. That is, it is limited in selecting public schools by an autonomous choice of residence.

Equality of opportunity is promoted or discouraged by governmental intervention in making education available, enforcing anti-discrimination regulations, and the like.

Selection on the basis of merit deals with rewarding individuals based on successful competition. This principle is supported by market forces, where individual advancement depends on personal achievements in fair competition.

Fishkin argues that all three principles are held to be immutable and universal by the great majority of Americans. Furthermore, he argues that these values are also jointly incompatible. Any two, but not all three, principles can be maintained at the same time. Autonomy of the family and selection on the basis of merit may be compatible, but there is no guarantee of equality of opportunity. Equality of opportunity and autonomy of the family may be compatible, but not with selection on the basis of merit, for the playing field must be levelled by adjustments to markets. Selection on the basis of merit and equality of opportunity may both be compatible, but

not without doing violence to the autonomy of the family, since its resources must be allocated to provide the opportunities that sustain selection on the basis of merit.²⁶

Fishkin believes that these tensions might be addressed sequentially, one or two at a time, in historically mapped policies. This remedy, however, must do violence to the immutable quality claimed by the principles. While this is troubling, and may require considerations which might be construed as "arbitrary," given the judgements required to make the evaluation that one tenet "needs help," Fishkin sees a sequential solution as being the most defensible approach to the problem.

An alternative to Fishkin's suggestion is that liberals do not, in practice, hold to all three as immutable principles. While granting that these principles are widely shared, I believe that it is typical of liberals to discount one or another of these tenets in forming a personal public philosophy. While philosophers and political theorists, with an interest in maintaining coherence and unbiased objectivity, may require *ad hoc* solutions, individual citizens are noted for tailoring their own interpretations of principles to fit their personal biases. In doing so, there is a possibility that one of the immutable tenets becomes mutable (i.e. discounted), via personal interpretation. Moreover, I postulate that there is an underlying left and right dimension in the selection of which principle to discount. The key to this dimension is the principle of equality of opportunity.

A position "to the right" within liberalism tends to discount equality of opportunity in favor of autonomy of the family or selection on the basis of merit. This reinforces existing social inequalities. Liberals further "to the left" tend to discount both selection on the basis of merit and autonomy of the family in favor of equality of opportunity. This is the most redistributive alternative. Between these positions is a moderate view that discounts (within some limits) the autonomy of the family or selection on the basis of merit (but not both) in favor of equality of

²⁶ For a more detailed explanation see Fishkin, Justice, Equal Opportunity, and the Family.

opportunity. The logical properties might be expressed as a series of transitive relationships, where these tensions are resolved by means of a kind of discounting, or emphasis.

Consider the positions A, B, and C, where A is equality of opportunity, B is selection on the basis of merit, and C is the autonomy of the family. One may rank one principle over another in a transitive ordering of the kind used by rational choice theorists.²⁷ Six transitive orderings of these principles are possible (see Table 1):

TABLE 1
LEFT, CENTER, RIGHT
ORDERINGS OF FISHKIN'S TENETS

RANKINGS OF TENETS	LEFT	CENTER	RIGHT
First (Most favored tenet)	A A	B C	B C
Second	B C	A A	C B
Third (Least favored tenet)	C B	C B	A A

Thus, underlying tensions within liberal thought might yield a left-right dimension, as conceived by Sani and Sartori, by virtue of certain kinds of interpretations, or personal solutions to liberalism's inherent tensions. The principle of equality of opportunity can be interpreted to be the pivotal principle defining what is to the left and what is to the right (see Table 1). Such a construction corresponds to the "social equality" portion of the left-right conceptual domain which Sani and Sartori describe.

With respect to the other two tenets, there is a slight difference in the way each justifies inequality. Autonomy of the family, if held as a paramount principle, provides an unquestioning justification for the legitimacy of familial holdings, regardless of their origins. On the other hand, selection on the basis of merit justifies inequality on the basis of the actions or talents of those who hold greater shares. Although both tenets would support inequality, through the

²⁷ See William H. Riker and Peter C. Ordeshook, An Introduction to Positive Political Theory, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1973), 16-9.

freedom to acquire and hold greater shares, selection on the basis of merit qualifies inequality, whereas the autonomy of the family does not rely on such qualifications.

The theoretical utility of conceptualizing the left-right dimension in this manner is that it provides a more definitive specification of conceptual content which is generally lacking in the empirically oriented literature.

Insofar as Fishkin's trilemma is valid for Americans the requirement that alternatives, or gradations in a conceptual dimension be "connected" is satisfied. That is, if political legitimacy rests on adherence to these principles, then those principles are "connected" by virtue of a common reference to the value of equality. Put differently, each "solution" provides a basis for judging the legitimacy of political decisions which follows a gradation of more to less support of equality.

What is more important is that an ordering of these three tenets renders an ideologically coherent spatial dimension. Moreover, this method of resolving the tensions within American liberalism satisfies another conceptual demand: exhaustiveness. The content of this particular version of the left-right dimension yields the pleasant quality of being conceptually bounded. There is no possibility that, when faced with these alternatives, a political actor could ideologically outflank the existing limits of the continuum thus defined.²⁸

Below, I offer some preliminary speculations on the factors which might lead individuals to hold a particular ideological position as defined above. This conceptualization of a left-right dimension in liberalism might be used to explain partisan differences as well as life-cycle or generational cleavages in the electorate.

²⁸ See Hans Daalder, "The Dutch Party System: From Segmentation to Polarization," where cross-national survey results are reported which indicate an underlying scalar principle in voter self-placements organized by party allegiance. On a left-right continuum, modal responses, arranged by party, demonstrate a clear transitivity. What is troubling is that new parties may take positions which are more extreme than any presently existing. Such an "elastic" continuum lacks a common metric which can be consistently applied across time or across national boundaries. Such a continuum does not "travel" very well.

LEFT VERSUS RIGHT SOLUTIONS: PRINCIPLES AND SELF-INTEREST

In discussion with colleagues, students, family members and acquaintances, I have noticed that many people do not immediately perceive a tension between these principles. For many, it is only when the practical implications of enforcing the principles is explained that they understand the "trilemma." Some come to this realization more readily than others. This "blindness" to the practical demands of tenets is reminiscent of the kind of cognitive dynamics described by Milton Rokeach.²⁹ But a more pointed connection with the landmark study by Prothro and Grigg is apparent. Prothro and Grigg conclude that when democratic principles are interpreted using different "frames of reference," in more specific terms, there is widespread disagreement.³⁰ In that study, one could easily see the influence of racism, and intolerance toward politically undesirable candidates (Communists). Biases such as these could conceivably operate in assent to other principles, especially if the interpretation of those principles follows perceived self-interest.

To the extent that Fishkin's "trilemma" is valid for liberals, by definition there are no resources within liberalism for resolving these tensions. Fishkin's sequential solution is presented from a standpoint which is sympathetic to liberalism. In his attempt to resolve these tensions without discarding the fundamental moral precepts from which they derive, Fishkin avoids passing a more severe verdict on liberalism, one that has been cogently articulated by others. That verdict is that liberalism is fundamentally incoherent.³¹

²⁹ See Milton Rokeach, The Open and Closed Mind (New York: Basic Books, 1960), for an excellent treatment of how beliefs affect the interpretation of events. For another good discussion of how core values are related to political ideology, see Elinor Scarbrough, Political Ideology and Voting: An Exploratory Study (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 24-49. Theoretical metaphors differ considerably. The cognitive processes described by Rokeach might be akin to operations conceptualized as "the calibration of receptors" by certain cybernetic theorists; see Karl W. Deutsch, The Nerves of Government (New York: The Free Press, 1962); Bradford P. Keeney, Aesthetics of Change (New York: The Guilford Press, 1983), 12-109.

³⁰ James W. Prothro, and Charles M. Grigg, "Fundamental Principles of Democracy: Bases of Agreement and Disagreement."

³¹ See MacIntyre, After Virtue, "Is Patriotism a Virtue;" Which Justice, Whose Rationality.

While the kind of interpretations might violate the liberal virtue of disinterested impartiality, but American notions of representation include a belief in the legitimacy of claims which are patently self-interested.³² Given the general tolerance toward political claims (which should not be overstated), one may appear liberal in endorsing the tenets which Fishkin has described, while at the same time using these tenets to support one's particular self-interest. Such an interpretation of liberal morality is nothing surprising, Marx, Nietzsche and many others have noted that moralities may be used for such purposes. But hidden in this trilemma is something unusual. There is a potential basis for solving the trilemma according to a general model of generational politics, or individual life-cycles.

It is possible that orderings of these principles might be a function of one's position in the political economy, a position which may correspond with an individual's changing economic interests throughout his or her life. These interests, which may be consistently attached to tangible economic benefits, provide a coherent motivational criterion for selecting a particular solution to the particular tensions presented by the incoherence of liberalism. Thus, interpretations of liberal principles may be "framed" in terms of self-interest in much the same way that interpretations of democratic principles may be "framed" in the context of racial attitudes or ideological biases suggested by Prothro and Grigg in their study of democratic principles.

POTENTIAL MOTIVATIONS FOR ADOPTING A PARTICULAR ORDER

If one postulates that political position-taking is grounded in self-interests, the attractiveness of each of Fishkin's tenets may vary depending on the economic status of an individual. For example, consider the problems faced by a young man or woman entering the work force. Such a person, having no prior work experience and facing a competitive job market, might find the tenet of equal opportunity to be most appealing in comparison to selection on the basis of merit or

³² One need only consult James Madison's arguments in Federalists 10 and 51. See Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, The Federalist Papers, Clinton Rossiter, ed. (New York: New American Library, 1961).

autonomy of the family. Without any prior work experience, he or she has little claim to merit, and almost no family resources to protect by proclaiming the autonomy of his or her family which is now in-the-making.

By comparison, a man or woman with five or ten years of work experience and perhaps some wealth, might be inclined to see their interest in supporting selection on the basis of merit, which they can now claim with evidence of prior employment. Moreover, equal opportunity has less relevance, since the starting point, where "opportunity" has meaning, has past. Nevertheless, such persons could be facing competition in advancement and may prefer the expected gains from that competition through support of a criteria which weighs their performance against the performance of younger, less experienced competitors. Selection on the basis of merit, therefore, may be viewed as a situational or contingent means to accumulating additional wealth, as a foreseen but not yet realized potentiality. At this stage, one's accomplishments in maintaining or advancing one's position may weigh more heavily in the balance of principles, depending on one's acquisition of meritorious accolades.

Later, when the individual has reached the zenith of his or her productive years, and that person could reasonably assume that the wealth accumulated through his or her life's work is reaching its completion, autonomy of the family, and the protections it implies might seem more appealing. Selection on the basis of merit might continue to provide some additional increment to that person's welfare, but equality of opportunity is almost moot, since that particular stage in his or her career has long since past. Though continued advancement might still be a reasonable expectation, the number of wage earning years are decreasing.

In retirement, neither equality of opportunity nor selection on the basis of merit has much relevance, since that person has now left the job market and has accumulated almost all the wealth he or she is likely to acquire. Protection of existing holdings of wealth may loom much larger in the mind of a retiree who exists on a fixed income derived from a pension, investments or government subsidies.

It is doubtful that most individuals who are not intimately involved in politics are conscious of "having changed" their political beliefs. Without having to defend their positions in public, such individuals may "drift" from one set of opinions to another without experiencing much cognitive dissonance between previously avowed beliefs and views which they follow later in life. Such a change may occur as one's position in the political economy matures with the accumulation of property. Such a preference for alternative solutions could be expressed in an adapted version of Table 2 below:

TABLE 2
AGE/CAREER STAGE, PARTY ALLEGIANCE
AND HYPOTHESIZED ORDERINGS OF TENETS

RANKING OF TENETS BY AGE/CAREER STAGE AND PARTISAN IDEOLOGY	YOUNG/ ENTRY- LEVEL (LEFTIST) DEMOCRAT	MIDDLE AG- ED /MID- CAREER (CENTRIST) DEM./REP.	ELDERLY/ RETIRED (RIGHTIST) REPUBLICAN
First (Most favored tenet)	A A	B C	B C
Second	B C	A A	C B
Third (Least favored tenet)	C B	C B	A A

Moreover, these orderings might correlate with one's selection, and strength of allegiance to a particular political party. Democrats have, since the New Deal, been associated with the advancement of people who might not otherwise excel (those who for a variety of reasons including discrimination, or initial poverty, or other reasons, face difficulties in entering the labor market prepared for competition). The programs of the Great Society (The War on Poverty) and many other educational programs are typical of this kind of concern. On the other hand, Republicans have long been noted for their pro-business positions, fiscal conservatism, anti-tax, anti-big government positions. These concerns revolve around property rights, which are closely akin to the intentions expressed by the autonomy of the family and to a lesser degree selection on the basis of merit. Their constituencies have been characterized in political rhetoric as corporate stockholders and other people who have accumulated wealth. Such people are unlikely to be

younger, highly indebted, entry-level people. Moreover, it is widely recognized that the holders of most of the wealth in the United States are older Americans.

Older Americans are much more likely to own their own homes, hold investments, et cetera. Thus, such persons would be more sensitive to taxation, downwardly redistributive social programs, and other forms of interference in the allocation of privately held resources, which they are more likely to possess. However, these hypothetical economic positions are not completely consistent with reality. More complex economic positions, such as those described by Fishkin, may be present which mediate the interests described in the oversimplified generational model described above.

As Fishkin notes, affluent families are capable of distribution their advantages to their children. The expectation of receiving advantages could also be a reasonable, self-interested justification for holding a position to the right. Likewise, a relatively affluent minority parent may consider a position to the left more advantageous, given the expectation of continued discrimination. All of these influences suggest motivations which are reasonable, self-interested causes for choosing a particular ordering of Fishkin's liberal tenets. To the extent that partisan politics is a manifestation of such interests, there should be a correlation between interpretations and partisan allegiance.

An empirical test of the hypothesis that one's allegiance to political parties hold one or another of these tenets more dear than another will also perceive themselves as being "liberal" or "conservative," or Democratic or Republican will require the development of a proper survey instrument to detect such a bias in the ordering of liberal principles.³³ If intransitivity in such

³³ See Appendix A for a rudimentary attempt to construct such an instrument. I have chosen to provide a thorough test of the transitivity of one's preference among the three tenets.

In very limited experiments, I have found a high rate of intransitivity among respondents who have not been introduced to an explanation of the trilemma. I suspect that the rate of transitivity may be higher among strong party loyalist, and other politically active people, given the likelihood that they have had to defend their positions in discussions and arguments among cohorts. I need to conduct further experiments with the instrument before attempting a study with a larger sample.

orderings is as commonplace as expected, given the lack of cognitive attention Americans give to such tenets, then some method of explaining the trilemma as part of the research instrument may be warranted. If respondents understand the implications of Fishkin's trilemma then survey questions might yield more accurate and/or valid responses to the question of one's bias for one principle or another.

APPENDIX A

1. Which of these things is MOST important to you? _____

- A. Jobs should go to the most qualified people.
- B. Parents should be allowed to give their children advantages.
- C. Everyone should have an equal opportunity to get ahead.

2. Which of these things is LEAST important to you? _____

- A. Jobs should go to the most qualified people.
- B. Parents should be allowed to give their children advantages.
- C. Everyone should have an equal opportunity to get ahead.

3. Which of these two things is MORE important to you? _____

- A. Jobs should go to the most qualified people.
- B. Everyone should have an equal opportunity to get ahead.

4. Which of these two things is MORE important to you? _____

- A. Parents should be allowed to give their children advantages.
- B. Jobs should go to the most qualified people.

5. Which of these two things is MORE important to you? _____

- A. Everyone should have an equal opportunity to get ahead.
- B. Parents should be allowed to give their children advantages.

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