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The Importance of Worldview

Wednesday, April 26, 2006

Why do people act and think as they do? That is one of the great questions of human nature, of course. But, even as we theologians are ready to offer an answer, the political scientists, sociologists, psychiatrists, and the like are also invested in the question.

The political scientists are not necessarily asking the big questions of human existence. In one sense, their concern is simply to explain why certain persons vote as they do. Armed with that analysis, politicians and political strategists can plan and plot accordingly.

Writing in *The Boston Review*, authors John Gastil, Dan M. Kahan, and Donald Braman attempt to explain why Americans vote as they do — and their conclusion is most interesting. They argue that cultural worldviews “orient” voting patterns.

Here are the two main paragraphs of their argument:

For most Americans, the intricacies of national policy have far less day-to-day importance than their jobs, their social and family lives, and even the performance of their local sports teams. How, then, do they figure out what positions to take on such fiercely contested issues as the threat of global warming, the impact of free trade, and the efficacy of the war in Iraq?

Our answer is culture, and here we agree with the late political scientist Aaron Wildavsky. Most citizens, he argued, possess an intuitive and vivid sense of their “cultural world views” —the term that he (and the anthropologist Mary Douglas) used to refer to the basic values that underlie people’s everyday activities. We have adapted their theory to distinguish people in two ways—as hierarchical or egalitarian and as individualist or communitarian. Hierarchical people believe strongly in the wisdom and necessity of social stratification, whereas egalitarians cherish equal opportunities. Individualists believe that individual people and families must fend for themselves, whereas communitarians believe that citizens in a healthy society maintain strong bonds of trust and commitment. These viewpoints help people to align themselves with like-minded peers, authorities, and organizations whose positions they will use to shape their own political preferences.

The authors are all academics, and their analysis is tilted toward the left. In the end, they argue for something like a centrist position, asserting that cultural polarization is often overblown.

Their thesis is worthy of debate. I find their hierarchical/egalitarian and individualist/communitarian dichotomies to be most interesting. These deserve a serious consideration.

Here is another interesting paragraph:

And it is not only powerful but pervasive. Culture exerts its organizing force not just on intensely partisan fringe voters but on the vast majority of largely tolerant, non-ideological, and under-informed middle-of-the-road voters. Whereas “liberal” and “conservative” self-identifications partly explain the preferences of politically sophisticated respondents, cultural world view predicts the preferences of even the most unsophisticated persons.

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