

Title: Christopher Federico on the Psychology of Political Behavior
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Transcript

[From Heterodox Academy, this is *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, conversations with scholars and authors, ideas from diverse viewpoints and perspectives. Here's your host Chris Martin.]

Chris Martin: Can we explain why people lean conservative or liberal based on their psychological traits? According to one school of thought, the answer is yes. People who have strong needs for certainty and security lean conservative whereas people who don't lean liberal.

However my guest today Christopher Federico has argued that the situation is much more complicated with factors like political engagement, national history and the influence of political journalists, writers and academics playing a role. So that the meanings of liberal and conservative can vary across people across nations and across history.

Chris is a renowned political psychologist and professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Minnesota. He has a joint appointment in the Department of Psychology.

Hi, Chris. Thanks for joining us on the show.

Chris Federico: Thanks for inviting me.

Chris Martin: So let's talk a bit about your latest paper with Ari Malka. It's a paper in which you talk about the conventional wisdom in psychology and some things that might be wrong with it.

Conventional wisdom which listeners who have read Jonathan Haidt's book, *The Righteous Mind*, or popular articles might be familiar with is that there is some basic psychological needs or psychological traits or inclinations that drive people towards conservative or liberal movements and parties. And you're suggesting there are some problems with those conventional psychological explanations. Can you elaborate on that?

Chris Federico: OK. Well, one thing to clarify ahead of time is what we mean by existential needs and epistemic needs. Basically, existential needs are needs for security, for safety, to avoid a sense of danger and threat whereas epistemic needs are effectively needs to achieve subjective certainty and to see the world in a relatively simple and coherent way.

So, as far as terminology is concerned, those are sort of some of the background things that we always talk about. It's probably easiest to just think of them as needs for security and certainty, which is a relatively straightforward way of putting it. Now as far as the conventional wisdom in psychology is concerned, I would say it's not entirely wrong. It really just needs to be qualified

in terms of what we know about the nature of mass belief systems from public opinion research. And that was sort of the main point that Ari and I were trying to get at in our paper last year.

So to kind of flesh this out a little bit, I think what we would say is that this process that a lot of psychological theories deal with of elective affinity, that does matter. So to put that in plain English, what we are saying is that it is indeed true that people gravitate toward political positions and identities that basically match their fundamental psychological inclination.

So for example, individuals who do have strong needs for security and certainty, they're going to gravitate – all other things being equal – to political identities and positions that appear to be traditional, conventional or somehow order-producing in their nature and meaning.

Now, where we diverge a little bit from the traditional way of looking at this is that political context shapes which things out there in the political world are seen this way.

So basically, this process of matching a lot of major psychological theories deal with, it kind of depends on the symbolic meaning that gets assigned to different positions and identities in everyday political life and these things are shaped by political culture, by political discourse among influential people and so on and so forth.

Now, we don't want to go crazy about this. Different things vary in the extent to which you need some kind of additional way of assigning meaning to it.

So for example, the symbolic meaning of some political positions is pretty obvious. So in the context of what we colloquially refer to as social issues, so things regarding gay marriage, immigration, abortion and things like that or disputes that have some strong linkage to basic in-group, out-group distinctions like nationality, ethnicity, or what have you. Those things are obvious. So there's not a lot of complexity that goes on in terms of how elites or leaders can influence how people look at those things.

But there's another set of objects out there in the political world, important ones, things like parties, ideological labels, and some of what we refer to as harder issues like economic issues where there's more construction going on.

And what we argue is that this construction is effectively contextual and it depends on history and political culture and it also depends on what political scientists broadly refer to as elite opinion leadership. And by that, we simply mean this idea that influential leaders, elected officials and other folks like that do a lot of work essentially to assign meanings to different positions, to tell you what positions go with others and so on and so forth. So basically our argument is that there are implications of this. So we talk a lot in a variety of disciplines about the left/right divide, the difference between liberalism or conservatism and so on and so forth and we kind of have a very taken for granted idea about what that means.

But one implication of a lot of work in political science and public opinion research and what Ari and I do in our paper is that the left/right divide as we commonly think of it in Western Europe and the United States is in fact the social construction.

So we have a certain idea of how say support for economic redistribution and support for socially liberal positions should go together. If you identify with the left, you support more redistribution and you also tend to be more socially open, less traditional, supportive of things like gay rights and so on and so forth.

But one thing that we note is that that that's not universal. Those things are a result of particular actions by elites to tie those things together into certain packages. In fact, as we can talk about it later, there are other parts of the world you can go to where those things don't necessarily hang together to the same extent ideologically.

Now, another implication to this is that not everyone learns the ideological packages that exists or that are on offer on the menu so to speak in a particular society. So some people pay a lot of attention to politics. Some people know a lot about politics. Others are simply tuned out. So what a lot of work finds is that it's really only the people who know a lot and who pay a lot of attention who learned what goes with what, what it means to be a liberal or conservative and so on and so forth.

Now that's where we try to make a big point about the traditional, psychological model of why people gravitate toward identities or positions of the left or right. So the basic argument we make is that needs for security and certainty are more likely to predict ideological identification and party identification, various kinds of issue positions and what not were among those who are interested and informed.

Basically, we argued that those are the people who pay enough attention to politics and enough attention to what political leaders say to know what kinds of positions or identities are going to serve their basic psychological needs. So it may very well be the case that conservative positions provide people with a sense of security and certainty. But if you don't pay enough attention to politics or know enough about politics to realize that, then there's not going to be much of a linking process.

Now, sort of a last thing that we will note is that sometimes, this traditional relationship breaks down in interesting ways, in particular issue domains, and one thing that both Ari and I have noticed in our respective research programs is that economics tends to be a little bit special. So traditionally what you would think is that economic positions are going to be like anything else. If you are high in needs for security and certainty according to the traditional psychological model, then all other things being equal, you should adopt conservative positions, which as they are defined in Western Europe and United States are free market oriented positions.

But interestingly, what both Ari and I have found in our respective research programs is that that really depends on political information or how much you know and care about politics. So among people who pay a lot of attention to politics, it's indeed the case that if you are high needs

for certainty and security, you're more likely to adopt conservative free market positions. However, if you look at people who don't pay as much attention about politics and don't know as much, that relationship actually completely reverses such that people who have high needs for security and certainty are adopting more left-wing redistributive positions.

And what we would argue is that it actually makes some sense in terms of a traditional model of how needs for security and certainty influence political actions even if it doesn't look like it.

So absent signals from political leaders that tell you that the free market symbolically means something conservative and traditional. How are you going to look at the notion of the government intervening to protect people to provide insurance against economic risks and so on and so forth?

We would argue that basically redistribution, government regulation, government protection of the little guy, a lot of that looks like it's security providing or risk avoidant to someone who has high needs for security and order if they are at the same time being subjected to political messages that tell them, "Nope. No. The conservative traditional thing that you're supposed to support is the free market."

Chris Martin: you mentioned that cultural needs as opposed to economic needs tend to be somewhat simpler. But even there, you do see some variation because I just talked to a guest recently about this on the show. If you think about the issue of abortion, it might not even be salient in some countries. I'm from India. It's not just – it's not really a salient political issue there. And in America, evangelical leaders were pro-abortion rights for a pretty long period of time. And then it got packaged with this conservative agenda and the evangelicals became very anti-abortion rights rather quickly, which you can't really explain if you just look at it psychologically.

Chris Federico: Exactly. I think that's a great example in many respects. It's an episode that's not well-understood in American history. But if you look at like the years immediately prior to Roe versus Wade, if you look at the major evangelical denominations, they don't care about that. And in fact, they kind of tend to regard opposition to abortion as a "Catholic thing". And there's a little bit of inner group antagonism there. But then that changes by the late '70s.

And there are some debates about – among historians about exactly what leads white evangelicals to get into politics and then to switch – change their tune on abortion. But yes, that's a very interesting example. Part of what we are talking about when we note that ideologies in the sense of sort of constrained systems of beliefs or interrelated attitudes, these are not facts of nature. These are things that have to get socially constructed. And more often than not, they are socially constructed by influential political leaders, by intellectuals, and writers and other folks like that. Those are the people that do the work of what sometimes is called creative synthesis.

Chris Martin: So when it comes to psychology in general, I think psychologists have goals that are similar to those of biologists and are trying to find some universal rules and all of these points raise the fact that psychology can never really be that much like biology because if you

want to look at human behavior in a political arena, there really are few consistent behavioral patterns.

So given all of this research, are there any consistent psychological rules within the field of political psychology?

Chris Federico: Well, to some extent I would say that it is possible to engage in some amount of theoretical universalism so to speak. Now, the context of politics complicates the task of uncovering universal patterns or figuring out exactly how certain relatively universal aspects of human psychological functioning get mapped on to different political preferences, identities, and so on and so forth.

So the two reasons I would say for the complexity that you encounter when you do this sort of work in the political realm. So the various political ideas and identities that personality for example might attract a person to or subject again to some level of social construction and cultural evolution in and of themselves. They have their own logic. That's a logic that kind of plays itself out at the macro level over and above psychology. So that's going on.

Chris Martin: So can you give me an example of what you mean by that?

Chris Federico: When we talk about what it means to be a liberal or a conservative, again, these are not facts of nature and what it means to be a liberal or a conservative, what's regarded as important to those identities in terms of the values you're supposed to emphasize, the political positions you're supposed to emphasize, those things change somewhat over time depending on what problems the society faces, depending on which competing groups become dominant among leaders and so on and so forth. So they have kind of a logic of their own.

What is changing so to speak is what you might call the menu that the vast majority of people in a society have to choose from. Again that menu is sort of disproportionately the work of political leaders, academics, intellectuals and folks like that.

Chris Martin: So let's talk about Eastern Europe and Russia. You were talking about other parts of the world and I really love how you devote a statement of your paper to those regions of the world because the term right wing has a different meaning there that might be unfamiliar to Americans.

Chris Federico: So as far as Eastern Europe and Russia are concerned, the sort of distinction between how politics and psychology link up in Eastern Europe versus Western Europe and the United States and other English-speaking countries, this is one of the best examples of the basic points that Ari and I try to get across.

So in fact, there are two points that we try to get across. Again, different political cultures assemble different sets of values and positions into ideological wholes in different ways.

And the other thing is that the extent to which various parties or ideologies are able to satisfy need for security and certainty really depends on what it means to support a particular ideology or party in a specific culture. So with respect to Eastern Europe versus other parts of the world, we see several interesting things going on. Now, as background to this, you have to kind of think a little bit about what's the political or ideological default is in Western societies, in Western Europe, the United States, other English-speaking societies and so on.

So, the kind of ideological packaging you see in those places is that left economics supports for redistribution of what have you and a sort of anti-authoritarian openness to change go together in the West. Those two things have been packaged together.

One reason for this is just simple history. Activists, leaders, other political actors who have sought a more egalitarian society over the last 200, 300 years in those places were also seeking change.

They wished to move away from the status quo. So given that functional relationship, you're naturally going to see in those context more of a link between support for greater equality, redistribution and what have you and also what we might broadly think of as social liberalism.

Now the thing is, that this isn't necessarily the case in Eastern Europe and in other places. And the big corporate in Eastern Europe of course is communism or the recent history of communism.

So given that history, what we think of as left wing economics, socialism so to speak was paired for a long time with a very repressive closed socially ethos. And in some ways if you look at post-communist in Eastern Europe, this pattern of constraint as we call it lives on. There are numerous mass parties that combine a very redistributive orientation toward economics with some form of right wing cultural populism. A great example of this is the Law and Justice Party that currently rules in Poland. A very good example of this.

So basically in Eastern Europe, you have two things going on. First, economic policies that often look like they are left leaning or socialistic in the West, in many ways reflect an old school way of doing things. It was sort of the default for a long time in those places.

And the other thing is that those positions were symbolically associated with stability and a time of volatile authoritarian social control. And the other part of that is that simply, they aren't paired reliably with socially liberal or tolerant outlook.

So because of this, we often find that needs for security and certainty predict left-wing economic positions in the East rather than right wing ones. One other thing is there's some evidence and this is very recent work from Ari Malka, Chris Soto and Yphtach Lelkes that the pattern we see in the West with left economics being paired with socially liberal cultural views, that's actually relatively rare at the global level. So not only do you not find this pattern necessarily in Eastern Europe and the English-speaking countries and even in Western Europe and the English-speaking countries like the United States, you really only find it among political elites and

among the most highly informed and interested segments of the public. So in many respects what we kind of think of as default patterns of ideological packaging such that left-wing and right-wing economic and cultural positions go together, that's not really the case in quite a bit of the world and among quite a bit of the world's people.

Chris Martin: And in the latter half of your paper, you talk about elites. Elites obviously refers to party leaders as you mentioned but you also said and you put these terms in quotes, "They are coalition merchants and academic scribblers."

Chris Federico: OK. Well, these are not my terms. These are terms that were used by a political scientist named Hans Noel who wrote a really good book on them in 2013.

Basically what I mean by coalition or what Hans means by coalition merchants and academic scribblers are intellectuals, political journalists, pundits and other folks like that who aren't necessarily politicians, party officials or people serving in government but who do have some level of political or cultural influence. Basically, these are the folks who do the work so to speak of putting together the packages of interrelated values, positions, and beliefs about the world that make up what we colloquially refer to as ideologies.

Now, if you go back and you look at Hans's work, sometimes you will see that this packaging process reflects a kind of intellectual or moral project that's important to certain intellectuals for symbolic reasons or aesthetic reasons.

In other cases, it reflects a more instrumental effort to assemble a big enough coalition of groups who might have somewhat different political interests or priorities to work together to gain power.

Chris Martin: So what are some examples of these types of people in the United States?

Chris Federico: The classic example that gets talked about in the literature is where does what we refer to as conservatism in the United States come from. How has it evolved? We know it has kind of been the dominant ideology of the Republican Party since the time of Reagan. But before that, where did it come from?

And if you look at the history of this, you find that it starts in the so-called small magazines. So places like the National Review, Human Events, these small circulation conservative journals. And if you look at the people who wrote in these journals, they assembled a unique world view starting in the 1950s and parts of the 1960s and it was this combination of support for a very strongly free market orientation in terms of economics and also a high level of cultural traditionalism, support for traditional religiosity in particular and also a strong anti-communist stance.

So this was very much emphasized in these small magazines and intellectual outlets. And it had more and more of an influence over time on activists and then political leaders in the Republican Party. And over time what you see to speak more broadly of this is this process of diffusion from

in some cases, journalists, intellectuals, writers, and folks like that to activists and then to actual political leaders.

It doesn't always work out that way. Some ideas don't become influential. But in other cases, they very much do as we saw on the case of the evolution of conservatism and contemporary American life.

Chris Martin: And so, you're talking about people like William Kristol, people who didn't run for office but people who extensively wrote for the small magazines. And in the more modern era, it's kind of the people who write for – who maybe write op-eds on the Wall Street Journal.

Chris Federico: Yeah. So to give you some of the classic historical examples and even better example than William Kristol would be Irving Kristol, Bill's Dad, who was one of the sort of central neoconservative intellectuals coming out of the '60s. Again, that was a very – it started out as sort of a handiwork of a small number of intellectuals who in many cases had either had liberal or even radical pasts who moved to the right and sort of assembled a unique world view that eventually had an influence within the Republican Party. But there are other figures as well. William F. Buckley is another one that's sort of classically cited.

Chris Martin: So tell me a bit about the evidence we have that helps us know that there is this elite influence, there's a pattern of it.

Chris Federico: OK. So what you're talking about again is this basic idea that comes out of public opinion research and perhaps most importantly, disciplinary-wise, political science on elite opinion leadership. And we have about six decades of evidence on this topic. And most of this evidence, most of the actual analysis looks at what public opinion scholars refer to as ideological constraint.

And when we say ideological constraint, we generally have two things in mind. We are asking about two things. First of all, do individuals adopt ideologically consistent views across different issues? So is the case that people take consistently liberal or conservative positions across different issues or issue domains?

And the other thing is do they adopt issue positions which match their symbolic ideological identification? So if they call themselves a liberal, do they also take specifically liberal positions on different issues?

Now, the political scientist who is a pioneer in looking at these things and how they related to elite opinion leadership was Philip Converse. And he laid the basics out in a very famous 1964 essay entitled *The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics*. And he did a couple of different things. He began by looking at the level of ideological constraint in a sample of elites. In this case, they were members of congress and basically what he found is what you might expect. These individuals have pretty constrained belief systems. If they believe something conservative about one issue, they tended to believe a lot of other conservative things as well.

And he then compared this elite sample to representative samples of individuals from the American mass public that were collected in the late '50s and early 1960s. And he found that most individuals in the general public showed far less ideological constraint. And he went so far as to call these folks in the mass public innocent of ideology. Now, that in some ways is a bit of a strong way of putting it since individuals in the mass public do show some level of ideological consistency. It's just far less of it than we see among elites.

Now, the most important thing that Converse found from my perspective is what's going on among different types of people in the mass public. Basically what he found is that individuals who know a lot about politics and who pay a lot of attention to politics do in fact show more constraints. So there are differences among people in the general public. Some of them are fairly ideological. Not a large group but many are not. And a lot of this varies as a function of information.

Basically, the folks in the general public who are paying enough attention to political leaders to learn what goes with what, those are the folks who adopt a more ideological way of viewing things.

And a lot of what Ari and I do in our paper is kind of just an extension of that basic idea to understanding when it is people adopt political attitudes that match their psychological traits for example. If people know – who have paid enough attention to political leaders to know what makes up liberalism or what conservatism means, they are going to be more reliably picking positions and identities that match their underlying psychological traits in ways that would be predicted by traditional psychological models of how people adopt political preferences.

Now, the big overarching thing here is that in terms of how ideologies get assembled, Converse's argument was that elites do a lot of this work of creative synthesis. So they are the ones who are kind of signaling to the rest of society who may not pay as much attention to politics about what goes with what, what are the programs you have to choose from so to speak.

Chris Martin: So to take an example from American politics, the issues of abortion and affirmative action don't necessarily have to be linked in a particular way but you would find among people, both liberals and conservatives, who do tend to engage with the news or read newspapers and are highly educated, they are linked in a classically liberal or conservative fashion. Some people, you would find among those people, people who tend to support abortion rights also tend to support affirmative action and vice versa.

Chris Federico: Yeah. So one important point that Converse and a lot of other people have made along these lines is that you can think of a lot of different ways that different belief system elements, for example, different preferences about different political issues might go together. One is to think about it in terms of logic. Is there any necessary inexorable logic that ties for example support for abortion rights with support for affirmative action?

And by and large, what Converse argued is that in quite a few cases especially when you take issue positions in different domains, say economics or support for taxation, different levels of taxation and abortion, that logical connection isn't necessarily there.

But what you can end up with is sort of normative connections among issues. Basically it becomes defined as normative within a particular political community to – that those things go together and eventually those ideas about what goes with what diffuse to other parts of the population.

Chris Martin: And you used the term discursive package here to describe a group of messages going together. So how do you describe – how would you define discursive package to someone outside political science and how that term is used?

Chris Federico: Well, it's basically what – discursive package or discursive super structure to use the term that Jost, Napier, and I developed back in 2009, it basically refers to the belief system aspect of ideology. So it's sort of the socially constructed network of value priorities, issue positions and assertions about the nature of reality that are associated within ideological labels.

So you can kind of think of it as the network of belief, attitudes and preferences that go along with being a liberal or being a conservative. And by using the term discursive, what we are trying to emphasize is that those things get assembled. They are socially constructed in a sense, in particular, by elites.

Chris Martin: Why do you feel psychologists don't recognize this phenomenon of elite influence?

Chris Federico: Well, I think that's kind of complicated. One thing I would emphasize at the outset is these issues of belief system structure and the role of elite opinion leadership. These are fundamentally psychological issues. So for example, they are dealing with things that are central to various areas of social psychology. So the nature of attitude structure, the nature of social influence, social cognitive ideas about knowledge structures. These things that are kind of built into this discussion are fundamentally socio-psychological.

And the other thing that I would note is that in many ways, belief systems and the role of elite influences have in fact been studied by social psychologists. It's often forgotten but Philip Converse's PhD was not in political science. It was actually in social psychology. So he began as a social psychologist. It's just his work ended up being particularly important in the study of public opinion. And I would note that other people in the mainstream of social psychology, have been interested in attitudes have delved into these ideas and focused on them a lot as well.

So Alice Eagly and Shelly Chaiken for example are the authors of one the most important texts on attitudes in social psychology, sort of the classic text. And they deal with this stuff a lot and they deal with ideologies in many respects in sort of the classic Converse sense, which again is the work of someone who is originally a social psychologist.

As for the question of why we don't see as much emphasis on this right now, I think it's in some ways kind of arbitrary. Part of it simply has to do with what's at the top of the agenda right now in social psychology. So when social psychologists have written and done research on ideology, the biggest question that people have been trying to address is really what leads people to gravitate to the left or right in terms of identities, political attitudes and things like that. So if you look at the work of John Jost or the work of Jon Haidt, they have very different outlooks with respect to the nature of left-right differences in psychological terms. But they're both operating within this broad focus. They are kind of interested in what distinguishes liberals and conservatives from one another or left from right in psychological terms. They are not quite as focused on this broader issue of how do belief systems get more broadly articulated. And that's OK. Different people have to focus on different things.

But I think in terms of why there's less of an emphasis on this, it partly has to do with that and also just simply has to do with arbitrary disciplinary silos. A belief system structure is sort of stereotypically thought of as a political science thing. And if you are trying to publish in social psychology, you're probably not going to focus on stuff that's going on in another discipline. I am an odd duck in that sense because I'm in two disciplines. I have an appointment in psychology and an appointment in political science. And naturally, that has kind of led me to look at things in sort of a hybrid fashion.

Chris Martin: OK. Well, thanks for joining us on the show. It has been great hearing about your paper and there will be a link to the paper in the show notes and a link to some of the older papers as well.

Chris Federico: Thank you very much. See you later, Chris.

Chris Martin: You can find links to the article and a few related articles in the show notes. You can also follow Chris on Twitter, @chrisspolpsych.

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