

PRAGMATISM VS. IDEOLOGY IN INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

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Motivations

- The role ideologies played in the 20th century seems to be over
- Politics in Western democracies is characterized by *pragmatism*, where feasible, incremental improvements of the status quo are advocated
- Paper by Brennan and Hamlin 2005
“Analytic Conservatism”

Q

- What is the relationship between pragmatism and ideology?
- Should there be a role for ideologies in politics, in particular in situations of “welfare enhancing” institutional change?
- If so, when?

Pragmatism

- Belief systems are guides to actions and should be judged against outcomes rather than abstract principles
- Belief systems that works and have practical consequences should be accepted and unpractical ideas rejected

Political pragmatism

- *Politics without ideology*
- *Politics without strong normative ideals and without firm beliefs or cognitive frameworks about how the world works*



A good compromise, a good piece of legislation, is like a good sentence; or a good piece of music. Everybody can recognize it. They say, 'Huh. It works. It makes sense.'

Barack Obama

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Ideological politics

- *Politics with strong normative ideals and with firm beliefs, principles or cognitive frameworks about how the world works*



Values

Strong

Weak

Firm

Cognitive
frameworks

Uncertain

<i>Ideology</i>	
	<i>Pragmatism</i>



Analytic Conservatism

(Brennan and Hamlin 2004)

- Pragmatism with a status quo bias is normatively desirable
- A “conservative posture” follows from taking feasibility requirements seriously in a world characterized by uncertainty and ignorance
- I.e. weak values and uncertain cognitive frameworks



Strength of pragmatism

- Focus on feasibility
- Empirical orientation
- In line with “piecemeal social engineering”
- Also supported by empirical research



Weakness of pragmatism

1. Well-documented status quo bias, with institutional lock-in, in Western democracies which conserves undesirable, normatively inferior social states.
 - Welfare benefits have created their own constituencies
 - Many reforms involve tangible losses to concentrated groups, while gains are diffuse and uncertain
 - Voters react un-proportionally negatively to losses in welfare (compared to increases)

Weak values and uncertain cognitive frameworks would be no good guide for action in such situations.

Weakness of pragmatism

2. Political pragmatism underestimates the role of tacit and explicit cognitive frameworks in human action in general and political action in particular
 - Status quo may be highly inefficient and still cannot be improved by marginal adjustments due to outdated, or even false, mental or cognitive frameworks

In such situations an ideological shift may be a prerequisite to higher efficiency and welfare.

A role for ideology in institutional change?

- Explicit and tacit ideologies will be part of political life whether we like it or not.
- Yes, there should be an important (normative and practical) role in modern politics, at least in certain situations, for radical ideological change.
- "Second order changes" sometimes necessary (Hall 1993)
- But risk of "ideological lock-in"

Conclusions

- Pragmatist reformers face the risk of becoming "the perplexed prisoners of tacit ideologies"
- Ideological reformers may not convince anyone but themselves
- A possibility to combine the strengths in each perspective?
- Emphasis on reframing outdated cognitive frameworks rather than attempting to change values

