The Paradox Of Polling Data: Philosophical "Conservatives" Support "Liberal" Policies . . . Has "Conservative" Been Invisibly Redefined?

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A new and easier comment section![/caption]

Michael Matthew Bloomer, January 25, 2013

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Future "conservatives" with an overwhelming liberal bias . . .[/caption]

Last night, Rachel Maddow spoke of a widely-noticed apparent paradox in American public opinion polling data: Americans identify themselves as philosophically conservative yet support so-called liberal policies. It's a paradox that begs for analysis, it's jarring in an almost surreal way.

Maddow pointed out what has long been disclosed by polling: some 70+ percent of Americans call themselves conservative, but, for example, 70% to 80% of these same Americans - Republican and Democrat and Independent - energetically support Medicare and Social Security, and disapprove of even mild changes to those programs. Also, by a strong plurality they support restrictions on firearms in almost every reform category, from universal background checks to a wide and deep assault weapons ban. The same pluralities hold for same-sex marriage, and more so, for immigration reforms that the radical right calls liberal.

President Obama's inauguration address has been labeled stunningly liberal by the GOP through its mouthpieces Mitch McConnell, Paul Ryan, Eric Cantor, Speaker Boehner and the man-known-as-a-disease called Reice Priebus. Why? Firstly, of course, they object primarily because it was Barack Obama and not Mitt Romney addressing the nation. (Imagine the different tone of the address - from Obama's “We Americans” to Mitt's “Me,Me,Me!!”) Secondly, President Obama's address was a call to collective action, and it's both a hallmark of GOP philosophy that "communitarian" is a a 13-letter word to be perpetually demonized.

And his address was *extraordinarily* communitarian in tone. President Obama underscored our past community triumphs and imagined those expressions of the common good into the future. As Maddow and others have noticed, he was consciously drawing a line in the sand of our history,

and in effect saying, we are a community, we are not simply a collection of individuals. We care about each other, and will pursue policies to advance and assure the common good. And, implicitly, Americans pursuit of the common good is *not* socialist or communist or tin pot Hitlerite. This infuriates an antediluvianand dishonest GOP; it doesn't yet understand the country has moved into the future, as much for most Americans' common belief in the ability of our country to encompass capitalism and free enterprise and wealth building alongside social insurance and continuous civil rights progress.

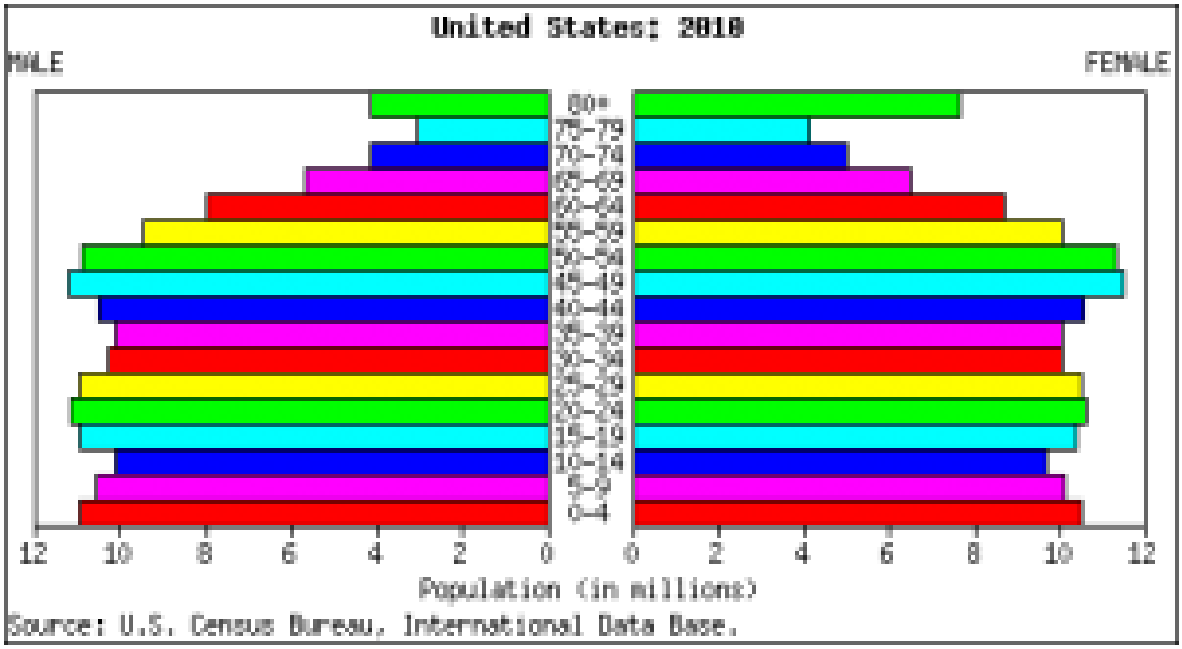
Crossing the Conservative Rubicon

Back to the original paradox: Why do so many call themselves "conservative" when they strongly support "liberal" policies? Are we a collection of demi-schizoid personalities? Are we so undereducated that we cannot see the contradiction? Are we just messing with the minds of pollsters? No (except maybe to the last one). The answer may be something far simpler and far more meaningful, and it's the sometimes boring (although not in *this* case) field of demographics that may yield some useful and clarifying clues about the paradox of polling data.

One key to the Gordian knot, I think, is in large part a historical and philosophical landmark: the term "conservative" has been significantly redefined in the public's lexicon due to demographic changes in our population. While a changing ethnic complexion within America is partly responsible and much discussed, also of significant importance, I believe, is our nation's changing *age distribution:*

For starters, here's a U.S. Census Bureau chart based upon the 2010 census:

Baby boomers moving out, "youngsters" moving in.



As you can see the United States now has approximately 130 million individuals of voting age who have lived their lives long after the genesis of the nation's New Deal and Great Society era. For them, these eras are deep history. As polling of these age groups indicates, for most of them them social insurance and advancing civil rights are established entities and movements. To be sure, during their lifetimes there have been continual attacks from the right on every one of the programs spawned during these eras, on every civil right won or sought.

However, in everything from earned social entitlements to meaningful financial regulations, the New Deal-Great Society agenda has remained essentially intact, although often hamstrungand undermined at the operational level by congressional action or inaction, and by executive interference in agency hiring and philosophy during GOP dominated governance periods. The national audience that these largely Republican attacks have influenced over time has changed dramatically. Today, the size of the audience of potential voters born between the mid-1970s and 1994 has perhaps reached a critical point, a point where their influence is emerging as ***the*** influence going forward.

Thus, the apparent polling paradox may be another sign - like ethnic demographics - of what might prove to be a further evolution of an American collective political and economic philosophy stuck in the unrealistic and simplistic bipolar world of conservative and liberal. Making coherent the polling paradox - philosophically "conservative" but operationally "liberal" - is important because it is so glaring and so seemingly irrational. Resolving the polling paradox may indicate a society-wide movement to a higher level of community spirit, untethered to outmoded fears of simplistically characterized "socialism" or other philosophies so frightening to the paranoid right wing. Is a post iberal-conservative shore on the other side of this Rubicon?

The term "conservative" redefined. For the more than one hundred million voting age adults between the ages of 18 and 50 the programs of the 1930s and civil rights advances of the 1960s have been their background, so to speak. The were born after programs like Social Security and Medicare had become forces in American society. In their era, African American and women's civil rights have become at least narrowly established, if not entrenched by any means whatever, and they've lived to witness civil rights battles to preserve those rights from the fiercest assault in decades. Moreover, this age group has experienced and taken part in the gradual but steady achievements of the GLBT rights movement.

On the social insurance front, these 18 to 50s saw programs that Republicans and some Democrats call giveaways and welfare kept largely intact, although this is not to underestimate the damage done by the right wing since the 1970s to date. Yet their attempts to entirely dismantle these programs have seldom succeeded. The landmark programs, Social Security and Medicare, continue to be sniped at, but they too remain strong and successful, admired by a large majority of Americans across the age spectrum. Medicaid, though consistently attacked with some success, will remain, and perhaps within our decade become stronger through the

Affordable Care Act; remarkably, even Arizona and Utah have now signed on for the Medicaid expansion program, and more intransigent states will likely follow as the decade advances. Indeed, the Affordable Care Act has moved our country farther forward toward universal health security than ever before which has underscored the abiding concern of most Americans of the 18 to 40 group for social insurance. This age cohort has witnessed its own communitarian health care advance analogous to the establishment of Medicare, true landmarks.

Therefre, in large part, for adults 18 to 50 the staying power of the New Deal-Great Society has been as water is to fish, most of these 18 to 50s experience these programs and civil rights advances as their habitual political setting, their environment, their America. As mentioned above, surely they've witnessed the many battles to dismantle the programs and rights they view as their legacy. And they've seen those vicious attacks regularly fail. This group of Americans is far removed from the genesis and the exodus years of social welfare struggles and expanding civil rights. They've also experienced the counterattack on the women's right struggle, typified by draconian anti-abortion legislation with its concomitant pressuring of women's overall health interests typified by Planned Parenthood defunding efforts. Polling of this 18 to 50 cohort demonstrates this group's disapproval for these right wing proposals.

Experience has consequences. In the end, these 100 million strong potential voters have, I believe, silently redefined the term "conservative." Having grown up from infancy in the era beginning in the mid-1970's their inherent sense of "conservative" is what today's angry white men (and Allen West) of the right wing labels "liberal, " "socialist," or "communist." The 18 to 50s largely view the sweep of their personal histories as a time of battle, beginning with Reagan, for the soul and essence of America. Moreover, they grew to adulthood advancing farther than their forebears thanks in part to the programs and civil rights successes that the right wing has all along demonized. In short, when right wing radicals attack Social Security or Medicare or women's and GLBT rights, those attacks invade and threaten this age group's own principles long and widely held.

In large part, I think, these 100 million strong see today's GOP attacks as ***radical*, not *conservative***. If only subconsciously, many of them view *themselves* as "conservative" in their efforts to *protect the progressive programs and human rights advances they grew accustomed to as "givens" during their lifetimes.* And they are now the majority of potential voters. So when asked whether they are conservative or liberal, many honestly check the conservative box. They're for *conserving* the New Deal-Great Society, and advancing it absent John Birch Society and Ayn Rand zombie fears.

So, although certainly not for all persons in the age groups discussed here, an age tranche phenomenon may help explain the seeming paradox in the polling data: many who check the "conservative" box think of "conservative" in the same way many in my own baby boomer generation once thought of as "liberal" in the roaring 60s and 70s. Given time - and under the radar in the way word meanings often evolve - the word and concept of "conservative," may for

many Americans have at least subconsciously evolved into a meaning more akin to "liberal *status quo*." All for the good.

Determining the extent of this development, or disproving the hypothesis, would be a good research project for someone out there. If verified, we would then need new and more meaningful terms to describe this somewhat subtle phenomenon in polling questionnaires, and within the broader media. Any suggestions? Please, leave a comment!