

NEWS & RECORD

Right and left differ on personal agency

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Because political behavior is a rich and fascinating field of study, you can find many valid and useful theories to explain why conservatives and progressives disagree about the proper role of government. Here's one with salience right now: The right and left disagree about personal agency.

That is, conservatives tend to believe that individuals are largely responsible for their own lot in life — by working hard, making the right choices or at least learning the right lessons from the wrong choices we all make from time to time. On the contrary, most progressives respond, larger social structures and impersonal forces shape our fates more than our personal decisions do.

In a 2019 Pew Research Center survey, for example, respondents were asked to choose between two propositions: 1) “Most people can get ahead if they're willing to work hard,” or 2) “Hard work is no guarantee of success for most people.”

Among self-identified conservative Republicans, 84% agreed with the first statement. Among self-identified liberal Democrats, 66% agreed with the second.

In another 2019 poll, the Cato Institute asked to what extent Americans agreed or disagreed with this: “My life is determined by my own actions.” While 52% of “very conservative” respondents said they “strongly agreed,” just 33% of “very liberal” respondents did.

A year earlier, the University of Chicago's General Social Survey (GSS) asked this question: “On the average, African Americans have worse jobs, income and housing than white people. Do you think these differences are mainly due to discrimination?” Yes, said 62% of extreme liberals. No, said 67% of extreme conservatives.

Now think about current disputes about The 1619 Project, critical race theory, implicit-bias testing and other flashpoints in the debate about “woke” culture. To many progressives, conservative resistance to these causes reflects some combination of bigotry, ignorance and

political gamesmanship. And to many conservatives, these left-wing causes reflect — you guessed it — the bigotry, ignorance and political gamesmanship of progressives.

On the substance of the specific issues in contention, my concerns track with those of other conservatives. I've written about them extensively. But for my part, I feel no need to question the motives or intelligence of progressives who disagree. For one thing, it won't do any good. Human beings rarely abandon deeply felt values because other humans beings ridicule or attack them.

For another thing, most Americans are neither extremely conservative nor extremely progressive. They don't think of themselves, their values, their relationships and their communities in ideological terms. Although they've become more likely over time to vote consistently for Democrats or Republicans, rather than splitting their tickets, their views on controversial issues are often mixed and even in tension. They often resist binary choices.

Speaking of which, take another look at the poll questions I described earlier. They required respondents to choose between alternatives, to be sure, but the stated alternatives allowed for nuance. The Pew question asks if "most" people can get ahead if they work hard, allowing for the possibility that some cannot. The GSS question asks if racial gaps are "mainly" the consequence of discrimination, which is different from asking respondents if they think discrimination is a problem.

I'd guess virtually every "extreme" conservative would grant that some Americans experience adverse outcomes despite working hard and playing by the rules. And virtually every "extreme" progressive would grant that personal effort can produce success for at least some individuals who face discrimination or other societal barriers.

What does everyone else believe? On balance, Americans put more stock in personal agency. Of the total Pew sample, 60% said most people can get ahead if they're willing to work hard. Of the total Cato sample, 74% agreed more than they disagreed with the statement that "my life is determined by my own actions." And on the GSS question, only 38% said racial gaps were mainly caused by discrimination.

I think most Americans are correct about this. Disagree? Then make sound arguments to the contrary. Name-calling doesn't count.