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Do All Libertarians Sound Alike?

Bryan Caplan

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An old cliché tells us that "All the music you don't like sounds alike." Does the same hold in politics? Does everyone on "the other side" sound the same?

They don't to me. Krugman, Rawls, Marx, and Lenin are all left-wing in some sense, but I wouldn't say that they're "formally committed to similar political beliefs." It's puzzling to me, then, that Matt Yglesias would say **exactly this** about me and Tyler Cowen. While Tyler and I are the best of friends, we constantly disagree. (See [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#) for starters). We certainly disagree more fundamentally than say Obama and McCain, or even Reagan and Carter - and lots of people think that their disagreements were major.

What would account for the misperception of libertarian homogeneity?

1. People generally misperceive their political opponents as more homogeneous than they really are. On this theory, most libertarians *would* consider Krugman and Lenin's political beliefs to be similar.

2. People misperceive *non-mainstream* political opponents as more homogeneous than they really are. On this theory, the typical Democrat would also see Marx and Lenin's political beliefs as similar.

3. People mistakenly equate amicable disagreement with fundamental agreement. On this theory, non-libertarians would *not* lump Cato and Mises Institute people together.

4. There's no misperception; lumping your opponents together is just a rhetorical tactic to lower their status. On this theory, people *wouldn't* equate dissimilar dead belief systems. For example, since the Catholic-Protestant dispute is irrelevant to modern politics, we would readily acknowledge the differences between Luther and Loyola.

#2 seems closest to the truth to me. Is it? Got a better explanation?

CATEGORIES: Politics and Economics

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razib writes:

i think #1 and #2 are both important. i've seen liberals generalize about and conservatives and vice versa in similar ways as what happened to you & tyler. but, i think that's because most people perceive political opponents as non-mainstream by definition. most liberals socialize with liberals, and most conservatives socialize with conservatives. even with they do cross-socialize (e.g., at work, or family gatherings) they try and not talk politics so they don't get anymore familiar with the worldviews of their opposite equivalents. so i think #1 occurs primarily because #2 is always really operative, because opponents are by definition "non-mainstream."

Posted March 23, 2010 10:17 PM

Doc Merlin writes:

Do All Libertarians Sound Alike?, Bryan...

5. People aren't really listening to the substance of the statements and just lump people with similar ideology to each other but not to them into one black box.

6. They are far more interested in their own and similar ideas so they know a lot about those and minute differences there. They don't care as much about the other side's ideas so they end up being seen as less differentiated.

7. It could just be a function of them being different kinds of socialists. Hayek pointed out in *The Road to Serfdom* that different types of socialists will naturally war with each other, because they both want control over the economy but have different ideas on how it should be run.

Posted March 23, 2010 10:21 PM

Robert Simmons writes:

Um, how about the tyranny of small differences? Plus, you and Tyler are academics who love to argue and see each other pretty much every day. Of course to you it seems like you two are very different.

Posted March 23, 2010 10:23 PM

Peter writes:

Covering your ears and humming loudly whenever a libertarian speaks might achieve the same result. So I agree with Doc Merlin.

Posted March 23, 2010 10:24 PM

Justin Martyr writes:

I remember reading that post and thought Matt was rude and insulting. The fact of the matter is that virtually all progressive bloggers have a mean-spirited attitude. That is not your defect Bryan, it is his. I think the correct answer is

#5. Make a play on social status in order to stigmatize the somewhat more orthodox libertarian.

Posted March 23, 2010 10:30 PM

Ted writes:

Two Points.

(i) Stop reading into something when there is nothing there.

(ii) Those examples were terrible. No fundamental differences in your core beliefs were exposed as being so dramatically contrary to one another that you can't be lumped in the "similar beliefs category." At least come up with good examples, not something stupid like whether we are all special or not.

Posted March 23, 2010 10:52 PM

Dan Hill writes:

Most people adopt and are attached to their political views in the same way as their religious views - it's about faith not reason. Those who don't hold the same views are heretics - the substance of the heresy doesn't matter.

Posted March 23, 2010 11:03 PM

AS writes:

A bit ironic that, to facilitate your argument that you and Tyler are very different,

you rely on one of his favorite blogging strategies: the brainstormed list.

Posted March 23, 2010 11:10 PM

Koz writes:

I'd be really interested in an explanation of why the disagreements between you and Tyler are more fundamental than Reagan and Carter.

That one just doesn't pass the smell test for me, though I'd love to hear your rationale for it.

Posted March 23, 2010 11:19 PM

John Thacker writes:

[Comment removed pending confirmation of email address and for rudeness. Email the webmaster@econlib.org to request restoring your comment privileges. A valid email address is required to post comments on EconLog.--Econlib Ed.]

Posted March 23, 2010 11:31 PM

bdm writes:

There are a million different ways for government to intervene, but only one way for government not to intervene. Yes, there are many different reasons that libertarians give for laissez-faire, but there are also many different reasons that liberals give for why they support intervention. Liberalism does not have an "end goal" the way libertarianism does.

Posted March 24, 2010 12:13 AM

Kurbla writes:

I do not think that all libertarians are alike. I think that libertarians are specifically American phenomenon. Because of the bi-party system, libertarian movement has two main components - (a) classical liberals, (b) various marginal crypto-fascist schools - mixed together. Not only these two groups of people, but these two ideologies are lumped together, and these are interconnected on strange ways.

How's that? The libertarians do not have incentive to profile the movement and separate these two main ways of thinking. They do not see large difference between pro-democracy and counter-democracy. In supposed real politics, partners who offer coalitions provide such incentives. They say "we can work together, but please guys, get rid of these extremists, they can be members, but not in the leadership of the party." Moderates accept that, while the extremists feel betrayed and join to Aryan Nationalist Party.

Sure, US is not strict bi-party system, but Libertarian party is artificially kept low. In decent multi-party system, I guess you'd have something like 20% votes, gradually decreasing to stable and frequently pivotal 10%.

And what is the reason that people think all libertarians are alike? No special reason, people just do not care enough.

Posted March 24, 2010 2:15 AM

Giedrius writes:

You can say that all socialists are the same based on a common denominator - that all of them support the use of political means (initiation of physical force against other people) to achieve their ends. So Lenin, Krugman and Ron Paul agree in principle and disagree only in details.

Posted March 24, 2010 3:34 AM

Daniel Kuehn writes:

Why do you think #2 over #1? That distinction seems a little self-serving. I think #1 is true.

And trust me - there are plenty of libertarians out there that claim there is no difference between Marx and Krugman. Just the other day on Cafe Hayek I had one raving that I was a social democrat. I am somewhat center-left, but I reject (on Cafe Hayek, regularly) large portions of the American Democratic party's platform. The idea that I'm anywhere near being a social democrat is preposterous.

I definitely think it's #1.

It's also all relative, you have to remember. Compared to the Krugman-Marx comparison you and Henderson ARE a lot alike. You agree on much more than Krugman and Marx do, and you at least have some foundational principles that you share. Krugman and Marx don't even share foundational principles. I think Krugman-Henderson or Krugman-Caplan is probably closer than Krugman-Marx, so the comparison that you raise itself is sort of strange to begin with.

Posted March 24, 2010 6:06 AM

Daniel Kuehn writes:

*you and Tyler. Not sure why I said Henderson.

Posted March 24, 2010 6:09 AM

Kevin Donoghue writes:

We certainly disagree more fundamentally than say Obama and McCain, or even Reagan and Carter - and lots of people think that their disagreements were major.

If Reagan and Carter were blogging academics they would be as different from each other as Casey Mulligan and Dani Rodrik. Presidents have to compromise. I can't imagine there being much difference between President Cowen and President Caplan, after the election campaign and the first few months in office had knocked the corners off them.

Posted March 24, 2010 6:17 AM

jb writes:

I'm guessing it's a status thing - Matt is very dismissive of unorthodox political thought. So it's easy to just put all of us in a box marked "deranged" and go on about his day.

I also would like you to elaborate further on how you think you and Tyler are more different than Carter and Reagan. I think that might be near-far bias on your part.

Posted March 24, 2010 9:17 AM

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