

Maybe Liberals Are Just Better Utilitarians

We keep hearing that conservatism in America is in crisis, that its messages don't resonate, that it continues to lose political ground. These woes are typically ascribed the conservative movement's lack of a dominant narrative.

But I actually think conservatism does have a dominant narrative. In fact, it's the same dominant narrative of liberalism. The main difference might be that liberals simply execute on this narrative in today's political climate much better than conservatives.

That narrative is utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism is a fruit of the Enlightenment project to provide a widely-accepted rational basis for morality other than a religious one. It has [various formulations](#), but in a nutshell, it's the belief that actions are right, or useful, inasmuch as they maximize good for the greatest number of people. Two of the classical exponents of utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and [John Stuart Mill \(1806-1873\)](#), identified the "good" with "pleasure," and I would argue that most people today do the same.

The platforms for both the [Democratic](#) and [Republican](#) parties (which, for better or worse, are the principal political representations of liberalism and conservatism today) consist of goals they feel will maximize pleasure for the greatest number of people. But one notices that the Democratic goals have a more concrete feel to them, give the impression that the pleasure from them can be more immediately realized, and appeal more to the poor and middle classes.

The Democratic platform leads with "raising incomes," "relief from crushing student debt," "universal health care," and

“making the wealthy pay their fair share of taxes.” The Republican platform, on the other hand, leads with abstractions: “Restoring the American Dream,” “A Rebirth of a Constitutional Government,” “a pro-growth tax code,” and “responsible homeownership.”

I sometimes crudely characterize the difference between the platforms as follows: Republicans tell people “In the long-term, our policies are going to make society more prosperous”; the Democrats say “We’re going to give you free sh*t NOW.”

The second thing I notice is that the Democratic platform reads like a syllabus for your average high school social studies or literature course. They claim they are working to “end systemic racism,” “close the wealth gap,” and protect most disenfranchised groups within society. First off, from a messaging perspective, they appear to be the advocates of maximizing the good for the greatest number of people. But I also wonder if, as a result of the bent of the education system, many people are simply programmed to identify more with the Democratic version of utilitarianism than the Republican version.

If conservatives are to rise again in the American political landscape, I think they have three options:

- 1) Attempt to articulate a version of utilitarianism that has greater mass appeal.*
- 2) Attempt to gain a greater foothold in the institutions that shape Americans’ worldviews.*
- 3) Blow up the narrative of utilitarianism by showing its incoherence and offering a better narrative.*

None of these are easy tasks.