

Why Progressivism Wins

Suppose you wanted to design a political ideology to maximize power. What would that ideology look like?

First, and most importantly, it would need to be attractive enough for people to believe it and support it. Especially in a democracy, there is strength in numbers. The ideology should provide a mix of moral and material incentives – it should give its supporters both a grand vision as well as more earthly rewards such as wealth and prestige. The ideology will prove effective at gaining power if individuals can both fight the good fight *and* make a living by advancing it.

Second, the ideology should have some way of propagating within institutions that are nominally unrelated to politics but in reality influence politics a great deal. Important centers of culture and education are examples. Cultural institutions orient people to specific conceptions of the good, true, and beautiful, while educational institutions pass on to future generations a worldview that helps them make sense of society. If our hypothetically engineered ideology were attractive not just to politicians and voters but to artists and professors, it would have a leg up on its competitors.

Third, the ideology should contain an internal mechanism that renders it perpetually applicable to the problems confronting society. If it's constructed to achieve too specific a goal, it will lose its *raison d'être* once that goal is achieved. In order to stay relevant, it must suggest goals specific enough that its adherents have some idea of what they are working towards, but vague enough that they can be reinterpreted such that the political work is never quite finished. One clever way of doing this is to make process a part of the ideology itself. If not just outcomes but procedures become essential tenets, the ideology can self-perpetuate for a long time.

There are a host of other considerations we could explore, but these three are enough to get the essential point across. A political ideology that maximizes power must contain properties that put it at a competitive advantage. Each of the above points is a source of competitive advantage. Thus an ideology that possesses all three would be formidable, indeed.

As it turns out, we have just such an ideology. It is called progressivism, and it has dominated American politics since it first appeared on the scene in the late 19th century.

Progressivism can be defined as promoting active and continual social engineering on the part of the state to achieve various social goods. Its chief instrument is the executive branch's administrative apparatus, although there are quite a few "independent" organizations, such as the Federal Reserve, that can happily tinker away without worrying about anything so gauche as the results of an election.

Progressivism satisfies each of the three criteria discussed above. It enlists supporters by giving them a moral vision – the rectification of social inequities and other injustices – as well as material support – prestigious and remunerative jobs in the federal bureaucracy, tax-funded programs for various projects and causes, etc. Progressivism is also firmly entrenched in society's educationally and culturally elite circles. The leftward leanings of academia and Hollywood are so well known that they hardly bear mentioning. And progressivism, because it refuses to acknowledge any principled limits on the reach of the state, always has another "problem" to address...on the taxpayers' dime, naturally.

Of course, something as complex as a political ideology and its attendant movement cannot be planned. It's a perfect example of a spontaneous order: "the product of human action, but not of human design." Nevertheless, it is stunning how well progressivism is explained by the "as-if" principle in

terms of maximizing power. Whenever you have an undesigned system that nevertheless seems perfectly suited to achieve rational ends, you have good reason to suppose that system's properties are best explained adaptively.

Politics is a filter that selects for power-maximizing coalitions, and progressivism is the biggest, baddest coalition builder around. It is no wonder that progressivism regularly trounces conservatism. Conservatism also fits the above three categories, but to a noticeably lesser degree. Because conservatism entails a principled belief in the limits of the state, there are certain issues conservatives cannot address using political power. Right-leaning academics and artists exist, but they are rare in comparison to their progressive counterparts. And conservatism has a concrete "end vision": the continuation of the Republic according to the constitutional principles of limited government, separation of powers, and federalism. Each of these puts conservatives at a distinct disadvantage to progressives.

The recent re-branding of conservatism into "national conservatism" further illustrates progressivism's power. Old-school, classically liberal conservatism could not get the job done, so national conservatives have embraced social engineering. Their new program is replete with federal industrial policy, political plans to fight the culture war, and a host of other top-down strategies for a renewed battle with progressives. But given these means, one wonders whether they have become the same as their opponents.

A word of caution: there is an inherent limitation to this kind of analysis. Any attempt to explain political ideologies adaptively cannot also address whether their claims are true. Everything above is perfectly consistent with progressivism being the One True Theory of politics. But that does not change the fact that we have every right to be skeptical. If history has any unambiguous lessons, then surely one of them is that when political movements are best explained in terms

of seizing and retaining power, we should be very wary of them, regardless of whether we think their claims true. Large, power-wielding groups almost always create nasty unintended consequences for the societies they ostensibly seek to improve.

However good their intentions are, progressives cannot be trusted with unchecked power for the simple reason that no human beings can be trusted with unchecked power. It is precisely because their behavior is so well explained by power maximization that we should do everything we can to keep them from it.

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