

## *Beyond Your Dominant Heuristic*

I believe that many issues are more complex than the simple heuristics would suggest. Left to ourselves as individuals, we would arrive at subtle, nuanced views on these issues. However, politics has a very important social dimension. The language we use to convey our positions to others typically does not reveal the nuances and doubts we hold as individuals.

As a social phenomenon, political discussions invite us to position ourselves relative to others. We want to raise our individual status in our own tribe, and we want to reduce the status of other tribes. By framing issues in terms of our preferred axis, we appear to accomplish both of these goals. We impress the people who agree with us, and we delegitimize those who disagree.

However, to the extent that we might like to see discussion lead to improved understanding, our political debates are frustrating and endless. Each tribe expresses itself along its preferred axis. As a result, we talk past one another rather than communicate. Moreover, we have a tendency to demonize those with whom we cannot communicate. Rather than consider that they may have a reasonable point of view, we come to believe that they are our opponents along our preferred axis. Thus, if you are a progressive focused on the oppressor-oppressed axis, you may come to view conservatives and libertarians as being on the side of the oppressors. If you are a conservative focused on the civilization-barbarism axis, you may come to view progressives and libertarians as enemies of civilized values. And if you are a libertarian focused on the liberty-coercion axis, you may come to view progressives and conservatives as champions of coercive government.

Learning to speak other political languages can enable you to look at political debate from a point of view detached from your preferred heuristic. I am not saying that you should give up your preferred heuristic. However, you will find it useful to detach from it on occasion. Detachment can help you understand those who use different heuristics. It also might enable you to employ slow political thinking rather than fast.

Detachment can help us to see the merit in other points of view and avoid taking our own views to erroneous extremes. Detachment can lead us to take a charitable view of others' disagreement, rather than retreating into demonization. Learning the other political languages might help us to have conversations instead of shouting matches.

Cognitive scientist Gary Klein uses the term "decentering." He writes:

Decentering is not about empathy—intuiting how others might be feeling. Rather, it is about intuiting what others are thinking. It is about imagining what is going through another person's mind. It is about getting inside someone else's head.

... Being able to take someone else's perspective lets people disagree without escalating into conflicts.<sup>8</sup>

Taking a charitable view of those with whom we disagree is rare in the political media. Many of the most popular newspaper columnists, radio talk show hosts, bloggers, and pundits using cable TV or social media do exactly the opposite. They take the most *uncharitable* view possible of those with whom they disagree, and they encourage their followers to do likewise. They achieve high ratings, but they lower the quality of political discussion. If you have a dominant

political language, then chances are that both your favorite public intellectuals and your most hated demagogues are guilty of doing this.

The strategy of being uncharitable focuses on finding the weakest arguments of opponents and denouncing those arguments and characterizing the opponents as having relied entirely on those weak arguments. Often, it involves finding opponents' statements that can be interpreted as justifying a view that the opponent is on the opposite end of one's preferred axis. For example, in 2012, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney was recorded saying the following:

All right, there are 47 percent who are with him, who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it.<sup>9</sup>

Progressive pundits took this statement as confirmation of their view that Romney had no sympathy for the oppressed. I am not suggesting that they should have taken a more charitable view of this remark. However, that they chose to focus on it and to use it to define Romney was a way of taking the least charitable view of his candidacy.

Conversely, during the 2012 Democratic convention, a platform controversy emerged. The original platform conspicuously omitted a reference to God and to Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. When that language was restored on the floor, some delegates were unhappy with the process, and they booed. Conservative pundits portrayed this as the Democrats booing God and Israel, as if this proved that the Democrats had abandoned civilized values and turned into barbarians. Those pundits, too, were taking the least charitable view of the event.

Few pundits of any persuasion attempt to be charitable. Instead, they play this game of "Gotcha." The net result for most people is that reading their favorite pundits actually reduces and narrows their understanding of issues.

Consider three goals that a political pundit might have. One goal might be to open the minds of people on the other side. Another goal might be to open the minds of people on the pundit's own side. A third goal might be to close the minds of people on the pundit's own side. Nearly all the punditry that appears in the various media today serves only the third goal. The pundits act as if what they fear most is that their followers will be open to alternative points of view. To me, these media personalities appear to be fighting a constant battle to keep their followers' minds closed. The saddest part

is that I believe they are succeeding. Political polarization has risen.<sup>10</sup>

Let me hasten to point out that I do not classify myself as a centrist. I am not looking for some sort of “Kumbaya” compromise that tries to satisfy everyone. I believe that on any given issue, libertarianism usually gets you to the best answer. However, the point of the three-axes model is to give people a tool for communication, not to steer the outcome of that communication in my direction.

The use of the three-axes model is analogous to the use of personality-type indicators by organizations. Experts in organizational behavior believe that some of the friction that often builds among people in an organization results from personality differences. Many training programs are based on the idea that increased knowledge of personality psychology can enable employees in an organization to better understand one another and to benefit from the strengths that people with different personalities bring to the enterprise.

The first personality test widely used in business was the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. That test remains very popular, even though many academic psychologists prefer something known as OCEAN, or the five-factor model.

Before I elaborate on the analogy between understanding other political languages and understanding other personality

types, let me emphasize that I am *not* trying to explain differences in political beliefs as a function of personality type or psychological makeup. That may be an interesting project, but I want to stay away from it. I want to encourage taking everyone’s political opinions at face value, rather than demeaning others by saying that “You believe X because you have personality type Y.” Reductionism, or taking other people’s opinions at less than face value, is suited to closing minds on one’s own side, which is the opposite of my goal here.

With the three-axes model, I am not trying to help you explain away the political beliefs of those with whom you disagree. On the contrary, I am proposing a framework that provides insight into the different languages spoken by people of various political ideologies. I believe in trying to understand the other person’s language, as opposed to trying to psycho-analyze why he or she speaks it.

When businesses use Myers-Briggs, their goal is to enable people to detach from their preferred style of thinking to better communicate with and manage people with different styles. For example, some people are inclined to think in big-picture terms, whereas others are inclined to think in details. Absent any training, the big-picture person thinks that the detail-oriented person is small-minded. The detail-oriented person sees the big-picture person as careless. Each thinks

that the other is stupid. However, in many situations it is necessary to combine both outlooks. Successful organizations are able to integrate people who focus on the big picture with people who are concerned with details. Understanding your Myers-Briggs type in relation to other types can enable you to respect, to communicate with, and to manage people with personalities different from your own.

Another Myers-Briggs axis is known as “judging versus perceiving,” with the former preferring to see issues as closed and the latter more comfortable treating issues as open. A “judging” manager is inclined to drive team meetings toward conclusions, checking off decisions before others can process and accept them. A “perceiving” manager is inclined to let meeting participants ruminate longer and is even willing to reopen questions that appear to have been decided earlier. In the absence of Myers-Briggs training, a meeting run by a judging type will drive a perceiving type nuts, and vice versa. With the training, each type of person can more easily detach from his or her own point of view, to appreciate the merits of the other’s style and to communicate with the other type of person more effectively. That is what I want the three-axes model to achieve in political discussions.

It is possible, I suppose, that the best way for people of differing ideological heuristics to get along is to avoid one another.

A 2012 Pew Research study found that 18 percent of social networking site users had “unfriended” someone because of political postings, most often because of disagreement.<sup>11</sup> In 2004, journalist Bill Bishop coined the term “big sort” to describe the phenomenon in the United States of people becoming more clustered among those with similar political views. Four years later, along with sociologist Robert Cushing, Bishop published a book on the topic. According to the authors’ analysis, the red countries in America are getting redder and the blue countries are getting bluer.

Taken to its limit, sorting ourselves by political ideology would break up the United States. There would be a progressive country, a conservative country, and a (small) libertarian country. However, the process of getting from here to there would be quite difficult, to say the least. In a divorce, how would the assets and liabilities of the dis-United States be divided up? What court system would have jurisdiction regarding disputes between citizens of conservative America and progressive America?

For me, a politically segregated America would be dystopian, if it were even feasible. I like most of the people with whom I disagree. If anything, I have more close friends among people who differ from me politically than among those who share my political outlook.

Another fantasy is to cause the demise of other ideologies by eliminating their voices in education and the media. If you are a progressive with such a fantasy, you want to get rid of Fox News, talk radio, right-wing think tanks, and advertising funded by corporations and wealthy conservatives. If you are a conservative, you want to get rid of “tenured radicals” on college campuses, “political correctness” in public schools, and the “mainstream media.” For their part, libertarians for decades have been seeking to “educate” Americans, particularly in economics. Bryan Caplan, a libertarian economist who wrote the 2007 book *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies*, believes that more economic education leads to more libertarian views.

What I am suggesting here is that we treat differing ideologies as if they were languages to be understood rather than heresies to be stamped out. Perhaps your ultimate goal is to win people over to your ideology. But to use an oft-quoted phrase from Stephen Covey’s best-selling 1989 book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”

In fact, I do not think one’s goal should be to win everyone over to the same ideology. I think one’s goal for others should be that they have open minds. And if that is my goal for others, then it should also be the goal that I set for myself.