Issues in GOVERNANCE STUDIES

Number 24 April 2009

Center-Left America?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

© Reuters/Carlos Barria - Supporters are seen through a U.S. flag in Bensalem, Pennsylvania.

The Republican Party's center of gravity has shifted to the right in recent decades. And notwithstanding the "post-partisan" style of President Obama, the Democratic Party has sidled leftward. Among most objective analysts of American politics, there is not much dispute about these trends. They are well documented in a comprehensive study titled *Red and Blue Nation?* co-published by Brookings and the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.

On the substance of the issues, if not the demeanor of the presidential candidates, last fall's election plainly reflected the polarized parties—contrary to an impression, or hope, held out by numerous commentators. As several of the Brookings-Hoover scholars quickly noticed, the respective party platforms, for example, had actually drawn farther apart in key respects.

Consider the Republican plank on immigration, which not only stepped conspicuously away from the Democrats in 2008 but from the GOP's own consensus in 2004. Whereas that earlier platform had stressed "humane" reform of the nation's dysfunctional immigration system, the emphasis in 2008 was on the "grave risk" posed by illegal immigrants, and the need for federal legislation to bar them from obtaining such things as driver licenses.

The Democrats of 2008, if anything, repositioned themselves on even more fronts. In 2004, the party had vowed to "win the peace in Iraq." Four years later, that pledge had given way to insistence on a rapid timetable for "ending this war." On trade, the Democrats now spoke not of "open markets" (the 2000 plank) but of amending NAFTA. With respect to health care, "covering all" was

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elevated to a "moral imperative." Such stances were all well to the left of where the party had stood in the previous two presidential elections.

The contents of platforms are but partial indicators of partisan positioning, of course, which is a multi-dimensional, dynamic process. Depending on the circumstances, political parties may gravitate toward their bases, or, in due course, drift away from them. Either party, or both, could retreat or depart from the markers they've laid down so far. A lot of factors influence such adjustments, not least the perceived success or failure of policies championed by the party in power, and the receptivity of the general electorate.

Which way does the American public lean—left or right—on the dominant questions of public policy these days? The following essay takes a look at public attitudes within five domains: the economic crisis, health care, the environment, immigration, and foreign affairs. Judging from recent surveys, Americans appear to have tilted toward the Democrats on some matters but not others. Indeed, the data would appear to counsel caution for Democratic policymakers eager to press too radical a progressive agenda. Much of the public remains divided or doubtful about the capacity of government to meet the nation's greatest challenges. In this climate, tolerance for new policy excesses and misadventures, or even mere underperformance, may prove quite limited. The governing party, in other words, is operating with precious little margin for error.

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Fixing the Economy

So severe and scary is the economic collapse that one would think a great majority of Americans now would be clamoring for government to ride to their rescue. Put another way, if ever there were a time for big government to be back in fashion, this would seem to be it. Right?

Well, not quite. From last fall, when the financial free-fall accelerated, to the present, the public has been profoundly ambivalent about the various massive "recovery" programs that policymakers have been in a rush to adopt. An NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll last October, for instance, found people almost evenly split over whether Congress should approve the $700 billion financial rescue package that eventually passed: 40 percent approved of it, 38 percent didn't, and (understandably) 22 percent were unsure. As all students of opinion surveys know, responses to questions are sensitive to how they are worded. This poll went out of its way to present the October bailout in a favorable light. It referred to it as a "plan" to "stabilize financial markets, make credit available" and even "protect some homeowners" by taking over "bad mortgages and other troubled investments." Despite the reassuring formulation, proponents and opponents remained statistically in a dead heat.

Many people, it seems, lacked confidence that the so-called "plan" would work—a reasonable doubt, promptly confirmed by the stock market, which

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continued to tank after the legislation passed. But there may have been more to the public's unease than just Washington's deficit of credibility. One of the most fascinating survey results turned up in October was the finding in a Pew poll aimed at uncovering people's views about the root causes of the financial crisis. "Weak government regulation" of financial institutions and markets was duly cited by 46 percent of respondents as contributing "a lot." This percentage, though, paled in comparison with the share—a whopping 79 percent—who cited "people taking on more debt than they can afford." If a much larger number of Americans in essence blame their fellow citizens more than the government for the mess they're in, many might be skeptical not only about the government's ability to make them whole but that it even *ought to*. Sentiments along these lines, needless to say, have conservative overtones.

Whatever the case, support for aiding other private parties—the big three automakers, for instance—was unmistakably weak. Last December, an ABC/*Washington Post* poll probed whether the automobile manufacturers should receive up to $34 billion in loans. This query was comprehensive and well-worded, too. It asked respondents whether they thought the companies were just getting an undeserved "bailout" and might be "better off reorganizing under the bankruptcy laws," or whether the assistance was "necessary to protect auto workers and save a key part of the U.S. economy." Only 37 percent considered the loan proposal "necessary," whereas 54 percent deemed it ill-deserved.

Patience for a *continuing* series of bailouts has worn especially thin. In December, a CNN/Opinion Research Corporation poll had raised the question bluntly: "If the major U.S. auto companies ask for more money next year, do you think the federal government should give them any additional assistance, or should the government let them go into bankruptcy?" Here, 70 percent replied bankruptcy, and only 28 percent countenanced additional assistance.

By the time a colossal stimulus bill was being crafted in early 2009, the economy had cratered to the point that a majority of Americans evidently acknowledged the need to act. What was striking, however, was how slim that majority tended to be—merely 52 percent, according to a Gallup poll in late January. Adding together persons flatly opposed and the substantial percentage of persons who remained undecided (often sensibly, by the way, since no one could safely predict how the contemplated stimulus would perform), the country seemed, at best, barely credulous that Congress and the president were charting the right course—and the margin narrowed as the debate progressed.

Pundits in Washington seemed mystified by the solid Republican opposition to the Democrats' stimulus package. (House Republicans voted unanimously against the lower chamber's original bill, and then remained solidly united against the final measure as well.) In the teeth of an economic debacle, wasn't such obstructionism politically hazardous?

Maybe, or maybe not. Part of the stonewalling may have been shrewd

political calculus: Why hand the Democratically-controlled Congress and the president a bipartisan bill that, even in the best of cases, was unlikely to reboot the economy before the next mid-term election? But a less cynical explanation is that the GOP also drew encouragement from the public's genuine uncertainty about the merits of shoveling, perhaps ineffectually even in the longer-term, unprecedented sums of money at a problem that had persistently defied all the preceding remedies the government had lavished.

All this is not to infer that Americans are signaling to their political leaders, in essence, "Don't just do something. Stand there." If the administration and Congress ultimately chalk up a successful economic program, the Democratic Party will reap rewards. The Republicans, however, are betting that the recovery will be slow and arduous, and that the Democratically-led response will mostly falter, or even be counter-productive. The public is by no means convinced that the GOP's misgivings are wholly unfounded.

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Health Care

Health-care reform appears to be a matter on which most Americans now align less ambiguously with the Democrats. In May 2007, a CNN/Opinion Research Corporation poll found that fully 64 percent feel "the government should provide a national health insurance program for all Americans, even if this would require higher taxes." A little over a year later, 66 percent in an ABC News/*Washington Post* evidently favored "providing health care coverage for all Americans, even if it means raising taxes," over the alternative of "holding down taxes, even if it means some Americans do not have health care coverage." Notice the language here: Both surveys are careful to discourage the illusion that universal health care is costless.

Yet, even these seemingly solid results may have exaggerated the robustness of the public's preference. An NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll taken between February 26 and March 1, 2009 posed the coverage-with-tax question a bit more pointedly: Each respondent was asked whether "I would be willing to pay higher taxes so that everyone can have health insurance." The advantage of this wording is that it attaches "higher taxes" *directly* to the respondent, instead of just alluding to them as a cost that might or might not be incurred by him or her. The effect? Now only 49 percent proved prepared to accept the tax increase to broaden coverage. Forty-five percent were not, while 6 percent weren't sure (or willing to say).

Several other aspects of the health care challenge elicit attitudes that might give bold reformers pause. Consider the fundamental question of whether most Americans feel that health care in this country is too expensive. Nearly a two-thirds majority in a Pew survey (March 2006) agreed that "the average American

spends too much" on health care. If Americans are so overwhelmingly sure that what they are buying is overpriced, surely advocates of a major overhaul have the edge.

But do they? For one thing, even larger majorities turn out to be satisfied with the quality of the care they personally receive—implying that few *really* feel they aren't getting their money's worth. Eighty-three percent in a Gallup poll taken in November 2007 rated the quality of their health care good or excellent. Another 12 percent said "fair." Merely 3 percent found it "poor."

The poll then followed up by asking whether people would prefer "replacing the current health care system" with a "government-run" approach, or "maintaining the current system based mostly on private health insurance." In light of the widespread satisfaction with "the quality of the health care you receive," it was not surprising that just 41 percent favored replacing the existing system, while a plurality (48 percent) did not. Gallup's formulation, to be sure, deploys a straw man. None of the health care proposals debated in the presidential election, for example, could be fairly characterized as jettisoning most "private health insurance" for a "government-run system." Nevertheless, the findings clearly bear on the larger debate. Tweaking "the current health care system"—in short, incremental adjustments—may garner majority support, but upending it comprehensively is a very different matter.

Which brings up an additional complication: Majorities may welcome "change"—until they are told specifics. People are often asked "Which political party, the Democrats or the Republicans, do you trust to do a better job handling health care?" Fifty-six percent picked the Democrats in this illustrative ABC/*Washington Post* poll (September 2007), whereas only 26 percent named the Republicans. The Democrats, advocating wider-ranging reforms during the presidential campaign, seemed to have identified an issue that was working for them. But now suppose we descend from vague generalities ("…a better job handling…") and get down to cases.

A *USA Today*/Gallup survey in October 2007, for example, tried to drill down into an actual policy dispute that was occurring over a particular piece of legislation: the so-called State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). This survey instrument began by noting that, under the proposed SCHIP benefit, "the Democrats want to allow a family of four earning about $62,000 to qualify for the program. President Bush wants most of the increases to go to families earning less than $41,000." It then asked "Whose side do you favor?" Somewhat surprisingly, more respondents sided with Bush (52 percent) than with the Democrats (40 percent). Apparently, at least at that point in the SCHIP debate, the stricter means test preferred by the Republicans—and their deeply unpopular president—touched a chord.

None of this means that new Democratic initiatives, possibly even including a broader safety net for the uninsured, are necessarily fated to lose popular

support. (Indeed, the party's SCHIP legislation eventually passed.) It does suggest, though, that latitude for sweeping systemic change may not be wide.

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The Environment

Environmentalists are taking heart from fragmentary evidence that American society is now keenly conscious of global climate change, and presumably might be increasingly disposed to act on the problem. In a July 2008 survey by ABC/Stanford University, 61 percent agreed that "the federal government should do more than it's doing to try to deal with global warming," and interestingly, 68 percent felt the country should do more "even if other countries do less." Such numbers would seem encouraging for Democrats. In August 2007, a *Newsweek*/Princeton Survey Research poll inquired: "In general, which political party do you trust more to handle the issue of global warming; the Republicans or the Democrats?" Merely 21 percent picked the GOP; 52 percent chose the Democrats (although a hefty 24 percent were noncommittal).

Further, getting a little more concrete, proponents of "doing more" can point to the fact that, according to polls like the ABC/Stanford survey, 59 percent of Americans support a cap-and-trade system to curb carbon emissions, while only 34 percent don't. Even larger majorities favor requiring so-called renewable energy portfolios for electric utilities. An ABC/*Washington Post* poll in December 2008 reported finding 84 percent of the public in favor of requiring electricity companies to "increase the use of renewable sources of energy."

But alas, if you scratch below the surface of such statistics, there are in fact few indications that the public understands what these policies actually mean, much less that most people are authentically backing them. Concepts like cap-and-trade, or even mandatory portfolios, are usually impenetrable to the average person, no matter how well pollsters try to explicate them in survey instruments. And it is especially hard to infer genuine support for such concepts from any questionnaire that fails to mention their implications: mandating renewables or capping emissions, for instance, perforce entails higher utility bills. When pollsters do pose the question rigorously, the outcomes are altogether different. An ABC/*Washington Post* survey (April 2007), for instance, probed opinions on various ways "for the federal government to try to reduce future global warming." The option of incurring higher costs, or taxes, for electricity "so people use less of it" was endorsed by a paltry 20 percent and rejected by 79 percent.

Majorities, in sum, dutifully nod at abstractions—for example, "doing more" to combat climate change. They may even appear to embrace the general labels of particular policy proposals (like "cap-and-trade"). And they say the Democrats can "handle" things better. But they jump ship as soon as they learn

that "handling" (or "doing more" about) climate change is not a free ride. For environmental progressives, that reality cannot be ducked indefinitely. Their partisan rivals will make a potent case that adopting, say, a cap-and-trade program will effectively impose a tax increase.

Immigration

While the left may end up on the defensive over the price-tag for battling global warming, the right has not netted gains in the course of the debates over immigration policy in recent years. Indeed, this appears to be one place where the GOP is increasingly out of step with mainstream opinion.

Hardliners seize on apparent signals like those that emanated from one of the questions in a CBS/*New York Times* poll in May 2007. It simply queried: "Should illegal immigrants be prosecuted and deported for being in the U.S. illegally, or shouldn't they?" Sixty-nine percent thought they should be prosecuted and deported, just 24 percent thought not, and 7 percent were unsure. But in fact, no reliable inference can be drawn from this binary choice framed in such black-and-white terms. Not answering that "illegal immigrants" should be prosecuted, for example, implies giving a pass to *anybody* in that too-capacious category, including terrorists slipping across the border.

Suppose, instead, that the inquiry takes a less simplistic form (as was offered elsewhere in the same poll): "What do you think should happen to *most* illegal immigrants who have *lived and worked* in the United States *for at least two years*?" Here, crucial subtleties—such as introducing the qualifying words I have italicized, and then offering a realistic description of the alternatives—nearly reverses the percentages. Thirty-three percent still thought that most illegals "should be deported back to their native country," but 62 percent preferred that they "be given a chance to keep their jobs and eventually apply for legal status."

It turns out, moreover, that the wider the range of real-world options available, the smaller becomes the share of the public that demands unconditional deportations. In April 2007, *USA Today*/Gallup went about the task of sizing up that group as follows: "Now thinking about immigrants who come to the United States illegally, which comes closest to your view about what the government policy should be toward illegal immigrants currently residing in the United States?" Forty-two percent opted to require illegal immigrants "to leave the U.S., but allow them to return to become U.S. citizens if they meet certain requirements." Another 36 percent were for letting them simply "remain in the United States and become U.S. citizens if they meet certain requirements." Six percent said they would require the illegals "to leave the U.S., but allow them to return temporarily to work." *Only 14 percent* chose the Draconian answer: "require illegal immigrants to leave the U.S. and not allow them to return,"

period, full stop.

It would seem from these outcomes that President Bush's bipartisan compromise on immigration reform in 2006 and 2007 had come reasonably close to the sweet spot. Reflecting the mix of public preferences, the effort, though unsuccessful, incorporated several of the approaches just outlined. In all likelihood, Republicans would have been better off accepting Bush's plan. Widely perceived in 2008 as the party more hostile to immigrants, Hispanic voters fled the GOP. The upshot proved a bitter irony for John McCain, who had been a leading supporter of the immigration compromise in the Senate. Had minority voters, not least Latinos, voted Republican in the same percentages as four years earlier, McCain would have come within striking distance of winning the election.

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Foreign Policy

There is no question that fatigue over the Iraq war, and anxiety about the economic crisis at home, have driven Americans toward what a Pew report at the end of last year called "an inward focus." Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to stretch the point. While most Americans are neither consummate internationalists nor war hawks, neither have they morphed into isolationists and pacifists.

When asked whether they believe the war in Iraq was "worth fighting," a large majority answer "not worth it." Sixty-four percent came to that verdict, while 34 percent disagreed, in a poll by ABC/*Washington Post* last December. Other opinion surveys have consistently yielded similar figures over the course of the year. But it is one thing to regard the war as a blunder; another to refuse responsibility for winding down the ordeal, like it or not, in an orderly and satisfactory fashion. Americans have been rather evenly divided on how to proceed, but most have not been comfortable concluding that Iraq was a hopelessly lost cause, to be promptly abandoned by a date certain.

Whatever else most Americans have believed about the war in Iraq, defeatism did not become their dominant sentiment. (Fifty-eight percent in a CNN/Opinion Research Corporation poll taken in August 2008 believed the United States "can win the Iraq war.") Not only that, but surveys such as one by *USA Today*/Gallup in July 2008 turned up considerable reluctance to, in effect, pull out precipitously. People were asked whether it was "better for the U.S. to plan for the withdrawal of U.S. troops but not set a timetable or target date," or alternatively, "to plan for the withdrawal of U.S. troops with a projected timetable or target date." The poll, in other words, essentially juxtaposed the recommendation of General David Petraeus (who preferred a prudential draw-down of troops with no rigid timetable) with the stance adopted by the Democratic Party platform. Forty-seven percent of the respondents selected the

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second solution (the timetable), but 50 percent leaned toward the first (the Petraeus path).

Was this an anomaly? Apparently not. Other polls confirmed the considerable public reluctance to simply cut and run. Here, for instance, are the results of a survey conducted last fall by Quinnipiac University's national polling organization. Respondents were given two alternatives: "Begin immediately a withdrawal of American troops, with a fixed date to have them all out within 18 months," or "keep troops in Iraq until the situation is more stable, and then begin to withdraw them, without a fixed date for full withdrawal." Perhaps because of wording subtleties (such as preconditioning withdrawal on stabilizing the "situation") now the share who rejected the "fixed date" approach rose to 56 percent, while those choosing it fell to 38 percent.

One might suppose that, wary of another quagmire, the public would push back at further military adventures—such as an escalation in Afghanistan or a pre-emptive strike at Iranian nuclear facilities. Attitudes, however, appear to be less dovish than you might expect.

Take the Iranian nuclear issue first. Yes, people are far more prepared to say that "Iran is a threat that can be contained with diplomacy now" than to say "Iran is a threat to the United States that requires military action now" (see, CBS/*New York Times*, September 2008). But if, instead of leaving the "threat" undefined, the question of a pre-emptive strike is posed in full-throated style, the opposing views become much more evenly matched. Here is what happened when an NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll of July 2008 asked "If Iran continues with its nuclear research and is close to developing a nuclear weapon, do you believe that the United States should or should not initiate military action to destroy Iran's ability to make nuclear weapons?" Forty-six percent still resisted the idea, and13 percent remained undecided, but 41 percent affirmed that military action should be taken.

Finally, where do Americans seemingly stand with respect to prosecution of the Afghan war? When simply asked whether they favor or oppose "increasing U.S. troop strength" there, as an Associated Press/Roper survey did in September 2008, a bare majority favor a build-up: 51 percent, against 41 percent opposed (and 8 percent undecided). But when the pollsters provide a little more context—for example, mentioning the presence of terrorists in Afghanistan—the numbers shift. "Would you favor or oppose sending additional U.S. troops to Afghanistan to fight al Qaeda and Taliban terrorist operations in that country?" In this version of the test, formulated by a *USA Today*/Gallup poll in July 2008, 59 percent supported an escalation, while 38 percent did not, and only 3 percent remained unsure.

Conclusions

With the public so skeptical, plans for new rounds of stimuli or bailouts, especially in the wake of ones perceived to have been futile, could be sailing into much stiffer political headwinds.

The American public is expressing a complex mix of attitudes about how to address the great policy dilemmas facing the nation. Regarding the economic crisis, just over half the population appears to support the massive mélange of government spending and tax breaks intended to recharge the economy. That majority has seemed surprisingly slim and tenuous under the circumstances. And public enthusiasm has been even lower when it comes to handing out additional billions of dollars to prop up the most distressed industries, such as banks and automobile companies.

The implications of such sentiments could prove unsettling to the Obama administration and the Democratic Congress as they try to chart economic policy. With the public so skeptical, plans for new rounds of stimuli or bailouts, especially in the wake of ones perceived to have been futile, could be sailing into much stiffer political headwinds.

It is conceivable that public resistance will not extend to new initiatives in the health care sector. The great majority of Americans are not so personally dissatisfied with the health care they receive as to trade it in for a new model. In general, therefore, they are likely to be more receptive to marginal adjustments than to a fundamental restructuring. Nevertheless, as job losses mount, and more people worry that their own sources of livelihood might be next, proposals for universal coverage may grow more attractive.

But as with past forays into health-care reform, the specifics—and the incidence of the tax bill—matter. Even amid the current economic calamity, more than nine out of ten American workers continue to have jobs, and most retain employer-based health insurance. They, and other citizens receiving health-care benefits, still greatly outnumber the uninsured. If ultimately faced with appreciably higher taxes, the fortunate majority may reconsider its altruism toward the unlucky minority. The main wildcard in this game would be if the president and Congress somehow manage to persuade the nation that universal coverage can, in fact, be paid for by only increasing taxes on "the rich," and that 95 percent of Americans will *surely* remain off the hook. That, naturally, could improve the political odds.

Some of what holds for health care—the devil is in the details—applies to environmental policy. True, most people say they are worried about climate change. But then mention the higher utility bills for doing anything serious about the problem, and suddenly, the popularity of ideas like cap-and-trade goes from being a mile wide to an inch deep.

Immigration policy may be one area in which "the details" do not burnish the prevalent reputation of the Republicans. Most citizens are all for tough, even unsparing, enforcement—until they learn that such a stance could imply, in effect, mass arrests and deportations of people who have lived and worked in the

Governance Studies
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country for years. Framed in *that* context, the public shifts toward a softer touch, seemingly along the lines acceptable to more Democrats than to Republicans partisans (with notable exceptions, such as former President Bush) in recent years.

Last, notwithstanding the trauma of the war in Iraq, it is far from clear that most Americans wish the United States would retreat from its international obligations. Alert to that fact, President Obama now is careful to speak of a need to redeploy from Iraq "responsibly." Likewise, significant majorities have seemed willing to ratchet up the U.S. counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan. As for the peril posed by Iran's nuclear program, the American public does not yet deem this development to be a full-blown crisis, so naturally a majority does not give military countermeasures a green light. Yet, the smaller percentage of Americans who would approve such action if the threat worsens is within range of the percentage who say they would oppose it. In sum, the nation may not be as fed up with "foreign entanglements" (or, for that matter, even with the much-maligned Bush doctrine) as many critics on the far left might imagine.

Where does all this leave the respective political parties? Public opinion can be notoriously fickle or unstable. Preferences are likely to be especially volatile amid worsening economic uncertainties. Two years hence, the Democrats will be judged according to what they accomplished. If their policies succeed in averting a depression, their popular backing—perhaps for a widening agenda—will almost certainly become more robust. But two years is a short time. And for now, on a range of critical questions, the Republican Party can justifiably infer that it has a fighting chance to regain more of the electorate's allegiances. Obama and the Democrats have unquestionably won the public's attention and interest. But they have not yet closed the sale.

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