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BICONCEPTUALISM

Understanding whom we are talking to—and whom we want to talk to—is crucial before progressives begin to articulate what it is they have to say and how best to say it. This is true for progressive candidates as well as activists and activist groups. The real challenge in this area is twofold: First, we want to activate our base while reaching swing voters at the same time; second, we want to do so without having to lie, distort, mislead, or pretend to be something we aren't.

The pressure to dissemble comes from certain commonplace myths about swing voters and the “center.” So for starters, let's put to rest the notion of the political or ideological “center”—it doesn't exist. Instead, what we have are biconceptuals—of many kinds.

When it comes to progressive and conservative worldviews, we are all biconceptuals. You may live by progressive values in most areas of your life, but if you see Rambo movies and understand them, you have a passive conservative worldview allowing you to make sense of them. Or you may be a conservative, but if you appreciated *The Cosby Show*, you were using a passive progressive worldview. Movies and television aside, what we are really interested in are active biconceptuals—people who use one moral system in one area and the other moral system in another area of their political thinking.

Biconceptualism makes sense from the perspective of the brain and the mechanism of neural computation. The progressive and conservative worldviews are mutually exclusive. But in a human brain, both can exist side by side, each neurally inhibiting the other and structuring different areas of experience.¹ It is hardly unnatural—or unusual—to be fiscally conservative and socially progressive, or to support a liberal domestic policy and a conservative foreign policy, or to have a conservative view of the market and a progressive view of civil liberties.

Political biconceptuals are commonplace, and they include those who identify themselves as having a single ideology. Biconceptuals are not to be confused with “moderates.” There is no moderate worldview, and very few people are genuine moderates. True moderates look for linear scales and take positions in the middle of those scales. How much should we pay to improve schools? A lot? A little? “A moderate amount” is what a true “moderate” would say. Such folks may exist, but moderation is not a political ideology. Nor is the use of two strongly opposed ideologies in different arenas a matter of “moderation.” It is biconceptualism.

PARTIAL CONSERVATIVES

Consider Senator Joe Lieberman of Connecticut, who describes himself as a moderate. In fact, little about him is moderate. He doesn't typically stake out middle-of-the-road positions on particular issues. Instead, his politics include both liberal and conservative positions, but on different issues. This makes him a biconceptual. His progressive worldview appears in his staunch support of environmental protection, abortion rights, and workers' rights.² His conservative worldview emerges in areas like his support of faith-based initiatives, school vouchers, and most notably, the current policy on Iraq.³ Because he tends to adopt progressive positions more often than conservative ones, we refer to him as a "partial conservative."

Many liberals are biconceptual. The "cold war liberals" were divided between a progressive domestic policy and a conservative foreign policy based on using force—or the threat of it—to further the nation's military, economic, and political strength. Other Democrats may be economic progressives and social conservatives, or vice versa. Unions, for instance, have genuinely progressive goals but are often organized and run in a strict way. "Militant" progressives commonly have strict means and nurturant ends, while courtly, gentlemanly and ladylike conservatives may have nurturant means and strict ends. Such a split between means and ends is not unusual.

PARTIAL PROGRESSIVES

Similarly, within the wide range of those who tend toward a conservative worldview, many are "partial progressives." If we want to communicate with these conservatives, we'd better recognize that they may live by the progressive moral system in extremely important areas of their lives.

In fact, their progressive values may be their defining characteristics, who they most essentially are—even if they do not see themselves as progressives or liberals. Let's look at five of the more common types of "partially progressive conservatives" and see how their values match up with those of self-defined progressives.

Lovers of the land. A lot of conservatives may be hunters and fishermen (who want to fish in unpolluted waters so they can eat their catch); they may be cyclists, hikers, and campers who love to take their families to the national parks; they may be farmers or ranchers who are viscerally connected to their land; or they may be devout Christians who take seriously their biblical obligation to be stewards of the earth. They might never call themselves "environmentalists" or toss around words like "sustainability" or "biodiversity," but they share many of the same values—values that are ultimately progressive.

Communitarians. There are conservatives who believe in progressive communities. Across the nation, for instance, self-styled conservatives often live in communities—rural towns or suburban neighborhoods—where leaders care about people and act responsibly, where everyone looks out for one another, cares about one another, helps others in need, provides community service, and emphasizes progressive empathy and social responsibility instead of conservative strictness and individualism. They may thus

be conservative in their national voting patterns and yet progressive in their communities.

People of faith. A sizable chunk of Americans who are conservative in certain parts of their lives are also progressive in their religion. For instance, religious Christians, both Catholics and Protestants, are progressives at heart if they believe they should live their lives according to the teachings of Christ—help the poor, feed the hungry, cure the sick, forgive the sinner, turn the other cheek. They will most likely see God as nurturant and loving, not strict and punitive. Even evangelicals (like former president Jimmy Carter) are often progressive.

Socially conscious employers. Many conservative entrepreneurs run their companies as progressive businesses—whether they see it that way or not. They treat their employees well, pay living wages and offer decent benefits, would not dream of harming the environment or their customers, and believe other businesses should also practice a morality that extends beyond just maximizing profit and following the letter of the law.

Civil libertarians. Some of the most ardent civil libertarians in America identify themselves as conservatives or simply as libertarians. They believe in the Bill of Rights and especially the Fourth Amendment. They want their privacy protected and don't want the government spying on them or interfering with personal moral decisions or with their sex lives. They want free speech and freedom of association and want the government to stay out of religion and religion to stay out of government. They want constraints on the powers of the police and want strong protections from the courts. On issues of personal freedom, they abide by progressive morality.

Understanding this opens up a powerful way for progressives to communicate with swing voters on the basis of real shared values.

THE MYTHICAL CENTER

This critical understanding of biconceptuals has been obscured for many years by an obsession with the proverbial ideological “center,” occupied by the people whose votes are needed by progressives and conservatives in order to win. Myths of the center come in a number of forms, which lead to counterproductive political strategies.

The four predominant myths of the center—the Label myth, the Linear myth, the Moderate myth, and the Mainstream myth—all assume that people vote on the basis of a candidate's positions on the issues. On the other hand, the biconceptual theory assumes that people vote according to the Wirthlin theory (see Chapter 1): on the basis of values, connection, authenticity, trust, and identity with issues used symbolically to reflect values.

The Label myth is the most vacuous. It asks voters to ascribe one of three labels to themselves: liberal, moderate, conservative. There is no content to these labels; they are empirically empty. There is no singular or definable “moderate” ideology or worldview, no consistency to what “moderates” believe. It is just a label of self-identification. Centrist Democrats William Galston and Elaine Kamarck adopt this theory in a widely publicized report, “The Politics of Polarization.”⁴ They use the self-identification percentages from 2004—liberal, 21 percent; moderate, 45 percent;

conservative, 34 percent—and assume that those who self-identified as “liberal” have a progressive ideology and those who saw themselves as “conservative” have a conservative ideology. This, they argue, means that if thoroughgoing liberals remain true to their values, they will fail to persuade any but the staunch liberals. Instead, progressives must move to the “center” on issues to attract more “moderates,” since they need a large majority of them to win.

On the surface, this may seem reasonable. But there is a significant problem with their methodology, a problem that psychologists have been dealing with for decades: There is a difference between self-identified labels and personal cognition. For example, there was no real change in sexual orientation that correlated with a rise in the number of people who self-identify as “gay” or “lesbian.” Instead, there was a change in attitude about that label.

Similarly, in recent years, conservatives have negatively branded the word “liberal,” and that is what is reflected in the 2004 poll, not the actual beliefs of Americans. The opposite is probably the case with the “moderate” label. “Moderates” are viewed as reasonable, unbiased, temperate, and balanced—all positive connotations, which may explain why people choose that label over the others. One remedy to this pitfall is careful investigation of voters’ worldview and values and not just their self-identifying labels. Such an empirical approach to voter cognition is rarely taken in progressive polling, though there are certain exceptions.

The “center,” according to the Linear myth, is based on a curious metaphor. It conceives of citizens as lined up left to right, with some on the extreme ends and others in between, with their locations determined by their positions on individual issues. This myth lurks behind the idea of the “center” and fosters the belief that progressives must move toward the right and abandon—or hide—their progressive ideology if they are to succeed. The theory is that moving rightward leaves more voters to the left of the candidate, making the candidate appear more, well, “moderate.” This runs contrary to the biconceptual view that it is best to communicate and appeal to swing voters by activating their partial progressive identities with a progressive vision and appropriate progressive language.

The strategic—and ethical—problems that the Linear myth causes are extremely significant. “Moving to the right” means becoming inauthentic, and voters can smell a lack of authenticity. It means offending your base. It means lending credence to conservative issues and values. Remember, conservatives did not become successful by “moving to the left.” They became successful by activating the conservative worldview—speaking the language of the base and inhibiting the liberal worldview by sneeringly attacking liberals.

The Moderate myth sounds good until you think about it. It says that people who act with moderation in their lives—people who are reasonable, unbiased, temperate, coolheaded, and balanced, people who don’t want to go too far one way or the other—have a political worldview structured by moderation, a choice of a midpoint on various scales. But as soon as you take this seriously, it becomes clear that there is no such political worldview—no coherent and consistent account of politics in which all possible issues are points on linear scales and moderates are in the middle on all scales. First, many cases are yes-or-no matters. No scales. Take some examples: Should there be a

death penalty? You can't kill someone only a little, or in moderation. Should abortion be legal? What does it mean to speak of someone having an abortion in moderation? Assisted suicide? What does moderation mean? Three strikes? Is it moderation to go for five strikes? Drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge? Even "moderate" drilling is drilling. There is no in-between. People who self-identify as "moderates" appear not to be in-betweeners, but rather biconceptuals—conservative in some issue areas and progressive in others.

Last, the Mainstream myth assumes that there is a real center of public opinion as determined by polls on particular issues. David Sirota, a progressive commentator, illustrates this myth:

On the Iraq war, for instance, polls show a majority of Americans want a timetable for drawing down troops. On economic policy, most Americans support stronger government regulations to protect citizens. On trade, polls show the public is widely suspicious of free-trade deals that have destabilized the middle class. And on health care, surveys show that about two-thirds of those asked want a government-guaranteed universal health-insurance system—even if it means tax increases.⁵

Sirota, turning a centrist mode of thought back on the centrists, argues that the real mainstream center is made up of people with these beliefs and that progressives can win if they follow these polls and take the same positions as the mainstream voters. However, as with the challenge of finding a family who has 2.3 children, if you look across enough issues, you may not actually find a person who holds every single view that the majority of Americans hold. This is because there is no ideology—no worldview—connecting the different positions reflected in the polls; it's just a list of issue positions, a product of number crunching. As previously illustrated, a great many voters do not resemble this mythical mainstream but are, instead, biconceptuals.

SPEAKING TO SWING VOTERS

Political reality is far more complicated than any of these myths allow. The biconceptual "center" actually includes partial conservatives, partial progressives, and undecideds (biconceptuals in nonpolitical areas of life but with no fixed moral views governing their politics). Conservatives have understood the "center" in this way, and they understand that biconceptuals have both worldviews. By using conservative language, and repeating it over and over, they activate the deeper conservative value system, not only in their base but in partial conservatives as well. They also use antiliberal language, repeating it over and over to inhibit progressive values. Conservatives who use this strategy do not have to give up their values or their authenticity. All they have to do is talk to the center the same way they talk to their base.

Progressives can do the same. They can talk to the center the same way they talk to their base, and activate progressive values and frames in biconceptual swing voters. This keeps the progressive base and activates the progressive values of not just conservatives who are partial progressives but also biconceptuals who are undecided. In short, they can effectively go after the voters in the middle without giving up their progressive values.

One other thing worth mentioning is that political operatives have also relied on the idea of single-issue voters—people who vote exclusively on a politician’s stance on one issue. This does not counter the idea that people vote based on values and not issues. Instead, what we find is that the single issue in question is almost always symbolic of broader cultural and political values. Examples include progressive Catholics voting for anti-abortion conservatives and progressive Jews seeing the Iraq war as being pro-Israel and voting for conservative Republicans on the war issue. On the other hand, “moral issue” voters tend to support abortion or gay marriage because they support a strict father worldview.

Trying to court these single-issue voters by taking a position you don’t believe will most likely backfire, because that issue will activate a larger system of values you do not have. And this leads us to the overarching topic of authenticity.

AUTHENTICITY

The moral of these myths is simple: Be authentic and stick to what you really believe. Changing to a position you do not believe not only lacks integrity, it’s a flawed and ineffective political strategy. There are, of course, progressives who are truly biconceptual and are partial conservatives. Here, too, honesty—and authenticity—is the best policy. If you believe that the conservative perspective is more appropriate to some issue area, argue your case, but do so using the linguistic frames that best represent your larger values and worldview.

The prevalence of biconceptuality among voters requires us to consider the role of pragmatism in issue politics. There are two kinds of political pragmatists. Both are willing to compromise, but for different reasons.

The authentic pragmatist realizes you can’t get everything you think is right, but you can get much or most of it through negotiation. The authentic pragmatist sticks to his or her values and works to satisfy them maximally. The inauthentic pragmatist, on the other hand, is willing to depart from his or her true values for the sake of political gain.

There is all the difference in the world between the two as political leaders, though they may vote the same way. The authentic pragmatist is maintaining a consistent moral vision, while the inauthentic pragmatist is surrendering his or her moral vision.

As Wirthlin discovered, authenticity matters in politics. When you surrender authenticity, you surrender your values, and you surrender trust.

When your values are not currently popular, being authentic means having courage. Being courageous does not mean being unwise, or offending one’s constituents. This handbook is intended to help make the courageous successful by helping them understand framing.