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## **Democrat Relativism**

**by Sheldon Richman**

It occurred to me recently that the American political system is even worse than I thought. Before the abstract discussion, let's look at some particulars.

When First Lady Hillary Clinton held secret meetings in order to formulate the Clinton administration's plan for medical services, the Republicans exploded with rage. Secret government! they shouted. Nefarious elitism! Conservatives overflowed with venom. Republicans even went into court.

Eight years later, when Vice President Dick Cheney held secret meetings in order to formulate the Bush administration's plan for the energy industries, the Democrats exploded with rage. Secret government! they shouted. Nefarious elitism! So-called liberals overflowed with venom. Democrats even went into court.

When Democrats proposed expanding Medicare to include prescription drugs, Republicans warned of budget-busting expenditures, a new entitlement, Big Government.

When Republicans engineered an expansion of Medicare to include prescription drugs, Democrats warned of a payoff to big pharmaceutical companies. Republican delegates to the GOP national convention cheered wildly each time the expansion of Medicare was mentioned.

When Democrats called for increased federal spending and regulation for schools, Republicans denounced the usurpation of local authority by Washington bureaucrats.

When Republicans increased federal spending and regulation for schools, calling it the No Child Left Behind Act, Democrats attacked it as a fraud. Meanwhile, Republican delegates cheered wildly every time No Child Left Behind was mentioned at their convention.

You get the point. What we call "democracy" in this country encourages a relativism that on its face is absurd. But to the extent that you're playing the political game, you can't say so. It's not far removed from Orwell's *1984*, in which if the Party says  $2+2=5$ , then it does.

Democracy has long been criticized as founded on a form of moral relativism. In a pure democracy, whatever the majority votes for, it gets. The minority must comply. Majority might

makes right. Representative democracy could be hit with the same criticism: whatever the people's representatives vote for, is right. Numbers determine legitimacy.

Today, however, I'm thinking of a slightly different form of relativism. It's both a moral and an epistemological relativism, a working assumption that truth as well as right is not absolute, but rather is party-bound. You can see it in the examples above.

### **Politics and moral relativism**

Maybe there would always be a danger of such relativism in any political system, but I sense that it is aggravated by the extension of government into more and more areas of life. As the state becomes dominant — and as it increasingly matters who holds power — it becomes tempting to put your trust in your party and your candidate on more and more matters. It's not "my party right or wrong." It's "my party is always right." Since no one can logically fault someone from the other party for believing the same thing, in everyday practical terms, truth and right become relative to party or candidate. There is no wider, objective frame of reference for testing propositions.

Look at the late campaign. George W. Bush was accused of not telling the truth about his time in the Air National Guard during the Vietnam War. John F. Kerry was accused of not telling the truth about his naval combat experience. Now, it cannot be random chance that Bush supporters believed Bush and disbelieved Kerry, while Kerry supporters believed Kerry and disbelieved Bush. There's a more likely explanation: truth is whatever your guy says. (The undecideds were probably mostly agnostic.)

There's a related aspect to this. Anything your side's opponent says is "political." Your guy, on the other hand, never engages in mere politics. If he's the incumbent, then he's above politics. If he's the challenger, his statements are purely objective and have nothing do with his wanting the incumbent's job.

Relativism is on display within the political parties too. Most of the delegates to the Democrats' convention were previously against the Iraq war and, I'm sure, the Vietnam war. (They blamed Nixon and forgot about Johnson's and Kennedy's roles.) Yet they backed a man who voted for the later war and fought in the earlier one. They applauded his Vietnam "service."

### **Reagan and Bush**

Republicans aren't above this sort of flip-flopping. No one is more beloved among them than the late Ronald Reagan. When Reagan was going for the presidential nomination in 1980, his chief opponent was George H.W. Bush, father of the current president and a man who showed no ideological inclinations beyond what was necessary to get high-profile jobs from Presidents Nixon and Ford (UN ambassador, liaison to China, CIA director). Bush blasted Reagan's pro-tax-cut,

supply-side approach to economic policy as “voodoo economics.” Yet Reagan put him on the ticket, and all the Reagan worshipers instantly became Bush supporters also.

Of course, they supported Bush eight years later when he ran for president. Conservative icon and GOP shill Rush Limbaugh built his radio empire beginning in 1988 by plumping for Bush every day. After Bush was elected, he used his inaugural address to promise a “kinder, gentler America,” which could only have meant, “I won’t be like my unfeeling predecessor who really believed that government is the problem not the solution.” Yet the Reaganites stuck with him.

So Reagan gave us Bush the elder, and Bush the elder gave us Bush the younger, who inherited the supporters of his Republican predecessors — this despite Bush the elder’s tax increase and other interventions (including the Americans with Disabilities Act), despite Bush the younger’s promise to be a *compassionate* conservative — unlike, presumably, that callous conservative, Reagan — and despite his criticism of those who oppose government on principle.

In other words, if George W. Bush was your guy, then it is no longer anathema to believe in bigger government. It is okay if the promises to abolish the education and energy departments are deleted from the party platform. It is even fine to go from skepticism about nation building to a full embrace of it.

I don’t think this position shifting is mere cynicism: “We have to take these positions, which we don’t really believe in, if we want to win.” My impression is that the rank and file *believe* their new positions: No Child Left Behind is not savvy politics; it is *right* and *good*. Medicare expansion is proper. Why? Because my party and candidate say so. That’s relativism: had Al Gore won the election in 2000 and proposed the same thing, the Republicans would have gone bananas.

### **A shifting of conscience**

Of course, wanting to win has much to do with it. But most people don’t like to see themselves in a cynical light. It is more comforting to become a believer in big government. One’s conscience rests more easily that way. Two plus two *does* equal five.

It might be objected that everyone puts his trust in experts at some time. We have to take the word of specialists: doctors, mechanics, physicists, and so on. True, but this is different. Those are technical subjects that most people will not have the time or ability to master. But political and moral matters, such as the proper scope of government or when force is permissible, are within the grasp of nearly everyone. Republicans did not switch on education or Medicare or nation building because a trusted specialist advised them to. They switched because the political cultural circles they move in shifted (as a strategy to win). They either had to change positions or redefine themselves, which isn’t easy.

Moreover, some questions can't be answered. I can say, after consulting experts, what kind of medical insurance or retirement plan is right for me. But I cannot say, no matter whom I consult, what kind of medical insurance or retirement plan is right for *society*. Yet that is the level at which democratic politics increasingly views things. Since the average Republican or Democrat can't make up his own mind on such questions, he will tend to go in the direction his party goes. If the party shifts, he shifts. Why? Because it's his party. This then carries over in other matters that no one can really answer for himself, such as: Did John Kerry deserve his medals and did George Bush fulfill his National Guard expectations?

This raises the question how people come to identify themselves politically. Few people select a party as a result of philosophical deliberation. The matter is more cultural than political. Many learn their cultural-political inclinations when growing up and stick with them through adulthood. Others find a political culture comfortable later in life. People think in stereotypes. Republicans see Democrats as people who coddle criminals and welfare recipients and are naive about foreign threats, while Democrats see Republicans as country-club, big-business types who blame poverty on the poor and see the military as an all-purpose problem-solver. (Stereotypes often have some basis in fact.) That's why neither side gives credit to the other when it seems to "come around" on an issue. If a Republican supports expanding Medicare, a Democrat will explain it away as a gift to the pharmaceutical companies. If a Democrat supports welfare reform, a Republican will explain it away as an insincere political strategy.

The upshot is that political contention fosters relativism, and the more issues that are in contention in the democratic arena, the more encompassing this relativism becomes. Severely limiting government power would minimize this problem by de-politicizing issues, converting them from social to personal matters in which people make decisions for themselves and not for others.

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