



How People Make Sense of Politics

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Americans regularly reach judgments about issues and candidates for public office. But how do they do it? Do they gather information and carefully weigh the costs and benefits of each alternative? For most people, the answer is no.

Political scientists gloss over how people decide by pointing to the power of party identification. Whether people call themselves Republicans or Democrats is strongly correlated with votes and issue positions. Yet this does not get us far toward understanding why people line up with one party or the other, and reveals little about how they interpret issues and zero in on judgments.

A good way to discover how Americans interpret politics is to listen as people who regularly spend time together talk in their own terms, on their own turf. From 1997 to 2000, I spent time with such groups, including the Old Timers, retired, self-proclaimed middle-class white men who met every morning in a corner store in Ann Arbor, Michigan, to solve the world's problems.

What Do People Like Us Think and Do?

The Old Timers did not solve the world's problems, of course. But they taught me a lot about political understandings. When they talked about politics, I noted, they didn't suddenly shift gears and put on a distinctive "good citizen" attitude. Political topics came up in the normal rhythm of conversation, as people interpreted issues and made choices about candidates using the same phrases and ideas they used to talk about other matters.

Daily talk about politics revolved around social identities. In other words, when the people I got to know talked about public affairs, they relied on their sense of themselves as certain types of people. The retired men called themselves "Ann-Arborites" and "hard-working Americans." Often they defined themselves in contrast to others – such as women, African-Americans, or "the elitist liberals" at the nearby university. Group identities helped them figure out which types of people stood where on given issues – and helped them decide whether a particular candidate was "someone like us."

Sometimes partisanship was the guidepost – primarily an allegiance to the Republican Party. But other considerations were usually more fundamental, such as values, places of origin, and past life experiences. The news of the day regularly provoked discussion about stances appropriate for people like themselves. Especially on election days, talk might include declarations about behavior fitting for "one of us Old Timers."

When I compared the content of the Old Timers' conversations with the news they consumed, I found that their visits often touched on topics raised in that morning's paper or on the television news the night before. Usually they started off discussing the topic in the same terms as the news coverage. But soon they took the topic in directions suggested by their own identities and priorities. We know that people are not blank slates – their prior attitudes and partisan leanings influence what they take away from news messages. Yet we seldom track the ways people rework media messages to make them fit their own sense of themselves.

Listening to the way people talk to each other about politics highlights the centrality of time and place, and real-world contexts. Social scientists pay lip service to the contexts in which people form attitudes by noting the distribution of opinions in the demographic make-up of a district or state. But demographics offer only rough predictions. Everyday interactions are where people arrive at shared assessments and make certain opinions acceptable while ruling out others. Particular attitudes are more likely to be expressed in a given place, because people there have taught each other in daily conversations that only certain views are acceptable for "one of us."

Similarly, national politics is not simply imposed on specific locales, but interpreted and applied by the locals themselves. One way to see this is through the evolving nature of partisanship. People tend to identify with

the same political party throughout their lifetimes. But what it actually means to be a Republican or Democrat is something that they spell out and rework over the course of their lives, as conditions change in their lives and the larger society.

The Value – and Downsides – of Informal Groups in Democracy

Talking regularly with like-minded others has great value in a democracy. When we have a chance to work out our ideas with people we perceive to be like us, we clarify our sense of who we are in the world, and figure out what we believe about how the world should work.

Yet when conversations only reinforce lines of “us” versus “them,” social and political divisions can deepen. In the Ann Arbor corner store, a group of African-Americans and a few white blue-collar workers met every day as well, on the other side of the room. The Old Timers and participants in the other group treated one another politely, but rarely interacted – a small reminder that mere physical proximity need not bring true interaction. Shared political outlooks are unlikely to evolve from separate conversations, even when they happen nearby.

The Bottom Line for Politics

Making sense of politics is not always (probably not even usually) about objective facts. More decisive are the ways people carve up the world into us and them. Candidates for public office need to convey that they grasp, intimately, the concerns of voters understood as people like themselves. Similarly, public policy advocates must tap into citizens’ sense of who they are and how the world should be, or the facts and proposals they proffer will fall on deaf ears.

Political campaigns inform the electorate, to be sure, but information as such is only conveyed meaningfully when spoken by people who successfully communicate that they are “one of us.”

Do my findings suggest there is little hope of bridging bitter polarizations in American politics? Politicians often gain by appealing to social divisions. But social identities are not singular or fixed. People divided in some ways, can come together in others – as national patriots, or as supporters of their town or region. Political leaders and institutions can help diverse citizens spend time together and notice common concerns; and they can help people make sense of public issues using common identities, rather than divisive ones.

Read more in Katherine Cramer Walsh, *Talking about Politics: Informal Groups and Social Identity in American Life* (University of Chicago Press, 2004).