

Has political ideology become irrelevant in the political process

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Introduction

It will be discussed whether political ideology has become irrelevant within the political process in order to decide whether ideology is still important in today's political parties. In doing so, contemporary party politics will be considered and a determination as to whether specific ideologies are still being conveyed will be made. An overview of political ideology will first be given so that the reader will be provided with an explanation of what political ideology consists of. It will then be considered whether political ideology is an important part of the political process and whether it still exists today. Various examples of today's political parties will be illustrated and applicable comparisons will be made. This will be achieved by accessing relevant text books, journal articles and online legal databases through the conduction of a library and online search. A secondary research approach will thus be adopted so that any data can be accessed with ease. Once all of the applicable information has been gathered an appropriate conclusion will then be drawn summarising all of the main findings. Accordingly, it will be shown that whilst there is less political ideology within the political process than there used to be, it is still present and a significant part of contemporary party politics.

Main Body

Political ideology is a set of ideas representing the objectives, expectations and actions of a political party. Nevertheless, whilst the belief system of a party may only comprise of one specific ideology, the belief systems of other

parties may consist of a broad range. Such beliefs, which may have been acquired from various doctrines, principles, ideals, myths or social movements, help to explain the preferred order for society of each political party. Consequently, as put by Sargent (2008: 2); “ An ideology is a system of values and beliefs regarding the various institutions and processes of society that is accepted as fact or truth by a group of people.” Political ideology therefore provides political parties with a view as to the way the world should be and helps them to allocate social values: “ the political system is the authoritative allocation of values for a society” (Easton, 1971: 129). Although this seems pretty straightforward, much debate has arisen over the years as to the exact meaning of political ideology and it has been questioned whether it is in fact irrelevant in contemporary party politics. In consideration of the word ‘ ideology’ it was noted by Freedman (2003: 3) that; “ there has rarely been a word in political language that has attracted such misunderstanding and opprobrium.” Therefore, whilst clear definitions of ideology have been provided, the different meanings have been frequently contested and as a result of this, ideology has been considered to have a “ wide analytical purchase” (Dommett, 2011: 2).

Because of the varying nature of political ideology, however, it could be said that it is now irrelevant in the political process. Hence, it cannot be said that political parties rely on traditional ideologies since this would otherwise lead to irrational decisions being made. This is because, political parties should consider the modern needs of society and successfully adapt to change. This could not be achieved if political ideology was followed rigorously which has

been supported by the views of Bell (1960: 372) when he argued that; “ political ideology has become irrelevant and polity of the future would be driven by piecemeal technological adjustments of the existent system.” In effect, political ideology appears to be outmoded, yet not all would agree with this and instead it has been argued that ideology forms the basis of politics: “ There is no politics without ideology” (Selinger, 1975: 99). Consequently, it is thus believed by some that all policies which are conceived by political parties do have some element of ideology since political parties embody moral judgements over the justifications of any given order. Essentially, rather than abandoning political ideology it seems as though new ideologies need to be formed so that a complete overhaul of the political process can be made. This would enable new ideologies to be created that are more reflective of today’s society and political ideology would still hold some relevance in contemporary party politics.

It has been stressed by Stankiewicz (2012: 408) that; “ ideological issues can be misunderstood if ones attention is confined to the way a government is arrived at, and to the type of legislation passed.” In addition, it was also added that; “ party politics are ideologically irrelevant, as are the personal values of political leaders.” Therefore, whilst political ideology is still in existence, ideologies do not form the basis of all decisions that are made as this would lead to a great deal of absurdity and the legislation passed would not satisfy the needs of modern society. Whether this means that political ideology is no longer applicable in politics is questionable since ideology has played a significant part in the political process for many years. As such, it

would be very difficult not to incorporate ideologies into the decision making process in some way since ideologies are widespread throughout the world and cannot be avoided. Political ideology has been going on for some time which is exemplified by the ideologies adopted by Margaret Thatcher and the Conservatives in 1975. Thatcher strongly believed in radical change, individuality and a law enforcing government and did not support the welfare state. She believed that the economy should not be interfered with and listed her ideals as; “ free markets, financial discipline, firm control over public expenditure, tax cuts, nationalism and privatisation” (Lawson, 1992: 64). In effect, Thatcher’s ideologies were largely similar to classical liberalism which is still common in today’s modern conservative party.

This was recognised by Newman (2008: 1) when he pointed out that; “ leaders after Thatcher have all stayed relatively true to her reforms of the party and its ideology, believing in economic classical liberalism.” In accordance with this, it is manifest that political ideology is still prevalent in the political process today and although some ideals may be departed from, the general values are still the same. On the other hand, it has been said that the ideals of Conservatives often conflict with each other (Newman, 2008: 1) which makes it difficult to determine their ideology. As a result, many argue that Conservatives do not have a specific ideological status and that they are instead a lot more open-minded (Cosme et al., 2010: 1). Arguably, it cannot be said that Conservatives hold a specific set of beliefs, yet ideology is still present since a number of different values are considered. The Conservatives new leader David Cameron has taken both a

liberal and conservative approach in the political process which signifies that Conservatives in contemporary party politics “ are an interesting mixture of neo-liberal economic policies, combined with moral and social conservatism. This makes them hard to place on any political spectrum, and thus it cannot be said that they really reflect any specific ideology” (Newman, 2008: 1). It could effectively be said that political ideology is not as relevant as it once was since each party does not follow a certain set of ideals in the political process and greater flexibility now exists which is vital in modern society.

The same can also be said in relation to the modern Labour party since they appear to have adopted a similar approach to the Conservatives in that they do not have a specific ideology (Lawton, 2005: 54). Furthermore, the Labour party often share the same values and beliefs as the Conservatives which demonstrate that contemporary party politics is not as ideological as it used to be. Not all agree that ideology has completely been eradicated, however, and instead it has been pointed out that whilst there are less ideological divisions, “ there is still considerable ideological tension, not just between the parties but within them also” (Griffiths and Hickson, 2009: 1). Therefore, although political parties may not hold specific ideological beliefs, ideology does still exist which signifies that political ideology is still important within the political process. This is especially the case for Liberal Democrats who have stayed true to their ideological beliefs for most of the 20th Century. Accordingly, the ideological views of the liberal democrats consist of two strands which are social democratic and liberal (Tandy, 2011: 1). The social democratic strand is a pioneer for equality, whilst the liberal strand is a

pioneer for freedom. Thus, because the Liberal Democrats have consistently supported both these strands, their party can be considered ideological as opposed to the Labour Party and the Conservatives who no longer adopt any specific ideologies. Nevertheless, this does not show that political ideology is irrelevant since the two main parties still follow a mixture of different values.

As a result, ideology is still within contemporary party politics but “ is usually discussed in terms of policy rather than specific ideologies” (Newman, 2008: 1). Conversely, it has been stressed that the ideological nature of the two main parties does produce problems for those who vote since it will be very difficult to decide which party should be voted for when their ideologies are unclear. As such, ideological labels are important parts of the political process as the public need to be aware of each party’s particular values and beliefs. Similarly, as pointed out by Jost et al.; (2009: 323) “ the most obvious consequence of ideological orientation is its influence on political attitudes and behaviours such as voting.” It was further stated that: “ Many studies have shown that those who identify as liberal tend to adopt issue positions that are conventionally recognised as left of centre, evaluate liberal political figures more favourably and vote for candidates.” This is in opposition to those who identify as conservative since they tend to adopt positions right of centre. It is clear from this that the voting aspect of the political process can therefore be easily swayed by each party. This is due to the similar ideologies that are adopted and because of this; more specific ideologies need to be ascertained. This would enable the individual values

and beliefs of each party to be easily recognised which would be a lot more helpful within the voting process.

Conclusion

Overall, political ideology is an important part of the political process and although many would consider it irrelevant in contemporary party politics, it is evident that ideologies still form the basis of each political party. This is because, each party has different belief systems and even though some similarities may exist, different social movements are continuously being proposed. Accordingly, it would be unwise for a political party to rely solely on a traditional value which is why it is important for parties tend to embrace change and alter their ideologies accordingly. Thus, if changes to the values of each party were not made, the whole process would be outmoded and the needs of society would not be accounted for. This would lead to a great deal of absurdity and ideologies reflecting the modern society would not be created. The Conservatives and the Labour party are, therefore, a lot more open-minded than they used to be and do not have a specific ideological status. Instead both parties adopt a mixture of ideologies which can often overlap and produce similarities. Although some would argue that ideology is irrelevant because of this, it is clearly not lacking and ideology still forms part of contemporary party politics. Nevertheless, because there are fewer ideological divisions than there used to be, many problems within the voting process tend to arise since each party will be able to alter their ideologies in order to sway the votes. In order to ensure that the voting process is fair, more specific ideologies would need to be created so that the political

ideologies could be more easily identified. This would prevent any difficulties from arising and the values and beliefs of each party would be more easily recognised.

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