

POLITICAL LABELS

An 'open' and 'closed' case?

History shows that using reductive labels for rival political brands can help explain views simply – but can also be misleading

BY ADAM IP SMITH



The aim of historical writing is to convey complexity with clarity – isn't it?

We know that the world is a varied and confusing place. Yet we also know that if we don't try to impose some kind of schema, all we're left with is anecdote. It can be hard enough to uncover the dots, but historians then need to join them up – knowing that this will necessitate some flattening out of the idiosyncrasies and particularities of lived experience. Finding the right balance – acknowledging complexity while also writing with enough clarity to be comprehensible – can be especially challenging when it comes to politics.

In part, that's because we know that political labels – conservative, liberal or progressive, for example – are rarely adequate to reflect real people's political understanding. Most people have views that are inconsistent. Sometimes that's because most people think only in a shallow or reflexive way about policy

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questions. But it's also because people – all of us, I suspect – want to preserve some things and change others, and we all constantly make multiple trade-offs between different objectives. We may hold to a consistent partisan affiliation, but that's at best a proxy for our political values, not a true representation of them.

And of course political categories are historically contingent. To generalise, 'liberals' in the United States over the past 80 years have been those who are more likely to want to preserve and defend things (welfare, public education or abortion rights, for example), whereas self-defined 'conservatives', confusingly, have often been the radicals.

Back in the 19th century, conservatism in the United States was entirely compatible with liberalism. After all, in a post-revolutionary society, conservatism often meant preserving and defending a social and political order that everywhere else in the world represented a radical ideal.

We can't even take refuge in the old standby generalisations of 'left' and 'right' anymore. It has become modish to declare that those old labels, with their origins in seating positions of parties in the French Revolutionary assembly, have given way to a new divide between 'open' and 'closed'. Tony Blair, predictably enough, is often quoted in support of this analysis. Left and right, Blair claimed in 2007, was the "traditional" way of thinking, whereas "open versus closed" is "what I would call the modern choice".

In a world in which protectionism, nationalism and wall-building has proven a winning election formula for populists who eschew the labels left or right, there seems to be some truth to this analysis. Although of course no one – not even Donald Trump, so far as I know – is likely to accept the label 'closed'. If there is ever to be a self-proclaimed 'closed' party it will be an example of a term of abuse transformed into a badge of pride. But that's happened before: 'Tory' was originally a term of abuse (and often still is – even if 'Tories' don't see it that way).

The way through this, perhaps, is to remember that political labels are not immutable; they are just another form of generalisation, and at best they work only in a specific context. They should really always include 'scare quotes'.

An old witticism says that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those who don't. Temperamentally, historians are in the second camp, even if to be understood they sometimes borrow from the first. Of course, that's a generalisation... 🌐



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