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## **The Limits of Pragmatism in Institutional Change**

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### **Abstract**

Modern politics in Western democracies is to a large extent characterized by political pragmatism, a position where feasible, incremental, and more or less technocratic improvements of the status quo are advocated. While such a position has some advantages, i.e. safeguarding against false ideologies and bad radical reforms as well as more populist policies, this paper argues that there are limits to pragmatism in “welfare-enhancing” institutional change. Pragmatism cannot deal with situations where a whole interpretative framework needs to be changed in order to achieve beneficial institutional change. The status quo may be highly inefficient and still cannot be improved by marginal adjustments due to outdated or false mental frameworks, special interests and institutional lock-in. In such situations an ideological shift may be a prerequisite for higher efficiency and welfare. A position that may combine the strengths in each of the perspectives may be called “principled pragmatism”.

**JEL:** H12.; H50; H70

**Keywords:** ideology, pragmatism, reform, institutional change

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Ideologies seem to no longer play the role they did in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Western democratic politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is characterised to a large extent by pragmatism, a position wherein feasible, incremental and more or less technocratic improvements to the status quo are advocated. From Angela Merkel in Germany to Fredrik Reinfeldt in Sweden, practical politics has become more about trying to get things done, doing things a step at a time, not being beholden to unattainable principles and yielding on some issues to make progress on others. This is a largely positive development, at least when compared to the practices of the most ideological and often non-democratic political leaders of the last century. Pragmatism, of course, is also superior to the populism that plagues many of the crisis-ridden countries of today's Europe.

However, what are the limits of pragmatism? What is the relationship between pragmatism and ideology? Is it really possible to avoid ideologies in politics? Should there be a role for ideologies in politics? If so, when? These are the questions to be discussed in this chapter.

My conclusion is that ideology will be part of political life whether we like it or not. Most politicians and voters will be guided by strong values and firm cognitive frameworks. Sometimes, these ideologies will be explicit, and sometimes, they will be tacit. Nevertheless, these ideologies will be decisive in political communication and decision-making. Pragmatism, therefore, has clear limits.

This is especially so in situations when there is a need for welfare-enhancing institutional change.<sup>2</sup> The main reason is that the

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status quo may be highly inefficient and still cannot be improved by marginal adjustments to because of outdated or false mental frameworks, special interests and institutional lock-ins. In these circumstances, an ideological shift may be a prerequisite for higher efficiency and welfare.

As we shall see, however, pragmatism also has its advantages. In particular, pragmatism may function as a second-best position, safeguarding against false ideologies, bad radical reforms and populist policies.

## **2. Pragmatism Versus Ideology**

The philosophy of pragmatism, as advanced by Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey and others, is essentially a theory of meaning (Ormerod 2006). Beliefs and belief systems, pragmatists would hold, are guides to actions and should be judged against outcomes rather than abstract principles. Belief systems that work and have practical consequences should be accepted and unpractical ideas rejected.

Political pragmatism is a different story, though there are similarities. In short, I shall define political pragmatism as politics without ideology – that is, politics without guiding abstract principles. Abstract principles in this context mean everything from normative ideals and doctrines to postulates, assumptions or laws about how the world works.

Hence, political pragmatism is firstly, politics without strong normative ideals. Additionally, political pragmatism is, secondly, politics without firm beliefs about how the world works. To a political pragmatist, normative ideals and beliefs are always

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<sup>2</sup> By “welfare-enhancing institutional change”, I simply mean reforms that satisfy the Pareto or Kaldor-Hicks criteria (Bergh 2009), i.e., reforms that make everyone better off or could at least make everyone better off if the losers were compensated by the winners. Often, such changes are equivalent to liberal reforms.

tentative and uncertain (in contrast to being *strong* and *firm*). Political pragmatists do not subscribe to abstract principles or ideals, such as individual liberty, freedom, justice, equality or even the rule of law. Political pragmatists hold no firm beliefs about the importance of the working class or the market economy for the development of society. All such principles, ideals and cognitive frameworks are considered uncertain to political pragmatists, who believe that all such ideas should be empirically tested and evaluated to see whether they “work” before they are accepted. I shall leave open for the time being what a pragmatist may mean by empirically “tested” and “evaluated”.

Ideological politics, in contrast, is politics and political action by abstract principles, strong normative ideals and firm beliefs about the functioning of the world. To simplify, in the matrix<sup>3</sup> below in figure 1, I distinguish between strong and tentative values and between firm and uncertain beliefs:

Figure 1: Pragmatism versus ideology in politics

		<u>Values</u>	
		Strong	Tentative
<u>Beliefs</u>	Firm	<i>Ideology</i>	
	Uncertain		<i>Pragmatism</i>

Pragmatism and ideology are thus polar opposites from this perspective. Pragmatism is characterised by tentative values and

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<sup>3</sup> Inspired by Sartori (1969). Sartori distinguishes between strong and weak “affect” and closed and open “cognition”. Compare Knight (2006).

uncertain beliefs, whereas ideology is characterised by strong values and firm beliefs.

These are of course ideal types, variation in the strength of values and firmness of belief systems may be a matter of degree; that is, there may be pragmatic ideologues and ideological pragmatists. For example, it seems clear that classical Marxism is closer to an ideal-typical ideology than modern liberalism. Idealists are different than moderates. Moreover, the two empty cells in the NE and SW corners may also be of interest. The case of strong values and uncertain beliefs may be of special interest in situations of institutional change, as we will see below.

### **3. Pragmatism, Conservatism and Status Quo Bias**

A position somewhat akin to what I have termed political pragmatism is labelled “analytic conservatism” in an influential paper by Brennan and Hamlin (2004a). As Brennan and Hamlin note, their view of conservatism “is most obviously linked with pragmatism and contrasted with radicalism and idealism.” They argue that a “conservative posture” follows from seriously considering feasibility requirements in a world characterised by uncertainty and ignorance. Rational actors ought to, Brennan and Hamlin believe, be risk-averse in relation to public policy because of social complexity, informational scarcity and the prevalence of unintended consequences in human action. Would-be reformers often pretend to know more than they possibly could.

In their argument for the importance of feasibility requirements, Brennan and Hamlin’s analysis explicitly parallels the normative analysis of contemporary economics, wherein a sharp distinction between positive or “feasibility” analysis and the analysis of the “ethical” or “desirability” is usually drawn. Moreover, this pragmatic focus on feasibility would, Brennan and Hamlin argue, limit the need for abstract discussions of the desirable and instead

lead to a normative “status-quo bias”, primarily due to the above-mentioned informational limitations. To quote Brennan and Hamlin, “the primary reason for treating the status quo as if it had intrinsic normative authority is rooted in the way the world is, in a proper sense of the feasible” (2004b:681). They also note that this normative claim concerning the status quo may have to be weighed against other normative claims.

It should be noted that this notion of conservatism is slightly different from pragmatism in the strict sense, as Brennan and Hamlin give normative status to the status quo, albeit for pragmatic reasons. An ideal-typical pragmatist would, I presume, be neutral between the status quo and other social states, even though status quo bias would apply to him or her as well. Apart from this note, it is quite clear that Brennan and Hamlin’s view combines tentative values and uncertain cognitive frameworks and is thus well in line with political pragmatism. Brennan and Hamlin’s conservatism, in other words, does not qualify as ideology in my terminology.

#### **4. The Strength of Pragmatism in Institutional Change**

As Brennan and Hamlin argue, there is a strong case for pragmatism if we want to promote welfare-enhancing institutional change. Indeed, this can be viewed as the heart of Brennan and Hamlin’s argument for analytic conservatism, and the same point is made in a later paper by Brennan (2009). The strength of pragmatism is undoubtedly its empirical orientation and its focus on feasibility. Empirically testing and evaluating different policies to see whether they “work” using available research and scientific results seem to be a positive strategy through which to promote reforms. Moreover, such an approach is well in line with Popperian “piecemeal social engineering” (Popper 1945).

In particular, political pragmatism seems to be a way to avoid *bad* radical reforms, wherein misinformed, false or outdated beliefs,

rather than accurate and well-founded beliefs, guide action. In a world with informational scarcity and social complexity, risk aversion is wise, even if better alternatives may exist.

There is empirical support for the pragmatic approach. Most reforms consist of marginal adjustments to existing policies (Lindblom 1959, Wildavsky 1988, Jones et al 1997). In a recent study by the OECD (2009), in which reforms of pensions, product markets and labour markets in ten different countries are compared, one of the major results is that policy design needs to be underpinned by solid research and analysis, both to improve the quality of policy and to enhance the prospects of policy adoption.

The question to be discussed, however, is whether pragmatism is sufficient to achieve welfare-enhancing institutional change. If belief systems of this sort dominate politics in modern Western democracies, where feasible, incremental, and more or less technocratic improvements to the status quo are advocated, one may wonder if such a view is sufficient to achieve reforms or if there is a role in modern politics, at least in certain situations, for ideology.

## **5. The Weakness of Pragmatism in Institutional Change**

The weakness of pragmatism in institutional change is, I will argue, two-fold. First, there is a well-documented status quo bias inherent in the politics of Western democracies, especially in those with developed welfare states. This bias tends to conserve undesirable, normatively inferior, social states. There are many well-known reasons why such a bias exists, including the following:

- welfare benefits have created their own constituencies;
- many reforms involve tangible losses to concentrated groups, while gains are diffuse and uncertain;

- voters react disproportionately negatively to losses in welfare (compared to increases).

In other words, the status quo is often characterised by institutional lock-in, wherein welfare-enhancing reforms are blocked, despite strong rational arguments in favour of them (Olson 1982, Weaver 1986, Pierson 1994, Rodrik 1996, Kahneman and Tversky 2000, Pierson 2001).

This does not resonate well with the claim that the status quo should have some kind of intrinsic normative authority. On the contrary, the status quo seems to be normatively inferior. Neither does it accord with the view that “feasibility”, rather than firm cognitive frameworks and strong values, should be the sole evaluation criteria for institutional change. Weak values and uncertain cognitive frameworks would be a poor guide to action in such situations.

Let me give two brief examples. In most Western European countries, there are various kinds of employment protection legislation (EPL), sometimes called “security on the job” legislation. This type of legislation has a well-documented number of negative consequences. Marginal groups, such as immigrants and younger people, have a harder time entering the labour market with these policies in place (Skedinger 2008, Lindbeck and Snower 1994, 2002). Moreover, these policies reduce economic dynamism, economic transformation and entrepreneurship, which lead to fewer start-ups and lower productivity (Dexter 1981, Scarpetta et al 2002, Skedinger 2008). The corresponding effects on employment and long-term growth are obvious. Still, reform often seems politically impossible. Reforms are blocked by insiders and labour unions through the mechanisms described above.

A second example is the difficulty in reforming pay-as-you-go pension systems. Here, as well, there is widespread rational agreement among economists and other experts that these systems

hold negative long-rung consequences for public spending and economic growth (Breyer and Craig 1997, Kruse and Palmer 2007, OECD 2009). Still, reform is stymied by the special interests of those who benefit from the established system. Again, we have a case where pragmatic changes to an inferior status quo are blocked. What is economically or scientifically feasible is not politically feasible. This leads us to the second weakness of pragmatism in institutional change.

The fundamental weakness of political pragmatism in institutional change is that, while the status quo may be highly inefficient, the status quo still cannot be improved by marginal adjustments because of outdated, or even false, mental or cognitive frameworks shared among various experts, voters and politicians. Political pragmatism underestimates the role of cognitive frameworks in human action, particularly political action.

There has been an upsurge in research over the last few decades showing how paradigms, frames, worldviews, principled beliefs and so on affect policy making (Campbell 2002). At the most general level, human cognition concerns how people make sense of other people, themselves and the world. There are clear limits to human cognition in acquiring and processing information. Moreover, how people think largely determines how they act (Fiske and Taylor 1991).

There is also increasing research among economists that identifies the important role of mental (or cognitive) interpretative frameworks, sometimes called cognitive paradigms, in understanding institutional change (Denzau and North 1994, Knight and North 1997). What politicians and voters believe is most likely just as important as what they want and what experts may think is feasible (Vanberg and Buchanan 1989, Thelen and Steinmo 1992). In other words, and in the terminology of this chapter, a growing body of literature agrees that ideologies do indeed matter.

Let us assume that we have a status quo, perhaps similar to the examples described above, in which inefficiency is upheld by belief systems with strong normative ideals and firm cognitive frameworks, not special interests and myopia. The actors involved are convinced that the situation is just, fair and in harmony with how society works. No doubt welfare enhancing reforms would be very difficult to bring about. In such situations, an ideological shift may be a prerequisite to higher efficiency and welfare.

One can even imagine situations where, in what may be called, false ideologies is embraced by society or at least the political elites in the society in question. These false ideologies are highly inefficient and self-destructive in the long run. The Soviet system and Maoist China are two fairly recent examples, though contemporary societies dominated by populist politics are also sufficient.

## **6. A Role for Ideology**

It is clear, therefore, that ideology and ideological change plays an important role in modern politics, at least in certain situations. Such changes, wherein normative ideals, doctrines, assumptions or laws about how the world works are transformed, are – and perhaps also should be – rare. To use the terminology of Hall (1993), such changes are “third order changes”, in contrast to changes that occur within a given cognitive paradigm.<sup>4</sup> In such situations, according to Hall, not only do policy instruments and their settings change, but so too do the overarching goals of a policy area.

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Hall’s analysis concerns what he calls “policy paradigms”, “a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing” (Hall 1993:279), but it should be equally applicable to ideologies.

Pragmatism may serve us well within a given, fairly accurate cognitive framework. As long as this is the case, ideology should have a limited role. However, pragmatism cannot address situations wherein an entire interpretative framework must be changed to achieve welfare-enhancing institutional change.

A question still remains: how might such a change come about? If the status quo is characterised by outdated mental frameworks, special interests and institutional lock-in, how can change be brought about? Here, the state of knowledge is still insufficient.

Still, it seems necessary that the old ideology must first be de-legitimised and perceived to fail. Then, ideological entrepreneurs can enter the scene and propose viable alternatives, which in turn have to be tested, implemented, formalised and institutionalised. Hence, technological and economical “feasibility” is not sufficient; administrative and political feasibility is also necessary (Kingdon 1984, Hall 1989, Goldstein 1993, Béland 2005). These conditions undoubtedly require advanced skills in communication, rhetoric and leadership, areas in which ideologies may be of help.

Let me once more give a couple of well-known examples. Both Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan fit the description sketched above; both can be regarded as ideological entrepreneurs who entered their scenes when existing ideology had been de-legitimised and were perceived to have failed. By offering new strong values and firm cognitive frameworks, Thatcher and Reagan communicated the need for institutional change and, thus, made such change politically feasible.

However, ideology, just like pragmatism, may have its own shortcomings. An ideology with really strong values and a firm cognitive framework may create an ideological lock-in itself. Historical examples abound. Even today a few examples of societies unable to extract themselves from utterly inefficient institutional arrangements may exist. Moreover, many ideologies have nothing to offer with respect to welfare-enhancing reforms.

Their policy proposals are simply economically infeasible. But even if they have truly good alternatives, convincing others that these offers are good is another thing entirely. This brings us back to pragmatism.

## **7. Conclusion: “Principled Pragmatism”**

If there are clear limits to human cognition, concerning both the acquisition and processing of information, ideology will remain a part of political life whether we like it or not. Most politicians and voters will be guided in their actions by strong values and firm cognitive frameworks. These ideologies will sometimes be explicit and sometimes tacit. Moreover, these ideologies will be decisive in political communication and decision-making.

The challenge to those who want to promote welfare-enhancing institutional change concerns how to handle such situations. As I have argued above, pragmatism cannot be the only solution. It is simply not enough with weak values and uncertain cognitive frameworks favouring feasible, incremental and more or less technocratic improvements of the status quo. Nor is a “conservative posture” and “status-quo bias”, founded on social complexity, informational scarcity and risk-averse actors, as Brennan and Hamlin explain, sufficient to escape institutional and ideological lock-ins.

“Pragmatic reformers” face the risk of becoming perplexed prisoners of tacit ideologies when they try to communicate with an electorate that bases its interpretations of proposals on cognitive frameworks that support an inefficient status quo. These circumstances, however, are equally problematic for “ideological reformers” unlikely to convince anyone other than themselves, no matter how strong their values or how firm, and even true, their cognitive frameworks.

The only way to escape this dilemma, it seems to me, is to combine the strengths of each perspective and move the political discussion to the centre of the matrix in figure 1. In other words, ideologues and ideologies must become more pragmatic, and pragmatists and pragmatism must become more ideological.

Interestingly, changes in perspectives or cognitive frameworks may come about quite rapidly, while values or preferences seem to be more stable. This phenomenon resembles the situation identified by the SW corner of our matrix above, with strong values and uncertain beliefs. This has led policy makers to try to “frame” new policies in order to make them more politically acceptable (Snow et al 1986). Such ideological reframing is essential to institutional change (Skocpol 1996).

Hence, emphasis should most likely be placed on reframing outdated cognitive frameworks rather than attempting to change values. Such a position may perhaps be called “principled pragmatism” (Hecló and Madsen 1987, Siemers 2004).

It is important to emphasize that, in contrast to my earlier definition, principles here refer to values and normative ideals, not postulates, assumptions, beliefs or laws about how the world works. This distinction is unfortunately not made clearly enough by Hecló and Madsen (1987), who analyse the success of the Swedish social democratic party up until the 1980s. Hecló and Madsen define pragmatism more along the lines of “pragmatic and feasible” political compromises made to implement the policies and beliefs already favoured.

Worldviews must be continuously empirically tested and evaluated to see whether they “work”, i.e., whether they actually promote the values and ideals that are embraced. Policy instruments and policy paradigms should be changed when situations and the world change. There should not be any kind of “conservative posture” and “status-quo bias”. Rather, principled pragmatism calls for a genuine “reform posture” to attempt to avoid cognitive and

institutional lock-ins. Such a posture may be the only hope when an entire interpretative framework needs to be changed in order to achieve welfare-enhancing institutional change.

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