

Rationally Speaking #185: Hans Noel on, "The role of ideology in politics"

Julia Galef: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host Julia Galef, and with me is today's guest Hans Noel.

Hans is a political scientist at Georgetown University and his research focuses, among other things, on political ideology and political parties, and the relationship between the two of them. For example, questions like, "Are ideological principles really the main motivating force behind the policies that parties try to enact? Are they the main motivating force behind how voters vote, and which parties voters align themselves with? Or, are there other things going on, like self-interest or the desire for re-election, and ideological principles are just kind of a fig leaf for those things?"

That's an example of one of the questions that Hans studies, and we're going to talk about that cluster of questions, along with some broader questions about political science as a field, and what kinds of things political science knows with confidence.

We should really jump in. Hans, welcome to Rationally Speaking.

Hans Noel: Great. Thanks for having me.

Julia Galef: One of the striking facts that you've touched on in your writing that I think a lot of people aren't quite aware of is how this relationship between ideologies, like liberal or conservative, and political parties, like Democrat or Republican, is ... We sort of take for granted that those overlap. In fact, we often conflate them in the way that we talk about politics.

As you've described, this was not always the case. This is a relatively recent phenomenon. How did we arrive at the current state of affairs in which Democrat is just synonymous with liberal and Republican is synonymous with conservative? How did that happen?

Hans Noel: I'd say it's a tough question. I have my answer and I think that there is lively discussion in political science about the nuances.

The simple version is that political parties are coalitions. They're coalitions of people who presumably disagree with each other on some things. You might be Republican 'cause you really care about economic policy. You might be Republican 'cause you're really concerned about traditional religious policy. You might care about different things, but you set aside the disagreements that you have to focus on the things that you can agree with. You let them get some things and you get some other things. That's what a political party is.

In a lot of ways, that's what ideology is too, except that unlike with a party, an ideology you actually believe all of things. You might become a

conservative because you care about economic stuff, but then if you really are conservative, you'll eventually come to believe in the rest of the things that conservatives stand for.

Both ideologies and parties evolve and change. We're seeing that happen right now with the discussion of the alt right and where is the conservative movement going in the future. That future movement and future changes, that's just like we had changes from the past.

In U.S. history, the alignment and organization of what parties told you were on your side and what ideologies told you were on your side haven't really been in sync very often. We often have one is leading the other, one is out of sync with the other, and they eventually come together. I think really we have in the late 80s, early 1990s, the first point where we've had modern liberal and conservative as ideologies, and modern Republicans and Democrats as parties in fairly strong alignment. It's not that there's never been any kind of alignment before, but we have really strong alignment because they've sort of caught up to each other.

Julia Galef: Just to flesh out the picture, what are some principles or policies that people who are used to the ideological alignment of today's parties might be surprised to hear were espoused by the Democrats or Republicans of previous decades?

Hans Noel: Well, the most obvious one that you still hear people talk about, but usually in a way that misunderstands it, is that the Democratic party in the 30s, 40s, 50s, even into the 60s, was pretty racist. The Democratic party was the party of segregation, 'cause it was the party of the South and it was the party of the most conservative segregationist elements of politics.

Those Southerners that were in the Democratic party weren't just pro segregation, they're also conservative on a lot of other things, actually. They're the most intense in fighting Communism and concerned about the threat of Communism. They're probably also the most vocal and concerned about changes in gender relations and evolution of woman's movement. The woman's movement had been very much at home in the Republican party for a long time, and the Southern Democrats were the opposite of that.

That group, now they were not all of the Democratic party, but a big part of the Democratic party ... Basically, you had this agreement in the Democratic party, you have to set aside disagreements and focus on things you can get along with. The Democratic party in the 1950s said, "Okay. In exchange for labor movement progress," that a lot Southern conservatives were skeptical of, "in exchange for that, we will hold back on any progress or change on civil rights."

So, the North got labor and the South got continued segregation. That was a pretty stable coalition that existed in the United States for a good chunk of time.

Julia Galef: Did we see clusters of ideological principles that just got adopted by one party versus another, but the clusters stayed the same? Or did we start to see different clustering of certain ideological principles that used to go together and now don't, or didn't used to go together and now do?

Economic ideology versus social ideology, that kind of thing.

Hans Noel: Sure.

I think part of what is happening, at least in that example, is that the way in which ideas were clustered together for ideological thinkers, for liberals and conservatives, sort of had been separated from the party system. The party system had a sort of stickiness. Southerners were not going to be comfortable with the Republican party. The Republican party was the party of the North and the party of the Union and the party of Lincoln. Southerners weren't really comfortable with that for obvious reasons.

Even though they had an ideology that maybe you could see forging a connection with conservatives in the Republican party, they weren't going to do that. Conservatism as a philosophy didn't have to worry about that, because it didn't need to win elections. Conservative thinkers were able to start to put together a set of ideas that were what we now call conservatism, and around that was in response to another set of thinkers who were putting together the ideas that we consider liberalism.

The liberal thinkers in the early 1900s, they thought about a lot of things, they were like "What can we do, or how can we apply the logic or the science of human nature to try to make the country a better place?" And they had a lot of good ideas but they kind of had a blind spot when it came to race. It wasn't something that was super important and they often thought "Well yeah, we want to have a Democracy, we want to have a lot of people to be able to participate but I don't know if it would work for everyone. It will probably work for white people like us but I don't know."

And then there was tension, those ideas thrashed around amongst themselves, but in response to that idea that we could use government to make things better for people, maybe with some blind spots on race, Conservatives responded by saying "Well I don't know. I think too often we try to use government to solve problems -- it makes things worse."

So there was a tension there. Those ideas started coalescing in a way that was a little bit free of parties, because the people who were advancing those ideas, people like William F. Buckley, and before him Herbert Crowley, but many many other thinkers, didn't need to win elections, so that wasn't important to them. But of course once they start to put together a package, "This is what we believe", well then they wanted to influence politics and they want to elect like-minded people, and they eventually try to influence party leaders. And I think we can see some evidence that they were successful both in reshaping the Democratic party first, and then later

reshaping the Republican party, to match up to the evolving ideas of what it means to be a liberal and what it means to be a conservative.

Julia Galef: But surely, ultimately, politicians care about votes. And so what reason would they have to want to acquiesce to the ideological demands of these intellectual elites, unless they thought that those ideological principles reflected what voters actually wanted?

Like what role are the intellectual elites, you know, the elite Liberals and elite Conservative thought leaders, actually playing in this calculus?

Hans Noel: Well there are two things that could be happening. One is, as you suggest, the voters are what ultimately matters and so people eventually read the ideological arguments of Liberals and Conservatives and they eventually adopt all those things. And so people come around to believe that if you think that the government should help people out and solve problems and try to address inequality on an economic dimension, maybe we should also do that on race. And so voters start to care about that, and so then therefore politicians have to pay attention.

I think maybe that happens a little bit, but it doesn't have to go all the way to voters for it to be really influential. And the reason it doesn't have to go all the way to voters is because parties, they do their work through campaigns and other sort of coordination efforts. And they need people to knock on doors, they need people to make phone calls, they need people to donate money. So those people, they are more politically engaged and they're more likely to become ideological.

So it doesn't have to be that all of the voters believe what the Liberals want in order for the Democratic party to pay attention to what Liberals want, it just has to be that the ones who are willing to volunteer for campaigns want that.

Julia Galef: Right.

Hans Noel: And then the political leaders are like "Okay I want to satisfy voters, but I also need to satisfy these people. Meanwhile, voters really aren't paying that much attention, so I can get away with satisfying these activists as long as I don't go too far and I don't completely ignore something that I know voters are going to pay a lot of attention to."

So then there's this slow tension as the politicians start to see the advantage of appealing to the changing demands of political activists.

Julia Galef: Okay, yeah. So you've talked about these small but especially passionate ideological minorities affecting party policy platforms, via time and effort of volunteers, what about money? Are you able to disentangle the effect of those two on policies?

Hans Noel: I think that there is an effect of money. Most of my work hasn't really dug into that. It's really hard to figure out "How much does it matter this dollar was given here?"

But certainly it matters. So high level examples you can pull out, something like the Koch Brothers, they have an ideological agenda.

Julia Galef: That is who I was thinking of.

Hans Noel: Right. If you want to please the Koch Brothers, well, you probably want to do some things that they are wanting to do, and maybe you're thinking "Okay, I could do a bunch of different possible things that would mobilize some activists on my behalf, but if I do what the Koch Brothers want I get those activists plus I get the Koch Brothers money, so I'll do that."

And sure that happens on the Left. That it matters, you know, the labor unions want something and so you want to satisfy what that group is.

So the point is that lots of people come into politics with lots of different resources, and at least in my mind the resources of money are really important but they're only one of the many things. If you have lots of money, but you can't get activists to do the work that you need and you can't get people to be passionate and want to go to the polls, and want to knock on doors for you and do all that work -- well then the money isn't going to do enough. Because you can't pay people enough money to create the kind of army of volunteers that you can create by saying and being ideological.

Julia Galef: Got it. Okay, so to make sure I understand: If I'm a political party and there are various passionate ideological -- interest groups? I don't know if that's the right word. Groups with resources that they could contribute to my campaign to helping me get reelected...

I am sort of trying to weigh against each other, on the one hand, "How much can they really help me?" And on the other hand "How much is their ideology going to ... Is their ideology going to really alienate voters and make it harder for me to get elected?"

So I'm looking for a "good deal," groups with an accompanying ideology who can help me a lot and will be not too harmful in the way that I present myself to voters, in terms of getting the votes I need. Is that right?

Hans Noel: Yeah. I think that's a good way to put it.

The one thing I would add to that that I think is often overlooked is that people themselves go into politics possibly because they actually care about stuff.

Julia Galef: Oh yeah, I forgot about that theory.

Hans Noel: Yeah. Right?

Julia Galef: I think I tend to discount that theory because it doesn't really match the data that I see. Maybe this is a whole other big question.

Hans Noel: Yeah well I mean I think certainly a lot of people are very flexible on things. And there's a certain selection going on, so that people who care a lot about a particular issue, but who care about it to the point where they won't compromise when they need to win, they're not going to be as successful as someone who does.

But even the most compromising politician, I think in the end they got into this instead of some other business because they wanted to make the world a different place, and ideally better, in their way. Even if that's not totally what's driving them, they've spent all of their time with these activists and engaging in these ideas, eventually they're going to come to believe some of this stuff.

I think that's something we tend to underrate, because I think we get a little bit cynical and say "Politicians, they just want to get reelected. They just want to win elections so they'll do whatever it takes to win elections, and if that means they have to flip flop on their policy positions then so be it." And they certainly do flip flop on lots of policy positions. Especially on things that aren't the thing they care the most about.

But, I think to some degree, especially if your political upbringing is in a Conservative environment, or is in a Liberal environment, you're going to come to say "These are all the things that we Conservatives -- or we Liberals -- believe, and I'm going to try to my best to satisfy those things because I believe them myself." At some point, you know, you drink your own Kool-Aid.

That's a terrible metaphor -- At some point you buy your own story, and you believe it yourself. And I think that does happen and I think that we have a tendency to be very cynical about politicians -- and I think for good reason, because I think a lot of politicians are self interested and just interested in power. But I also think that it matters that you could be successful as a Democrat or as a Republican, they made a choice, and made that choice because they probably kind of liked that direction of things.

Julia Galef: I think the only evidence that would convince me of that model would be actions that politicians take that are clearly, predictably bad for their chances of getting reelected, and therefore could only be explained by some commitment to ideological principles. I wouldn't be convinced by *apparent* passion or a politician *seeming* to care a lot in the way that he talks about an issue.

Because in my model people can really believe that they're doing something for ideological reasons, but it's actually just a very convincing rationalization

even in their own minds. And if you actually look at what Bills they vote for, or the policies that they promised to voters, all of that data just lines up perfectly with the theory that they're just trying to get reelected. Even if that's not how it feels to them internally.

So do you think that the data suggests that in a significant minority, or even a majority of cases, politicians are doing things that can be better explained by principle than by self interest?

Hans Noel: That, I'm not so sure of. I think I would agree that it's very hard to tell the difference with data...

Julia Galef: So this is just, sort of your impression?

Hans Noel: Yeah. But my impression is, though, that it is hard to tell the difference and it's hard to tell the difference for a legit reason -- which is that if you are the kind of person who is going to regularly do things that are for the interests of your principles that you care about, but that are against the ends of your getting reelected, you're not going to get reelected. And then you're going to be out of a career, so you're gone. So you're not going to see very many of those folks.

But the difference is the person who would choose to do something on principle, or work a little harder on something because they care a lot about it -- that doesn't cost them the election, but they could have spent their time on something else. You know, they could have done something different. And that's very hard to distinguish because we don't know if they're doing that or they're just choosing "Well I gotta choose something and this seems like it's going to be successful so I'll do it. I don't really care."

I do think though people go into politics who ... You know, it's sort of strange to me to say that the only people who are in politics who don't care about the issues are the actual politicians. Because so many other people really do care, and the people who are working, certainly the people who are volunteering for campaigns, they care at some level. Maybe they just want to be close to the action and they're excited -- but a lot of them, I mean they care about something.

Julia Galef: I guess it wouldn't surprise me if politicians were the exception, in being the only group active in politics that doesn't really care about the principles. Because they're getting other things out of their time and effort and considerable headaches that come along with being active in politics. Like they're getting prestige, and influence, and attention. And I don't think there would be a mystery there, like "Why would this person spend all this time and effort if they didn't care about the issues?" Well no, they're getting all these other things.

Hans Noel: No, that's true. I grant that. It's possible that probably a lot of politicians don't really care that much.

But there's also, from the point of view of, to take this back to political parties, point of view of the party who's choosing who their nominees are going to be. Suppose I've got two people here who are both qualified people that I'd like to run as the representative for my district. And they both have expressed the same preferences to me. But one of them I believe, because I'm behind the scenes and I get to talk to these people, I believe he really wants that.

Well as a power broker behind the scenes that's the person I'd rather send to office. Because then I don't have to try to monitor them. Then I don't have to make sure that they do the right thing, and push. So I think there's going to be some selection towards that.

But I don't want to overstate the case either. I think the main thing is what we were talking about earlier which is you have to satisfy your activists, you've got to satisfy your donors, you've got to satisfy your voters, and all of those things as ideology shapes a set of beliefs that are "Here's what it means to be Conservative." Well then you satisfy a lot of people by satisfying Conservatives, and you don't have to believe it.

I just think on top of that, probably a lot of them do.

Julia Galef: Given that both the Democrats and the Republicans, back in the early or mid parts of the 1900's, were facing these same kinds of tradeoffs that you were just describing, is there a reason why the Democrats became the party of what we call Liberalism, and the Republicans the part of Conservatism? Why didn't it shake out the other way?

Hans Noel: That's a good question, and I think it's possible at least that it could have shook out a different way. Or at least it's possible the ideology could have shaken out some different way.

For a while it was the case that the anti-racist, civil rights movement stuff were people who were also in favor of smaller government. The Plessy vs. Ferguson case is about a train company wanting the government to get off their back and let them have these integrated train cars, and it wasn't the policy of [the businesses] to segregate lunch counters, it was the policy of the towns that they were in.

So you could imagine that going that direction, but it didn't. I think there's a lot of things that are going on with why it bundled the way that it did... so when I say "Oh it could have gone anywhere else" well it's kind of hard to imagine the way of who was advantaged, who was making the cases, and who was being persuaded, and the like.

But it could have gone in lots of different bundles, and so certainly it's possible that the Democratic party ... Say the Southern Democrats win the conflict with the Northern Democrats, on what it means to be the Democratic party. And in 48' Truman isn't nominated, someone else is -- and

so the Southern Democrats don't feel the need to walk out. And again in 60's the Southern Democrats get what they want in those fights.

And then it's quite possible that the Northern Democrats could have said "Okay, well I guess we're out of the party and we need to try to change our position and ally in a different way."

There's so many moving parts that eventually got us to where we are now that it's hard to point out a particular "This thing, if only it had been different." But you can imagine several things going in a different way and having a very different alignment. We certainly have had different alignments in U.S. history.

Julia Galef: Earlier you were expressing some skepticism about the idea that intellectual ideological elites directly affect the ideology of voters and that politicians are then responding to voters.

It does however seem like Democratic voters, Republican voters, have changed their ideology quite significantly over the years. Do you think it's just like a different causal pattern? Where political parties change their ideologies to get the resources of the activists, and then the voters are like "Well I'm a Democrat and I guess now Democrats believe that you should have trigger warnings on campus" or "Well I'm a Republican, I guess now Republicans believe that Russia is good" and so now that's their ideology?

Hans Noel: Yeah I think that's exactly right. That the way it works for most voters is via the political parties, via other groups that they're attached to. The intellectuals are sort of thinking about "what direction should we do things" -- they might be part of a movement, and then a lot of ordinary voters have got a connection to some, you know, "Who am I? Part of my identity is I'm a Democrat" or "I'm a Republican" and so that drives things. And as the Republicans change what they stand for, well then I guess I must change too.

One thing that does seem to be happening though, is increasingly for some people, your identity, it's not just about being Republican or Democrat. Ordinary voters do have an identity that is about being a Liberal or being a Conservative, so then that's more like a direct thing that your identity is "I'm just being Conservative. Conservatives want these things so I want them too."

One of the interesting things though is among Conservative identifiers -- and also among Liberals, but it's stronger on the Conservative side -- people identify as Conservative, they say they're Conservative, they will talk about themselves as being Conservative in a way that matches up with the Republican party... but they don't actually believe in a lot of the same things that Conservatives believe in on policy.

So they'll be "I'm a Conservative, but I think that we should have better healthcare and more government spending on healthcare solves that

problem." "I'm a Conservative but I think we really ought to have some restrictions on how management can treat labor." They might not use that language, but they don't agree with those policies. And there is this group of Conservative people who identify as Conservative and identify as Republican, and vote as Republican, but who don't agree with Conservative principles.

There's also a group of Liberals like that, but it happens to be, the people who study this stuff seem to suggest that, it's a smaller group.

Julia Galef: Are there any theories for why it's somewhat asymmetric, with it being stronger for Conservatives?

Hans Noel: I mean it's hard to say. I think part of it is that Conservatism has done a lot of work to try to create itself as an identity in a way that Liberals just hasn't, and so it tries to reach out and say "Hey, what we are is Conservative, and that's what you are." And so many people buy that argument, they buy that label, and they like it, without getting the underpinnings.

Whereas Liberalism as a label is actually -- people don't really love that label, but they might buy into the principles, and that sort of philosophy of equality and that government can be used to create egalitarianism and equality, and then "Oh, it turns out that means I must be Liberal." And so that kind of comes later.

There are some other interesting works on this. There's a really great book that's coming out soon by Eric Oliver and Tom Wood on the way in which voters... the gist of it is something about magical thinking. Their argument is there are a lot of people who think about politics in this sort of magical thinking way, rather than in a rational way of what leads to things.

And then those folks identify as Conservative, and so they think of themselves in that way. But their attitudes are different about how to understand evidence and the like, and that leads them to be in this identity but their policy positions are like "Well I like all kinds of policy things."

I'm not sure that's the complete answer, but that is one theory. And I just recently read a draft of that book -- it's going to be out soon and I think it's good and I'll plug it.

Meanwhile Ellis and Stimson are two people who have done a fair amount of work on this, that have sort of shown that there is this asymmetry. And I think that their argument is the difference is that people who identify as Conservative, they know that they're Conservative because they're religiously or traditionally Conservative, and they don't really think of that in the same political way that we think about it here.

But then as they hear that word come along, and they know that being Conservative is good... and they know a lot of Conservatives are supposed to

like the Republican party, the Republican party is Conservative, but it really has come from a different way of thinking about what the word conservative means. I think that's the argument that they would make.

This is a little bit of an open question. My sort of pet thinking about this is that one of the things that Conservatism does is a lot of Conservative policies kind of feel like they violate some things that we otherwise like. So there's an idea that Conservatism is just identity politics for white people, which is not true of a lot of Conservatism, but it is some, but no one wants to admit that.

But as long as you keep it at the higher abstract level then you don't have to confront the fact that Conservative policies maybe are just really good for rich people and might not be good for you -- whereas Liberalism doesn't have that problem. Because the policies seem like, even if they aren't good for you, they seem like they're good for you right off the bat.

Julia Galef: I see.

Hans Noel: I think there might be something about the way in which the ideology embraces labels to avoid talking about some difficult topics. I'm not really sure if that's right, but it seems like that might be something going on too.

Julia Galef: I mean it definitely seems to me, and I think you've written about this as well, that the principles espoused by the different ideologies, by Liberals versus Conservatives, are very selectively applied.

Like free speech. Conservatives will promote free speech, except if there's something that violates decency, or insults Christianity or something. And similarly Liberals will also espouse free speech, except speech that's offensive to minority groups.

Or traditionalism -- both Conservatives and Liberals. I guess Conservatives are more officially about traditionalism, but not in the case of say, big-box stores taking over and putting mom and pop stores out of business. And Liberals might actually not espouse traditionalism, but there's a bunch of things they do, like defend the historical character of a city against skyscrapers, that actually do fit with the traditionalist label even though they don't apply it to themselves.

So really it's just so hard, for me at least, to square the pattern of support that we actually see -- like, the in-practice application of these principles -- to some theory of Liberals and Conservatives having coherent ideologies, internally consistent ideologies that they actually believe.

Hans Noel: Yeah I definitely don't think that ideology is in any way internally consistent on that level.

Part of it is that we're very creative in understanding these nuances. So if we got someone in here who is a bonafide Liberal, or bonafide Conservative, and said "Hey look, you're being inconsistent. You're being hypocritical when it comes to free speech." They would give us an argument for why, "Yes I think freedom is important, but look at these values, these things are also important and this kind of speech undermines that so that's a problem. No, no this speech is what's the problem." They would have an argument that's somewhat coherent, and we're very creative about this.

I think the policy preferences probably come first, and so this is why I like to think of ideology as also a coalition right? It's things that you might not necessarily agree with your fellow ideologues about, but then you can eventually come up with a narrative that says "These things go together because we believe these principles, and the way that we're going to apply them."

And a lot of it really has to do with who is benefiting and who is not benefiting. So policies that are good for racial and ethnic minorities in the United States tend to be things that Liberals like, even if that policy doesn't seem to match up with other things that Liberals like. And policies that are good for businesses and success to help businesses thrive tend to be things that Conservatives like even if they don't match up perfectly with other Conservative principles.

And I don't even think it's fair to say that's being dishonest or anything, because the world is complicated, and everything isn't one value, right? Freedom is important, but so is equality, and so is social order, and so is sort of a comfortable life with other people that we can get along. All those things are valuable too, and so how we work those things out is tricky. And if it were easy then the whole disciplines of political theory and philosophy would be done with them by now, and they aren't. So it's hard.

I don't want to impugn people for being hypocritical and coming to answers that seem self serving, because we're all flawed at trying to come up with that. But what's interesting is there is a Liberal, and there is a Conservative answer, and those ideas come from not just "What is best for my team" but also "and I think I believe in these principles and I need to try to apply them in some way." And the principles, they do bite occasionally in some ways and they lead people to think about new things.

Julia Galef: They "bite" in the sense that we can't explain the policies that people support solely with reference to whether they identify as a Liberal or Conservative, or whether they identify as a Democrat or a Republican?

Hans Noel: Yeah. There is a part of Liberal or Conservative belief that is informed by the complicatedly applied principles.

Like why would your typical Liberal be so in favor of gay marriage? Most Liberals are not gay, they don't need it, doesn't benefit them directly, but

there's an idea that whatever you want to do with your life is supposed to be okay and that's part of why "Maybe I believe it because what I want to do with my life has nothing to do with sexual morality, but people are still telling me I can't do it because it doesn't match some religious doctrine that I don't believe in and so that's what I think."

So then that connects, "and I've been taught if I believe that for this position I should believe it for these other things," and being in favor of gay rights becomes a way of expressing that that's maybe even safer than trying to defend my own policy needs.

Julia Galef: Well, I certainly like that story. And I think that the fact about Liberals' or Democrats' support for gay marriage, it does undermine this theory that voters are only voting in their self interest, and any principles they espouse are just fig leaves for their own self interests.

But it doesn't seem like this data undermines the theory you were espousing earlier -- small passionate ideological groups win over the Democrats, and then the Democrats espouse this ideology, and then the voters adopt the ideology just because they're Democrats.

Hans Noel: Yeah.

Julia Galef: Couldn't that have been what happened with gay marriage or any other seemingly altruistic principles that current Democrats espouse? They're just following what the party did, and the party is just doing what was advantageous to them, based on the resources promised to them by special interest groups?

Hans Noel: Yeah. I think that's part of it. I do think though that it increasingly is the case that some kind of Liberal identity plays a more direct role than simply through the parties.

The Democratic party took a long time to come around on gay marriage. And a lot of Liberal activists were okay on gay marriage already, before the Democratic party got there. Even to the point of, I think that when Obama kind of flipped on this issue, when he evolved, I think he and a lot of other people who moved at that point, there was a big change in the party. I think a lot of those politicians believed themselves -- you know, if you really pinned them down -- yeah probably there should be gay rights, but it's just too dangerous. And now suddenly it's not dangerous and they switched.

But the activist base of the Democratic party was way out ahead on that issue. So it can't simply be that it was the Democratic platform, because the Democratic platform was catching up with the activist base.

Julia Galef: You've done some interesting research and original data collection yourself to try to disentangle the different causal arrows here. Can you talk a little bit

about what kinds of data can help us distinguish between politicians following ideology versus ideology following politicians?

Hans Noel: I guess it's a little bit generous that it really disentangles these things. You know it's a very tricky question.

Julia Galef: "Help us" disentangle I believe were my words! Yes.

Hans Noel: Help as best I can.

So what I did in the book was I said "Okay, we think we can figure out pretty easily what parties stand for. We can look at platforms."

Which I don't much do, but you can look at them, and you can also look at voting patterns in Congress. And it's pretty easy to see "These are things that Republicans are voting for and these are the things that Democrats are voting for." And we can also sort of look at how those Republicans and Democrats are voting in alignment to some kind of Liberal or Conservative voting patterns in Congress. It's easy to see this stuff in Congress, because we ask them lots and lots of questions.

And so I said, "Well, why don't we just do the same thing among political elites?" And so I defined political elites by saying that ideological elites are people who are writing in magazines and newspapers about politics. So the op-eds in the New York Times and articles that are in The Weekly Standard, or The National Review, or The New Republic, or The Nation.

So what I did was I took a base of all those things, and I read through them -- and I actually had a lot of good research assistants at UCLA and then again here at Georgetown, and actually some at Princeton as well, who read through things with me. And we would classify "All right, this is an article about slavery" -- the data set goes all the way back to 1850 -- "This is an article about slavery and this person is in favor of abolishing slavery. And so let's say this is about abolition of slavery, that's what this issue is," and then "What's this next article?"

And so then we can treat those articles kind of like votes on a Bill in Congress in the same way that we have all of that. It's a little bit more difficult because on a vote for a Bill in Congress, the Bill comes up and everybody gets to vote on it, whereas in the conversation that's happening among intellectuals a lot of people just don't bother to talk about some stuff.

But still across all of that, we can look for some patterns, and then what we can find is: here are the patterns, here are the things that are separating these pundits from those pundits. And it looks like these pundits are taking Liberal positions, and these pundits are taking Conservative positions on stuff, but what are the actual issues that are separating them?

And then we go look and see what the breakdown of those things were in the legislature. So what I found was that the intellectuals seemed to divide into a Liberal and Conservative camp first, at a time when the Republican and Democratic parties had not yet divided into those two camps. And then slowly the Democrats and Republicans came to divide into the same camps that the intellectuals had staked out 20 or 40 years earlier.

Julia Galef: So the timing was distinct enough that it suggests the intellectual elites were influencing the parties, and not the other way around?

Hans Noel: That's right. Yeah.

It seems hard to believe. The one alternative you might think of is that the intellectual elites are just trying to rationalize their party's platform because they want their party to win. And that doesn't seem to be happening, because they're not just defending what their party wants, they're constructing an alternative coalition, that they are then trying to get the party to adopt.

So I use the language "coalition merchants" -- they've got this coalition and they're trying to get the parties to accept it. And it seems that that's what's happening in the Democratic party on change on race, and then on the Republican party in response to that.

There's other possibilities. It could be things that I'm not looking at that are driving everything. Maybe voters are changing.

Julia Galef: That's what I was going to ask, yeah -- that maybe the intellectual elites, and parties, are both following voters?

Hans Noel: That's entirely possible. It doesn't seem like that's the case, at least if you look at Republican attitudes on racial issues, or on so many other things that we can track really closely, that doesn't seem to be the case.

A really nice example of this is on abortion where if you survey people on abortion in 1970 there's not very much polarization on that at all. And if there is, it's slightly the case the Republicans are more likely to be pro choice, and Democrats are slightly more likely to be pro life. Mostly because pro life activists are mostly Catholic, and Catholics were in the Democratic party. And then that changes. We see it change in Congress, and then we see it change among voters later on.

So that's one case, but you see some other evidence of that. You see that on civil rights a little bit too. And so it suggests to me that it is not being driven mainly by voters.

Now there are some possibilities. The data that have, because it's very time consuming to collect all these positions, I have data from 1910, and then

1930, and then 1950, and a lot happens in those gaps and so Eric Schickler at Berkeley just has a book out now on the realignment of the Democratic party on race, and he argues that there are voters that seem to be very much leading the path and that voters seem to be organizing and changing their positions on this ahead of Congress and possibly ahead of the intellectuals, but the real story is that we can't really tell from my data because it seems that it's happening somewhere in the 1920's, 1930's, well I think that's also when it happened and I just have 1910, 1930, it's rough.

So if we really want to get to the bottom of that question I would want to go back and spend more time digging into what people are writing in that period, and of course now I've moved on to other things.

Julia Galef: Yeah. Interesting. A related topic that I really wanted to make sure that we get to before we have to end the conversation is polarization. It's kind of a truism at this point that political polarization has increased. Is that supported by evidence?

...Or maybe a better way to phrase the question is: is there a reasonable definition of the word polarization, for which it is true that polarization has increased?

Hans Noel: Yeah, I think that's the right question.

Julia Galef: Right.

Hans Noel: I'm writing this thing right now where I just tried to articulate this, and in the book *Political Ideologies and Political Parties*, I talk a little bit about this too. There's a lot of different things that polarization means, and one of the problems is that journalists, understandably, don't spend a lot of time trying to unpack these different things.

Julia Galef: Right. If only journalists were all analytic philosophers, that would be so useful.

Hans Noel: Exactly. So it's hard to fault that, but what is happening?

One thing that we think of when we think of polarization is that the Left is just moving far more Left, and the Right is moving far more to the Right -- and I don't think there's a ton of evidence for that. On some issues it seems like the Right is moving to the Right, but at the same time on other issues the Right is moving more to the center, and vice versa. On government intervention in the economy the Left has compromised a lot, and on race and on gay rights the Right has compromised a lot, so it's not so clear that everything is flying off in directions.

Another possibility could be that we're just hollowing out of moderate positions. But what does it mean to be moderate exactly anyway? When we

figure out that someone's a moderate, what we do is we ask people "Yeah here's your position on on a bunch of the issues" and if you take the Conservative position on everything you're a Conservative, if you take the Liberal position on everything you're a Liberal, and if you get into a mix we call you a 'Moderate.' But that's not necessarily moderate. You could be far to the Left on one thing and far to the Right on another thing -- you're just inconsistent.

There's some really good work by David Broockman and Doug Ahler -- Broockman's at Stanford and Ahler I think is at Berkeley still, I'm not sure -- who have been digging into this and trying to unpack what's happening with that. I think that's an important way of thinking about what is going on with polarization. So it might be that there's no 'Moderates,' but maybe there never were any 'Moderates'.

Or it could be that there's an increasing alignment, so being Liberal is aligning more consistent -- that, we do have evidence for. You know, people who are Liberal on one policy position tend now to be Liberal on more things, and Conservatives are the same way.

Another thing that could be happening is that polarization could just be sorting of Liberals to the Democratic party and Conservatives to the Republican party. That's definitely happening.

Julia Galef: So then in that model it wouldn't be the case that any individual voter is changing his or her opinions to be more consistently across-the-board Liberal, or consistently across-the-board Conservative -- it's just that voters are sorting themselves such that each *group* is more consistently across-the-board Liberal or Conservative?

Hans Noel: That's right. And so I think there's a lot of evidence that that's happening and that people are becoming more internally consistent with Liberal, Conservative.

The other thing that I think there's a fair amount of evidence on, about polarization -- and it's probably the most important thing actually -- is the degree to which we now don't like people of the other side.

Julia Galef: Right.

Hans Noel: And so in history we call this sort of *affective* polarization, or negative partisanship or something like that. And so it's not that anybody has changed their positions, and no one's become more extreme -- but maybe because we're now more internally consistent, we now know who is "on our side" and so forth. We don't know other people on the other side, and we distrust them, and we dislike them.

And that there is a ton of evidence for. Increasing animosity to political enemies. And on top of anything else, that alone could have really serious consequences for compromise and the like.

Julia Galef: You argued in one of your papers, I can't remember which one, that polarization -- maybe not in this sense, but in some sense -- might actually be good. And that in the past there were legitimate concerns that the Republican and Democrat parties were too similar to each other, and that it might actually be good to have each party have sort of a distinct coherent ideology. I think the term you used, and I hope I'm citing it correctly, is "responsible party government."

What's the case for that?

Hans Noel: That's right. Sure. So responsible party government is a concept that was coined by the American Political Science Association's commission on political parties, that had a report in 1950, so this was a long time ago now.

The report in 1950 had a lot of concerns about things, but one of the things that they said was it's really a problem that the parties don't have clear policy positions. Because when you go to vote, you don't know what you're voting for. You're really unhappy with the direction that the country is going, and the Democrats are in power so you want to vote out the Democrats -- but actually your member does want what you want, they're just unlike the leadership of the Democratic party. And so you should be happy with your own person, but you don't know. Because just because someone is a Democrat doesn't tell you anything about what they stand for.

So this is a concern. It makes it difficult to hold parties accountable, and it makes it difficult for what parties to do to be very transparent. It's hard for us to know what the parties are doing when you don't know what they stand for, unless you're really, really attentive and know all of the nuances. And so what they were advocating for was more ability for parties to control their nominations and their choices, and be able to impose more discipline.

That's not exactly what's happened. What's happened is that the parties have become more ideological. And a lot of the influence is now ideologues pushing their preference, and holding the party leaders to account for that, right? So now you've got Republicans who are afraid to challenge Trump because they're afraid of a primary challenge, right? So that's not that the parties have more control over their nominations, it's exactly the opposite. The ideologues are holding things together.

But we do have a clear distinct choice now. You know what you're getting. And if you go to the polls and say "Oh I don't know, Democrats, Republicans, they're the same," you just aren't paying attention, because there are clear differences.

Julia Galef: Right.

Hans Noel: And so that's maybe a good thing. Having clear programmatic differences is probably a good thing.

The animosity that each side has for the other, maybe that's not such a good thing. The degree to which party leaders don't have control over their nominations, or that the polarization is being driven by activists who have no interest in compromise, that's probably not a good thing.

But the idea that you have programmatically different parties, that's probably a good thing. Or at least it could be a good thing.

Julia Galef: Really? It seems to me like we could get the goods of that without the downsides, if we just tried for transparency. Let's say there were sort of 10 ideologies, and then each politician could say "Here are my coordinates on this multi-dimensional grid of ideologies." Maybe that sounds too complicated, but imagine a simpler version of that.

Hans Noel: I get it.

Julia Galef: "Here's where I am on the two dimensional grid," or whatever -- authoritarianism and left/right. Then you could just, as long as you knew what the ideologies were, you could just pick the politicians that supported you. And whether the politicians who call themselves Democrats were especially clustered together on that grid wouldn't really matter, because we would have transparency and that's all we needed.

Hans Noel: Well, so you would have transparency about who you sent to the legislature-

Julia Galef: Yeah.

Hans Noel: But you wouldn't have transparency about what they're doing once they get there. And I think this actually is a variant of one of the complaints that people often have, where they say "Well we only have two parties, what if we have more parties?" And then those parties, we'd know what they all, you know, I can vote for my party that wants this.

Julia Galef: Yeah, it'd be a much more fine grained way to choose.

Hans Noel: Exactly. It would be a much more fine grained way to choose -- but then at the end of the day, the people go to the legislature, and they have to vote, and they have to make decisions where they are compromising with one another.

And the thing about a party is it tells you who they're going to compromise with. Because that's what a party is, is a group of people who decided "This is the people I'm going to compromise with, to try to be consistent within, because this is my team and we work together. Then I know that they'll have my back after I've had theirs."

And so if you don't know what the party as a collection stands for, you don't know what kind of logroll you've bought into.

Here's the interesting thing: suppose the only thing you care about is abortion and you're pro-choice, and that's the only thing you care about. And I give you two candidates, one is Republican who's pro-choice, and one is a Democrat who is pro-life, who should you vote for?

I submit that you should vote for the pro-life Democrat. The reason is, even though that person is pro-life, and you would be better off with a pro-choice Democrat for sure-

Julia Galef: Right, but if that's not on the table...

Hans Noel: If that's not on the table, you want the pro-life Democrat. And why? Because the pro-life Democrat is going to vote for Nancy Pelosi as speaker, or as party leader, whether you win the majority or not. And that person is going to coordinate with other Democrats. And part of the Democratic coalition is being pro-choice. So the larger party coalition is a big deal, what you're buying into.

Sending a bunch of people to the legislature who agree with you, that's great -- but sending a bunch of people who agree with you *who are capable of compromising* on things you're also willing to compromise on, that's better.

So you need to pay attention to the compromise, because at the end of the day we don't get a million different policies, we get one policy. Whatever the government chooses. And that policy is the result of lots of compromise, and a lot of times the interesting compromise isn't compromise with the other side, it's compromise with your fellow partisans. And so you need to know who those fellow partisans are, which is why I think it's important to know what the parties stand for.

Julia Galef: Interesting! Okay, well that's probably a good point on which to end, conditional on having to end at all.

Hans Noel: Okay.

Julia Galef: But before I let you go, Hans, I want to invite you to introduce the pick of the episode. So this is a book, or a article, or blog, or something that has influenced your thinking in some way. Doesn't have to be recent, doesn't have to relate to the topic of the episode, just something that influenced your thinking.

Hans Noel: Well, something that does relate actually to what we've just been talking about, so I'm going to recommend people go back and read E.E. Schattschneider's book *Party Government*. It's very old. Schattschneider was one of the people who was involved with the acts of commission that I

mentioned earlier. In Schattschneider's book he talks about how parties work and what they do. He makes a defense, a sort of normative defense, of why parties are good.

But the thing that was in Schattschneider's book that really influenced me and really changed my thinking is I was really interested in persuasion. Why do people change their minds? Why become Liberal on all these different things?

Julia Galef: Yeah.

Hans Noel: And the thing Schattschneider pointed out -- that once I read it, it was like "Oh, this is obviously true and needs to be accounted for" -- is that persuasion is often completely unnecessary. Because what politics is often about is putting together a coalition of people who will vote together. And they don't have to agree, there just have to be more of them to defeat the other side, and more depends on the institution or whatever. But once that became clear, it's like "oh, that's really the story."

And Schattschneider's book is good for so many other reasons too. So it's out of date, right? It's back from a period when the parties weren't ideologically distinct from each other.

Julia Galef: Yeah, although that's interesting in its own right. To read something written from that framework.

Hans Noel: Yes that's right. And one of the points that he makes, that he says, is "Wow, it's really interesting that both parties are completely ideologically diverse." And we would never say that today.

But I think it's a really good book. It's an older book. It is reissued, you can find it. Party Government, Elmer Eric Schattschneider, and that's what I would recommend people take a look at.

Julia Galef: Great. We'll link to that on the podcast website, as well as to *Political Ideologies and Political Parties* in America, which is one of your recent books, and your website.

Hans, thank you so much for being on the show.

Hans Noel: Thanks for having me. This was a lot of fun.

Julia Galef: Yeah, likewise.

This concludes another episode of Rationally Speaking. Join us next time for more explorations on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.

