

Evidence and Inquiry Certificate

The College of Natural Sciences Honors Center
Home of Polymathic Scholars

Conservatism in the United States

"...I propose to examine the philosophical, historical, and psychological foundations of conservatism in the United States. I am particularly interested in studying the social and cognitive mechanisms that both common citizens and professional politicians use to determine and articulate their political affiliations."

Bianca Vicuna
Natural Sciences
Neuroscience

● ***Describe your field of study. What are some of the questions you would like to answer, and what academic disciplines do you think will be useful in answering them?***

In my interdisciplinary field of study, “Conservatism in the United States,” I propose to examine the philosophical, historical, and psychological foundations of conservatism in the United States. I am particularly interested in studying the social and cognitive mechanisms that both common citizens and professional politicians use to determine and articulate their political affiliations.

As defined by economists Arthur Denzau and Douglass North, political ideologies are shared mental models that allow individuals to evaluate their environment, to visualize an ideal state of the environment, and provide a coherent plan to achieve that ideal state. Thus, it becomes evident that different political ideologies require individuals to exhibit different cognitive and motivational tendencies to some extent. For instance, recent research suggests that conservatives are “more structured and persistent in their approaches to decision-making,” which would explain their tendency to adhere to established systems. Conversely, liberals have been associated with a “higher tolerance of ambiguity,” illustrating their tendency to support reforms.

Conservatism is a political philosophy that endorses tradition and social stability, and favors gradual change and established institutions. Conservatives advocate for a limited government that ensures the liberty and security of individuals. In the United States, a major concern of conservative leaders has been the establishment of a nationalist view that unites people under the identity of one nation.

Over the past decade, we have been witnessing a significant shift in the principles of conservatism in the United States that attempts to use American exceptionalism, or the idea that the U.S. is the future of humankind because it is inherently different from other nations, to justify opposition to current social issues such as immigration. Many republicans believe that the exceptionality of the U.S. is being destroyed by foreigners. According to a Gallup survey, today, Republicans are about 40% more likely to be dissatisfied with the current magnitude of immigration than Democrats, which is thirty-two percentage points higher than during President George W. Bush’s first term. Furthermore, most Republicans support a massive deportation as a solution to undocumented immigration. Many critics believe this general disapproval of immigrants and immigration is undermining the fundamental principles of U.S. conservatism.

Some questions I hope to answer are: How do conservatives justify their political beliefs? What are the mechanisms driving the shift in U.S. conservatism?

My curriculum will draw on the perspectives of Government, American Studies, Psychology and Philosophy.

● ***Why are you interested in studying this topic?***

I was born and raised in a small town in the middle of Mexico, a country whose revolutionary leaders failed to secure the socioeconomic interest of the common people and left all power in

the hands of the central-conservative party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Sadly, many of my countrymen are so deeply affected by this that they can hardly forget about politics. I remember going every Sunday to my grandfather's house and hearing him discuss political issues with his friends. I will never forget how immersed they were in their conversations. They spoke so fervently as they talked about the failures of our political system. But to them, actual change was impossible. Their passion and frustration inspired in me a profound interest in politics at a very young age.

This past spring, seven years after I moved to the US, I spent my entire RHE 306 class studying the stance of each party on the issue of immigration. I learned about the pros and cons of the major propositions of each party. I was surprised to see that the majority of Republicans favor massive deportation. Their position did not make sense to me because the deportation of 11 million undocumented immigrants would have very high economic and social costs. There are other Republican leaders that take these ideas even further. For instance, Donald Trump has proposed the elimination of the 14th amendment as a solution to deal with "anchor babies."

Furthermore, some conservatives believe global warming is fiction. Jim Inhofe, a Republican leader and U.S. Senator, took a snowball into the Senate chambers, claiming that it was sufficient evidence to disprove global warming. This scientific illiteracy astonishes me. To see a well-educated and intelligent man use a snowball to disprove a global phenomenon was inconceivable.

In my opinion, neither of these ideas exemplify the core values of conservatism, which were once shared by the PRI: family values, individual liberty, and national security. In fact, I believe the Republican positions on immigration and global warming conflict with these values. The PRI has abandoned its original values and I want to study why Republicans are doing the same.

- Name two faculty with research interests in your area. Include their home departments and relevant research interests. If a research interest isn't obviously related to your topic, explain its relevance.**

Dr. Bethany L. Albertson, Department of Government
Political Psychology and Public Opinion

Dr. Bertram Gawronski, Department of Psychology
Social Cognition and Decision-making

- Explain how each course is relevant to this field. What do you hope to learn from each?**

Primary Course

AMS S370

Conservatism in America

This course analyzes the development, expression and history of conservative ideologies from the 18th century to the present. This class will enable me to understand the historical events that gave birth to conservative ideologies, and the consequences of each.

GOV 370L

Political Psychology

This course examines the psychology behind political attitudes and behavior. This course is taught by one of the professors I listed in Section II, and it will enable me to have a better understanding of how people acquire their political attitudes.

PHL 342

Natural Law Theory

This course examines the fundamental moral principles of human beings, and their implications on social issues and the policy making process. This course will enable me to understand how an individual is able to come up with a stance on a social issue based on what he/she perceives from his/her environment. This relates to my field since I am interested in studying the process by which an individual identifies himself/herself with a political ideology.

PSY 341K

Social Cognition

This course analyzes the underlying mental mechanisms of social judgement and social behavior by making the assumption that an individual acts in accordance with his own construction of social reality. This relates to my field of study since I want to understand how an individual is able to make social and political decisions, and subsequently determine his/her political affiliation, based on his/her own perception.

PSY 319K

Social Psychology

This course gives an overview of the major theories and research methods that attempt to explain the way people think and behave in a social setting. It would teach me some of the necessary skills to analyze the psychological mechanisms used to determine the political affiliation of an individual.
