

Party over Country: The American Obsession with Identity Politics

The Pew Research Center (PRC) political typology quiz utilizes a selection of political opinion questions that tackle the concepts of government size, immigration, social justice, etc. to narrow the quiz-taker's political stance down to one of their nine typology groups. During this process, the PRC interface employs their database filled with the quiz results from over 10,000 Americans to verify their user identification process. The nine typology groups range from the far right "Faith and Flag Conservatives" to the far left "Progressive Left" with more moderate, "Stressed Sideliners" ideologies scattered in between. After completing all of the 15 questions, the quiz supplies the user with a collection of resources regarding their results and in comparison with other responses from Americans of their same political stance as well as the percentages of all quiz-takers who would generally agree with each of their question responses.

The PRC does a nice job at providing the general public with a quick and concise method to learn more about where they may land on the political spectrum. However, there are some limitations to their method and appeal to accessibility as their questions are not entirely comprehensive and may leave some users misplaced ideologically or left out entirely: "most people, but not all, are good fits for their group. Some patterns of responses to the values questions just do not match up well with any of the groups. The procedure will assign everyone to the group that fits them best, even if they are not a very good fit with any of the groups. And some people may actually be a good fit for more than one group, since some of the groups are quite similar in many of their views." (How We Identified, 2021). The accuracy of these questionnaire-style political compass mechanisms is certainly up for debate, but they are most definitely growing in popularity since the presidential election and "social awakening" of 2020. The PRC political identifier quiz, in particular, was established in November of 2021 with the

Center recognizing a very real demand for their political compass software as old and young Americans alike were going through political identity crises all around the country.

While I would agree with my PRC quiz results and confirm that out of all of the nine typology groups, I would have predicted to most reflect the perspectives of the ‘progressive left,’ I try to make an effort in my life to not subscribe to the limitations of identity politics. I, personally, refrain from strong affiliation with any political party or hot, new buzzterm as I have found through my own experience that this behavior is both restricting and distracting. I would much rather take each political issue on a case-by-case basis to determine my stance rather than pulling up the front page of my favorite progressive left media source that will tell me exactly how and what to think about it. Nonetheless, it took me years of hardcore party affiliation and days upon days filled with confirmation bias in the podcasts I listened to, news I watched, people I surrounded myself with, and social media accounts I followed to truly understand the echo chamber I had created around myself and vow to diversify my political experience. And if you think about it, all it truly takes is a number of years of this kind of lifestyle in which every source of information you consume reinforces what you already believe for someone to become truly married to that school of thought...or dare I say...brainwashed? And regardless of the kinds of effects this has on people’s mind and critical thinking skills, I despise the process most for how it so effortlessly distracts people from the real issues at hand, those that get swept under the rug while people spend their days fighting about the issues of abortion and LGBTQ+ rights with their extended families on facebook.

The powers of political polarization and an obsession with identity politics have slowly become the crutch of political candidates in every election season and a way to keep the public preoccupied without the pressures on elected officials to actually legislate or advocate for the

progression of society past such antiquated ideologies. Politics, seemingly, is the new religion and Americans have all but devoted their lives to it. But, now, do not get me wrong, I am in no way meaning to minimize the importance of being politically aware, educated, and passionate on and about the latest international affairs; however, I believe there to be a unique difference between those who consume news from a variety of channels and take the time to develop their own perspective versus those who are relentlessly devoted to their political title and would die on their ideological hill before ever recognizing their neighbor's perspective. Personally, I am very passionate about the issues of social and climate justice, open immigration, U.S. inexceptionalism, universal healthcare, LGBTQ+ rights, democracy, and robust social welfare; and therefore, I make a point to involve myself in my local community in committing to the realization of the country that supports people and the planet over profit. But, I believe it to be possible to immerse yourself in a community with a common mission and background without closing yourself off to the rest of the world.

The two-party system has become ubiquitous and assumed in the United States; however, I am a proponent of a system in which would allow people to express their opinion and vote on a per-issue basis would allow for far more flexibility and challenge this obsession with one's party and ideological affiliation. After all, we have unfortunately created the society this country's founding fathers most prolificly warned us about: "There is nothing which I dread so much as a division of the republic into two great parties, each arranged under its leader, and concerting measures in opposition to each other. This, in my humble apprehension, is to be dreaded as the greatest political evil under our Constitution" from John Adams, "I never submitted the whole system of my opinions to the creed of any party of men whatever in religion, in philosophy, in politics, or in anything else where I was capable of thinking for myself. Such an addiction is the

last degradation of a free and moral agent. If I could not go to heaven but with a political party, I would decline to go.” proclaimed by Thomas Jefferson, “A man under the tyranny of party spirit is the greatest slave upon the earth, for none but himself can deprive him of the freedom of thought” written by Thomas Paine, and “...It serves always to distract the public councils and enfeebles the public administration. It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms; foment occasionally riot and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption...A fire not to be quenched, it demands uniform vigilance to prevent its bursting into flame...” quoted by George Washington himself (King, 2018). Now I ask: party over country or country over party?

Americans, desperate to find themselves and understand themselves on a deeper level, latch onto the comfort provided by identity politics and party affiliation. There is no room for confusion, or for variation of opinion for that matter, they simply open their favored news platform and are immediately relieved with the burden of doing their own research to form their own perspectives on the latest affairs. Political compass identifiers, like the 15 question PRC quiz, provide temporary repose while people try to grapple with where they stand in society; however, the problem arises when people take one compass quiz and hold onto their “title” and results for far longer than it is useful to them. This phenomenon has led to the creation of society in which people are eternally bonded to their political identities and choose to only associate with people, media, and platforms that reinforce their own beliefs. I am ‘progressive left’ by the PRC standard, but in reality, I can be whoever I want to be and think however I like to think on any given issue. It does and will not define me. I can think for myself in a world that desires to be told what to believe and so can you.

References

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