

You're All A Bunch of Socialists

A fun figure from Tetlock et al.'s "The Psychology of the Thinkable".

Background:

Participants were told that the goal of the study was to explore the attitudes that Americans have about what people should be allowed to buy and sell in competitive market transactions:

Imagine that you had the power to judge the permissibility and morality of each transaction listed below. Would you allow people to enter into certain types of deals? Do you morally approve or disapprove of those deals? And what emotional reactions, if any, do these proposals trigger in you?

Respondents then judged two types of trade-offs: routine (secular-secular) and taboo (secular-sacred). The five secular-secular trade-offs included "paying someone to clean my house," "buying a house," "buying food," "paying a doctor to provide medical care to me or my family," and "paying a lawyer to defend me against criminal charges in court." The nine secular-sacred trade-offs included buying and selling of human body parts for medical transplant operations, surrogate motherhood contracts (paying someone to have a baby whom the buyer subsequently raises), adoption rights for orphans, votes in elections for political offices, the right to become a U.S. citizen, the right to a jury trial, sexual favors (prostitution), someone else to serve jail time to which the buyer had been sentenced by a court of law, and paying someone to perform military service that the buyer had a draft obligation to perform.

Libertarians are notorious for gratuitously alienating everyone who doesn't agree with them. Looking at diverse critics and sneering, "You're all a bunch of socialists" is a classic

example. Figure 1 shows, however, that there is a more than a kernel of truth in this unfriendly observation. Conservatives, liberals, and socialists are all highly and almost *equally* hostile to creative expansions of the domain of the free market. Is this because the “unthinkable” proposals are too radical to appeal to anyone who isn’t a libertarian? Not really; many economists with zero libertarian sympathies would be on the same page.

Could the socialists analogously gripe, “You’re all a bunch of capitalists”? Not easily. Even self-conscious socialists are only moderately outraged by routine trade-offs – and this outrage tapers off almost linearly as we move from liberals to conservatives to libertarians. At least in this data set, libertarians are clear outliers – and the disagreements between conservatives, liberals, and socialists are marginal. I wish it were otherwise, but it rings true.

Last point: Tetlock et al.’s data helps explain why so many people falsely imagine that most economists are libertarians. How so? Because they are the only two groups that routinely transgress anti-market taboos. Even left-wing economists, for example, have been known to endorse a market in human kidneys. Even if they disagree, most will politely discuss an issue that almost everyone else considers beyond the pale. Upshot: When libertarians tell mainstream economists, “You’re all a bunch of socialists” they’re not merely being undiplomatic. They’re being wrong.