

Tax Reform: Citizens Fact Council

Ideology, bias and self interest have overtaken politics (I'll refer to these three as IBSI). Facts seem to have become secondary, at best, to the political discourse. There is seemingly a total lack of trust between conservatives and liberals, and this is fostered by politicians and some media.

Facts have objective truth, ideology does not. At the end of this submission is a short note distinguishing fact from ideology. My suggestion is to establish a Council whose sole purpose is to set up and administer committees that will evaluate the relevant and material facts pertinent to the various legislative issues under consideration. One of the past problems with such independent commissions has been that both sides have claimed them to be influenced by IBSI. So if such Council is to work, the first goal must be to demonstrate that only facts are considered and that IBSI is banned.

Here is an example of how a tax reform committee might be set up and administered by the Council. The Council first identifies 50 of the most intelligent and knowledgeable people who are experts in various fields relevant to taxation. Each of the 50 must state whether they are, or are leaning toward, conservative or liberal. (See Jonathan Haidt's The Righteous Mind for his helpful categorization). The council then selects 10 conservatives and 10 liberals from the 50 (or whatever total committee number makes sense). The committee will be provided an adequate budget and access to appropriate research sources. From this point forward the committee of 20 is self-regulating.

The 20 set an absolute rule that only facts will be considered -- each member pledges to leave IBSI at the door. The committee and each committee member will be responsible for monitoring their own and others' behavior to make certain there is no IBSI influence. The committee will decide and prioritize the list of relevant and material facts to consider. The committee will use best efforts to agree all factual issues considered. Disagreement on the facts will be scrutinized to make sure it is not the result of IBSI. The committee will not draft specific proposed legislation, but their factual determinations will serve to demonstrate the legislation needed. The committee will continue to review relevant and material facts throughout the legislative process, and convey their findings to Congress and the public.

Once the factual findings are made public, the politicians will likely do their best to obfuscate the findings and claim IBSI influence. Perhaps the most important task of the committee will be to sell and explain its findings to the American people. They must convince the public that the bipartisan committee has made certain that only facts were considered and that IBSI was eliminated from the determinations. Perhaps more important, the committee must make certain that its factual determinations are clear and unambiguous to the American people, so that they can't be misconstrued by the politicians. Explaining tax related facts to the general public in layman's terms is not easy, but it can be done.

In this utopia I have defined, IBSI is now relegated to its proper place. Politicians can debate ideologies and the public can enter the fray, but there should be no dispute regarding the relevant and material facts of any proposed legislation. These fact committees will have resolved these facts for all the various areas of proposed legislation. Ideology is now where it belongs, in the political debates separated from the facts. There will still be ideological disputes on proposed legislation, but resolution is many times easier once factual issues are agreed. This process should provide the information and transparency that is needed by Congress and the public.

Ideology vs Fact

To paraphrase Daniel Moynihan: Everyone is entitled to his own ideologies but not his own facts. It seems that today there is often little attempt to distinguish between ideology and fact.

Ideology is *“the body of doctrine, myth, belief, etc., that guides an individual, social movement, institution, class, or large group”*. Ideologies may be based on religious, social, political, or economic grounds. They include such things as religion, atheism, pro-life/pro-choice, pro/anti gay rights, racism, conservatives (social, fiscal and Neo), liberals, Republicans, Democrats, libertarians, altruists, capitalists, free traders, socialists, communists, etc. etc

Ideology is not a pejorative term. Each of us has our own set of ideologies. Everyone is entitled to his belief system and everyone should be fully entitled to express his ideologies.

Facts are facts, totally different from ideology. Some facts are extremely difficult to determine and agree. The important point is that ideology should have no role whatsoever in determining facts, but facts and ideology are often confused and combined. Let's examine this proposition considering three examples: abortion, global warming, and taxation.

Abortion is a good example of an issue that is almost entirely ideological. The ideological issue involved is the sanctity of life, or in a non religious context, the inviolable nature of life. There are few facts in dispute regarding the issue of abortion. For example, the physical development of the fetus post conception is generally known and agreed. Everyone is entitled to apply their own ideological opinion, but facts play little or no role in this ideological debate.

As contrasted with abortion, global warming is an issue that is almost entirely fact. 1) Does it exist? 2) What caused it? 3) What is its scope now and in the future? 4) What remedies are available? We agree that the answers to these factual questions are extremely important to us today and for future generations. The scientific community that studies these matters has reached near unanimous agreement on the first two questions. There is much uncertainty but relatively minor disagreement on the last two.

What seems to have happened is that ideology has, to a large extent, supplanted the facts. Today there is a major divide between Democrats and Republicans on the factual issues.

Instead of evaluating facts on their own merits, ideologies are being applied to the facts. Today there is a “schism” of ideologies affecting climate change. In a 2010 poll only 29% of Republican voters saw man-made warming as real, compared to 70% of Democratic voters. What seems to have happened here is that facts were supplanted by ideology.

Whereas abortion is an ideological issue and global warming is a fact issue, taxation is clearly a combination of the two. The issue of taxation involves social, political and economic ideologies. Facts are also an integral and important part of taxation. The harm taxation does to the economy (or lack thereof) is a fact issue that people of different ideologies should be able to agree; yet the actual factual analysis is being ignored and all these issues are instead bandied about as part of the ideological discussions.

Politicians and pundits continue to explain these often complex factual issues in simple ideological terms. These explanations are usually willingly accepted by the public -- a win-win situation for the politicians and pundits, and an easy solution for the general public. We can only blame ourselves if we continue to accept biased ideologically infused explanations of the facts, and fail to independently evaluate the facts.