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The Three Languages Of Politics: Talking Across The Political Divides



Synopsis

When it was first released in 2013, Arnold Kling's *The Three Languages of Politics* was a prescient exploration of political communication, detailing the "three tribal coalitions" that make up America's political landscape. Progressives, conservatives, and libertarians, he argued, are "like tribes speaking different languages. As a result, political discussions do not lead to agreement. Instead, most political commentary serves to increase polarization." Now available as a newly revised and expanded edition, Kling's book could not be any more timely, as Americans—whether as media pundits or conversing at a party—talk past one another with even greater volume, heat, and disinterest in contrary opinions. *The Three Languages of Politics* is an accessible, precise, and insightful guide to how to lower the barriers coarsening our politics. This is not a book about one ideology over another. Instead, it is a book about how we communicate issues and our ideologies, and how language intended to persuade instead divides. Kling offers a way to see through our rhetorical blinders so that we can incorporate new perspectives, nuances, and thinking into the important issues we must together share and resolve.

Book Information

Paperback: 146 pages

Publisher: Cato Institute (May 9, 2017)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1944424466

ISBN-13: 978-1944424466

Product Dimensions: 5 x 0.3 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 5.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 102 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #82,271 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #7 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Ideologies & Doctrines > Libertarianism #178 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Elections & Political Process > General #300 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Ideologies & Doctrines > Conservatism & Liberalism

Customer Reviews

It looks like most political commentators are just talking past one another. Why? Arnold Kling hazards a guess, arguing that people don't understand one another because they have

fundamentally different visions of how the world works. According to Kling, conservatives see the world as a conflict between civilization and barbarism, liberals see it as a conflict between oppressors and the oppressed, and libertarians see it as a conflict between liberty and power. Kling is clear that he is offering a hypothesis rather than an exhaustive empirical study. It is a short and easy read, and it is one that (I expect) will help us make sense of political history and the political present.

The Three Languages of Politics

This is an interesting, but atypical passage: Libertarians also look at government as the ultimate source of the problem. Libertarian economics is closely aligned with the Austrian school, and Austrian economists view central banks as the Demon the Menace of capital markets, distorting interest rates and causing bubbles. Again, there is some plausibility to this, because housing prices did experience a bubble. However, there are problems with blaming this on Fed interest-rate policy, because it is difficult to explain the evolution of the interest rate controlled by the Fed (the Fed funds rate), mortgage rates, and house prices. From January of 2002 through January of 2009, as the Fed moved its rate up and down, the mortgage rate remained relatively stable, between 5.25 percent and 6.75 percent. The most spectacular phase of the house price bubble was 2005–2006, and it is hard to see how this was connected to mortgage rates, which drifted toward the high end of their range in those two years. Other libertarians, including me, have focused on the perverse impact of bank capital regulations. In what ultimately proved to be a misguided attempt at sophisticated control over bank activity, agencies in the most advanced countries collaborated on a set of risk-based capital requirements, known as the Basel Accords. The goal of international collaboration was to avoid a race to the bottom in regulation and instead to ensure that banks in all countries faced similar rules. Because bank safety and soundness is such an important regulatory goal, the Basel Accords set strict standards that required banks to maintain more capital against assets deemed to be risky than against assets deemed to have less risk. Unfortunately, in 2001, the assets designated as low risk were expanded to include mortgage securities with AAA ratings from the major bond-rating agencies. In hindsight, this expansion proved to be quite a blunder.

Most folks analyzing politics look at it from a left-right axis. This is clearly nonsense. There is at least a third position, which is opposing both left and right, and that position is the libertarian position. However, just talking about the third position isn't enough to make a book worth reading. The other major flaw that almost all political discourse suffers from is the flaw of treating alternate

positions as bad/evil/stupid. While the first book I read that played well along this axis was Thomas Sowell's "A Conflict of Visions", in which he presents two world views and doesn't judge either of them. In this book here, Dr. Kling presents a three-way separation, and respects properly all three views. I haven't seen it done well by anyone else. Great short book

Great for those with a desire to better understand why we hold such strong but different political positions. Makes it easier to discuss and find shared common objectives.

Dr. Kling eloquently describes why most politically inclined folks fall prey to the fast thinking that more often than not comes from our polarized media. Only with slow thinking can we start to make progress in some of the most troublesome issues that malign our society. If we avoid the talking head noise and the bluster of those entrenched in their chosen tribe, we can start to see a reasoned reality from which understanding and progress take root.

It's a great read, especially for anyone interested in understanding the tribalism of American politics today. However, do yourself a favor and buy the eBook. The book is only slightly bigger than my hand and is actually only 88 pages long once you omit the appendix, index and 'fluff' pages.

Kling has been laying out his "three axes" model on his blog for several months now. This short kindle book explains the basic idea and then expands upon it. For the most part, I think Kling's model is accurate and effective as a means of understanding ideological positions and the language used to support them. The shortness of the book is a blessing, because the power of Kling's system is that it's so simple; it doesn't need a 300-page treatment. That said, I do wish that Kling had spent a little more time discussing applications of the three axes to specific political issues -- including ones that don't seem to fit the mold (though I think most do). Also, some of the examples he does use aren't as "clean" as they could be, and as a result they may undersell his model. For instance, Kling uses the mortgage finance crisis as a leading example. But because Kling is an expert on the subject, he goes into greater depth and complexity on the issue than needed, when the power of his three-axes model is really in explaining the broad outlines of ideological positions rather than the nuances. The resulting analysis is somewhat messy. Nevertheless, Kling's model is useful and (usually) accurate, and it could prove the basis for a whole research program in political science. On those grounds alone, it gets a thumbs-up.

Author uses fairly clear writing style to lay out the different ways conservatives, liberals, and independents talk about what politics is to them.

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