Romney, Obama and the New Culture War over Fairness

POLITICS

By Jonathan Haidt

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Remember when the culture war was about obscenity in rap music, protecting the flag from match-wielding protesters and spanking in schools? Not all so-called cultural issues have faded away — gay marriage and abortion are still quite divisive — but after the 2008 financial collapse and the rise of the libertarian-influenced Tea Party, both armies in the American culture war shifted their crack bridges over to the so-called economic issues of taxes and entitlement spending. The front line in this new culture war is fairness. Both sides claim to own the territory, yet they draw the map of American morality differently.

The two major gaffes of the presidential campaign were failed attempts to rally the troops with arguments about the outrageous unfairness of the other side. President Obama’s “You didn’t build that” speech in Roanoke, Va., last July and Mitt Romney’s comments about the 47% of Americans who pay no income taxes were political Freudian slips — careless words that resonated because they seemed to reveal deeper motives and values. The kinder, gentler Romney that we saw in the first presidential debate finally disavowed the 47% comments, but people disavow Freudian slips all the time.

(VIDEO: TIME Explains Swing States: Could Obama and Romney Tie?)

So let’s take a closer look at the two speeches. They began in uncannily similar ways. Both men started off by describing their grandfathers, whose hard work, persistence and devotion to family gave their children a shot at a better life. Both men then described their wives’ fathers or grandfathers, who worked blue collar jobs but sent their children to college. So guess which man said, “At the heart of this country, its central idea is the idea that in this country, if you’re willing to work hard, if you’re willing to take responsibility, you can make it if you try”?

The answer is Obama, but it could just as well have been Romney. Both men try to establish their credibility by showing that their family embodies the American Dream. Both men extol the virtues of hard work, self-sacrifice and devoted parenting. The only difference is that for Obama, the government was a crucial partner at every step, giving his grandfather the GI Bill to pay for college and a Federal Housing Administration loan to buy a house and giving his mother a variety of grants and scholarships to pay for her education. For Obama, the government offers a helping hand, making the American Dream accessible to anyone willing to work for it. For Romney, a good government hangs back and lets people succeed or fail on their own merits.

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But as in most grand political narratives, a villain comes along to ruin everything. For Romney, America’s vitality was sapped by the social programs Obama extols. By shoveling money and new rights around indiscriminately, the Democrats created an entitlement society in which 47% of the people “are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe that government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you name it.” If you accept Obama’s history, the good old days ended when George W. Bush tilted tax and regulatory policies to favor businesses and the wealthy. America’s urgent priority is therefore to undo those programs, roll back the welfare state and restore the vigorous virtues of hard work and self-reliance.

Arguing in a parallel way, Obama said it was the Republicans who shattered the American Dream: “Now, the reason that I think so many of us came together in 2008 was because we saw that for a decade that dream was fraying, that it was slipping away, that there were too many people who were working hard but not seeing their incomes or wages go up, that we had taken a surplus and turned it into a deficit … There was a sense that those who were in charge didn’t feel responsible.” If you accept Obama’s history, the good old days ended when George W. Bush tilted tax and regulatory policies to favor businesses and the wealthy. America’s urgent priority is therefore to undo the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy, roll back the rising inequality and expand federal programs that might help people succeed.

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Both candidates are essentially saying, Vote for me because the other side destroyed a fair America in which hard work paid off. Vote for me because I’ll restore fairness and the American Dream. But if we dig a little deeper into what the two sides mean by fairness, the similarities melt away.

I’m a social psychologist. I study the moral foundations of politics. With my colleagues at YourMorals.org, I’ve collected data from 300,000 people who participated in dozens of studies and experiments, and their responses tell a consistent story. There are three major kinds of fairness, and we find that liberals and conservatives value them to different degrees.

(MORE: Who Is the Better Communicator: Romney or Obama?)
1. When Fairness Means Proportionality

The most general form of fairness is proportionality, which means that people are getting benefits in proportion to their contributions. Nobody is cheating or getting cheated. If you've ever shared a kitchen with roommates, you know how sensitive people can be about who's doing their fair share and who's the slacker who uses the kitchen a lot but doesn't do a proportional amount of cleaning and shopping. Everyone — right, left and center — values proportionality, but conservatives value it more.

You can see that in the accompanying graph, which shows responses from 5,200 American visitors to YourMorals.org. The red line shows how strongly people agreed with the statement "Employees who work the hardest should be paid the most." If you look at the left edge of the graph, you see that people who described themselves as "very liberal" when they registered at the site slightly agreed with that statement. But as you move to the right — as people get more conservative — they agree with it more strongly. The line slopes upward.

This is the kind of fairness that pervades the 47% speech. In fact, the question prior to the one that elicited Romney's ill-chosen words is worth quoting, for it reveals a great deal about the mind-set in Romney's social circles. One of the wealthy donors at the Florida fundraiser asked:

My question to you is, Why don't you stick up for yourself? To me, you should be so proud of your wealth. That's what we all aspire to be — we'll stick ourselves, we don't stick up to a 9 to 5. We're away from our families five days a week. I'm away from my four girls five days a week and my wife. Why not stick up for yourself and say, Why is it bad to be, to aspire to be wealthy and successful? You know, why is it bad to kill yourself?

For the last three years, all everybody's been told is, Don't worry, we'll take care of you. How are you going to do it, in two months before the elections, to convince everybody you've got to take care of yourself?

These two questioners set up a clear moral vision of America: rich people work hard, and everyone else wants to be coddled. Romney then showed his audience that he shared their vision when he dismissed the 47% of Americans who don't pay income taxes. By the logic of proportionality, people who are not paying into the Treasury should not be drawing benefits. Of course, if you apply this logic fully, you should not exclude those who paid taxes in the past (like the elderly), those who will pay taxes in the future (like students) and those who pay payroll taxes but not income taxes (like the working poor), but never mind that. For Romney, the Democrats killed the American Dream by getting us to the point where 47% of Americans feel entitled to government benefits they are not paying for.

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It was precisely to counter this Republican moral frame that Obama made his famous remarks in Roanoke:

There are a lot of wealthy, successful Americans who agree with me, because they want to give something back ... Look, if you've been successful, you didn't get there on your own ... I'm always struck by people who think, Well, it must be because I was just so smart. There are a lot of smart people out there. It must be because I worked harder than everybody else. Let me tell you something: there are a whole bunch of hardworking people out there.

Obama tries to use the logic of proportionality to justify higher taxes on the rich. He rejects the claim that the rich work harder than everyone else and argues that they owe something in return for their success. As he put it:

If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you've got a business — you didn't build that. Somebody else made that happen. The Internet didn't get invented on its own. Government research created the Internet so that all the companies could make money off the Internet.

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It's clear in the context of the entire speech that the that in "You didn't build that" refers to infrastructure — to the roads and bridges, the Internet and the "American system." Obama was not trying to say, "You didn't build your business." But he was trying to take away credit from entrepreneurs. He was telling successful people that their success was due less to brains and hard work and more to their use of government-provided infrastructure. Needless to say, those who think of themselves as job creators heard this as an act of ingratitude and an offensive violation of proportionality. They think the country should be thanking them, not billing them for infrastructural services rendered.

2. When Fairness Means Equality

The second common meaning of fairness is equality: everyone gets the same. Equality is a special case of proportionality. When everyone's inputs are equal, what's fair is that everyone should get the same outcome. With voting, for example, we think that all citizens are equal in their citizenship, so each citizen gets one vote. But what about wealth? Should that be equalized? The blue line in the graph shows how much people agreed with the statement "Ideally, everyone in society would end up with roughly the same amount of money." Liberals (on the left) are ambivalent — some agree and some don't — but the line slopes steeply downward. Conservatives strongly reject the claim.

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The word equal occurs exactly once in each of the two speeches, and the differences are revealing. Obama appealed to equality in the rousing conclusion of his speech when he compared his audience to his grandparents, saying they all shared a faith in America and "a belief that all of us are equal [audience applause] and that we're not guaranteed success, but we're guaranteed the right to work hard for success." Romney, in contrast, used the word equal only when describing a meeting years ago with a lawyer who asked...
him how he’d like to divide his future estate. His reply: “I want to divide it equally among my five sons.”

Obama is probably downplaying the liberal value of equality in this campaign more so than in his 2008 campaign, in which he was raked over the coals by Republicans for his response to Joe the Plumber. When Joe asked whether Obama’s plan would raise his taxes if his income rose, Obama said, “It’s not that I want to punish your success … I think when you spread the wealth around, it’s good for everybody.”

But even if Obama never talks about redistribution anymore, many liberals do. I visited Zuccotti Park, home of Occupy Wall Street, in October 2011. Among the most common themes on the protest signs was the need to raise taxes on the rich to create greater equality.

At Tea Party rallies, one never sees signs extolling equality. Fairness is a major theme, but it is almost always fairness as proportionality. Tea Partyers may not be enthusiastic about Romney, but they share his conception of fairness, in which progressive taxation is a punishment for success and social programs are a reward for failure.

(MORE: How Mitt Romney’s Faith Could Help Him Win)

3. Procedural Fairness

The third major kind of fairness is procedural fairness, which means that honest, open and impartial rules are used to determine who gets what. Liberals and conservatives each claim to value procedural fairness, but in a society with massive inequality, the rich have many opportunities to rig the game in their favor and give their children advantages. Should we do anything to level the playing field? The green line in the graph shows how much people agreed with the statement “Our society should do whatever is necessary to make sure everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.” It slopes down sharply. Liberals strongly agree, which is why Obama invoked the government programs that helped his and his wife Michelle’s parents succeed. Conservatives are ambivalent, which is why Romney praised his and his wife’s forebears, who succeeded despite the odds stacked against them, with no help from government.

One of the central Occupy Wall Street concerns is that business interests and other assorted millionaires have fatally compromised procedural fairness in the U.S. Crony capitalists own the Congress and rig the game — and tax rates — for their own benefit. This is why there is such pervasive despair on the left about the Supreme Court’s decision in the Citizens United case, which enables wealthy individuals to buy influence in bulk by spending unlimited sums to support specific candidates.

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It’s not that conservatives don’t value procedural fairness. They surely want everyone to play by open and impartial rules in their workplaces or when they go to court. It’s rather that they trust corporate America more than the federal government, and they are suspicious of government efforts to level the playing field, which they see as a covert way to achieve social justice. Conservatives reject social justice as liberal code for enforcing equality of outcomes despite inequality of inputs.

So this is where we are as a nation. We all agree that something is broken in America, and the American Dream is dying. (Data back up the fear: economic mobility in the U.S. has fallen behind that of many European nations.) We all agree that the other side is to blame and that tax policy can be used to restore basic fairness and revive the dream. We just can’t agree on what fairness means.

MORE: How Obama Saved Romney
Pay hardest workers the most

Create equal opportunity

Ideally, all have same amount of money

Source: YourMorals.org Data are not nationally representative, but the differences between liberals and conservatives found at YourMorals.org have been replicated on nationally representative samples.