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Ideology and Statecraft: A Reply to Griffiths

Abstract

This article offers a qualified defence of statecraft theory. It argues that it helps frame important questions about politics by drawing our analytical attention towards the partisan strategic calculations that politicians make. It cautions, however, that in utilising the statecraft approach we must remain sensitive to the ideational dimension of politics, and to the (often implicit) ideological assumptions of our own theoretical viewpoints.

Keywords

Jim Bulpitt; statecraft; ideology; Conservative Party; David Cameron

Introduction

This piece has been prompted by the thought-provoking reply to articles by Andrew Gamble and I published in this journal. This has provided a welcome opportunity to reflect on some of the theoretical assumptions underpinning my own work, so I'd like to thank Simon Griffiths for engaging with it and the editors of *Parliamentary Affairs* for providing the space for this dialogue. Both Gamble's (2015) paper and my own (Hayton, 2014) deploy Jim Bulpitt's (1986) notion of statecraft in exploring the political strategy of the Conservative Party in the Coalition government. The response to our articles, while acknowledging that they 'make a significant contribution to the understanding of the Conservatives under David Cameron, and importantly draw attention to the strategic partisan considerations that leading politicians make', argues that they are hindered by their use of Statecraft theory which acts as a 'straightjacket to a better understanding of British politics' (Griffiths, 2015 p. 7).

In this article I would like to respond to the critique offered directly in relation to my original paper, and also to contribute to the wider discussion points raised about the study of British politics, political leadership and the place of ideologies within this. My comments consequently firstly address the four main issues raised by Griffiths, before going on to argue these concerns are linked by the broader question of how we take sufficient account of the ideational when analysing political action. I suggest that the statecraft approach need

not necessarily preclude this, but wonder whether it is itself an implicitly ideological viewpoint.

Statecraft theory: a qualified defence

Griffiths lays out an extensive charge sheet against Bulpitt's statecraft theory. My purpose here is not to offer an unqualified defence of Bulpitt's approach. Indeed, as Griffiths acknowledges, I have discussed some of its limitations elsewhere (Hayton, 2012, pp. 6-11), and have never regarded myself, to use his term, as a 'strict Statecraft theorist' (2015, p. 4). However, the four main criticisms against Bulpitt are related directly to its recent application by Gamble and I, so I will seek to defend this usage in relation to the quartet of issues raised.

The first critique is that statecraft offers only 'a narrow account of the goal to which politics is directed' (2015, p. 3), namely the gaining and retaining of political power through holding office. This is particularly problematic as 'ideology or values are reduced to a means to getting into power' (2015, p. 4) – essentially a Downsian, rational choice position. This is widely discussed limitation of Bulpitt's work (see for example Marsh, 1995; Buller, 1999). However, it is one that I acknowledge in the article. As Griffiths grants in his response, in the opening discussion I note the 'analytical bias against the role of political ideas' of Bulpitt's approach (2014, p. 7). Consequently I set out to do something slightly different, namely to '*attempt to locate Cameron's statecraft within its broader ideological context, arguing that the former is influenced in important ways by the latter*' (*ibid*., emphasis added). In other words while the primary purpose of the article was the analysis of the Prime Minister's statecraft strategy, I also sought to explain and understand this in relation to Conservative Party ideology. In that sense, ideological considerations are an important facet of statecraft decisions, limiting choices and informing strategic calculations. Ideology influences how actors interpret the political context they face, and also forms part of that context (for example for a leader in terms of the ideological spectrum of their party). This, approach, I believe, is consistent with the argument laid out at much greater length elsewhere about the way in which the ideological legacy of Thatcherism shaped and constrained the Conservative Party in opposition, including in terms of Cameronite modernisation (Hayton, 2012; see also Kerr and Hayton, 2015; Hayton, 2016).

It is of course for others to judge whether the article was successful in its aim, but Griffiths does note that 'Hayton's piece contains and interesting discussion on ideology and the Coalition' and concedes that the article 'often discusses political ideas in a way that implies ideology is not instrumental and strategic, but something that provides frameworks within

which politicians operate' (2015, p. 4). That was my hope, so the fact that utilising the statecraft approach did not act as an insurmountable barrier to offering an account that was sensitive to the role of political ideas is reassuring, and suggests that, carefully applied, it may have some utility after all.

The second main criticism raised is that 'Bulpitt's assertion that the "main bias" of politicians is winning elections is epistemologically and methodologically problematic', and for Griffiths it 'is striking that statecraft theorists tend to provide an account of the motivation for the action of politicians at odds with accounts politicians give themselves' (2015, p. 5). However, as he also concedes, politics 'is clearly, in part, concerned with winning power' (2015, p. 4). It is reasonable to assume that a key priority of many politicians, and certainly those who hold the leadership positions in the major parties that have traditionally competed to hold office at Westminster, is to win elections. Most will happily admit as much - there is no shame in seeking to win office in a democratic system. Indeed in the case of David Cameron, who was the focus of my article, it is possible to identify this as the explicit driver of the modernisation strategy he advocated even before he was elected as leader. His pitch for the leadership to the Conservative Party conference in October 2005 was entitled 'Change to Win' (Cameron, 2005). The objective, and the justification for the changes he advocated, could not have been more explicit. This is not to say that politicians don't also hold multiple other objectives. It would be odd if they didn't. Nor is it to say that the strategic thinking about how to win elections that they engage in isn't ideological influenced – my view would be that it most certainly is (again see Hayton, 2012, for a longer exposition). However, it does seem to me that in an article explicitly focused on Cameron's strategic positioning, the use of a theoretical lens that draws our attention towards the electoral imperative is a potentially useful one.

The third critique Griffith's advances is that the major dimensions of statecraft that Bulpitt highlights (party management, electoral strategy, political argument hegemony, and governing competence) are overly restrictive, and can 'lead to a narrow methodology' (2015, p. 5). While this is certainly a risk, it need not necessarily be the case. Can we not, instead, utilise these four aspects of statecraft as broad categories to guide our analysis and accommodate a plurality of factors within them? For example, can consideration of the 'personal characteristics of the leader' (2015, p. 5) not be incorporated within a wider analysis of a party's electoral strategy, which might be formulated with these in mind? In Bulpitt's original formulation, all four dimensions are broad in scope: a winning electoral strategy for example includes not only 'the manufacturing of a policy package and image capable of being sold successfully to the electorate' but also one that 'will unite the party'. In addition, 'it may also involve a stance towards a governing coalition in a 'hung'

parliament' (1986, p. 21). For Griffiths, 'avoiding Statecraft allows a broader discussion of the wide variety of strategic partisan decisions that help win elections and maintain power' (2015, p. 6), but it is not immediately obvious which strategic partisans decisions the approach excludes. If anything, it is about drawing analytical attention towards strategic partisan decisions.

Fourthly, Griffiths is concerned that statecraft encourages a focus on too narrow a range of actors, and 'excludes those thinkers that have directly or indirectly shaped their views' (2015, p. 6). A narrow interpretation of Bulpitt's approach would certainly lead to this concern. Yet, is it not possible to incorporate sensitivity to the fact that both individual politicians, and the wider climate of opinion within which they operate, are influenced by a variety of political thinkers? This relates to the response to the first point of criticisms above, namely how strategic thinking by political actors is shaped and influenced by ideology. This may well prove difficult to pin down in practice, but that is not the particular fault of statecraft theory, more a reflection of the complexity of politics in practice. As such, statecraft's focus on high politics and elite actors is conceivably both a weakness and a strength. If the approach were advocated to the exclusion of all others it would certainly be deleterious to our understanding of British politics. But for scholars seeking explicitly to analyse the political elite, as both my article and Gamble's set out to do, it offers a useful framework for doing so.

Ideology and Statecraft

At the heart of Griffiths' broadside against statecraft theory is his worry that it acts as a 'straightjacket to a better understanding of British politics' (2015, p. 7) by downplaying, avoiding or excluding a range of potentially important factors and avenues for debate, particularly in relation to the ideational side of politics. This is a concern that all analysts of British politics should take heed of, regardless of their theoretical standpoint. His own superb scholarship, for example his work analysing the response of the British left to Friedrich Hayek (Griffiths, 2014), demonstrates the rich insights to be gained through careful consideration of the intellectual currents and debates which form the backdrop to the more prosaic disputes that frequently characterise everyday political activity, especially that which takes place in what these days is commonly labelled the Westminster bubble.

And yet we perhaps need to guard against casting overboard the proverbial baby with the bathwater in our search for an approach to the study of British politics that satisfies all our ontological, epistemological and methodological anxieties. The statecraft approach, in my view, does not offer the definitive guide to how British politics should be examined.

Nonetheless, as the likes of Buller and James (2012) have demonstrated, when harnessed with care it can yield revealing interpretations of the strategic behaviour of elite actors. As originally formulated it was presented as an alternative to both interpretations of Thatcherism that emphasised its ideological coherence, and those that did the opposite by focusing on policy analysis (Bulpitt, 1986, p. 19). Nevertheless, as I have sought to demonstrate, a more subtle usage can accommodate an awareness of the ideological nature of politics. While this does not make statecraft an all-encompassing theory of British politics, it does offer itself as worthwhile framework for analysing the strategic partisan calculations that politicians make. In dispensing with statecraft, while calling for greater theoretical clarity, it is in many ways a shame that Griffiths does not posit an alternative approach. In an area of the discipline often criticised for a lack of theoretically-driven thinking, epistemological and methodological pluralism should, in my view, be encouraged.

I am left, however, with one nagging concern regarding all of this, namely the extent to which statecraft theory itself is an ideological position. Even if the realist suppositions are tempered by a more nuanced application that Bulpitt's original offering, with its focus on elites and 'high politics' statecraft retains implicit assumptions about the Westminster Model in the tradition of the British School (Gamble, 1990). A focus on the analysis of the political elite is justified, to better understand strategic and ideological thinking by those in power, and by shedding light on their actions and decisions better hold them to account. However, if in examining statecraft we unwittingly reinforce notions of adversarial politics, centralised and closed systems of power, and politicians driven purely by self-interest, we will have done the discipline a disservice. Perhaps the best guard against that is the kind of critical self-reflection Griffiths has called for and promoted.

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