

Good Intentions, Bad Consequences: Voters' Information Problems

Phillip Nelson

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Economic arguments are used against the American left wing in the political science book Good Intentions, Bad Consequences.

Phillip Nelson's political science book *Good Intentions, Bad Consequences* defends traditional conservative ideas and argues against liberal dreams.

Confronting political divisions in the US at their origin points and in their current incarnations, this book divides the American electorate into two groups: traditionalists and those who vote based on "liberal altruism." It includes interesting considerations of how and why people adopt the political and social perspectives that they do, too.

Early on, the book assumes a clear side, arguing that liberal people are guilty of "naïve altruism," or "concern for others without taking into account the unintended consequences of any policy." But such altruism is a poor guide for creating a society, it asserts, leading to "faulty" policies (the book uses the examples of welfare and of opposition to oil drilling in Alaska) that are rife with unacknowledged problems. Further, it argues that there is obfuscation when it comes to naming the actual cost of such policies and asserts that many would consider such positions less attractive if they understood their "real" costs. Here: "limousine liberals" may talk a good game about how their policies will help, but the truth is much more stark.

After introducing its central arguments in its opening pages, the book devotes most of its time to expounding upon its reasoning. It draws on a wide range of sources to do so. Its citations are clear and are helpfully listed in its appendix. Proposing that people be provided with better information in order to understand that "good intentions" do not necessarily lead to good outcomes for society, it moves from a general overview of its political concepts into specific examples, as of the minimum wage and the exaggerated influence of wealth on politics. But it drones through these supporting examples in a stultifying manner. It aims to be dispassionate and methodical (efforts that are supported by its use of economic theories and data), but its continual takedowns of "liberal naïveté" make it dense and repetitive. It does not devote the same attention to examining traditionalist ideas, either. Thus, though it purports to be a scientific study of the political landscape, it never achieves a sense of objectivity; its conservative agenda is never far from view. Such obvious biases make the book's conclusions unpersuasive.

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JEREMIAH ROOD (December 21, 2022)

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