Dependence on Political Talent

by Henry Oliner

I find the principles, theories, and ideologies of economics and political power fascinating, but I suffer no illusion that most voters weigh such topics when they vote. I also do not contend that every voter is only interested in their immediate self-interest.

For ideologies to last, they must face the test of pragmatism. If the ideology must be forced by pure political power and violence then you have tyranny which will eventually collapse under its own weight, but not until it has brought misery to millions. The collapse of socialist and communist experiments have shown the limits of raw power.

At the roots of our greatest economic and political failures are the failures of ideology, or the rejection of ideology to the seduction of short term pragmatism. The ideologies of capitalism and limited government have evolved from addressing its failures or shortcomings, but their central theory remains intact. There are periods when the government power is used to address short term problems without rejecting the ideologies in place during those periods.

Franklin Roosevelt saw his progressivism of the New Deal as necessary to save capitalism by the populists and socialists empowered by the Depression. While ideologues will argue that the government caused the Depression, when we are faced with the reality we will shelve the ideology to relieve the pain. George W. Bush likewise commented that he sought to save free market capitalism by subjecting it to central power.

The problem is that the short-term solution becomes long term and we do not return to the principles that work most of the

time. The next problem is caused by the solution to the last problem.

We become more dependent on the political talent of the executive to bridge the ideological with the practical.

This talent once meant the ability to cross the aisle in Congress and compromise bills to pass and remain effective. Today this talent includes the ability to recognize valid voter blocks to attain and keep political power. Social media gives political leaders and advocates reach, even if substance is sacrificed.

Our great leaders had to balance a clear vision, and reality and remain politically astute to balance the voters' concerns and fears. The ability to reach the voters comprised a political talent that went beyond ideology. Hoover did not cause the Depression, though some of his actions made it worse. His crime was being tone deaf to its real impact on the voters.

FDR's actions extended the length of the Depression, but his willingness to act outside of economic ideology did bring some short-term relief. Yet despite the duration of the Depression under his tenure, he kept getting re-elected. He possessed a critical political skill, a connection with the voters.

Sometimes we confuse political skill with the benefit of a weak opponent. I write little about the political skills necessary to succeed, but it cannot be discounted. To compose the correct ideology, the tactical pragmatism, and the political skill to execute is a tall order. We should not be surprised that it happens so rarely.

This difficulty is the prime reason we should tread cautiously when extending central power, especially in a time of a such a rapidly developing economy. The founders feared the misuse of power. The progressives wanted superior leaders and administrators to correct the shortcomings of a market

economy. They grossly overestimated the ability of the state or any leader to consistently accomplish that task.