U.S. Political Ideologies and Political Culture

Inquire: Conservatives, Liberals, Republicans, Democrats...

Overview

In order to understand American politics, we need to discuss the various names, titles, and substance of the major belief political systems in the United States, compare and contrast their positions on major issues, explore how people develop their personal political beliefs, analyze the process and validity of public opinion polls, and identify ways people participate in the political system in the U.S.

In this lesson, we will identify and analyze the beliefs that distinguish Republicans from Democrats, conservatives from liberals, and the right from the left without name-calling, screaming, shouting, or making any disparaging remarks. Not an easy task in 21st-century America!

Big Question: Are Republicans and Democrats the same as conservatives and liberals?

Watch: Scandals and Voter Apathy

Since the mid-1960s, Americans have become increasingly frustrated with their government. The current trend toward negativism can be traced to the disillusionment engendered by the government's handling of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. President Lyndon Johnson was accused of lying to the public about the war's progress, while President Richard Nixon was caught in a web of deception around the 1972 break-in cover up at the Democratic Party's campaign office in the Watergate building. Similarly, President Ronald Reagan's administration was tainted by the Iran-contra Scandal, and President Bill Clinton was impeached for obstructing evidence in a civil suit brought against him.

But, earlier presidents have also made mistakes. Why do these more current events seem to have such long-lasting effects? Some observers believe that the media’s growing political influence is largely responsible for public skepticism about government and politics. For example, the complete 1974 Watergate hearings were broadcast on television. Millions of Americans followed the proceedings and anticipated the answers to important questions. "Were top aides in the White House a part of the deception?" "How much did [Nixon] know?" "Is he lying to us?" Public opinion so overwhelmingly condemned Nixon that he was forced to resign.

Others blame investigative reporting because it emphasizes sensational, high interest stories. Continuing scandals, such as the 1998-99 Monica Lewinsky scandal and investigation of President Bill Clinton’s personal behavior, keep the public focused on negative aspects of politics. According to this view, the media almost never reports anything good that politicians do, so they feed and extend the influence of negativism.
Others believe that we expect too much of government. With the dramatic increase of government responsibilities since the New Deal era, how can politicians live up to such high expectations? Others contend that voter indifference is on the rise because times are good; if Americans are content with the economy’s progress, why should they bother following every political issue?

Although Americans share some broad agreements on basic political values, such as liberty, equality, and justice, they also reflect a wide range of political attitudes, from highly conservative ideologies to very liberal ones. Despite their differences, modern Americans share one other political view — they are highly critical of politicians and have high expectations for their government and elected leaders.

Read: The “Left” and the “Right”

Overview
Democracy, liberty, equality, and justice; these values are not very controversial. But, Americans have vastly divergent viewpoints on the meanings of these core values. Does assisting the poor represent a movement toward equality or does it create an unfair burden on the middle and upper classes? Does the permission of abortion defend American women’s liberties or endorse the ending of a human life? Do elected officials really represent the people or are they just out for themselves? These issues, and many more, reflect a wide range of political attitudes that shape how Americans participate in government and politics.

The Left and the Right
Assigning the description of “left wing” to liberals and “right wing” to conservatives dates back to the French Revolution during the drafting of their constitution, when the more revolutionary and anti-royalist members sat on the presiding officer’s left and the aristocratic, more conservative members sat on the right.

Liberal or Conservative? Left or Right?
Just who — or what — are these liberals and conservatives? The terms liberal and conservative mean different things to different people, but they broadly describe contrasting political ideologies — worldviews that reflect an individual’s values and ideas. Generally, a liberal ideology favors the use of government power to regulate the economy and bring about justice and equality of opportunity. For example, liberals believe that the government should do more to help minorities, the homeless, women, the elderly, and society’s “have-nots.” They also believe that the government should provide foreign aid to countries in need. Liberals generally favor a tax system that taxes the rich more heavily than it does the poor.

Conservatives also believe in justice and equality of opportunity. However, conservative ideology believes that individuals are primarily accountable for their own well being, and that the government's responsibility is to see that they have the freedom to pursue their dreams. Any government support should come from the local and state levels, or preferably, from families and private charities. To a conservative, big government infringes on individual rights.

Ideologies and the Ideological Spectrum
One way to look at different ideologies is to place them on a spectrum that allows viewers to visually compare them based on what they prioritize. On the ideological spectrum, liberal ideologies are traditionally put on the left and conservative ideologies on the right. (As discussed above, this placement
dates from the French Revolution and is why liberals are called left-wing and conservatives are called right-wing.) The ideologies at the spectrum ends are the most extreme, while those in the middle are moderate. Thus, people who identify with left- and right-wing ideologies identify with beliefs to the left and right ends of the spectrum, while moderates balance the beliefs at the extremes of the spectrum.

There are major problems with identifying ideologies this way: the confusion caused by the often incorrect characterization of the terms liberal and conservative in the media and pop culture, and even that which is mis-taught in educational settings. This confusion is compounded by the melding of “governmental” systems and “economic” systems.

Take this linear graph for example. This is a typical linear ideological spectrum, with the most liberal on the left and the most conservative on the right. Even the definitions and/or descriptions are often slanted, appearing to give a bias to the left, either intentionally or unintentionally, though created by the false definitions expressed, again, either in the media or educationally.

Note that the farther left you go, the more “equality” there is in society. The further right you go, the more freedoms and rights you lose. As you look at this, where would you rather be and where do you want your government to be? Obviously, on the side of equality — the left — and not on the side of control — the right. But, compare this characterization to the definitions we gave above:

“Conservative ideology believes that individuals are primarily accountable for their own well-being, and that the government’s responsibility is to see that they have the freedom to pursue their dreams” Does that sound like more “control of society” by the government?

“Liberal ideology favors the use of government power to regulate the economy and bring about justice and equality of opportunity.” Doesn’t this require more “control of society”?

Another inherent problem with this depiction is the inclusion of both economic and governmental systems. Communism and socialism are economic systems, like capitalism, and they need to be on their own graph which would indicate government control of economic and national resources. However, even putting them in such a spectrum illustrates the inherent bias in this sort of a spectrum.

Communism is a total command economy, with the government controlling all of the country’s resources and being in total control of all economic choices. Communist governments control where a person will work, what profession or job they choose, where they can spend their money, and what they can spend their money on. True laissez-faire capitalism is the exact opposite: private ownership of resources with the marketplace having sole control of the economy. Socialism falls in the middle — more government control of the resources but less personal freedom of choice in economic issues.
A chart like this one seems to indicate more personal freedoms and more equality on the left, but it actually "an equality of no choices" instead of "an equality of choices." Every prisoner has equality — each receives the exact same food, clothing, and housing — but this does not equal freedom.

A fascist government also has total control of the resources and is, in fact, more closely related to a communist system than a society of choices. In reality, anarchy is the opposite of both communism and fascism, the complete lack of rules and controls. So, a better chart would look more like this:

Here is where the real confusion sets in. What about political ideologies? In order to place them on the spectrum, we must do so by identifying what the ideology believes regarding government controls and freedoms of choice. Where do the left and the right — the liberals and conservatives — fit? To understand this question, we must understand the differences between traditional conservatism and modern conservatism, and classical liberalism and modern liberalism.

Conservative governments attempt to hold tight to a nation’s traditions by balancing individual rights with the good of the community. **Traditional conservatism** supported monarchy and church authority and believed that government provides the rule of law and maintains a society that is safe and organized. **Modern conservatism** differs from traditional conservatism in assuming an elected government will guard individual liberties and provide laws. Modern conservatives also prefer a smaller government that stays out of the economy, allowing the market and businesses to determine prices, wages, and supply.

**Classical liberalism** believes in individual liberties and rights. It is based on the idea of free will, that people are born equal with the right to make decisions without government intervention. It views government with suspicion, since history includes many examples of monarchs and leaders who limited citizens’ rights. Today, **modern liberalism** focuses on equality and supports government intervention in society and the economy if it does so to promote equality. Liberals expect the government to provide basic social and educational programs to help everyone have a chance to succeed.

So, in this linear expression, the left and the right make more sense and do fit into the paradigm. The modern liberal — on the left — believes in more government control of society in order to bring about equality. The modern conservative — on the right — believes in less government control of society and places more power and responsibility in the hands of the individual. And, in this linear paradigm, the further left you go, the more control the government has over society, and the further right you go, the more the government’s power decreases and personal power and responsibility increases.
Please note, since the Democratic agenda requires more government involvement and control, they are on the left, though they do not want total governmental control. Their line stops short of the Communism/Fascism end point. And, since the Republicans are espousing less governmental control, especially industry and commerce, they are further to the right, though they do not want a total lack of governmental control. Their line stops short of the anarchy/chaos point.

Viewed this way, we can see the goals of the two political ideologies — Democrat and Republican — based on their protection, or lack thereof, of personal freedoms.

In closing, remember political ideologies are not morality. They are different theories on what is best for the people, but neither is good nor evil. The American people and the American government must always remember that reasonable minds can disagree.

**Reflect: Right or Left**

**Poll**

Based on the information in this lesson, do you see yourself more as a liberal or as a conservative?

- liberal
- conservative

**Expand: The American Dream and Political Culture**

**Discover**

The American dream.. It's the belief that each American has the freedom to pursue a better life — a nice house, a car or two, and a more comfortable existence than their parents.

This freedom has fueled incredible "rags to riches" stories, such as presidents starting out in log cabins and highly successful entrepreneurs who came to America as penniless immigrants, not to mention the guy that dropped out of Harvard to become the richest man in the world. These stories all contribute to America's political culture.

Every country has a political culture — widely shared beliefs, values, and norms that define the relationship between citizens and the government, and citizens to one another. Beliefs about economic life are part of the political culture because politics affect economics. A good understanding of a country's political culture can help make sense of how that country's government is designed and the political decisions its leaders make. For example, why does Great Britain still have a queen? She doesn't have
any real political power, so why don't they just end the monarchy? These questions can be puzzling, unless you understand something about the British political culture — one that highly prizes tradition.

Alexis de Tocqueville

Why does our system of government work better for us than for almost anyone else? French writer Alexis de Tocqueville, an early observer of the American political culture, gave some answers during the 1830s.

Tocqueville came to the United States primarily to answer the question, "Why are the Americans doing so well with democracy while France is having so much trouble with it?" France was in turmoil at the time, swinging back and forth between absolutism and radical democracy, and Tocqueville thought France could learn a thing or two from the Americans. Tocqueville's observations remain today a classic study of American political culture.

He identified several factors that influenced America's success: abundant and fertile land, countless opportunities for people to acquire land and make a living, lack of a feudal aristocracy that blocked the ambitious, and the independent spirit encouraged by frontier living.

The American View

The American political culture that Tocqueville described in the 1830s has changed over the years, but in many ways, it has remained remarkably the same, even after the continent was settled coast to coast. The American view has been characterized by several familiar elements:

- Liberty: Most people believe in the right to be free, as long as another's rights aren't abused.
- Equality: This generally translates as "equality of opportunity," not absolute equality.
- Democracy: Elected officials are accountable to the people. Citizens have the responsibility to choose their officials thoughtfully and wisely.
- Individualism: The individual's rights are valued above those of the state (the government); individual initiative and responsibility are strongly encouraged.
- The Rule of Law: Government is based on a body of law applied equally and fairly, not on the whims of a ruler.
- Nationalism: Despite some current negative attitudes toward the government, most Americans are proud of our past and tend to de-emphasize problems, such as intolerance or military setbacks. This value includes the belief that we are stronger and more virtuous than other nations.
- Capitalism: At the heart of the American dream is the belief in the right to own private property and compete freely in open markets with as little government involvement as possible.

Other countries may share some, or even all, of these beliefs and values. However, how such values are arranged and their subtleties form an array that makes every political culture unique. The elements of the American political culture include disagreement and debate. They include ideals, but they leave room for the reality of falling short of goals.

Famous events from American history — the Civil War, the Industrial Revolution, involvement in World Wars I and II, the New Deal, and the Great Society — have been expressions of American political culture. Many events have questioned and answered various interpretations of American values and beliefs. But, most of all, the political culture defines political attitudes, institutions, and activities that are most cherished in American political life.
Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Political Ideology: Crash Course Government and Politics #35
- A Crash Course video covering the political ideologies in the U.S.
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_k_k-bHigM

Where do you fit on the US political spectrum? - BBC News
- A short video helping you decide where you stand on the political spectrum
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZAYMWSBXG

The Political Spectrum
- A short video explaining the beliefs on each side of the political spectrum and how you should vote to accurately support your personal beliefs
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XyyYALSJayI

Lesson Glossary

classical liberalism: political ideology that believes in individual liberties and rights, based on the view that people are born equal with the right to make decisions without government intervention

conservative ideology: generally, a belief that individuals are primarily accountable for their own well-being, and that the government's responsibility is to see that they have the freedom to pursue their dreams

ideological spectrum: system of classifying different political positions, typically used in the United States to represent conservative and liberal ideologies

liberal ideology: generally, a belief that government power should be used to regulate the economy and bring about justice and equality of opportunity

modern conservatism: political ideology that believes an elected government will guard individual liberties and provide laws, while preferring a smaller government that stays out of the economy and allows the market and businesses to determine prices, wages, and supply

modern liberalism: political ideology that focuses on equality and supports government intervention in society and the economy if it does so to promote equality

political culture: the widely shared beliefs, values, and norms that define the relationship between citizens and the government, and citizens to one another, that is unique to every country

political ideologies: views of the world that reflect an individual's values and ideas

traditional conservatism: political ideology that supports monarchy and church authority and believes that the government provides the rule of law and maintains a society that is safe and organized

Check Your Knowledge

1. When it comes to the American view, ____________ states that government is based on a body of law applied equally and fairly.
   A. equality
   B. liberty
   C. the Rule of Law
   D. nationalism
2. Generally, conservative ideology favors the use of government power to control the economy and bring justice and equality of opportunity.
   A. True
   B. False

3. Liberals are considered left wing while conservatives are considered right wing.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:
1. C  2. B  3. A

Citations

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