

Conservative Versus Liberal

What's the Difference?

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In America, a great deal of fuss is made over the attribution of the terms “liberal” and “conservative,” especially as they apply in the policy making arena where these terms are often used to disparage the views of opponents. In light of the conflict that the use of these terms both indicates and engenders, many have tried to define what it means to be “a liberal” or “a conservative” but without much success. While I think it is possible to indicate what characterizes the difference between a liberal and a conservative perspective, I think it is mostly impossible to categorize people or groups as a whole using these terms. I explore this seeming paradox in what follows.

The terms “liberal” and “conservative” begin as adjectives which describe points of view relative to one another [the liberal position vs. the conservative stance]. Only secondarily are these terms pressed into service as nouns to generalize about individuals or groups - “a conservative” or “a liberal”. It is these generalizations about individuals and groups that typically do not hold up, and for good reason. The fact is that the point of view of individuals and groups very often changes between a more liberal and a more conservative position as the issues change. And as the individual or group in the comparison changes, it frequently occurs that what was a liberal position in one comparative context becomes a conservative position in another. For clarification, let’s consider some examples, using the current debate over immigration – especially on America’s southern border with Mexico. Allowing for the range of more and less liberal and conservative positions on the immigration issue, an example liberal position might be one that emphasizes and sympathizes with the economic needs of both non-citizens [Hispanics] and the many American enterprises that employ them – helping to keep costs down and products and services competitive in a world economy. A conservative position might be one that emphasizes the negative effect of illegal workers and their families on wages for American workers or the costs to American taxpayers of providing health, education, and social services for these illegals. In this example comparison, the liberal position considers the needs of both Americans and Hispanics and accepts a more fluid and accommodating border, while a conservative position seeks to secure America’s borders and to punish those who illegally attempt to enter or remain in the country.

While these kinds of liberal and conservative positions seem rather straight forward, the situation easily becomes more complex. For instance, within the liberal position on immigration there are those who favor general amnesty for existing illegals, those who favor amnesty for select categories of illegals, and those who reject amnesty all together. Relative to support for general amnesty, each of the alternative positions is conservative, and the last is conservative relative to the middle position. So, as the issue changes, or in this case as the issue becomes more specified [amnesty within the immigration matter], it is entirely possible for an individual to hold a liberal position on the general issue and a conservative position on the more specific matter within it. Correspondingly, within the conservative position on immigration, there are those who favor the more liberal capture and deportation way to handle transgressors versus those who favor the more conservative imprisonment solution or even those vigilantes who favor shooting to maim or kill. Given these differences among liberals and among conservatives themselves, identifying who is “a liberal” and who is “a conservative,” even on this single issue is not at all clear.

Across issues and domains the same complexity applies: those who favor a conservative approach to immigration may support a liberal view of the medical use of marihuana or of benefits for the handicapped. The fact is that individuals are not consistently liberal or conservative on all issues or in all spheres of life [social, religious, political, economic, etc.] And the same applies to groups, although there are some groups that are single issue and highly specified in orientation. Add in the fact that even on the same issue, individuals are not consistent and the matter becomes even more muddled. For example it is not uncommon to find people who favor increased taxes to support improving libraries [a more liberal position], while at the same time hiring accountants at the personal level to aggressively pursue reducing their individual tax liability. Liberal or conservative ideology is not necessarily matched by behavior when it comes to an individual’s self interest. In this regard, the immigration conservative who even participates in private militia border patrols may conveniently “overlook” the illegal housekeeper or gardener that he or she employs on a regular basis.

The fact is that liberal and conservative labels can only be assigned under individual, comparative, and rather highly specified conditions. Alter the members [individuals or groups] in the comparison, or the issue, or the specificity within the issue, or consider the personal behavior in relation to the issue, and the labels can and often do flip. This is why it is so difficult to define in general “a conservative” or “a liberal.” Individuals and most groups are very rarely consistently liberal or conservative relative to others in all cases. Only

those who dwell at the extremes of the liberal – conservative continuum will occupy those positions when compared to others in nearly all situations. And, as we will see, these extremes invite a comparison to the pathological.

In most cases, if we change the positions of the parties in the comparison, one person's liberal becomes another person's conservative.

Allowing for the conditional and relativistic nature of the assignment of the terms "liberal" and "conservative," it is nevertheless possible to characterize the distinction between the liberal and conservative perspectives themselves. The key distinction is that the social scope of the reference group for the conservative perspective will always be more limited or circumscribed than that for the liberal perspective. And correspondingly, the liberal perspective will always reference a more expansive or inclusive social framework than the conservative perspective. Put another way, the liberal perspective will always identify to a greater extent with the party or entity that the conservative perspective would ignore or exclude. A liberal perspective is inclusive at whatever scope it applies [our land, our resources, our community, our economy, our faith, our world], while a conservative perspective is exclusive at whatever scope it applies [my land, my money, my home, my family, my church, my race, my ethnic group, my business, my country]. The full scope of consideration ranges from ego only to all entities of the cosmos. Select any point of reference on this continuum and the conservative position orients in the exclusive direction while the liberal stance orients in the inclusive direction. Whatever the issue may be, this is the key to the distinction between liberal and conservative points of view.

To clarify this distinction, consider some representative, comparative examples on particular issues: 1) Capital punishment: From a conservative perspective, the crime of the perpetrator is serious enough for the citizen to be permanently excluded from society by ending his or her life. From the liberal perspective, whatever his or her crime, he or she retains his or her membership as a citizen and human being and should receive a significant but not terminal punishment. 2) Health Care: From the conservative perspective, each individual or family is responsible for providing for their own health care and should make their own arrangements for this provision. Those who cannot or do not provide for their own health care invite whatever negative consequences follow. From the liberal perspective, it is society that needs its citizens to be healthy, so it is society that should provide directly or indirectly for the health care for its citizens – no one should be excluded from the opportunity for good health. 3) Abortion: From the conservative perspective, it is each individual life that is of paramount value and life begins at its earliest moment – conception. From the liberal perspective,

individual life is important but so is both the life of the mother and the ability and commitment of the parents to provide for the successful rearing of the child. From the liberal perspective, life begins when the child is in its last stages of development and nearing the time of entering the world, and excluding consideration of the interests of others beyond the "rights" of the fetus is too limited. 4) War on Terror: From the conservative perspective, national security is paramount and moving expeditiously to force in seeking retribution is necessary to address all who attack America, her institutions, or citizens. From the liberal perspective, national security is important, but so are respectful international relations; so it is as important to look beyond America and her interests at what motivates aggressive behavior toward America and Americans and to work to address these issues and to move to a military option only as a last resort. 5) Gun Control: From the conservative perspective, each individual has the right to defend him or her self in the face of serious threat to life, property, or well-being. And encouraging citizens to arm themselves with guns is the best way to assure that they will have this ability. From the liberal perspective, self-defense is legitimate, but easy access to hand guns and automatic firearms for all individuals also makes these weapons readily available to criminals, encourages their use in criminal acts, and increases the likelihood that innocent citizens and law enforcement personnel will be seriously injured or killed.

In each of the above examples, the liberal perspective in the comparison considers the issue from a more inclusive social position – allowing for a greater degree of acceptance, obligation or respect for those individuals or groups who have the potential to be affected. Conversely, the conservative perspective in the comparison sets more limited social boundaries and excludes from acceptance, obligation or respect those who lie outside those boundaries.

Within their respective social domains of reference, both conservative and liberal perspectives apply a principle of equality and fairness, but in the comparison, the domain of the liberal perspective is always more expansive than that of the conservative perspective. At the extreme, the hyper-conservative perspective is centered on the single individual and considers only his or her needs, wants and desires as legitimate. Even spouses and immediate family lie outside the domain of acceptance and respect in this extreme view. On the other hand, at the extreme, the hyper liberal perspective commits to a universal principle of fairness and equality across all of cosmic existence, including, of course, all humans and all "living" creatures on earth. The interest of all of existence is included and fully respected in this extreme and idyllic liberal viewpoint.

Virtually no one lives totally at these extremes; sociopaths and ascetic, vegetarian monks are about as close as humans get to commitment at these extreme positions of conservatism and liberalism. Most of us live in the middle zone, oscillating between the pull of these conservative and liberal extremes depending on our basic socio-philosophic view and our personal interests. The more we trend toward considering only our personal interests or those of our own limited and “exclusive” groups [whether these groups be family, business, ethnic community, tribe, department, organization, race, platoon, region, nation, etc.], the more conservative we are. As conservatives, the principles of equality and fairness apply only within our reference group. Outsiders and strangers [other gangs, families, corporations, ethnic groups, races, religious believers, etc.] are identified as easy to exclude from acceptance and respect. And once excluded, these “others” may be ignored, shunned, denigrated, preyed upon, enslaved, or even exterminated depending on the level of opportunity or threat they are seen to pose. On the other hand, the more we trend toward committing to a universal principle of fairness and equality at an ever increasing scope of social reference [from family, to humanity, to Gaia, etc.], the more liberal we are. As we approach the liberal extreme, we may denounce the needs and desires of individuals and curtail efforts by individuals and groups of more limited scope to gain an advantage in influence, wealth, power, or prestige. But to disallow gain and advantage for some is to deny competition and to threaten the motivation for human achievement, innovation, and progress – the biological imperative of the modern predatory human species. So, the ultimate liberal lives in an ideal state of total existential interconnectedness where equality and fairness prevail comprehensively, while the ultimate conservative lives in complete social isolation in competition with all that surrounds him or her. The ultimate liberal obeys only the social imperative, while the ultimate conservative obeys only the biological imperative. Alone, neither of these extremes is realistic or productive.

In the end, as in all things, the liberal and conservative debate is not a matter of right and wrong. It is just one of the ways we point to tendencies in thought and action, which as humans we must negotiate and balance. It is more important first, that we are aware of this ongoing challenge to us as individuals and as members of social groups at many different levels, and second, that we employ this awareness to decide in general and on specific issues where we want to locate ourselves and our membership groups in this dynamic equilibrium. The worst circumstance is to be inadvertently captured by labels and their associated fixed ideologies. We all dwell within the pull of liberal and conservative tendencies, and, in fact, the “labels” are always floating and relative. The vast majority of us are not simply liberal or conservative; we are both. At different times or on different issues we are one or the other only in

comparison to the position of some other person or group. We do ourselves a disservice to press ourselves or others into one general category or the other. The reality is more nuanced and subtle than that!

Yes, as we Americans negotiate the conservative – liberal center between our major political parties, Republicans trend generally in a more conservative direction while Democrats trend in a more liberal direction. And yes, in comparison to other developed nations, the American dynamic center is somewhat more conservative. But neither Republicans nor Democrats are anywhere near the conservative or liberal extremes, and both deserve the respect of the other.

It is the greatest shame of our current political situation that we have allowed ourselves to carve out such extreme, disrespectful, and disingenuous rhetoric to characterize what are in fact rather small differences in how our major parties envision balance in the center of the liberal – conservative dynamic. And unfortunately much of our news media, with its fascination with the sensational and its orientation more to entertainment than to education, stokes the fires of extreme rhetoric – whether liberal or conservative – by focusing attention on the claims of extremists and in the name of “impartiality” not exposing their glaring weaknesses. Real debate is not won with sound bites and cute or outrageous comments, or with salacious name calling by quick-mouthing media populists. It is won by reasoned argument that appeals to the facts and that reflects the best thought of experts on the subject. It is time for the media and the emerging blogosphere to start serving the public good, stop attending to celebrity “news” extremists, and expose the selective editing of the facts by these extremists to fit their undeclared biases. And it is time for liberals and conservatives alike to stop encouraging the media and blogosphere feeding frenzy by knowingly offering them disinformation, spin, and sensational sound bites. As citizens, who are in reality both liberal and conservative, we have to demand better of ourselves, our elected officials, and our information media.

Unfortunately, until we become as “liberal” as our developed brethren and exclude the unseemly influence of money in politics, close the revolving door between politicians and lobbyists, and create the conditions in which our elections are won by those offering the best ideas to preserve and advance the public good, it is very unlikely that we will escape the negative effects of the current perfect legislative storm that leaves us paralyzed by and in the throes of a phony, media enhanced, liberal – conservative debate, which ends up mainly serving the objectives of moneyed special interests.