POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

Liberalism and Conservatism
IDEOLOGY

A coherent and consistent set of beliefs.
(a way of thinking)

Be careful not to confuse ideology with party. You don't join an ideology the way you join a party, and while the parties lean in certain directions, not all members share the same ideology. We will examine the parties in a couple of weeks.
Suppose person X told you that:

• They oppose abortion.
• They support school prayer.
• They want to reduce environmental regulations.
• They want to cut government spending.
How well do you think you could predict this person’s position on gun control?

1
Quite
Certainly

2
Maybe

3
Random
Guess

While there may seem to be no logical connection between one’s position on gun control and one’s position on abortion, it turns out that one who opposes gun control is more likely to oppose abortion than someone who does not.

This lecture will examine the roots of liberal and conservative ideology and show how seemingly disparate issues can be linked by ideology.
Questions to Consider

• What does it mean to be ideological?
• What unites the various aspects of liberal and conservative thinking?
• How have liberalism and conservatism change over time?
Political Ideology

Just What do the Words “Liberal” and “Conservative” Mean?

A Historical Perspective

We will first take a look at the historical origins of the words “liberal” and “conservative”.
The French Revolution 1789

• Those who wanted to preserve (conserve) the Old Regime were referred to as **Conservatives**.
  – They supported the rights and of the Aristocracy as well as the Catholic Church.
  – Basically they did not want any change.

Prior to the French Revolution which broke out in 1789, the Church and the Aristocracy (including the King) had all the power. They did not pay taxes, set all the rules, and allowed the “commoners” (97% of the French people) no voice at all in government.

The “commoners” included poor rural peasants (the vast majority of society) and urban workers as well as a small but rather wealthy “middle class” comprised of businessmen, lawyers, doctors, and other professionals. Despite their wealth and importance to the economy, this middle class had no more political freedom or rights than the poorest peasants. It was group that led the Revolution against the Old Order.
The French Revolution

• Those who wanted to preserve (conserve) the Old Regime were referred to as Conservatives.

• Those who wanted to change the old system and give all people equal opportunity to advance and thus more freedom (liberty) were called Liberals.

You may notice the word “liberal” stems from the word liberty; thus, the original liberals were those who wanted change that would bring political and civil liberty (freedom) to the mass of the French people.

Conservatives opposed this and wanted to preserve (conserve) the old ways; thus, the word “conservative” gets associated with resistance to change and the word “liberal” is often applied to someone who wants change. But, be careful as we will see that this is not always true in the modern context.
The French Revolution

• While the National Assembly wrote and debated a new constitution, the liberals and conservatives generally sat together.

• The liberals sat on the left while the conservatives sat on the right.

You have probably heard the terms “left wing” or “right wing”. Those terms also come from this time period.
The French Revolution

• Thus, we have or terms “left” and “right” to refer to liberals and conservatives.

left ___________________________ right
Liberal    Moderate    Conservative

The National Assembly was the body that was commissioned to write a constitution for France. Because the liberals sat with their buddies on the left side of the room, they became known as “the left”. Today we still say that someone who is liberal is on the left or is a “left winger” if they are extremely liberal. Likewise, the “right” is still associated with conservatism.
The 19th Century Liberalism

• Throughout the 19th century “classical liberalism” resembled the liberalism of the French Revolution, especially those ideas stemming from John Locke, perhaps the father of “classical liberalism”.

The “liberals” of the French Revolution, like our own founding fathers, were inspired by the ideas of intellectuals such as John Locke, Montesquieu, and John Jacque Rousseau who were all part of an intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment.

Remember what we learned about John Locke: He supported an equal voice for all people (or at least all white males) regardless of wealth or hereditary birth right. He also wanted minimal government interference in our lives and for government to leave us with as much freedom as possible. This is what most ‘liberals” supported throughout the 19th century and in this sense most all Americans were liberals. In Europe at this time, conservatives were those who supported monarchy and rule by the aristocracy.
The 19th Century Liberalism

• These included:
  – An emphasis and faith in human reason which emerged during the Enlightenment - a rejection of Divine Right. (the Deist position)
  – A belief that government should be minimal and not interfere with people’s private lives.
  – A belief that ordinary people (non-aristocrats) deserved the same rights and privileges of others.
  – Support for the “common man”, protect him from the power of government - a reaction to the oppressive governments of the past.

While seemingly conservative by today’s standards, in his day Locke was considered quite forward looking, and his ideas promised to give huge portions of society rights and privileges they had been previously denied.

Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke based their ideas on human reason rather than God and faith. Though they were not atheists, they thought religion ought to be kept out of politics for the most part. (This is where we get our idea of separation of church and state from.) Part of their reasoning for this was based on the fact that for ages the church had been closely aligned with the aristocracy which had denied a political voice to the masses. They also believed religious belief ought to be a private matter - freedom of thought and conscience.
20th Century Developments (that change the debate)

- The Progressive Movement (early 1900’s):
  - Government regulation of the economy
    - Anti-trust laws.
    - the Pure Food and Drug Act, the FTC.
  - Government Social Improvement schemes
    - Urban renewal, city services
- The New Deal (1930’s):
  - Social Security, Jobs Programs, Labor Rights
- The Great Society (1960’s):
  - The War on Poverty; welfare, Medicare/Medicaid
  - Civil Rights and eventually affirmative action

During the 20th century, despite maintaining ties to its origins, liberalism changed dramatically. We talked about how the movements and epochs above contributed to the expansion of the federal government. All of these movements were reactions to the changes brought on by industrial and post industrial society. In light of the growth of corporate power, those on the left no longer supported minimalist government (and its companion laissez-faire capitalism). They came to believe that the government needed to step in to protect workers (minimum wages, the right to unionize, safety standards, etc), stabilize the economy, and protect the environment. While this a very different role for the government than what Locke had advocated, liberals feel that they are continuing the tradition of standing up for the “common man”. 20th century liberals also began to support civil rights programs that spread the liberal promise to women and ethnic minorities.
Liberalism in the 20th Century

• In all three cases those who wanted to help the less advantaged groups in society turned to government as an agent of change.

• Thus, liberals, in adapting to industrialize society increasingly turned to the government. This represents a radical paradigm shift in “liberal” ideology, which now embodies faith in government.

• However, these new liberals shared with their old counterparts a belief in change, progress and innovation, and a desire to aid the “common man”.

Whereas Locke (along with the framers of our Constitution) were somewhat distrustful of government based on its past associations with aristocracy and various forms of tyranny, 20th century liberals came to see government as a positive agent of change that can benefit ordinary people.

While the means liberals use to achieved their goals have changed, their ends remains much the same - serve the people. In the days of FDR and LBJ, to be liberal was associated with being young, progressive and forward looking. In most parts of the country, it was a good label to run under to have if you wanted to be elected.

Modern day conservatives were less enamored with the expansion of government - though they came to accept some things such as social security. For the most part they see the growth of government as a basic intrusion on liberty and feel liberals have gone too far in helping the “common man” which violates the basic principles of individualism. Today it is conservatives who talk the most about liberty (lower taxes, fewer regulations on business, etc,) while liberals tend to emphasize equality.
The 1980’s

- After nearly 80 years of liberal dominated government, the Reagan revolution vowed to dismantle as many “liberal” programs as they could.

- Thus, another paradigm shift takes place, with liberals promoting the status quo and conservatives supporting change.

For most of the 20th century until 1980, liberal thinking tended to have the most leverage within government and liberals were successful in creating the wide range of government programs that we looked at. However, when Reagan took office in 1981 with his New Federalism - he threatened to dismantle much of what liberals had achieved in the previous decades; thus, liberals became the ones who wanted to prevent change and preserve past achievements, while conservatives wanted to usher in a new era.
The 1980’s

• After nearly 80 years of liberal dominated government, the Reagan revolution vowed to dismantle as many “liberal” programs as they could.

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Thus the old idea of liberals wanting change and conservatives opposing it no longer really holds. Now it is more an issue of what kind of change one supports. Conservatives perhaps want changes that will bring back the good ol’ days of the 19th century - such as lower taxes, less government regulation, more economic freedom, and a more religious orientation. The most radical fiscal conservatives want to do away with the income tax and the IRS altogether. Thus like conservatives of all ages, today’s conservatives tend to look towards the past for inspiration.

Throughout the 80’s and 90’s, liberals may have wanted to expand liberal programs, but political support for this was so weak that they mainly contented themselves with trying to preserve what they already had. As Barak Obama admitted during the 2008 primary campaign, during the Reagan era, it was the conservative wing of the Republican Party that was the party of new ideas.

Brink Lindsey in her book “The Age of Abundance” has an interesting take on today’s cultural divide. The left, she says, likes the cultural changes (personal freedom), but not the economic changes (free trade, globalization) brought on by our new technological age. The right, on the other hand, likes the economic changes but not the cultural ones. Liberals criticize capitalism and its inequality, but like the social changes it has wrought while conservatives like capitalism but reject its fruits as poisonous.
Liberalism’s Low Point

- Reagan’s popularity intimidated many liberals.

- During the 1988 election Bush attacked Dukakis’ liberalism by calling him a “card carrying member” of the ACLU.

- During the 90’s, even liberals shunned the “liberal” label. Clinton, for example called himself a “New Democrat”.

In the years following Reagan’s election, most of the country was largely against what was seen as inefficient government, costly government programs, and wasteful spending. Politicians who were successfully labeled by their opposition as being “liberal” was often doomed for defeat. Thus, most politicians who were slightly to the left tried to define themselves as “moderates”.

This current presidential election seems to be marking quite a shift as Democrats are openly talking about a more activist and positive role for the federal government. While they still shy away from calling themselves liberal, and while Republicans still hope to define them as so, there seems to be a mood in the public that a move towards the left is in order. Concerns about the environment, the economy, and health care have many people looking for more government help and Democrats openly talking about what might be called “liberal” ideas.

The financial meltdown in Sept. of ’08 even had John McCain endorsing more government regulation. (Though he will try to get away from saying this is a ”liberal” strategy.)
8 Dichotomies Distinguishing Liberalism and Conservativism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conservative</th>
<th>Liberal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. look towards the past (traditionalists)</td>
<td>forward looking (innovators)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. religiously orthodox</td>
<td>secular, humanist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. absolutist notion of morality</td>
<td>individualist morality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. belief in individualism</td>
<td>belief in interdependence</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. econ: emphasis on liberty</td>
<td>emphasis on equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. skeptical of government</td>
<td>faith in government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. isolationist (except Cold War)</td>
<td>interventionist (ie -Bosnia, Kosovo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. military strength/unilateralism</td>
<td>diplomacy/multilaeralism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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These two lists (adapted from another source) go a long ways towards depicting the liberal vs. conservative mindset. As you go down each list, in most cases you can see how each point evolves out of the previous one.

Some notes:

#3 - An absolutist notion of morality is the idea that there are clear rights and wrongs while and individualist (or relative) sense of morality leaves it more up to the individual. You can clearly see this difference in the abortion debate where conservatives tend to see abortion as an absolute wrong while the more liberal view sees it as a difficult moral issue that must be left up to the individual to decide. At the time of the French Revolution, the church was such an integral part of the old system, that the conservatives who defended the old political system also defended old religious values. Despite our heritage of separating church and state, conservatives today, like their predecessors, continue to support traditional religious values and often see a greater role for these in the forming of public policy. They reject the more secular outlook of many liberals.

Note that the lists above contain a mixture of economic, political and social aspects and someone who we say is very ideological tends to be either conservative or liberal on all of these issues. However, in reality many people are conservative in some respects and liberal in others.
The Mix of Ideology

- Religious liberalism
  - The Abolitionists  The Civil rights Movement
- Libertarianism:
  - Economically conservative/socially liberal
  - Ron Paul
- Populism:
  - Economically liberal/socially conservative
  - Mike Huckabee
- Pragmatism:
  - (doing what seems to work in a given circumstance, not ideologically bound
  - Arnold Schwarzenegger / FDR
    - “I am a fiscal conservative, a social moderate, and an environmental progressive.”  Schwarzenegger 2/07

Both McCain and Guilliani angered social conservatives by not taking strong stands against abortion, gay rights and gun control. Yet, both are fiscal conservatives who generally support lower taxes and lower government spending.

Mike Huckabee, while seeing homosexuality and abortion as practical evils, has advocated government programs to help the poor and angered economic conservatives by supporting tax increases while governor.

Populism has both a negative and positive connotation. Positive as is refers to someone who appeals to the people, but negative in that it may imply to someone who appeals to the people’s fears, phobias, and emotions. A populist leader may promise things undeliverable and rouse up the people. They may blame foreigners or other “undesirable” groups for the nation’s problems and them promise all sorts of social programs while cutting taxes.
Was Bush a True Conservative?

- Moral issues
- The Budget
- Foreign Policy

Many conservatives such as pundits George Will and David Brooks look at the Bush record and don’t see our current president as a true conservative. They point out that, though he lowered taxes, he oversaw the greatest expansion of government spending and largest deficits in our country’s history. Finally, his foreign policy seemed to go beyond simply defending the nation to the loftier goal of spreading democracy to the Middle East. While he did appoint social conservatives to the Supreme Court, he seemed to do little to push Congress to pass an amendment proposal banning gay marriage.
How would you label the following?

George Bush
John McCain
Barak Obama
Hillary Clinton
Sarah Palin
Just how liberal or conservative someone is often rests in the eye of the beholder. The chart shows that both Republicans and Democrats saw the Republican candidates as being slightly right of center. However, members of each party perceive the Democratic candidates quite differently. Democrats saw Obama as slightly more liberal than Clinton, but both as somewhat moderate. Republicans saw both Clinton as way liberal with Clinton practically off the charts.

Source: PEW Jan 2007. About two weeks before the CA primary.

Of course this is before Sarah Palin came into the picture, but it is pretty clear she tows the line in terms of both fiscal and social conservatism (at least in terms of her language, anti-choice, anti-gay rights, cutting spending and taxes) (just ignore those earmarks she endorsed).
McCain 2008

I will fight every moment of every day in this campaign to make sure Americans are not deceived by an eloquent, but empty call for change that... promises no more than a holiday from history and a return to the false promises and failed policies of a tired philosophy that trusts in government more than the people.

John McCain

2/18/08

There is a lot of talk these days in the Republican Party as to whether John McCain is a true conservative (mostly because of his stand on immigration and some social issues). However, the following quote by him captures the conservative ethic pretty well. Certainly, the Palin pick tremendously helped his stock with conservatives especially due to her stances on social issues.
This graph pulls together a lot of what you learned in some of the past lectures. All those who fit in the top half of the circle support the democratic process, even if it may mean losing. Most Americans fit in a relatively narrow range near the top of this circle. Those who are at the extreme right or left (right or left wingers) tend to have less patience with those who disagree with their views. In this way they become less tolerant and more authoritarian. At extreme edge, they come to support their policy objectives more than the democratic process. While fascism and communism derive from opposite sides of the spectrum, If you are a poor bloke on the street it doesn’t much matte if you get beaten up or thrown in jail by a left wing thug (ie Mao, Stalin in the USSR) or a right wing thug (ie. - Hitler, Pinochet, Suharto)
Where do You Fit?

left __________________________ right

Liberal          Moderate          Conservative

Ideological    pragmatic    Ideological
or
un-interested