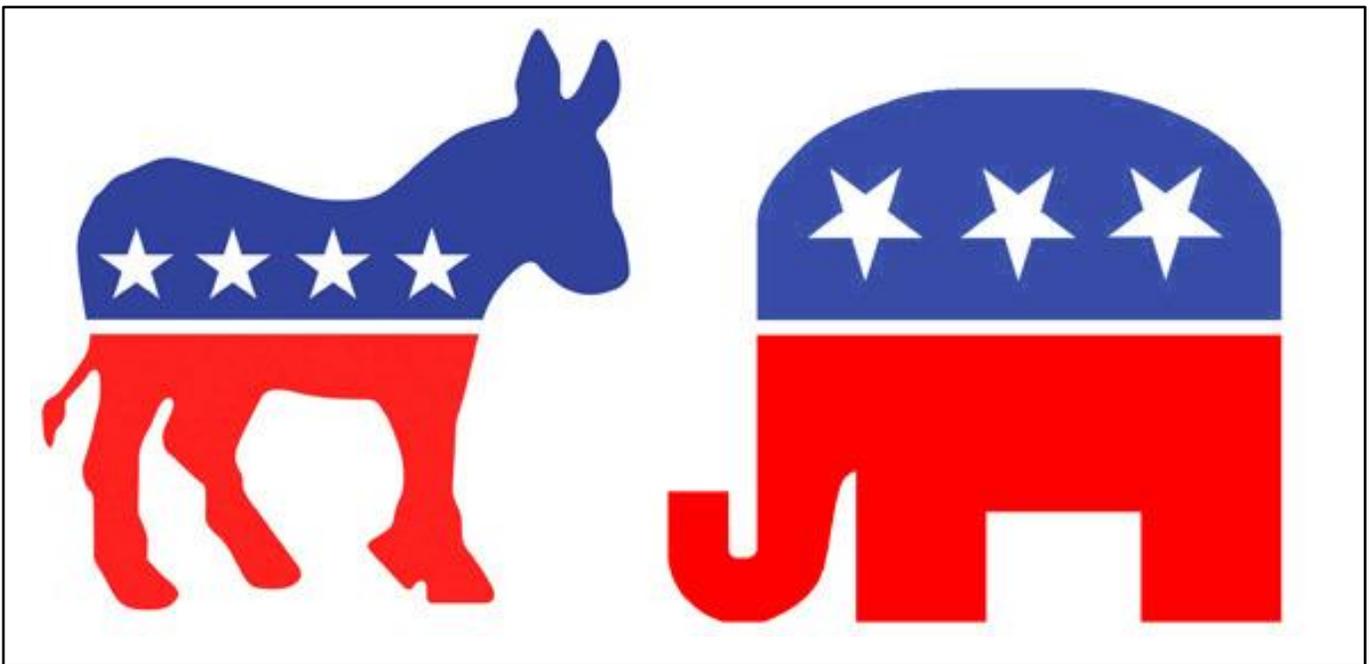


# CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POLITICS



**Opposing views in a free, pluralistic society**  
**Basic principles of the Left and Right**  
**Our two-party system**  
**Third Parties, Independents, and swing voters**

The United States is the world's largest, and one of the oldest, democratic nations. Americans with diverse views and ideologies organize into multiple political parties to advance their causes through the electoral process. We discuss this political competition in terms of **Left and Right; liberal and conservative**. In our **two-party system**, most people identify with either the **Democratic or Republican** Parties, while others remain independent or join one of the many small "third parties."

***What do opposing sides in American politics believe?***

***What are they trying to achieve?***

***What do most of us agree on?***

*"We are all federalists, we are all republicans..." \**  
...and we are all classical liberals... [right?]

It's important to remember that in the big scheme of things, **most liberals and conservatives in America still share basic values about a free and pluralistic society, stemming from the classical liberalism of America's founding principles**. These principles include: protection of natural individual rights; limited government; an emphasis on freedom of speech, press, and religion; respect for property rights; and regular, free, and fair elections based on universal suffrage. How much America, the Left, and the Right might have strayed from our founding goals, and in which areas, is for you to consider.

# WHAT DO THE LABELS MEAN?

**DEMOCRATS, REPUBLICANS**

**LIBERALS, CONSERVATIVES**

**LEFT-WING, RIGHT-WING**

**LIBERTARIANS**

**PROGRESSIVES**

**MODERATES, CENTRISTS, INDEPENDENTS**



Image from Matt Groening's *The Simpsons*

# THE *CHANGE VERSUS STATUS QUO* TRAP



Thanks to the French Revolution of 1789 and the seating arrangements in their National Assembly, ever since we have thought of liberals, or those on the political left, as supporters of change or **reform** (change for the better), while conservatives, or those on the political right, as defenders of the **status quo** (the existing order and traditions). Here is a **political spectrum** of change, with labels we often use:

LEFT	CENTER			RIGHT	
REVOLUTIONARY, IMMEDIATE CHANGE	GRADUAL, CAUTIOUS CHANGE	STATUS QUO	RETURN TO THE PAST		
Radicals	progressives	liberals	moderates	conservatives	reactionaries

This works well to understand politics and labels in most countries. But America is often an **EXCEPTION** to global norms... Do American liberals consistently support change and reform? Do American conservatives consistently try to keep things the way they are? **NOPE.**

## CONSERVATIVES FOR CHANGE!

Conservatives were the big supporters of S.D.I. (the Star Wars missile defense shield) in the 1980s, a **radical departure** from the long established M.A.D. approach to world peace. Conservatives pushed for welfare **reform** in the 1990s, and call for tort **reform** (to reduce lawsuit abuse) as well as **changes** to affirmative action policies today. Liberals typically defend the “**status quo**” in these areas.

## LIBERALS FOR THE STATUS QUO!

Liberals today tend to oppose any changes to the Supreme Court’s 1973 abortion ruling. Most liberals oppose the school choice reform movement, school voucher programs, charter schools, and other alternatives to the traditional public school system. Liberals fight conservative efforts to reform our Social Security system. Conservatives are much more likely to call for “change” and “reform” in these areas.

## CHANGE THIS, STATUS QUO THAT

It’s true that American liberals often do support change and conservatives often defend the status quo. **But this is not a rule.** It depends on the issue. Each side at times wants reform or wants to defend an existing law, program, or institution from alteration or replacement. If you try to stick to *liberal=change* and *conservative = status quo*, it works great for Iran, China, Uzbekistan... but you will be wrong A LOT when it comes to US politics.

## LEFT AND RIGHT OF CENTER

It’s also true that in America, the Democratic and Republican Parties are understood as **center-left** and **center-right**. This is supposed to mean that they are not that different; both parties generally agree on the most basic questions of government, and differ over how to achieve generally shared goals. Both parties tend to reject the extremes or fringes of the political spectrum. BUT, the divide is widening - American politics have become more **polarized**: oppositional. Are we growing apart? Are we losing shared values?

# UNDERSTANDING THE AMERICAN LEFT AND RIGHT

## A BETTER WAY THAN CHANGE V STATUS QUO...

Study the issues that split American liberals and conservatives, and certain core differences come into focus. There are *tendencies* that can consistently be applied to the left-right labels. While this approach is not perfect, identifying these tendencies is a much more accurate way of understanding how liberals and conservative think. Remember, these are tendencies, not rules.

In the debates liberals and conservatives have over policy, here are the top three core differences. Most of their positions come from how they are at odds over three questions...

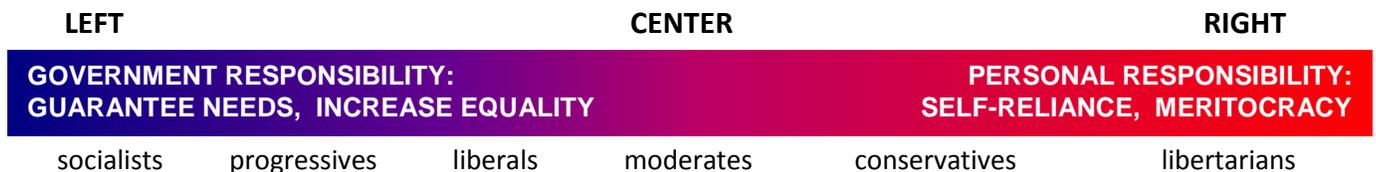
## THREE QUESTIONS AT THE HEART OF LEFT-RIGHT DISPUTES

1. RESPONSIBILITY: MORE PERSONAL OR SOCIAL?
2. EQUALITY: HOW MUCH?
3. GOVERNMENT: BIGGER OR SMALLER?

No matter how divergent the topics of debate, virtually all issues come back to core divides between the left and right on responsibility, and on equality. Based on these differences, the left and right do not agree about the size and role of government.

### ROLE OF GOVERNMENT: A BETTER POLITICAL SPECTRUM?

This puts core values as the focus, instead of change and status quo:



Libertarians would object to this spectrum, because they reject being labeled left or right, and there are other issues that complicate their placement. But they are a small minority in politics. This spectrum emphasizes the opposing views on the role of government, and does work very well when applied to American politics. Related to the Three Questions above, liberals and conservatives are also divided on these core questions:

4. USE OF FORCE: HOW VALID? WHEN?
5. HOW MUCH FAITH IN THE FREE MARKET?
6. CULTURE WARS: PRESERVE OR REPLACE TRADITIONAL VALUES?
7. IDENTITY: HOW SHOULD WE SEE OURSELVES AND OTHERS?
8. NATIONALISM OR GLOBALISM?

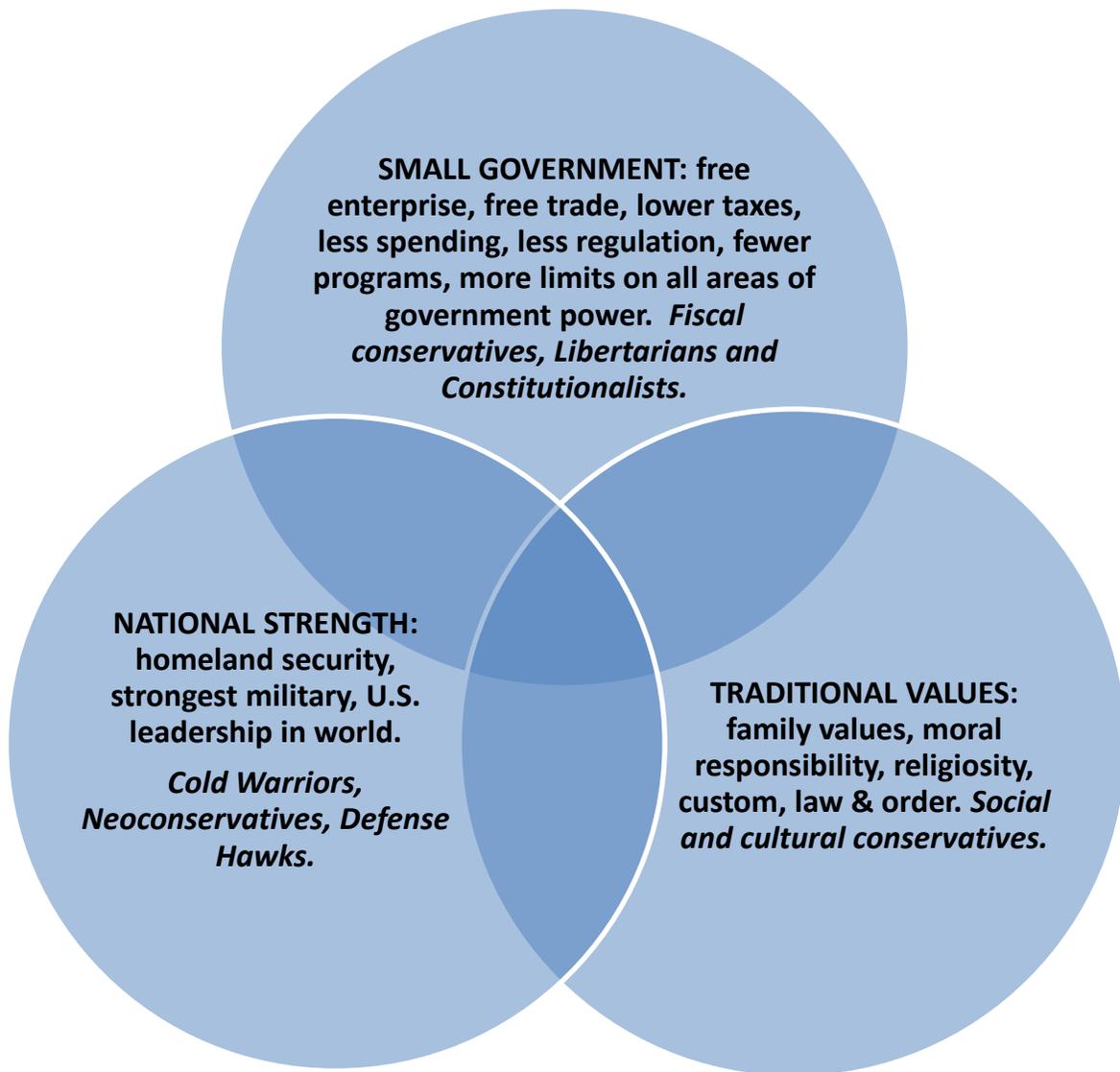


# THREE LEGS OF CONSERVATISM

What is considered the political Right in America today is a diverse coalition of groups and views. These views overlap, but often different types of conservatives will disagree with each other on certain issues.

To generalize, these groups can be understood in three categories:

## SMALL GOVERNMENT, STRONG NATIONAL DEFENSE, AND TRADITIONAL VALUES CONSERVATIVES



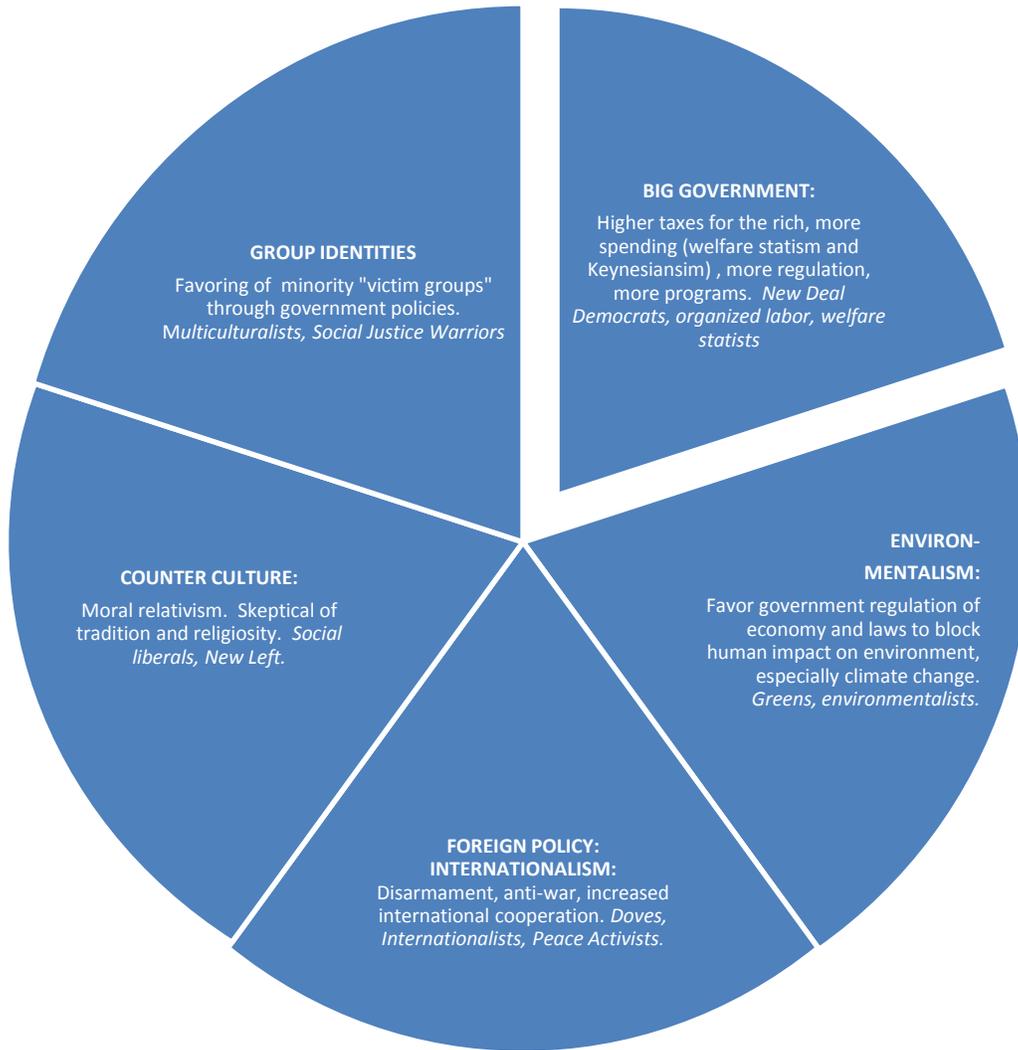
**All three groups usually vote Republican** because they see that party as closer to their beliefs. However, the coalition cracks from time to time: libertarians also have a third party organization; many small government conservatives did not vote in 2006 out of disgust with a big-spending Republican Congress; and evangelical Christians have often stayed home rather than vote for certain Republicans they saw as too socially liberal. Foreign policy divides many small government conservatives/libertarians from neoconservatives; social conservatives are at odds with libertarians on a number of issues, and free traders often disagree with defenders of traditional manufacturing jobs.

# MANY IDENTITIES OF THE LEFT

The political Left in America today is usually more ideologically unified than the American Right. Central is a desire to use government to correct perceived social flaws and injustices that are believed to victimize specific groups or the environment. Still, it is often a coalition of different groups with parallel and overlapping political, economic, or social views, who sometimes disagree with each other on certain issues. To generalize, the more important groups can be identified as:

## WELFARE STATE LIBERALS, SOCIAL LIBERALS, LABOR INTERESTS, MULTICULTURALISTS / SOCIAL JUSTICE WARRIORS, INTERNATIONALISTS, ENVIRONMENTALISTS

People who represent consistent left wing views in America today tend to identify themselves as **PROGRESSIVES**. All these groups usually vote Democrat because they see that party as closer to their beliefs or interests. However, the coalition cracks from time to time: the Green Party and other third parties have drawn votes from Democrats; and early 2008 witnessed the spectacle of people on the Left calling each other racist or sexist, according to their support for Obama or Clinton in the primary vote.



# SWING VOTERS: WHO ARE THE INDEPENDENTS?

According to polling by Gallup, as of 2019, 26% of Americans described themselves as liberal, 35% as conservative, and 35% as independent. Elections are mostly determined by two things:

- Revving up “the base” (the diehard left and right) to come out and vote
- Winning over the undecided “swing voters” or independents who could go either way

The voters who might vote for either party are known as:

## MODERATES, UNDECIDED VOTERS, INDEPENDENTS, or SWING VOTERS

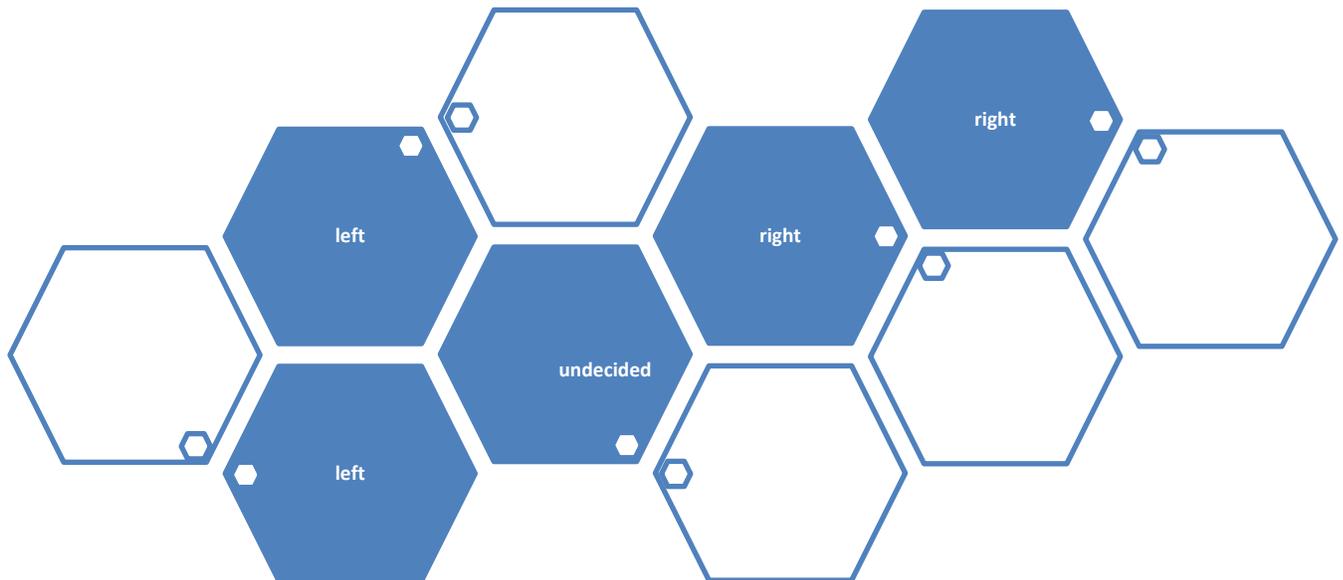
Swing voters are not committed to either party. A large portion are apathetic and less likely to vote. Some may vote third party: the largest is the **Libertarian Party**. But more often these voters choose either the Democrats or Republicans. They tend to hold a mix of conservative and liberal positions, and vote according to the chief concerns of the times, or according to a candidate’s “likeability.”

### Some common combinations of values that put these voters “in the middle”:

Traditional values + desire for more government programs

Small government / low taxes + anti war

Social conservatism + organized labor / union identity



# 1. RESPONSIBILITY: PERSONAL VERSUS SOCIAL

## LIBERAL / PROGRESSIVE

Liberals tend to believe that many issues are matters of collective or social responsibility, to be solved together through government.

Generally, many of our problems are caused by external factors; crime is caused by poverty, poverty by excessive capitalism or unfair economic systems, both and many other problems are caused by racism, sexism, and discrimination. Leaving individuals to cope with these challenges alone only condemns them to failure. Your failures, if caused by flaws in the social or economic system, are not your fault.

## CONSERVATIVE / LIBERTARIAN

Conservatives tend to believe in people taking personal responsibility for their own lives and choices, stressing self-reliance, independence, and individualism.

Usually, the root cause of crime, poverty, failure, addiction, STDs, and most other problems are the bad choices individuals make. Despite many obstacles, in our free society we can overcome most difficulties in life. If you work hard, obey the rules, and avoid destructive behaviors, you will lead a happy and successful life. If not, your failures and problems are usually mostly your own fault.



## 2. EQUALITY: HOW MUCH?

### LIBERAL / PROGRESSIVE

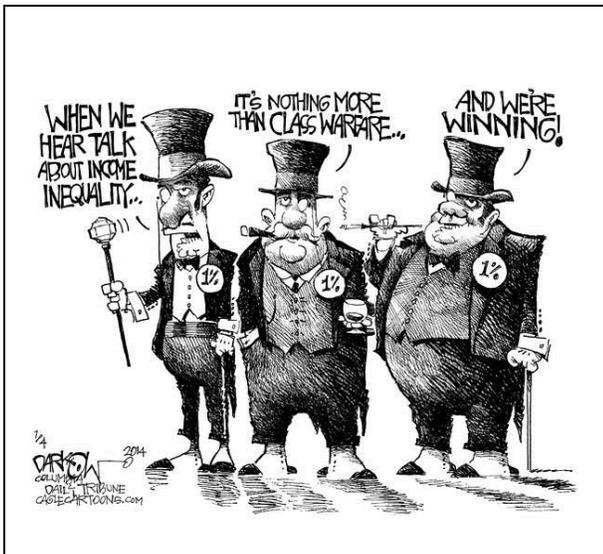
Liberals believe that equal justice before the law, and equality of opportunity, do not go far enough. **“Social justice”** requires a reduction of inequality in income, employment, education, status, and recognition.

Most inequalities in wealth and status are the result of too much capitalism, racism, the patriarchy (male sexism), and bigotry. Efforts to reduce the “income gap” or redistribute wealth more evenly, guarantee equal pay for men and women, and increase the minimum wage will result in a fairer society, and government must do more to achieve this. Society must also expand political correctness, enforce recognition of marriage equality and gender identities, increase diversity, use affirmative action, and make people **feel more equal**, are needed to promote harmony. It is an **injustice** to permit a society of winners and losers. Everyone should share in success and status.

### CONSERVATIVE / LIBERTARIAN

Conservatives believe in equal human worth, equal justice before the law, and all citizens having an equal right to pursue their happiness (equality of opportunity).

Taking equality further than this, such as to redistribute wealth more evenly or “affirmative action” to guarantee multi-racial representation at college, is opposed by conservatives as an erosion of freedom and **meritocracy**: success based on ability and work. Envy of others’ successes is ultimately self-destructive: the achievements of the wealthy expand our economy, create opportunity, and improve the lives of us all. Wealth redistribution has always resulted in a society that is poorer. Equality in poverty is not progress. Everyone deserves equal protection of their rights, but not everything is equal. Forcing PC equalization of opinion and of status or recognition is **unjust** and unreality.



### 3. ROLE OF GOVERNMENT: HOW INVOLVED SHOULD IT BE IN SOLVING OUR PROBLEMS?

#### LIBERAL / PROGRESSIVE

Liberals believe that government should be expanded to give more rights to all, and to promote the public welfare.

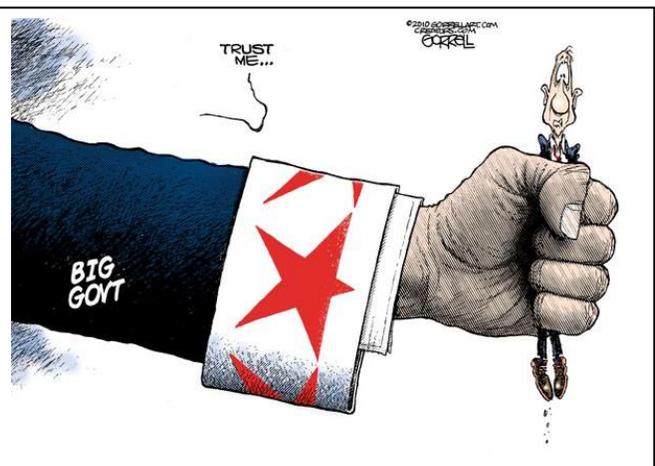
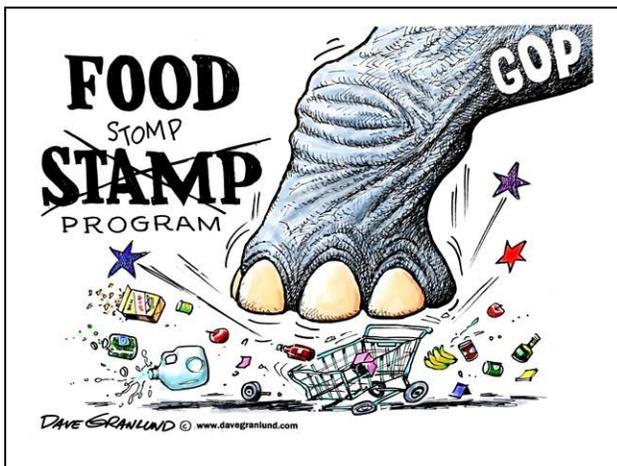
An “energetic government” with more resources at its disposal can help more people, specifically the lower and middle classes. Government programs in virtually every facet of society are needed to make people’s lives better. This includes **assistance** for children, single mothers, the elderly, students, workers, minorities, women, and anyone else in need. More of this should be done at the federal level, instead of leaving it to the states. Further, government workers are motivated by caring and the public good, rather than profit.

#### CONSERVATIVE / LIBERTARIAN

Conservatives believe in a constant struggle to reduce or limit the size of government, in order to protect freedom and promote the public welfare.

Big Government is a paternalistic “**nanny state**” that makes people lazy and dependent. It destroys people’s dignity and self-reliance. It also requires higher taxes, which means taking from people what they rightfully earned. Government should only do for us what we absolutely cannot do ourselves. Many issues now involving the federal government should be left to the states. Further, government bureaucrats are rarely better at serving the public than private interests are. And, bigger government just means more corruption.

**Libertarians** tend to go further than conservatives, desiring the elimination of most government departments and the repeal of most laws. From this position, government exists to stop us from force, fraud, and hurting each other. Laws against gambling, prostitution, and drug use are examples of excessive government intrusion.



## 4. FAITH IN THE FREE MARKET: HOW MUCH ECONOMIC REGULATION IS NECESSARY?

### LIBERAL / PROGRESSIVE

American Liberals tend to support the free market system if it is blended with significant government regulations, controls, and responsibilities to promote social justice and protect those “left behind.” “Progressives” have even less faith in capitalism, preferring a European style mixed economy with significant socialist characteristics. The Democratic Party now has a “democratic socialist” left wing, represented by Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who call for much higher taxes, government planning, and redistribution.

Market forces of supply and demand, and the incentive of profit, often pit people against each other and put consumers and workers at the mercy of powerful corporations. Government can be a bulwark against greed and Big Business.

Also, the free enterprise system results in greater inequality of result. This is not fair. The income gap grows, and the rich get richer, unless government steps in to moderate.



### CONSERVATIVE / LIBERTARIAN

Conservatives believe that the free market system is the best political economy. Libertarians have even more faith in capitalism, favoring free trade and as little government interference as possible.

Market forces of supply and demand, and the incentive of profit, are the best tools for economic growth and improved living standards for all (including those at the bottom). Too much government regulation or control actually hurts the economy and therefore the people. Globally, socialism has a long record of failure compared with capitalism. This is proven in any study of nations with free market systems, versus nations with government domination. Supposedly “socialist” Scandinavian countries actually have freer economies than most American leftists favor.

Also, the free enterprise system is the most moral, because it respects the private property that people work hard to earn, and treats people as capable individuals.



# 5. USE OF FORCE: HOW VALID? WHEN?

## LIBERAL / PROGRESSIVE

Liberals believe that the primary purpose of government is to protect our rights- But the use of force, by police or by the military, is an absolute last resort, if justified at all.

Institutional racism and flaws in society such as corruption and abusiveness are reflected in police brutality and racism. Also, many criminals are themselves victims of social injustice or bad circumstance. As a result, many police are suspect and police power should be restrained. In the military, strict rules of engagement should limit what force can be used in combat situations, to protect civilians and prevent escalation.

If the US has disagreements with other countries, we should try to be more understanding of their point of view, and come to a peaceful resolution of conflicts. These regimes are usually not "evil", just different.

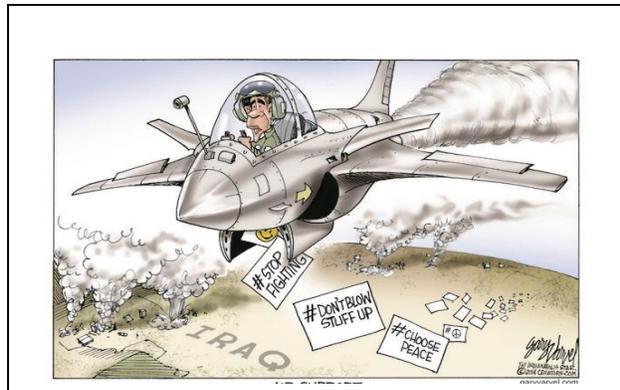
## CONSERVATIVE

Conservatives believe that the primary purpose of government is to protect our rights. When we are threatened by criminal elements, or by outside enemies, the gov must have the strength and resolve to act.

This applies to both the police and the military. Both are viewed as legitimate protectors against threats to our security. Having superior power, and using it when necessary, are crucial. A few bad apples do not represent all police or military; cops and soldiers put their lives on the line for us and should get the benefit of the doubt.

Many criminals, and many external threats, represent EVIL (disregard for the rights and dignity of their fellow man). The use of force is justified to protect the innocent against murderers, and Americans against our enemies.

Many **libertarians** agree more with the left in desiring a reduced size and role for the military, and are very suspicious of police power. On the other hand, libertarians favor the right of the individual to own guns and to take personal responsibility for self-defense.



## 6. CULTURE (THE CULTURE WARS): ARE TRADITIONAL VALUES MORE POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE?

### LIBERAL / PROGRESSIVE

Liberals tend to believe that religion and family are some of many lifestyle choices. No choice is better than another in this subject.

Organized religions, specifically Christianity in America, contribute much good to society, but also do harm by causing division and being judgmental. It is crucial to preserve and promote complete separation of church and state. Government should not fund religious institutions under the guise of helping the poor. Religious displays, on public grounds or facilities, are unacceptable.

“Family” has no correct or superior definition. “Love makes a family.” It is wrong and judgmental to promote any approach over another. “Traditional family values” are often a code for intolerance towards LGBTQ, or for the maintenance of gender roles repressive towards women. For the sake of tolerance and inclusion, single parenthood, cohabitation, and same sex marriage should all be recognized as equally valid to traditional marriage.

Abortion should be a woman’s choice. Opposition to abortion is either based on religion, which cannot be forced by the state, or by patriarchal ideas that deny women autonomy. It’s up to women to decide when they have children.

### CONSERVATIVE

Most conservatives defend organized religion (especially America’s Judeo-Christian heritage) and traditional family values as important pillars of a good society.

In a free society, organized religions offer spiritual and moral guidance for those who choose them. This is crucial for helping free people make good decisions, and in having a sense of community. In addition, religious teachings such as the 10 Commandments serve as a basis for civilization. Most charitable efforts are achieved through religious institutions. It is positive to publicly acknowledge this.

Family is the cornerstone of organized society. All of us come into the world as children in need of care. Not all arrangements are equal: children statistically do best in intact families with a mother and a father. Good parenting helps children develop academically, morally, and socially. We should not deny this reality in the name of “inclusion.” This cannot be mandated by law, but it should be understood.

A pregnant woman already has a child; murdering a living baby in the womb should not be a “choice”. Laws restricting abortion are not about religion or patriarchy, they are about scientific reality and the natural right to life.

**Libertarians** can be on either side in the culture wars, but tend to believe that in this case, both liberals and conservatives often involve government where it does not belong. Many of these issues should be left to the states, or entirely left alone by government.



# 7. IDENTITY

## LIBERAL / PROGRESSIVE

Most liberals perceive American society as still greatly impacted by a racist, sexist, and discriminatory past and present.

According to Americans on the left, special consideration, such as affirmative action policies, special government programs and payments, and politically correct attitudes must be actualized for victim groups. **Women, blacks, Latinos, and members of the LGBTQ community are all seen as victim groups** who suffer from the effects of “straight white cis male privilege.”

Promoting diversity is important for social justice. A person’s identity is largely a product of their gender, race, culture, sexual orientation, etc. All such identities should be equally recognized.

## CONSERVATIVE

Most conservatives believe that America has largely moved on from past racism and discrimination. They want a colorblind society that sees individuals according to their accomplishments and character, not their gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. **Discrimination is wrong** and should be fought, **but individuals, not our institutions, are to blame for it.** Categorizing people into opposing groups is itself seen as prejudiced, and government policies that do so are often “reverse discrimination.”

Some social conservatives worry that America is becoming too diversified. But most conservatives celebrate America as a “melting pot” of many ingredients. Crucial for conservatives is that citizens identify first as Americans, instead of our trend towards a “hyphenated society.”

On one hand, many **libertarians** tend to lean towards the liberal view that discrimination still has a significant impact on certain groups- and they think that some social conservatives are either blind to this or guilty of it. On the other hand, libertarians are very opposed to the “political correctness” and collective identity politics promoted by much of America’s left. Libertarians champion an individualist society that does not dwell on group identities.



## 8. NATIONALISM, INTERNATIONALISM

### LIBERAL / PROGRESSIVE

Liberals tend to be uncomfortable with nationalism. While many liberals might view the United States as a special country, they lean towards an attitude of global citizenship. The US should do more to work with the international community. Instead, US policy is the problem in the world as often as it's a solution.

Every nation has a unique cultural heritage and its own needs and interests. Many countries have similar national sins or problems, from poverty to corruption to global warming. The US is no exception.

The US needs to make it clear that we are not a threat to the world, and we need to be more respectful of world opinion. This is especially true regarding climate change, anti-terrorist efforts, and the Iraq mistake.

In particular, the UN is an important symbol of global unity. The US should strive to work through the UN to solve global problems.

### CONSERVATIVE

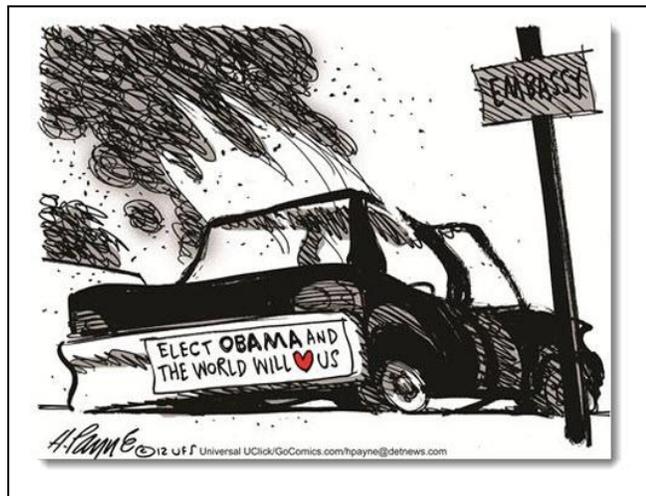
Conservatives tend to view the United States as a special country with a special political legacy, and a responsibility to stand up for freedom around the world.

Most nations are only recently achieving freedom for their people, many are corrupt, some still embrace socialism, and many are still dictatorships. This does not put their regimes on an equal moral level with the US.

While the US should try to work cooperatively with other nations, we should not let terrorists, dictators, rivals, or envious countries stop us from doing what is right, and what is in our interest.

In particular, the UN is a bloated, corrupt bureaucracy that is often unfriendly to the US. Its recurrent failures to live up to its mandate require the US to at times act unilaterally, to solve problems or protect our interests.

Libertarians tend to support national sovereignty, free trade, and, other than disaster relief, minimal U.S. aid or involvement in the affairs of other nations.



# IMMIGRATION

Many of the core differences between the American Left and Right come to a head over immigration, so we will give it its own category.

## LIBERAL / PROGRESSIVE

Liberals tend to favor very lax immigration laws, or outright open borders. If immigrants came illegally, they should be granted amnesty. They should not be called “illegals” but instead “undocumented migrants” or simply immigrants. All immigrants should be provided whatever health, welfare, and education benefits they need through government programs. “Sanctuary cities” are right to shelter undocumented immigrants from Federal border agents.

Immigrants make America more diverse, since most are not coming from Europe, and therefore can speed the breakdown of white dominance in America. Opposition to more open borders is mostly based on white racism.

National sovereignty to control borders is an outdated concept (for some Progressives, the whole idea of countries might be outdated too...). A country is like a shop- and immigrants are like customers. No customer should be barred from entering a business except for very serious reasons.

## CONSERVATIVE

Conservatives tend to favor immigration, but in a lawful, organized way. More should be done to secure the border to control how much immigration occurs. The backgrounds of immigrants should be checked to help protect Americans from gangs, criminals, terrorists, illnesses, and other threats. If immigrants came illegally, there should be consequences; violent illegal immigrants should be deported. Immigrants should not come here unless they will work to take care of themselves. No city has the right to ignore our nation’s immigration laws.

Too much immigration, too fast, destabilizes the economy and could cost some Americans their jobs. It also makes it less likely for immigrants to assimilate: to see themselves as Americans. This is extremely important, otherwise long term divisions will result.

National sovereignty means having control over borders. A country is like a home- and immigrants are like guests. You should not barge into someone’s home without permission.

Even though **Libertarians** tend to support national sovereignty, they usually see immigration as a personal liberty issue and favor more open borders.

