

# AMERICAN POLITICAL CONSERVATISM AND LIBERALISM

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This is a short description of American political conservatism and liberalism. Politicians, news reporters, educators, talk show hosts and "spin doctors" do not provide a clear definition of the differences. The following is a brief analysis, some history and difficulties that Republicans and Democrats have in achieving their goals.

## Conservatism

Conservatism is the belief that government at all levels—particularly the Federal Government—should be as small as possible and taxes need to be kept low. The main function of the Federal Government should be restricted to what is in the US Constitution under Article I, Section 8 which outlines the powers of Congress. These powers are mainly military and foreign affairs.

Conservatives believe that free, unregulated market capitalism is essential for the success of a democracy. The government needs to limit the regulation of business and keep taxes low. The forces of supply and demand--not government regulation--will result in high wages, good products and environmental protection. Modern conservatives believe there is some need for government regulation such as child labor laws, product safety, safe working conditions and food and drug safety. However, they feel there is too much regulation that is hampering business.

Conservatives believe that most assistance to the needy should be from private charities and not so much from government. Private organizations such as the Salvation Army are much better at running a charity than government. Modern conservatives believe that government needs to supplement charity when private charities cannot meet all the needs of the poor. However with lower taxes and less regulations business will prosper and be able to provide higher paying jobs resulting in more contributions to charity.

Since the 1980s, religious/evangelical conservatism has become more influential. This element of conservatism is based on the issues of values, morality and ethics. The main agenda for achieving a society with high values is the outlawing of abortion, allowing prayer in schools and a voucher system to allow more students to attend private schools. However, many churches resist the government regulations that come with vouchers.

## Liberalism

Liberals believe in the free market system, but strongly believe that it takes a strong government to set rules and regulations for business (this liberalism contrasts to socialism where government runs everything). In addition to child labor laws, product safety, safe working conditions, food and drug safety, strong government regulations and laws are essential to ensure a minimum wage, protection of the environment, rights of workers to join unions, and fairness in competition. Strong regulation of financial and security institutions is necessary to protect the investments of the public and prevent criminal abuse.

Liberals also believe that private charities cannot meet most of the needs of the disadvantaged in society and that government welfare programs are necessary. Welfare and social security programs for senior citizens, children, the disabled and minorities need to be accomplished by government. Liberals believe that government must ensure that medical care is provided for all citizens.



Relating to values, liberals believe that government should have minimum interference with individual freedom, civil liberties, personal choice, and free speech, even though there may be outrageous-although legal-actions and statements by some people. However, liberals believe that regulations are needed to protect people from the adverse behavior of others such as no-smoking in public places, reducing production of automobile emissions, etc.

### **Republicans and Democrats--Some History**

Today conservatives are generally Republicans and liberals are Democrats. But that has not always been true. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Democratic leaders in the US Congress were mostly conservatives from the South who held office for very long periods of time and gained chairmanships of key committees. Since the 1980s, most Southern conservative political leaders have become members of the Republican Party. The Democratic conservatives have retired, switched parties, been voted out of office or died.

During the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Republican liberals (progressives) were a strong political force. Progressives, under the leadership of Theodore Roosevelt, broke up corporate monopolies, expanded national parks and passed food and drug regulations even when opposed by leaders of their own party. During Eisenhower's presidency, in the 1950s, Republican progressives led the effort to expand government public works and supported Federal action on civil rights. Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren, a Republican, led a liberal interpretation of the Constitution with the best known case (Brown vs. Board of Education) outlawing segregation in schools.



Democrats would unlikely have been able to pass social programs like Medicare and civil rights without the support of Republican progressives due to the opposition from many Southern Democratic conservative leaders.

Today most liberals are Democrats, but there are moderate and even conservative Democrats, particularly those who own businesses. However, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the big social programs like Social Security, Medicare, aid to the poor, and civil rights legislation were led by liberal Democrats.

Today, the Republican party is dominated by conservatives, although there are some moderate Republicans who believe in such issues as environmental regulations and a women's right to have an abortion.

### **Historically: Who are Conservatives?**

Polls have shown that the majority (but certainly not all) of following groups tended to vote Republican (Conservative):

- Owners and managers of businesses—particularly large corporations.
- Military officers.
- Religious conservatives who attend church frequently.
- Professionals such as corporate lawyers, accountants, engineers, and doctors.
- Senior citizens who are well off economically.
- Polls have shown that people with incomes over \$150,000 tend to vote conservative.
- Men generally are more likely to vote for Republicans.

## Historically: Who are Liberals?

Polls have shown that the majority (but certainly not all) of following groups tended to vote Democratic (Liberal):

- Non-management workers.
- Members of most labor unions.
- Minorities.
- Senior citizens on fixed incomes.
- Social workers.
- Trial lawyers who assist people with liability lawsuits against corporations.
- Journalists, particularly those who are covering local problems.
- Educators.
- Some people of faith such as Catholics and Jews.
- Jewish businessmen are normally conservative relating to business but liberal when it comes to social issues and civil rights.
- Women generally are more likely to vote Democratic.

## The Frustration in Politics

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, liberals/progressives set the agenda with conservatives being the "loyal" opposition. However, the large government programs resulted in high taxes and large government bureaucracy. This resulted in taxpayer's revolts beginning in 1978 with the Proposition 13 property tax reduction in California and the election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980. Liberals are frustrated because new programs, such as national health care, are expensive and the public resists the raising of taxes for such programs. Even a return to a more progressive tax structure, where the wealthy pay a higher tax rate, is not popular. Liberals want to protect existing programs from elimination by conservatives, but find this difficult to sell as a main political agenda.

Conservatives have been frustrated in attempts to achieve a small government with low taxes because the elimination of popular programs will be necessary. Even elimination of waste and earmarks would not result in a balanced budget. The initial effort by the Reagan administration, with the support of a Democratic Congress, met the campaign promises of increasing the size of the military and providing tax cuts by borrowing money which kept the social programs going. This resulted in a four times increase in the National Debt (\$1 trillion in 1980 to \$4 trillion by 1990). Under control of **both** parties, since then, the debt has increased to \$14 trillion. The borrowing alternative cannot go on forever because of the huge national debt and large interest payments needing to be paid by taxpayers.

Conservatives have found it difficult to pass legislation relating to values. With large control of government by 2002 and getting support on their positions from a large section of the population, they failed to pass legislation to outlaw abortion, to legalize school prayer or to create a national school voucher system. These issues are very controversial.

Government deregulation of business was achieved, to an extent, in the late 20th Century/early 21st Century. However, problems have arisen that have resulted in government interference such as when the US Government had to bail out the failed, deregulated savings and loan industry in the late 1980s and financial and corporate bailouts in 2008/2009. Corporation failures and corruption-such as Enron-have resulted in more Federal regulation of accounting practices.

Conservatives have been successful in decreasing taxes. But there can be opposition to large tax decreases for the wealthy if there is little improvement to the economy and there are fewer higher paying jobs. Also decreasing taxes can result in increased deficits resulting in a growing national debt.

## Changing the Direction of Government is Difficult

Changing the direction of government will be difficult in the future. Government can be compared to a pyramid with 95% of its base being made of solid concrete that represents the bureaucracy, which is difficult to change. The 5% at the top, representing elected officials, is like straw. The straw blows away from time to time by the changing "winds of elections" and is replaced by different straw. The result is that it is very difficult for elected officials to change the "huge concrete bureaucratic base of government".

