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American Ideologies

American political ideologies are variations on classical liberalism. As a result, these ideologies tend to be very similar: Almost everyone in the United States, for example, believes in limited government, the free market, and individual liberty. Democrats just happen to lean slightly to the left and Republicans slightly to the right. Differences arise between these two groups because each party has a slightly different opinion on how best to achieve these goals. American political ideologies, like all others, are not monolithic. Republicans frequently disagree with other Republicans, and Democrats frequently disagree with other Democrats. In the end, however, members of both parties share very similar core beliefs, unlike members of political parties in most other countries.

Political scientists sometimes organize the four major American political ideologies with respect to their preference for the size and influence of the political government. Libertarians favor almost no government at all, whereas socialists, at the other end of the spectrum, favor a high degree of government intervention. At the center of the spectrum, American liberals and conservatives represent a balance of the two extremes. Note that adherents to all four ideologies still favor representative democratic governments.

American Liberalism

American liberalism argues that the government needs to act to ensure equality among its citizens. Historically, for example, liberal groups worked to promote civil rights for African Americans and other minorities. In current politics, many liberals are pushing for gay rights, affirmative action, open immigration, and similar policies.

American Liberal Beliefs

Generally, liberals push for social, political, and economic equality, as well as expansive civil liberties. Liberals generally want the government to help the poor and make sure that the rich do not have too much power. Although they support capitalism, liberals do not want a completely free market; some government action is needed to ameliorate the worst aspects of the market. Therefore, liberals tend to favor:

- Graduated income taxes that tax the wealthier more than the poor
- Welfare programs to aid the poor
- Major government spending on education
- Job-retraining programs for unemployed workers
- Action to promote equal opportunity
- Expanded civil liberties

The chart on the following page lists the different views held by liberals and conservatives on a variety of issues. Of course, individual beliefs transcend general categories: Some conservatives are pro-choice, some liberals are anti-gun control, and some liberals and conservatives might not have strongly held views on any of those issues.

LIBERAL VIEWS VERSUS CONSERVATIVE VIEWS

Issue	Liberal View	Conservative View
Abortion	Legal and open to all women	Immoral and should be banned
Gun control	Heavy restrictions	Few restrictions
Taxes	Higher, progressive	Lower, flatter
Affirmative action	Necessary to make up for centuries of discrimination	Unfair because it reversely favors some and excludes others
Gay marriage	Should be legal	Should be illegal

We sometimes think of conservatives as being stronger on national defense than liberals, but this is not always true. During the twentieth century, conservative and liberal leaders worked to strengthen the American military and sometimes engaged in war. For instance, in the 1960s and 1970s, John F. Kennedy increased military spending dramatically, and Lyndon Johnson greatly expanded America's role in the Vietnam War.

How a Liberal Becomes a Conservative

There are many adages about how belief changes. For example, one adage states that a conservative is a liberal who has been mugged, while a liberal is a conservative who has lost his or her job. Winston Churchill is said to have remarked, "Any twenty-year-old who isn't a liberal doesn't have a heart, and any forty-year-old who isn't a conservative doesn't have a brain."

American Conservatism

American conservatism argues that the government's main job is to protect freedom and provide security. Beyond that, the government should stay out of people's lives and should allow people to do, act, and behave as they see fit. According to conservatives, freedom trumps equality: The government should promote the former, regardless of how expanded freedoms might affect equality.

American Conservative Beliefs

Conservatives argue that the best way to achieve prosperity is for the government to stay out of the economy. Taxes should be low and regulation minimal so that the market can work most efficiently. Although the government should not ignore the plight of the poor, the best way to help the poor is to give them opportunities to better themselves. Conservatives tend to:

- Believe strongly in tradition, particularly religious tradition
- Support traditional notions of family

- Oppose gay marriage and abortion
- Favor lower taxes
- Support states' rights
- Favor a strong military and aggressive foreign policies

Neoconservatism

In recent years, the term **neoconservative** has emerged to describe one branch of American conservatism. A neoconservative believes in using the government to actively work to achieve conservative goals. Although most neoconservatives still favor a small government, they argue that the government must act assertively in some areas to promote conservative values and policies.

Neoconservatives and the Iraq War

Even before George W. Bush was elected in 2000, a number of neoconservatives pushed for an invasion of Iraq to oust Saddam Hussein. William Kristol, editor of *The Weekly Standard*, had argued for such a war as early as 1998. When Bush came into office, he appointed a number of neoconservatives to key government positions, including Paul Wolfowitz as assistant secretary of defense. Many critics of the Bush Administration have complained that the Iraq War was started because of the ideological zeal of the neoconservatives. Some have even referred to the war as “Kristol’s War” because of the role William Kristol had in promoting it.

American Libertarianism

A smaller but equally important American ideology is **libertarianism**. Libertarians believe that personal liberty trumps all other considerations. Therefore, according to libertarianism, the government should stay out of people’s lives as much as possible. So libertarians want the government to lower taxes, reduce its size dramatically, and literally leave people alone. Some people advocate controversial positions, such as the legalization of drugs, abolishing income taxes, and ending all welfare programs. Libertarians are few in number, but they have exercised important influences on American politics.

Example: Libertarian ideals contributed to the founding of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which has played a key role in monitoring what it sees as excessive government power, in the early twentieth century. Although the ACLU is not, strictly speaking, a libertarian organization, some of its views are very libertarian in nature. On the other side, the Cato Institute is a conservative think tank with very strong libertarian views. Both groups have shaped policy and society for decades.

Both liberals and conservatives attack libertarianism. Liberals want the government to play an active role in the economy, whereas conservatives do not want to extend freedom to behavior such as drug use. Libertarians are neither liberal nor conservative, and they essentially differ from anarchists in that libertarians want a very limited government, whereas anarchists want no government.

American Socialism

American socialists advocate strong federal leadership and centralization of the economy in order to provide the greatest public good by benefiting as many citizens as possible. Most socialists in American are democratic socialists who want to preserve the American tradition of representative government, although there a number of small communist parties in the United States that still believe revolution is necessary in order to overthrow the capitalist order.

Example: The turn of the twentieth century was the golden age for American socialism. Hundreds of thousands of impoverished midwestern farmers fought for increased federal intervention in the economy to regulate big business. Political activist Eugene V. Debs ran for president several times on the Socialist Party ticket—and at one point, he waged his campaign from jail. In the 1920 presidential election, Debs won nearly a million popular votes.

American conservatives and liberals alike attack socialism because of the nation's history of fighting communism during the Cold War and because socialism challenges the belief in the free-market economy. Nevertheless, proponents of socialism have influenced mainstream American politics a number of times, most notably during the Great Depression, when President Franklin Roosevelt and Democrats in Congress passed a variety of New Deal bills aimed at helping the poorest Americans.

Feminism and Environmentalism

Two American political ideologies have gained momentum in recent years. **Feminism** is the belief that women are equal to men and should be treated equally by the law. Thus far, feminists have not yet banded together into one distinct political party. **Environmentalism** is the belief that we have an obligation to protect the world from the excesses of human occupation. Environmentalists are represented by the Green Party, which has won elections in Alaska, Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, Iowa, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania, among other states.