

# Inquiring Minds topic – 23 June 2017

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## What are liberals, moderates and conservatives?

### Questions:

1. Have you ever said, "I don't like to be labeled because..."?
2. Why do we use these labels, putting people into categories?
3. Are there better labels than these?
4. Is modern conservatism built on a longing to return to classical liberalism—the liberalism of the Founding Fathers? Or are conservatives more like the Tories, wanting to hold on to what was?
5. Is modern liberalism more like socialism than classical liberalism?
6. How would you describe yourself?

*Taken from Wikipedia, The Intercollegiate Review and other sources*

Modern liberals place great emphasis on rational social planning and the use of government to solve social ills; conservatives emphasize the importance of tradition and spontaneous order; moderates are individuals whose political views are in between liberal and conservative extremes. In their current usages, liberal, conservative and moderate are fairly recent terms. As a result, their precise meanings are in flux.

According to Regis University, modern liberalism is a derivative of the classical liberalism that influenced America's founders. Classical liberals were highly concerned with freedom, individual rights and limited government. Modern liberals are likewise concerned with freedom and equality, but they favor the use of

a strong central government to protect people's rights and expand their opportunities. In particular, liberals support regulation of the economy and social welfare.

Conservatives are skeptical of deliberate change to the status quo. They have less confidence than liberals in the power of human reason. Instead, they emphasize the importance of religion and tradition. Conservatives believe that society organically grows and improves with limited intervention. As a result, they usually favor minimally regulated free market economics and social welfare.

Moderates do not have a specific political doctrine. They may hold any of the positions of liberals and conservatives. Moderates are simply people who try to avoid radical extremes by choosing the middle road between the two ideologies.

Classical liberalism focuses on individual freedom; contemporary liberalism focuses more on social infrastructure and an expanded definition of human rights. Liberalism is considered the standard left-wing position in the United States. However, it is considered more right-wing in some nations.

Before the 20th century, the definition of liberal was similar to modern libertarianism. There was a strong emphasis on industry, which created many of the jobs at the time, and on human rights. However, liberals were not as opposed to regulations as libertarians, and they were not opposed to somewhat larger government.

Through the years, liberalism changed to take on some aspects of socialism. In addition, liberals spoke out on a wider range of what they considered to be human rights. Liberal activism led to women being given the right to vote, and liberals campaigned for stronger worker unions to improve job safety.

In the middle of the 20th century, liberalism changed again, and many embraced what some call "new liberalism." The civil rights movement in the United States and radical politics in the 1960s encouraged a new brand of thinking. Environmental policy became a top issue, and many liberals made anti-war policies a part of their political philosophy.

Conservatism is a political and social philosophy that promotes retaining traditional social institutions in the context of culture and civilization. By some definitions, Conservatives have variously sought to preserve institutions

including religion, monarchy, parliamentary government, property rights and the social hierarchy, emphasizing stability and continuity, while the more extreme elements called reactionaries oppose Modernism and seek a return to "the way things were. "

There is no single set of policies that are universally regarded as conservative, because the meaning of conservatism depends on what is considered traditional in a given place and time. According to Quintin Hogg, the chairman of the British Conservative Party in 1959, "Conservatism is not so much a philosophy as an attitude, a constant force, performing a timeless function in the development of a free society, and corresponding to a deep and permanent requirement of human nature itself.ö In contrast to the tradition-based definition of conservatism, political theorists such as Corey Robin define conservatism primarily in terms of a general defense of social and economic inequality. From this perspective conservatism is less an attempt to uphold traditional institutions and more the felt experience of having power, seeing it threatened, and trying to win it back.

Modern American liberalism is characterized by social liberalism, and combines ideas of civil liberty and equality with support for social justice and a mixed economy. The American modern liberal philosophy strongly endorses public spending on programs such as education, health care, and welfare. Important social issues today include addressing inequality, voting rights for minorities, affirmative action, reproductive and other women's rights, support for LGBT rights, and immigration reform.

John F. Kennedy defined a liberal as follows "...someone who looks ahead and not behind, someone who welcomes new ideas without rigid reactions, someone who cares about the welfare of the peopleö their health, their housing, their schools, their jobs, their civil rights, and their civil liberties.ö

Modern American liberalism is typically associated with the Democratic Party, as modern American conservatism is typically associated with the Republican Party. Over the past half century, conservatism has become the dominant political philosophy in the United States. Almost every Republican running for office will try to establish his place on the political spectrum based

on how conservative he is. Even Democrats sometimes distinguish among members of their own party in terms of conservatism.

Conservatism as we know it today is a relatively new movement—it emerged after World War II and only became a political force in the 1960s. The basic foundations of American conservatism can be boiled down to four fundamental concepts. We might call them the four pillars of modern conservatism:

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***The first pillar of conservatism is liberty, or freedom.*** Conservatives believe that individuals possess the right to life, liberty, and property, and freedom from the restrictions of arbitrary force. They exercise these rights through the use of their natural free will. That means the ability to follow your own dreams, to do what you want to (so long as you don't harm others) and reap the rewards (or face the penalties). Above all, it means freedom from oppression by government and the protection of government against oppression. It means political liberty, the freedom to speak your mind on matters of public policy. It means religious liberty to worship as you please, or not to worship at all. It also means economic liberty, the freedom to own property and to allocate your own resources in a free market.

Conservatism is based on the idea that the pursuit of virtue is the purpose of our existence and that liberty is an essential component of the pursuit of virtue. Adherence to virtue is also a necessary condition of the pursuit of freedom. In other words, freedom must be pursued for the common good, and when it is abused for the benefit of one group at the expense of others, such abuse must be checked. Still, confronted with a choice of more security or more liberty, conservatives will usually opt for more liberty.

***The second pillar of conservative philosophy is tradition and order.*** Conservatism is also about conserving the values that have been established over centuries and that have led to an orderly society. Conservatives believe in the ability of man to build a society that respects rights and that has the capacity to repel the forces of evil. Order means a

systematic and harmonious arrangement, both within one's own character and within the commonwealth. Order is perhaps more easily understood by looking at its opposite: *disorder*. Disorder describes everything that conservatism is *not*.

***The third pillar is the rule of law.*** Conservatism is based on the belief that it is crucial to have a legal system that is predictable, that allows people to know what the rules are and enforce those rules equally for all. This means that both governors and the governed are subject to the law. The rule of law promotes prosperity and protects liberty. Put simply, a government of laws and not of men is the only way to secure justice.

***The fourth pillar is belief in God.*** Belief in God means adherence to the broad concepts of religious faith—such things as justice, virtue, fairness, charity, community, and duty.

Within a few years after 1945, conservatives began to speak out about what they viewed as a dangerous drift of the United States toward socialism. They were also concerned with the need to maintain American values. They were focused on tradition and faith and the preservation of Western civilization and culture. They saw a growing threat from permissiveness and vulgarity. They believed in ethics and honor, in the importance of the church, and in the need for traditional education and higher learning.

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For further reading see: *Conservative vs. Liberal—A Debate* by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Russell Kirk

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/11/26/specials/schlesinger-debate.html>

Or a chart comparing liberal and conservative positions at: [wp.lps.org/tnettle/files/2013/12/Liberal-vs-Conservative.pdf](http://wp.lps.org/tnettle/files/2013/12/Liberal-vs-Conservative.pdf)

