

an opinion. This phenomenon is especially true with regard to foreign policy. Most Americans often know little of the world around them. Unless major issues of national importance take center stage, American public opinion on foreign affairs is likely to be volatile in the wake of any new information. In contrast, most Americans are more interested in domestic policy issues, such as health care and employment, which have a greater impact on their daily lives.

POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

10.3 Assess the influence of political ideology on political attitudes and behaviors.

Many of citizens' opinions on political issues are determined by their **political ideology**, or the coherent set of values and beliefs people hold about the purpose and scope of government.¹⁰ Ideologies shape the thinking of individuals and how they view the world, especially in regard to issues of "race, nationality, the role and function of government, the relations between men and women, human responsibility for the natural environment, and many other matters."¹¹ Observers increasingly have recognized these beliefs as a potent political force. Isaiah Berlin, a noted historian and philosopher, stated that two factors above all others shaped human history in the twentieth century: "one is science and technology; the other is ideological battles—totalitarian tyrannies of both right and left and the explosions of nationalism, racism, and religious bigotry that the most perceptive social thinkers of the nineteenth century failed to predict."¹²

It is easier to understand how ideology affects public opinion when we examine the four functions political scientists attribute to ideologies. These include:

1. **Explanation.** Ideologies can offer reasons why social and political conditions are the way they are, especially in time of crisis.
2. **Evaluation.** Ideologies can provide standards for evaluating social conditions and political institutions and events.
3. **Orientation.** Much like a compass, ideologies provide individuals with an orientation toward issues and a position within the world.
4. **Political Program.** Ideologies help people make political choices and guide their political actions.

Finding Your Political Ideology

The four functions of ideology discussed above clearly have real-world implications. Political ideologies create natural groups within society and can lead to political conflict. In America, we often hear about conservative, liberal, and moderate political ideologies (see Figure 10.4).

CONSERVATIVES According to William Safire's *New Political Dictionary*, a **conservative** "is a defender of the status quo who, when change becomes necessary in tested institutions or practices, prefers that it come slowly, and in moderation."¹³ Conservatives tend to believe that limited government is best, especially in terms of regulating the economy. Conservatives favor local and state action over federal intervention, and they emphasize fiscal responsibility. Conservatives are also likely to believe that the private sector is better equipped than the government to address domestic problems such as homelessness, poverty, and discrimination.

Since the 1970s, a growing number of **social conservative** voters (many with ties to the evangelical or Religious Right) increasingly have affected politics and policies in the United States. Social conservatives believe that moral decay must be stemmed and that government should support and further traditional moral teachings. These voters favor government intervention to regulate sexual and social behavior and have led efforts to restrict contraceptives, abortion, and same-sex marriage. While a

political ideology

The coherent set of values and beliefs about the purpose and scope of government held by groups and individuals.

conservative

One who favors limited government intervention, particularly in economic affairs.

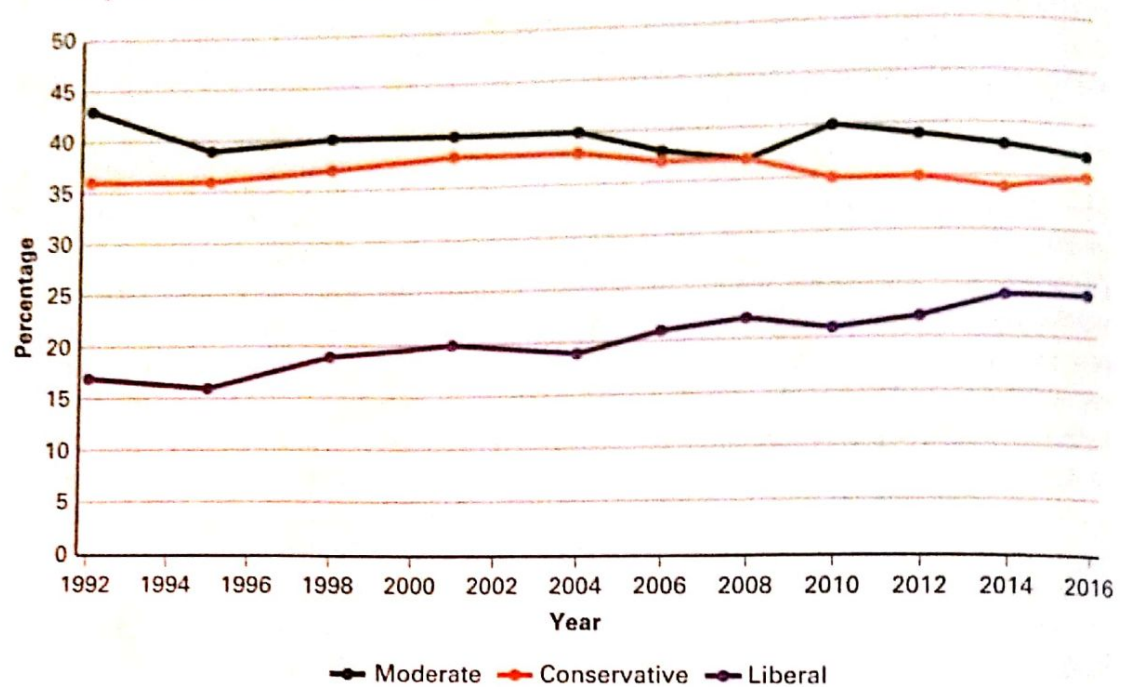
social conservative

One who believes that the government should support and further traditional moral teachings.

FIGURE 10.4 WHAT ARE AMERICANS' POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES?

Americans' political ideologies have been relatively constant for most of the last twenty years. In 2016, those identifying as moderate and as conservative were almost evenly matched at 35% and 37% respectively. Those identifying as liberals were significantly lower at 24%.

SOURCE: Saad, Lydia. "Conservatives Hang Onto Ideology Lead by a Thread," *Gallup*, Jan. 11, 2016. Accessed at www.gallup.com/poll/188129/conservatives-hang-ideology-lead-thread.aspx



liberal

One who favors greater government intervention, particularly in economic affairs and in the provision of social services.

moderate

A person who takes a relatively centrist or middle-of-the-road view on most political issues.

majority of social conservatives are evangelical Protestants, Mormons, and Roman Catholics, some Jews and many Muslims are also social conservatives. Others are not affiliated with a traditional religion.

LIBERALS A **liberal** is one who seeks to use the government to change the political, economic, and social status quo and foster the development of equality and the well-being of individuals.¹⁴ The meaning of the word "liberal" has changed over time, but in the modern United States, liberals (who may also refer to themselves as progressives) generally support well-funded government social welfare programs that seek to protect individuals from economic disadvantages or to correct past injustices. In contrast, they generally oppose government efforts to regulate private behavior or infringe on civil rights and liberties.

MODERATES In general, a **moderate** takes a relatively centrist view on most political issues. Most political philosophers from ancient Greece favored moderate politics, believing a balanced viewpoint was best when it came to managing issues of wealth, poverty, or the role of government.

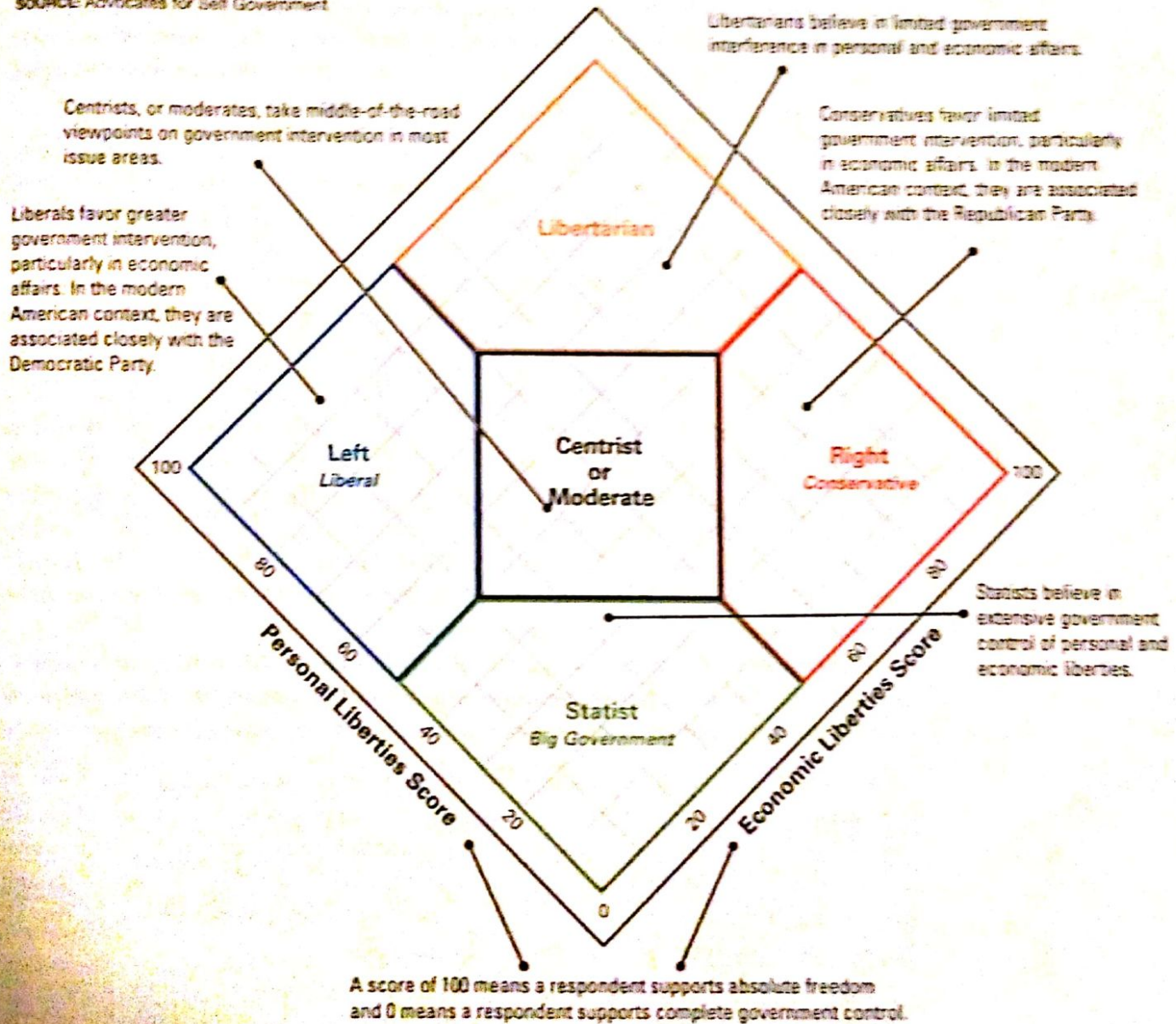
Problems with Ideological Labels

In a perfect world, liberals would be liberal and conservatives would be conservative. Studies reveal, however, that many people who call themselves conservative actually take fairly liberal positions on many policy issues. In fact, anywhere from 20 percent to 60 percent of people will hold a traditionally conservative view on one issue and a traditionally liberal view on another.¹⁵ People who take conservative stances against "big government," for example, often support increases in spending for the elderly, education, or health care. It is also not unusual to encounter a person who could be considered a liberal on social issues such as abortion and civil rights but a conservative on economic or pocketbook issues.

FIGURE 10.5 HOW DO YOU CLASSIFY IDEOLOGY?

The Nolan Chart, created by Libertarian Party leader David Nolan, is a political ideology chart that helps to classify citizens' political beliefs on two key dimensions—economic and personal freedom. The chart identifies five key political ideologies: left (liberal), centrist or moderate, right (conservative), libertarian, and statist. Where do you believe you fall on this chart?

SOURCE: Advocates for Self Government



Some critics also charge that a simple left-to-right continuum cannot capture the full complexity of most citizens' political ideologies (see Figure 10.5). They suggest that the ideologies of most people are better represented by a spectrum measuring individuals' viewpoints on government interference in both economic and personal liberties. This spectrum includes not only liberal, conservative, and moderate ideologies but also **statist** (pro-governmental interference) and **libertarian** (anti-governmental interference) perspectives.

statist

One who believes in extensive government control of personal and economic liberties.

libertarian

One who believes in limited government interference in personal and economic liberties.