

What Are Conservatives and Liberals?

Directions: Read the following information about liberals and conservatives. Then write a two-page essay analyzing each ideology. Be prepared to share your essay.

Conservatives

The word "conservative" has a simple, direct significance. It means wishing to conserve things the way they are. In politics, conservatives are generally supportive of the status quo. Since politics and society are changing almost daily this means that conservatives are often unhappy with what has happened recently and prefer things to be the way they were in the recent and not-so-recent past. They generally feel that the U.S. political system has changed too much and wish to return to an earlier time when things were better.

Conservatives are likely to be supportive of traditional values and customs. In the United States conservatives usually emphasize the values of individualism and freedom. . . . This means that they admire the free enterprise system with its emphasis on private ownership, individual hard work, and monetary rewards. They are often disdainful of welfare, believing that in the United States everyone has a chance to succeed and, with few exceptions, people should look out for themselves rather than expecting the government to take care of them.

Conservatives believe that individuals are responsible for their behavior. They think that punishment, or the fear of it, is the most successful way to discourage crime. If a person breaks a law they should be punished. If the United States increases penalties for crime we will have a lower crime rate. Murderers deserve capital punishment.

Conservatives are often suspicious of government, particularly the federal government. They speak of "big government" being the problem, rather than the solution. They subscribe to the philosophy of "laissez faire," or that government should keep its hands off the economy and allow the free enterprise system to operate with minimum government interference. Currently, they often support the "devolution revolution." This means the national or federal government should give many of its powers back to the local and state governments. In particular, they think the states and localities better administer social welfare programs.

Conservatives often oppose what they call "environmental extremism." They believe the government, especially at the federal level, has often gone overboard protecting wildlife and ignored the impact of environmental regulations on property owners, businesses, and jobs.

Conservatives also are likely to be very patriotic or nationalistic. They believe the United States is, without question, the best country in the world. They respect the flag and are likely to get very angry with people who defile it. For them the U.S. Constitution is a revered document. They are fully behind the men (and sometimes the women) of the U.S. military. They support military spending and generous veteran benefits. They often see communism as evil. (Ronald Reagan—a hero to most conservatives—spoke of the USSR as the "evil empire.")

Conservative views on U.S. foreign policy are a reflection of their domestic ideology. They are suspicious of foreign aid and international organizations, particularly the United Nations. They believe that the U.S. should participate in international organizations only to further the direct interests of the United States.

Conservatives believe that the United States should fiercely protect its economic and political interests abroad. Countries who step on the toes of the United States or its allies should know there is a price to pay. The United States military should be used as the major tool to protect Americans and the interests of their government.

Fairly recently a new brand of religious conservatism has entered the political sphere. Often referred to as the "new right" or the "religious right," this group has pushed their religious agenda vigorously. Their defining issue is abortion. They favor a Constitutional Amendment opposing it. This is often their litmus test. Politicians who support their position on this issue will receive their money, time, and energy in political campaigns.

The abortion issue started to organize this group and it has expanded its concern to other issues as well. They view homosexual behavior as sinful. They believe strongly that sex should occur inside the institution of marriage only; their opposition to pornography is vehement. They would like to see Christian prayers and artifacts (crucifix) allowed back in government facilities. They believe in what they call "family values." . . .

The Religious Right, or New Right, has Pat Robertson as its spiritual head. In fact, he received their full support in his bid to become the Republican nominee for President in 1988. However, the real power of this movement lies in the group called the Christian Coalition. This organization was founded by a man named Ralph Reed with the initial goal of helping Pat Robertson in his bid for the Presidency. It has changed over the years to one of the most powerful political organizations in the United States. It has over a million active members, raises hundreds of millions of dollars for political campaigns and provides hard-working and enthusiastic volunteers for many politicians who support their beliefs. It is a political organization; very much like a political party except that it fields no candidates. It endorses candidates though, and distributes lists of worthy candidates to churches around the country. . . .

It should be noted that the Christian Coalition supports Republican candidates for office almost exclusively. . . . Amongst the more interesting information you will find [on the Christian Coalition's Web site] is a scorecard that ranks all members of Congress according to how they voted on measures that the Coalition supports. . . .¹

Liberals

Early in the history of the United States liberalism stressed a protection of individual rights from government. Government was seen as dangerous to the rights and privileges of citizens and therefore liberals were generally opposed to a large, active government. In the twentieth century the concern for individual rights has continued, but the view towards the federal government and its role in citizens' lives changed with the advent of the New Deal and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Since that time liberals have viewed the federal government as a tool to bring about equality of opportunity, ensure basic food, housing, and medical treatment for all citizens. The stress on protection of individual rights especially in regards to freedoms of expression and privacy has remained.

Perhaps the single most important philosophy of contemporary liberalism is its emphasis on equality of opportunity. To further that end liberals constantly look to improve public education. They feel that an educational

¹Tom Byrnes, "Conservatives," Valencia Community College: Tom Byrnes' Home Page, <<http://faculty.valencia.cc.fl.us/tbyrnes/ideology1.htm#Conservatives>> (3 November 2005).

system that treats everyone alike and provides quality instruction goes a long way to providing equal opportunity for children of poor, disadvantaged parents. To this end, liberals are very supportive of remedial programs for students who have behavior, language, or physical difficulties.

In the same vein, liberals support programs that provide free basic medical services to all, but especially economically disadvantaged children. They are generally in favor of social welfare programs that are designed to help the poor, the elderly, and disadvantaged ethnic minorities.

Liberalism opposes discrimination in almost all forms. . . . Liberals were the champions of the civil rights programs that provided legal protection and access to public and private facilities for black Americans in the 1960s. In the nineties liberals supported laws that punished businesses who discriminated against women, ethnic or religious minorities, and other minority social groups, including homosexuals. Liberals are likely to believe that the rich will take care of themselves. The government needs to concentrate on protecting the poor from the wealthy who will try to exploit them and also from big business which will try to force their workers to work hard for little pay and little protection from injury.

As much as conservatives distrust what they call "big government," liberals distrust big business. Liberals are likely to believe that businesses will pollute the environment, mistreat their workers, and provide poor products if they can get away with it. To that end, liberals are usually very supportive of environmental protection laws, unions, tough worker safety laws, and stringent consumer protection laws.

Liberals stress the establishment clause in the First Amendment that has been used by the Supreme Court to restrict religious practices in public facilities, especially schools. Liberals believe that the government should stay out of religion or remain scrupulously neutral. Government institutions should not favor a particular religion or religion in general over irreligion. Religion should remain a private affair for individuals. Liberals, therefore, are in favor of not allowing prayer or religious artifacts in schools or other public facilities. They have opposed successfully the teaching of creationism in public schools on the grounds that it is primarily a religious belief rather than a scientifically supported theory.

Liberals are concerned about the influence that wealthy individuals and big business have on government. They are very much in favor of campaign reforms that provide for public funding of political campaigns and restrict the use of private monies to politicians and political causes. Liberals often believe that laws and justice in the United States favor wealthy individuals and organizations. To that end, liberals are usually in favor of smoothing out wealth extremes in the United States. They support progressive taxes that force the more wealthy to pay a higher percentage of their income in taxes; and they especially favor taxing the estates of wealthy citizens so that their children don't automatically become billionaires.

Finally, contemporary liberalism sees the law enforcement community as often abusive of the rights of the weak and disadvantaged. Liberals support strict laws governing law enforcement officials in searches and seizures and upholding the Fifth Amendment's protections against self-incrimination. Liberals are especially supportive of the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments' due process clauses and the equal protection under the law clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. These clauses have been used to protect women, ethnic minorities, homosexuals, and others who are not traditional in their behavior or social characteristics.

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Name _____

Date _____

In summary, Liberalism now often sees government in positive light. It believes that government should be used to protect the environment, the weak from the strong, to protect children, workers, women, homosexuals, and people of different religious and political beliefs. Liberals see government as a creative mechanism that should be used to improve society. They believe that an inactive government favors the wealthy and big business.²

²Tom Byrnes, "Liberals," Valencia Community College: Tom Byrnes' Home Page, <<http://faculty.valencia.cc.fl.us/tbyrnes/ideology1.htm#Liberals>> (3 November 2005).