

THE DEFINITION OF LIBERALISM

The purpose of this section is to define liberalism, and the differences between it and other political ideologies. A critique of these political positions will be reserved for later sections of this FAQ.

In defining the differences between liberalism and conservatism, there are five main political spectrums to consider. These are:

1. Individualism vs. Altruism
2. Anarchy vs. Organization
3. Democracy vs. Constitutionalism
4. Equality vs. Merit
5. Competition vs. Cooperation

Let's define each spectrum, and see where liberalism and conservatism reside on them.

Spectrum One: Individualism vs. Altruism

An individualist (in this case) is someone who is 100 percent self-interested. An altruist is someone who is 100 percent interested in the well-being of others. Of course, there is a spectrum between these two positions.

There are many ways to believe in pure individualism and still allow that individuals can cooperate in the sort of interdependent, specialized society that makes us all richer. Libertarians and extreme conservatives believe in the "invisible hand," a term coined by 18th century economist Adam Smith. In his desire to get rich, a baker bakes bread for hundreds of people, and in this he is led by an "invisible hand" to feed society, even though such altruistic notions were not part of his original intention. When individuals are allowed to seek their own rewards, the argument goes, the common interest naturally takes care of itself. No central authority needs to consciously promote the common interest.

But liberals can be pure individualists too. They point out that the "invisible hand" is an important concept, but it hardly works in all cases. The criminal seeks his own self-interest, yet causes harm to society. A polluter finds it cheaper to dump pollution than to treat it, and this self-interest is equally harmful to society. Because it is in the self-interest of individuals to live in crime-free and pollution-free societies, they have a need to defend the common interest. In short, there are selfish reasons to promote the common good through government.

A good many other people, however, believe that humans are not 100 percent individualists; rather, they naturally possess a degree of genuine altruism as well. Perhaps the clearest example is romantic and sexual behavior, which is genetic (hormonal). The resulting social union of man and woman is responsible for the creation of new individuals in the first place. And nature has given us maternal and paternal instincts which cause us to sacrifice unselfishly for the survival of our children. This school of thought claims there are also non-family examples of natural altruism as well. These arguments will be addressed in a later section.

Spectrum Two: Anarchy vs. Organization

There are many definitions of anarchy, but for our purposes here let us define it as no laws and no governments. Competition is the main characteristic of such a society. It's survival of the fittest -- kill or be killed.

This is not to say that order and cooperative groups do not arise in anarchy; after all, order and cooperative groups seems to have arisen spontaneously in the anarchy of nature. It's just that they are not centrally planned. (Or appear to be.)

In a perfectly organized society, a central organization plans every aspect of life. Cooperation and coordination are its primary traits. Most people entertain the mistaken belief that the centralized government needed to run such a society can only be a dictatorship, but this is hardly true. A highly centralized government can also be democratic, as proven by the social democracies of Northern Europe. (If this is difficult to picture, then imagine a country where people vote on literally everything, from the price of tea to the safety features of automobiles. The government then puts these ballot results into action.) Nor does the central organization have to be a government; theoretically, it could also be a giant business monopoly (like "The Company" in the movie *Aliens*.)

Anarchy is the ultimate in individual freedom (meaning individuals can do anything they want); a democratically organized society is the ultimate in group freedom (meaning that the majority can do anything it wants). However, most people desire neither of these extremes, and prefer their government to be somewhere in the middle of this spectrum.

A common philosophy of moderation is this: government should support and promote those forms of individual freedom and self-interest which advance the common interest, and prevent those forms of individual freedom and self-interest which harm it.

Although this philosophy is widespread, few people agree on how it should be implemented. Conservatives, for instance, believe that government should allow the invisible hand to work on the free market -- an example of self-interest that advances the common interest. And they believe that government should prevent and punish crime -- an example of self-interest that harms the common interest.

Liberals, on the other hand, believe that government can actively promote, not just allow, the free market. For example, the government can build roads, wire the countryside for electricity and phone service, launch communication satellites and provide economic statistics, all of which allow the free market to flourish. (Conservatives tend to believe these should be privatized, but whether this is even possible is one of the controversies we shall explore later on.)

And liberals believe that the government should be more active in preventing harmful self-interest. For example, they believe government should regulate corporate polluters. Conservatives oppose this, but it is inconsistent with the very philosophy that generates their position on crime.

Spectrum Three: Democracy vs. Constitutionalism

Democracy has been with us for thousands of years, but most of these experiments have ended badly. It was the rise of individual rights in the 18th century, as protected by the Constitution, that has distinguished the United States and made it such a successful democracy. (At least so far!)

The Founding Fathers also knew that democracy only works if the voters are educated. But in the 18th century, the overwhelming majority of Americans were illiterate. So they created a representative democracy, or a republic, in which laws were voted upon not by the people, but their elected representatives. For this reason, the United States is technically not a pure democracy, but a constitutional republic -- a fact which conservatives are always quick to point out.

Many of the Founders advocated a government where representative democracy, the constitution and the courts form a system of checks and balances. The entire rational behind such a triangular system is to prevent too much power from accumulating in any one segment of society. We all know the old adage: power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Liberals acknowledge the value of all three corners of this system. If anything, they would argue that democracy could be strengthened, because mass education has largely wiped out illiteracy in America. Therefore, more direct forms of democracy are possible, like state or even national referendums. More radical liberals advocate replacing our representative democracy with a direct one -- but there is a real question of whether or not the people are *that* educated.

Conservatives, on the other hand, argue that the constitution should be strengthened, and democracy proportionately weakened. Why? Because they perceive that the Constitution gives them the individual freedom to act however they want, as long as they don't violate other people's individual freedom. Democracy, on the other hand, often tells individuals what to do. If a law you voted against is passed, your personal will is denied. In other words, democracy forces individuals in the minority to act in the interest of the majority, which is why conservatives tend to oppose it. Libertarians take this opposition to an extreme.

Spectrum Four: Equality vs. Merit

The debate between equality vs. merit is one of the oldest in our society. When merit is rewarded, competition becomes supreme, the fittest survive, and people get what they deserve. When rewards are given out equally, people become more pleasant and civilized to each other, but incentive falls, since trying harder doesn't get you anywhere.

For classification purposes, there are three types of societies: egalitarian, moderated meritocracy, and unrestricted meritocracy.

Socialism is the best example of an egalitarian society. When Marx wrote "From each according to his ability, and to each according to his needs," he was acknowledging that people are certainly born with different abilities, but they should be rewarded equally.

Libertarianism is the closest example of an unrestricted meritocracy, where there are the fewest constraints on the fittest reaching the top. Unfortunately, we have no historical examples of such a government.

Conservatism and liberalism are examples of moderated meritocracies. In a moderated meritocracy, the most successful continue to be rewarded the most, but a percentage of their power or income is redistributed back to the middle and lower class. Liberals, who lean more towards equality, believe the degree of redistribution should be rather high; conservatives, who lean more towards merit, believe that it should be rather low. In our economy, a progressive tax code achieves this effect, and liberals and conservatives argue over how steep its progressivity should be.

Spectrum Five: Competition vs. Cooperation

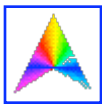
In general, the right favors competition; the left, cooperation.

The advantage of competition is that it drives humans to their maximum potential and maximum performance. The disadvantage of competition is that it can be destructive.

The advantage of cooperation is that we are all stronger together than we are separately. The disadvantage of cooperation is that it diminishes incentive, since trying harder than the next person will not achieve anything.

There is a complex interplay between competition and cooperation in human society (and, indeed, in all animal life). It is possible to engineer society to emphasize competition (by emphasizing the individual) or to emphasize cooperation (by emphasizing society). Finding the right mix requires an accurate understanding of the roots of competition and cooperation, as well as a knowledge of game theory (which is the science of competition and cooperation).

These, then, are the general definitions; now let's critique them.



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