

"A conservative is a man with two perfectly good legs who, however, has never learned how to walk forward."

Franklin Delano Roosevelt,
32nd President of the United States

"The trouble with our liberal friends is not that they are ignorant, but that they know so much that isn't so."

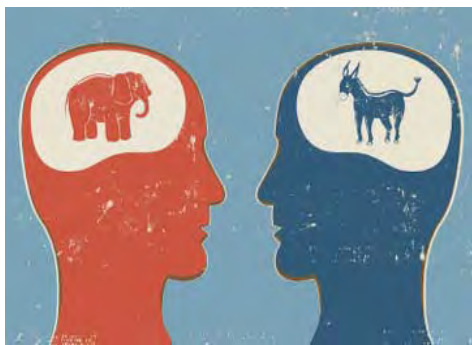
Ronald Reagan,
40th President of the United States

9.0 | What's in a Name?

Have you ever been in a discussion, debate, or perhaps even a heated argument about government or politics where one person objected to another person's claim by saying, "*That's not what I mean by conservative (or liberal)?*" If so, then join the club. People often have to stop in the middle of a good political discussion when it becomes clear that the participants do not agree on the meanings of the terms that are central to the discussion. This can be the case with ideology because people often use familiar terms such as conservative, liberal, or socialist without agreeing on their meanings. This chapter has three main goals. The first goal is to explain the role ideology plays in modern political systems. The second goal is to define the major American ideologies: conservatism, liberalism, and libertarianism. The primary focus is on *modern* conservatism and liberalism. The third goal is to explain their role in government and politics. Some attention is also paid to other "isms"—belief systems that have some of the attributes of an ideology—that are relevant to modern American politics such as environmentalism, feminism, terrorism, and fundamentalism. The chapter begins with an examination of ideologies in general. It then examines American conservatism, liberalism, and other belief systems relevant to modern American politics and government.

9.1 | What is an ideology?

An [ideology](#) is a belief system that consists of a relatively coherent set of ideas, attitudes, or values about government and politics, AND the public policies that are designed to implement the values or achieve the goals. Let's examine the parts of this definition. First, an ideology is a belief system: it consists of a *set* of ideas or values on a broad range of issues as



opposed to a single belief about a single issue. These beliefs help people make sense of the world around them. People go through life with “mental images” of “how the world is or should be organized.” These images constitute an ideology—a way to simplify, organize, evaluate and “give meaning to what otherwise would be a very confusing world.”¹ Individuals who are daily bombarded with information can use ideology to help make sense of it. When people read about a terrible crime or crime statistics, ideology can provide a ready-made explanation for the cause of the criminal behavior as well as a predisposition to support a liberal or conservative public policy response to crime. A person who sees video of police officers beating someone on the streets on Los Angeles or elsewhere is apt to use ideology to provide a handy mental image of whether the use of force is justified or a case of police brutality. A person who reads about the latest data on unemployment can use ideology to provide a framework for thinking that the unemployment rate is too high or too low. A person who thinks about taxes is apt to use ideology to conclude that taxes are too high or too low without having to spend a great deal of time learning about economic policy. And finally, individuals who view actual images of bombing or read about the use of military force can use an ideological “mental image” to react to the action based on an ideological bias for or against the use of military force.

Second, an ideology has an action component. An ideology is about ideas and positions on public policies. A public policy is a plan of action to implement ideas or values or achieve specific goals. The commitment to acting on ideas differentiates an ideology from a philosophy. A philosophy is primarily concerned with ideas or values. For example, political philosophy is the study of fundamental questions about the government, politics, liberty, justice, equality, property, rights, law, and what constitutes a good or moral public order. Political philosophers examine questions about the legitimacy of government; the difference between power and authority; the nature of freedom and equality; civic duties and obligations; and the nature and scope of government power to limit individual liberty. The adherents of an ideology are committed to specific sets of values and to acting to achieve them in the realm of politics and government.

9.12 | *A Coherent Set of Ideas: Human Nature and the Role of Government*

An ideology is not just a set of ideas it is a *coherent* set of ideas. This means that the components of an ideology should be consistent with one another. One idea should not conflict with others. For example, ideologies typically include beliefs about human nature and beliefs about the appropriate role for government. In terms of human nature,

Think about It! Watch the trailer for the 1938 film *Angels with Dirty Faces*. What do you think the film says about human nature?
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nld4DcRHME0>

an ideology can describe human nature as basically 1) good or bad; and 2) fixed or flexible. The belief that human nature is basically good means that people are expected to do the right thing because they have a natural sense of right and wrong and will generally do what is right. The belief that human nature is basically bad means that people are by nature self-interested, that evil is part of human nature, and therefore people will often do wrong. The belief that human nature is fixed assumes that an individual's capacities and abilities are determined at birth: intelligence, aptitudes, and character are a matter of nature. The belief that human nature is flexible means that an individual's capacities and abilities can be developed by family, religion, culture, tradition, and education: intelligence, aptitudes, and character are a matter of nurture. Beliefs about the determinants of human behavior are of great political importance because they shape beliefs about the best form of government (e.g., whether democracy will work), the

Read about it!

What does Jefferson think about “egoistic,” self-loving behavior?

<http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=JefLett.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=228&division=div1>

appropriate role of government (e.g., limited or broad), and they shape public policies. For instance, they determine criminal justice policies, particularly whether sentencing policies should emphasize punishment or rehabilitation.

James Madison is remembered as the architect of American government because he designed a form of government with elaborate institutional checks and balances. He believed that people were by nature self-interested and needed to have their ambitions checked. Thomas Jefferson wrote extensively about human nature, specifically about the question whether humans were self-interested egoists (individuals whose actions are based solely on “self-love”) or whether they had a moral sense. He believed people had a natural moral sense. The question was whether it was based on religion, which would justify government support for religion, or a natural sense of moral obligation or conscience. These are some of the most profound political questions. In a June 13, 1814 Letter to Thomas Law, “The Moral Sense,” Jefferson discusses his thoughts on the question.

In his [First Inaugural Address](#) (delivered March 4, 1861), President Lincoln spoke about human nature when he closed his Address with the hope that the divisiveness of the Civil War could be ended by appeals to “the better angels of our nature.” Lincoln believed that without such appeals to our good nature, appeals to the worse angels of our nature would result in division, discord, and violence.

An ideology would be inconsistent if it included positive *and* negative views of human nature, or if it included both fixed and flexible views of human nature. Assessing the consistency of views on the role of government is more complicated. They typically include ideas about the appropriate *size* and the appropriate *use* of government power.

The size usually refers to small government or big government. The use refers to the purposes of government. With the notable exception of libertarianism, ideologies typically support small government for some purposes and big government for others. For example, modern conservatives believe in big government for national security, morals regulation, and crime. Liberals believe in big government to regulate business and to expand social and economic equality. American politics tends to focus on the *size* of government—which individual, ideology, or political party supports big government and which supports small government. However, the *role* of government—what government power is actually being used for—is probably more important than the size of government.

Think About It!

Are humans Hobbesian creatures who are violent by nature?

What does Steven Pinker's 2007 TED Lecture, *The Myth of Violence*, say about human nature?

9.13 |

http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/steven_pinker_on_the_myth_of_violence.html

The terms conservative and liberal are commonly used in American politics. One of these two labels is usually attached to individuals, parties, interest groups, media articles and outlets, public policies, and government officials—including judges. But the fact that the terms conservative and liberal are commonly used does not mean that their meanings are clear. In fact, arguments are often about the meaning of words such as freedom, order, and justice—as well as conservative and liberal. The fact that our ordinary political vocabulary includes words whose meanings are not agreed upon explains why so many political arguments pause with the declaration, “That’s not what I mean by liberalism/conservatism/order/justice!” Democracy requires a shared political vocabulary, and it works best when citizens know the meanings of the words they use to describe government and politics. Defining conservatism and liberalism is complicated by the fact that they have changed a great deal over time. Ideologies are dynamic, not static. They change over time. What it means to be a conservative or liberal changes over time, which is one reason why it is sometimes hard to know just what is in a name.

9.14 | *The Functions of Ideology*

In politics as in economics and sports, *organization* increases effectiveness. Ideologies organize interests. Ideologies can increase the effectiveness of individuals and ideas by organizing them in order to maximize their impact on public policy. In this respect, ideologies serve a purpose that is similar to political parties and interest groups. But ideologies both unite people and divide them. Ideologies do bring people together to work for shared ideas but they also move people apart by dividing them into opposing camps: believers and non-believers. The fact that ideologies both unite and divide, increase political cooperation and political conflict, is one reason why Americans are so ambivalent about ideology, why they have conflicting feelings about ideology. The ambivalent feelings about ideology can be traced to the earliest days of the republic when the Founders warned against “the mischiefs of faction.” In *Federalist Number 9* Hamilton argued that a firm union was a safeguard against “domestic faction.” In [Federalist](#)

[Number 10](#) Madison described how to design a political system that “cured” the “mischief of faction.” Worries about the harmful effects of factions have not gone away. Today’s worries are about ideologies or parties or special interests divided Americans into competing camps that fight hard for their views rather than working toward the common good. The later chapters describe how organization can increase an individual’s feelings of efficacy, the belief that individual participation in politics matters because it can make a difference. Ideology *can* play a similar role because it unites and organizes like-minded people to work on behalf of shared ideas.

9.2 | The Major Isms

The range of ideological debates in the U.S. is very limited compared to other democracies. American politics is practically limited to liberalism and conservatism. There are occasional references to other ideologies such as libertarianism, radicalism, socialism, and fascism, but these ideologies are for the most part outside the mainstream of political debate or they are considered the more extreme elements within liberalism or conservatism. The



more extremist ideologies of the left and right ends of the political spectrum are not usually part of political discourse. In this sense, the two-ideology system mirrors the two-party system: both present voters with a limited range of political choices.

Liberalism and conservatism have changed a great deal over time. In the early 1800s, the conservative party was the Federalist Party, which advocated a strong federal government, and the liberal party was the Jeffersonian Republicans, which advocated states’ rights. In the 1930s, conservatives supported states’ rights while liberals supported expansion of the federal government. Since the mid-1960s four major issues have consistently divided conservatives and liberals:

- *National Security Policy.* Conservatives have generally been stronger supporters of national defense (anti-communism and anti-terrorism) policies than liberals.
- *Crime Policy.* Conservatives have supported getting tough on crime by strengthening police and advocating punishment. Liberals have generally been considered soft on crime by strengthening due process rights of suspects and advocating rehabilitation.
- *Moral Regulatory Policy.* Conservatives support moral regulatory policy related to abortion, pornography, sexual behavior, and public displays of religion. Liberals support deregulation of morals.
- *Economic Policy.* Conservatives have been more consistently pro-business and anti-tax. Liberals have generally been more pro-labor and more supportive of government regulation of business.

9.30 | Conservatism: Traditional and Modern

This is a conservative era in American politics. Conservatism has been the dominant, but not exclusive, force in national politics since the late 1960s² with the notable exception being the reaction to the Watergate scandal in the mid-1970s. However, conservatism is not a monolithic ideology. In fact, wherever two or more conservatives are gathered together the discussion invariably turns to who is the real, true conservative. The following describes the two main strains of conservatism: traditional conservatism (during the period from the 1930s until the mid-1960s) and modern conservatism (from the mid-1960s until today). There are three main differences between traditional and modern conservatism—their views on change, ideology, and the role of government.

9.31 | *Views on Change*

Traditional conservatism is closest to the original meaning of the word conservative, which is derived from the Latin *conservāre*—meaning to conserve by preserving, keeping, or protecting traditional beliefs, values, customs, or ways of doing things. Traditional conservatives defend the status quo against radical or revolutionary change or



Edmund Burke, 1771

the assumption that all change is reform (good change). [Edmund Burke](#) (1729-1797), the Irish-British political philosopher, is considered the father of traditional conservatism. He did not oppose change. In fact, he argued that a government without a means of changing lacked the necessary means for its own survival. However, Burke preferred slow or incremental change and opposed radical or revolutionary change.

Modern conservatism is a much stronger advocate for *change*. In fact, some conservatives call themselves radical conservatives. A radical is someone who advocates basic, even revolutionary change. Radicals can be leftwing or rightwing. When President Reagan called his administration a bunch of radicals he reminded voters that he was a movement

conservative, a person who was committed to the cause of overturning liberal social, economic, and defense policies. In contrast to traditional conservatism, which rejected radical or revolutionary change of the right or left, modern conservatism advocates major, even radical or revolutionary change. However, the change is usually described as radical change from the liberal status quo, change that will bring the country back to the basics. This usually means that the solution for many of the contemporary social, economic, and political problems is to return to the Founder's original understanding of politics, government, and the Constitution. This recurring conservative theme is one of the main points of the Tea Party movement.

Traditional conservatism's skepticism about change is related to the belief in the importance of order. Traditional conservatives consider order the necessary condition for achieving or maintaining other important values such as individual freedom, private property, and justice—and without good order, these other values and valuables are unlikely to be attained. Traditional conservatives believe that order can be created and maintained by social institutions (family, schools, churches, and civic organization) as well as by government. In this sense, traditional conservatives are not anti-government.

They believe that government has a responsibility to maintain domestic order, to control crime, to preserve traditional values through moral regulatory policies, and to provide national security from foreign threats. But traditional conservatives believe that the primary responsibility for these activities lies with the private sector, the civil society, rather than the public sector (the government). The Burkean emphasis on order, social institutions, and civic responsibility made traditional conservatism less committed to other values such as individualism, individual liberty, and equality. A leading American traditional conservative is Russell Kirk (1918-1994). The [Russell Kirk Center](#) provides a good description of traditional conservative principles. They include belief in natural law, hierarchy, the connection between property rights and freedom, faith in custom and tradition, and skepticism of change.

9.32 | *Views on Ideology*

The second different between traditional and modern conservatism is that modern conservatism is much more *ideological*. Today's conservatives portray conservatism as an ideology that will solve the problems created by liberalism. The term *movement conservative* refers to those conservatives who consider themselves part of an organized cause to work for conservative ideas. These conservatives are part of a cause. Traditional conservatives were to a certain extent anti-ideological. They considered ideology problematic because it was extremism rather than moderation—and traditional conservatives were in the Aristotelian and Burkean traditions that emphasized conservatism as moderation rather than extremism. The word ideology was originally coined to refer to the [scientific study of ideas](#). It was originally used to describe how the systematic study of ideas could lead to a better understanding of the political world the way that science increased understanding of the natural world. But by the middle of the 20th Century the word ideology was used to describe the ideas that were used to get and use political power. In fact, beginning in the latter 1950s, sociologists including Nan Aron, Seymour M. Lipset, Edward Shils, and Daniel Bell described ideology as assuming the role that religion played in traditional societies. In modern, Western-style secular democracies of the world ideology played the role of religion. They did not mean this as a compliment. They considered ideology at least partly an irrational, unthinking, and therefore unreasonable force in a political world where states had become very powerful, even totalitarian. The criticism of ideology was a reaction against the ideologies of the left and the right during the period from the 1930s to the 1960s. These critics of ideology came to be called neoconservatives, or new conservatives. Prominent neoconservatives were a group of former leftists who rejected ideologies of the left, which produced communism (e.g. The Soviet Union and China), and ideologies of the right, which produced fascism (Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy). They associated ideology with totalitarianism.

9.33 | *Views on Role of Government*

The third difference between traditional and modern conservatives concerns the role of government. Modern conservative support for change and ideology has changed conservative thinking about the role of government. Conservatives are not antigovernment or even advocates of small government as much as they oppose what

government has been doing. Specifically, conservatives oppose public policies that promote egalitarianism, social welfare, the due process model of justice, and the deregulation of morals. The claim that conservatives are not antigovernment can be supported by examining conservative views on the four major policy areas that have consistently divided conservatives and liberals: national security; crime; economics; and moral regulatory policy. The conservative position is not antigovernment in these four areas. Conservatives are pro-government on national security, crime, regulation of morals, and even, to a lesser extent, economics. There *is* a libertarian strain within conservatism that is consistently antigovernment but mainstream conservatism does not take the libertarian position on the major policies.

The conservative movement's support for government is apparent in the principles and positions taken by leading conservative organizations such as [The Heritage Foundation](#), the [The American Conservative Party](#), and [The American Conservative Union](#). The Heritage Foundation, for example, describes itself as a leading voice for conservative ideas such as individual freedom, limited government, traditional values, and strong national defense. It promotes the latter two values by support for “big” government. The American Conservative Party's principles are more anti-government in the sense that they more consistently advocate limited government. The principles include natural rights and individual liberty, the belief that law should be used to support liberty and mediate disputes where one person has harmed another, and the reminder that “[t]he armed forces and law enforcement exist to bolster private defense, not supplant it.”

Ideologies include a commitment to acting on values. Conservatives use both the government and the private sector to achieve their goals, but they are especially committed to the private sector. The free market plays a central role as a means to achieve conservative goals. In fact, the market model is often presented as an alternative to a statist or government model for organizing society. The English political philosopher [Adam Smith](#) developed the marketplace model in *Wealth of Nations*. This book, which was published in 1776, the same year as the Declaration of Independence, is one of the most influential books ever written. Smith advocated an alternative to mercantilism, the conventional economic model of the day that the government should direct economic activity for the wealth of the empire. Smith described an economic system where the prices of goods were determined by the interactions of buyers and sellers in a competitive marketplace rather than the government. Over time, however, the logic of the marketplace model has been extended beyond economics to other, non-economic areas of society. For example, the economic free marketplace of goods has been expanded to politics where the free market place of ideas is based on the same logic as the economic free market. This is controversial because the marketplace model assumes that goods and services should be available on the basis of the ability to pay—but some things are valuable even though they are not highly valued in the economic marketplace. The philosopher Michael Sandel worries that the logic of the marketplace is now being applied to more and more non-economic settings. Listen to his argument about what money cannot buy and should not buy. Do you agree with him?