

Liberalism and Conservatism: Ideology and US Domestic Politics

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In the run-up to the U.S. elections, this document aims to briefly unpack the notions of Liberalism and Conservatism as they manifest in the U.S. domestic political scene. The purpose of the paper is to discuss and describe ideological difference. It is not an argument for any particular ideology, but functions as an explainer for those unfamiliar with U.S. domestic politics as to how ideologies manifest.

Introduction

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With these concerns and more, unlike other countries in the world, most American voters will cast ballots in favour

of one of two parties: the more liberal, left-of-centre Democratic Party, and the more conservative, right-of-centre Republican Party. This document aims to unpack some of the ideologies at play and how they manifest within the U.S. political scene.¹ The idea is not so much to extrapolate possible foreign policy futures (though the inclination to do so is inevitable) but to focus on how these two broad ideological categories have been understood in recent times, as well as some measure of the continuity and change within them. Whether or not the interplay between the spectrum of meanings attributed to both Liberalism and Conservatism will in any way condition [foreign policy](#) can only be ascertained through deductive peregrinations, *if* an exhaustive understanding of the role such ideologies have in political life is fleshed-out in the first place. It may even be the case that foreign policy moves to the right [at the same time](#) that domestic policy moves left. In any case, what to make of such a quest when President Trump, in both in the run-up to his election and throughout his time in office, expressed the idea that he is a candidate above such divisions? Speaking in 2016, Trump is alleged to have [said](#): "Folks, I'm a conservative, but at this point, who cares? We got to straighten out the country". Or, for example, how to juggle the critique attributed to Democrats as well that Trump has himself discredited central tenants of Conservatism across the spate of his Presidency, or that he is actually [not a conservative](#) at all? How might the series of nuances and caveats across the spectrum of Conservative thought avail the notion of Conservatism from association with Trump and the failures attributed to him, and similarly how might the differences within Liberalism be marshalled in a way to attract support across the political spectrum, given histories of crosscutting divides across American society? All these questions and more persist and are the subject of the discussion that follows.

Conservatism & The Republican Party

Conservatism in the U.S. has a complex history, one that is far too lengthy to detail here². To approach the concept tangentially for now, reflective of that complicated history is the claim that Conservatism, as per [Russell Kirk](#) (a prominent post-war proponent of what has come to be known as traditionalist Conservatism), is variegated and "strictly speaking, not a political system, and certainly not an ideology", but "a way of looking at the civil social order"; more [instinct than idea](#). Reflective of complexity is the fact that Conservatism is also [a contested term](#), especially given the contemporary questions over the future of the Republican Party. Complexity need not be hidden behind, however. To paraphrase some [leading conservative thought leaders](#): the central tenants of Conservatism have been animated by a commitment to the conservation of the [American](#)

¹ There is a fascinating account of the [psychological dispositions](#) said to characterise the binary electoral system.

² [Noble \(1978\)](#), in "A Century of Conservatism", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 13(4), 635-652; provides a useful historical assessment of the evolution of conservatism in the U.S. A more recent source could be [Will \(2019\)](#), *The Conservative Sensibility*, Hachette Books.

[Founding](#), with the concept of timeless, natural rights, a regime of liberty but also of a separation of powers, and the pursuit of a maximum amount of freedom consistent with order. Hence, some commitments precede what may also be ideas encapsulated within Liberalism. In other words, there can be a Conservatism that includes “[...] liberal capitalism, but with a prior commitment to the dignity of the human person [...]”. Of course, there is something to be said about the origins of small government as advocated by the Conservative mindset, which does not necessarily mean a less effective state, as will be considered. However, a popular line of reasoning is that when it comes to social welfare, the well-known notion of the “[Protestant work ethic](#)” may inhibit social welfare programmes. It is a vast discussion, but the central tenants can include suspicion or derision of the poor, a lack of awareness of the limits of human agency and the asymmetry of opportunity and support. This, of course, will run counter to the notion of the common good or the community, as can be heavily emphasised within the language of Conservatism, although commitments to such ideas are not limited to it. There is also part of the Conservative oeuvre that promotes free-market capitalism and American leadership around the world. The position of the Trump White House vis-à-vis that inclination is an important question to explore. Contemporary Conservatism in the U.S. is often coloured by the axioms of social conservatism, free-market capitalism, and libertarianism. Somewhat confusingly is the interplay between Conservatism and what is known as Classical Liberalism, the latter associated with the ideological foundations of the U.S. and said to be [in vogue](#) amongst anti-Trump Republicans. With an eye also on self-sufficiency, and with a desire to be emancipated from what can be lamented as the increased politicisation of all walks of life, Conservatism would emphasise that individuals are not entirely [autonomous and unconditioned](#). This is not to say, by contrast, that Liberalism is thoroughly individualistic. It may be that Conservatives themselves posit that individuals are entirely responsible for their [economic condition](#). As per the [New Statesman](#), however, under the wing of contemporary U.S. Conservatism one can find the neologisms of national-conservative, integralist, traditionalist, post-liberal, but now with added scepticism of the predominant economic inclinations that have thus far dominated American Conservatism, driven in part by a more vocal Catholic intelligentsia³. On the economic front, it is said that [no Republican would call themselves a Keynesian](#). The expansionary fiscal policy of Federal Reserve in the era of Trump (and more recently amidst the exceptional effects of the global pandemic), has given credence to the idea that the anti-Keynesian hallmark of the Republican Party seems now not as hard-line. In reality, it is quite hard to argue in terms of such economic abstractions without prior delimitations of the terms in question. However, it still stands that the Republican Party, perhaps against misplaced expecta-

tions, is willing to press for stimulus packages as and when deemed necessary, but perhaps not to the extent that the Democratic Party may go for. Whether or not such an approach merits the term “Keynesian” depends on the definition of the term itself, best discussed elsewhere.

Liberty is perhaps the key concept at stake for both Conservatives and Liberals. The role and scope of government vis-à-vis liberty seems to be a never-ending debate in the U.S. Commentators from the more conservative end of the spectrum would maintain that liberty can be best secured by a limited-role government, combined with the various bonds in virtue as espoused in associations and relationships from the family to the church, or from the school to the village. On the former, there is a distinction to be made regarding what Democrats and Republicans mean by big government alongside how [interventionist](#) a state may be economically in times of crisis. On the latter, the debate revolves around the necessity of order by the state vis-à-vis atomised individuals who may seek full autonomy. In 1967, the writer Jacques Ellul made the argument (with overlaps to be found in the work of figures such as late Conservative English philosopher Sir Roger Scruton, or former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom [Lord Jonathan Sacks](#)), that excessive politicisation along with the increasing power of the state, leads to several difficulties recognisable today: polarisation (as a result of said politicisation), enhanced public disenfranchisement, dependency on the state, and increased individualism. To this, Conservative doctrine usually envisions a more limited role for government which, however that is to materialise, does not in the eyes of conservatives then incur a degradation of the fundamental institutions necessary for democratic rule. The trouble, however, is that with the expansion of the liberal state, which when juxtaposed with the litany of domestic concerns (economic inequality of eminence in the discussion), credence is given to the assertion that there is something very wrong with the way Liberalism (in tandem with globalisation) operates today. On [Why Liberalism Failed](#), Patrick Deneen suggests that Liberalism has in fact actualised itself in its fullest form and is behind today’s assortment of failures:

“A political philosophy that was launched to foster greater equity, defend a pluralist tapestry of different cultures and beliefs, protect human dignity, and, of course, expand liberty, in practice generates titanic inequality, enforces uniformity and homogeneity, fosters material and spiritual degradation, and undermines freedom”⁴.

Rather than merely circumstantial evidence, the ills of today’s society as seen from the Conservative perspective arise “directly from liberalism’s fruition”⁵. The debasement of virtues such as that of self-restraint, civility, modesty, contentment, and so on have been driven by what has

³ Adrian Vermeule, Professor of Constitutional Law at Harvard, is a leading figure here.

⁴ Deneen (2019, 3).

⁵ (*ibid.*, 30).



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emerged alongside a compatible economic ideology that encourages immediate material gratification, utilitarianism, and individualism. The latter apotheosising of will above all else is seen as highly problematic to the Conservative mind, for the idea that one liberates oneself entirely from latent bonds, responsibilities, and hierarchies is a naïve desire that simply ushers in a new set of hierarchies. There is also the general hostility to the established tradition that has been registered as well, where “superficially self-maximising, socially destructive behaviours [that] begin to dominate society”⁶ [Authoritarian or extreme tendencies](#) are by no means exclusive to the right-wing, with the 20th-century bearing witness to deadly excesses by totalitarian left-wing regimes. Again, there are of course other seemingly more innocuous [excesses of Liberalism](#) seen from the perspective of Conservatism. Here the idea of ‘cancel culture’ often attributed to the Left, despite its avowed commitment to liberty, is often picked-up by Conservative thinkers. Although scholars such as Deneen may note that today’s Conservatism has had at least some role to play in the ills of society, the nuance is missed with Trump, who has [expounded the existential view](#) that “our radical Democrat opponents [...] want to destroy you and they want to destroy our country as we know it”. Deneen argues that, in reality, Conservatism, as it stands, has helped advance the liberal project (particularly as it concerns its economic outlook). Trump’s association with the latter assessment is hard to exactly pin down. He has been a vocal opponent of globalism (referred to otherwise as globalisation), with his mantra of ‘America First’ presented as the required patriotic response (also with an alternative label in the form of economic nationalism). If Liberalism, as it

stands, is seen as the antithesis of Conservatism, then this is just the sort of rhetoric that engrains a fear of the ‘Other’ in power and might then go on to polarise society further and then increase tolerance of actors such as Trump who may not be straight and true to Conservative values. Equally, the idea may appeal to those who vote Democrat but may be persuaded that liberty is best safeguarded with a more Conservative sensibility. This still may not necessarily mean that voters will flock to the Republican Party, particularly if the vilified Trump comes to define it.

Liberalism and the Democratic Party

Unsurprisingly, like Conservatism, Liberalism in the U.S. has a complex history⁷, as well as a variegated present, where Democrats themselves can be classed between [liberal, moderate, and conservative](#). Interestingly, Pew Research Centre found that the majority of Republicans view both Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders as simply “liberal”. Before wading into the spectrum of thought within the Democratic Party, to the accusations that Liberalism has ushered in a series of degeneracies, is an equally hard-hitting account that, in contrast, roots Liberalism firmly within the realm of “[democracy, egalitarianism, and individual liberty](#)”, as opposed to with the perils of what is described as Trumpism, the mention of which then ushers a long-list of witness-to-prosecution ills that have blighted the Trump Presidency, where Trumpism is said to have thoroughly [gutted the Republican Party](#).

⁶ (*ibid.*, 39).

⁷ See [here](#) for the historical uptake of the term in U.S. politics, and in particular the dynamic between Enlightenment principles and religion.

Liberalism appeals to the desire for human freedom. Liberalism in and of itself does not create that impulse for freedom, nor does it have a monopoly over it and critics would suggest that the invocation of freedom in the abstract obscures the need for rules, regulations, and responsibilities, in any scenario. Likewise, the idea that Liberalism entails the disavowal of said rules, regulations, and responsibilities, is equally exaggerated, the sort of accusations that would befit the extreme ends of the political spectrum only. Here the backlash against 'elitism' takes hold, one that crosses-over between both Republicans and Democrats. [Flattering portraits](#) often associate Liberalism with tolerance, empathy, open-mindedness and a focus on equality of outcome, with less of an inclination to use force as a method of conflict resolution. Each of these traits can be viewed in more cynical terms of course, or, at the very least problematised in favour of traits associated with the Conservative outlook. What seems to have ushered in a wider cleavage between the Democrats and the Republicans is that the former have become, as described by [Thomas Edsall](#) at the New York Times, "decisively more liberal, especially on cultural issues; more dependent on states on the East and West Coasts; more diverse; more ideologically orthodox, less religious, less white; and in many cases more highly educated". Earlier this year came confirmation that [the largest share of Democratic](#) voters is made up of Liberals, albeit with slower growth it seems over the years and with moderate Democrats a close second.

There will be of course both continuity and change, but change seems to have manifested more in the Democrats than the Republicans where, in recent times, liberal orthodoxies are said to have taken hold after a period where before the Obama era Democrats themselves had [critiqued liberal orthodoxies](#). The pandemic, and the responses necessary to it, as well as the sort of sweeping reform advocated in the Black Lives Matter movement, are said to provide an impetus for Biden to "move left". As unhelpful as that label may be, what seems to be the case with a candidate such as Biden is [ideological flexibility](#) within the centre of the Democrat Party. The victory of the more centrist Biden over Bernie Sanders meant that what was received as the more 'radical' (although that term would be contested), elements of the Democratic Party were abated, and a more amenable candidate in the form of Biden was found. Still, the appeal of a Democratic Socialist such as Sanders was emboldened by the need for a more comprehensive change, particularly as it concerns economic inequality, which again features in the debate on elitism⁸. Sanders is said to have represented the first major challenge to what is labelled as a [neo-liberal take on economic matters](#) that has endured in the mainstream of Democratic Party thought, one that valorises market and private-sector solutions rather than government-induced redistribution policies. Neo-

liberalism is a key concept⁹, one that has been critiqued by Republicans as a means to drive the work that still needs to be done from their perspective, but [also critiqued from Democratic voices](#) as a reason why the party is not in power owing to economic disenfranchisement picked up on by Trump. How both Republicans and Democrats will go on to address economic inequality, and just how far elite interest will hinder more wide-ranging structural change, remains to be seen. For what it is worth, Sanders is now fully behind Biden, for [the progressive cause](#) is said to be threatened more by a Trump presidency than by moderate Democrats. There will be of course more progressive tendencies that vie for change across both political parties, as well as attempts to reimagine the ideologies at hand. On the latter, that same sense of intellectual reform is also present within the Liberal sphere. In fact, there also seems to be [anti-liberals that stem from the left](#), where liberal economic doctrine is again identified as the source of contemporary woes. Just how far the problem of economic inequality is inherent to contemporary neoliberalism and economic globalisation, or a more fundamental neo-Marxist reading that sees capitalism itself as the issue, goes on to inform at least in part the left-wing political spectrum, the latter sort of critique expounded more on the fringes of the left. Whether one can oppose neoliberalism without taking aim at Liberalism is another central tenant of the dispute, where the consummation of both of these doctrines is likely to be advocated for by the opponents of Liberalism as it stands today. There is also a retort against the almost automatic application of ["liberal" to "leftist"](#), where all forms of left-wing thought are associated with Liberalism and, ultimately, the Democrats.

Entrenched Battle Lines

Any worthwhile attempt to comprehend the domestic political landscape of the United States will acknowledge just how complex the subject matter is, and therefore how difficult it is to describe it, let alone infer election outcomes. No doubt the coronavirus pandemic and the nationwide protests following the death of George Floyd will have coloured impressions of Trump's performance in office, though of course there will be voters unphased, perhaps even supportive of the President's efforts. Professor Allan Lichtman of the American University (credited for the accurate prediction of every presidential election since 1984¹⁰), [asserts](#) that Biden (though described as an "uncharismatic challenger") will overcome Trump in what will nevertheless still be a close contest. But the picture is always complicated, and messages mixed. Pew Research Centre asserts that [voters rarely switch parties](#). The idea is that, despite an assortment of controversies and upheav-

⁸ The Occupy Wall Street movement during the Obama Presidency is said to display Democrat frustration at the persistence of [elitism](#).

⁹ The [following article](#) by Ryan Cooper in *The Week* provides a good overview of the American experience of neoliberalism.

¹⁰ Lichtman predicted Al Gore would win the presidential election against George W. Bush. Though Gore won the popular vote, Bush won the presidency, with the infamous Florida recount at stake. Lichtman retains the validity of his prediction.

als, to the extent even of a global pandemic that has seen the US become one of the hardest hit countries, leading the way in deaths, partisan battle lines remain more or less the same. Between September 2018 and July 2020, a sample of 11,077 registered voters displayed a 9% or so shift in political allegiance between both the Democrat and the Republican Party. Within these general trends are nuances such as education levels and identity categories, [amongst others](#), that are related to varying levels of shifts in political allegiance. Beyond the remit of any such study where meaningful correspondence can be problematised is, as of 2018, the 157.07 million registered voters to also consider. Still, added to that is the fact that polarisation seems to be the order of the day. Beyond boundaries of race and religion, a [Public Religion Research Institute /Atlantic](#) poll found that 35% of Republicans and 45% of Democrats would express disapproval if their children even married someone from the other party. Within, for example, those previously supportive of the Republican Party are what have come to be known as the recalcitrant 'never Trumpers', but just how numerous and influential this bloc is remains to be seen?

Conclusion

To be fair to President Trump, his remark that "Folks, I'm a conservative, but at this point, who cares? We got to straighten out the country", illuminates the heart of this discussion. To what extent is contemporary American political life governed by the supposed binary or parallel ideology between Liberalism and Conservatism? Are there not moments of necessity where ideological orthodoxies are put entirely on the back burner or are ideological nuances still there in times of distress (such as that of the global pandemic), albeit in an inconspicuous manner? With eventualities that may demand effective government action, such as a strong response to the pandemic, perhaps it is the case that the electorate simply wishes to see solutions to the immediate problems of the day, responses to which may not, in fact, deviate in essence across the political spectrum. Amidst this all, should we be [satisfied with the recognition](#) that "the question of which comes first, the ideology or the empirical analysis, is essentially unanswerable"? The trouble with the latter assertion is that questions of epistemology come into the fray, where empirical analysis itself (and what counts as empirical), can be conditioned by all manner of precepts, some of which may indeed crossover into the realm of the ideological, all of which will be subject to the limits of human perception. That is a far grander discussion for another time. It is easier said than done, but what might need further explication is not the sharp divisions between Republicans and Democrats as expressed through the language of Liberalism and Conservatism, one that might highlight conceptual overlaps where they exist and give context and proportionality to differences in ideology in a manner that may help allay the acute polarisation in the U.S. The same can go for both U.S. foreign policy and the more centrist con-

victions of either Republicans or Democrats, which can be animated by the large, cross-cutting challenges of the day, even if then ideological differences go on to affect policy outcomes. Beyond ideological binaries, may simply be the need to recognise the need for greater virtue and morality, one that sustains the forbearance of difference, challenges the debasement of the debate, and instils the sort of civility necessary for today. That is easier said than done of course, given the debate that can rage on in the most fundamental of questions, such as what exactly may constitute the "common good" or the "American dream".