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Are You Liberal or Conservative

The answer to this question, as used in political connotation, requires an understanding of the respective terms. This process involves the semantics of their use in discourse.

It stands to reason that a mutual understanding of the words and terms when utilized in discussions is required for any communication between the parties involved to convey true meaning to the discourse. This is especially true when the words and terms are expressed in ideological and political platforms and through the media to the public at large. Unfortunately the dictionary usually only deals in defining words and is insufficient in providing the required semantical definition necessary for one to clearly obtain true meaning in their actual application.

To further confuse the issue, we find in conversation the interchange of the words "liberal" with being "to the left" and "conservative" as being "to the right". This apparently arose from the use of the terms in the parliaments of foreign countries; the parts of the parliamentary chambers located to the right and left of the presiding officers accordingly representing conservative and liberal elements respectively. Adding additional complication we find, at times, connotations used tying "to the far right" as tending towards "fascism" and "to the far left" towards "socialism" or even "communism"

Unfortunately, these terms are flagrantly interchanged by activists, politicians and those in the media. This results in the public receiving distorted and frequently misrepresentation of the facts. Our interest here is to the mis-information being conveyed to the American people that accordingly distorts their ability to clearly understand the meaning of the rhetoric to which they are exposed.

Looking to the past, it is no wonder that confusion exists regarding the understanding of what the terms "liberal" and "conservative" really mean. It is only in the last century that the term "liberal" has become associated with socialism. This collectivist ideology involves the redistribution of income and wealth with an accordingly greater control by the central government over the interactions of economic enterprise. Prior to this evolutionary change, being "liberal" had the reverse meaning of being in strong support of individual freedom with an attendant limited role of government in one's life.

The term "liberalism" was coined in Europe somewhere in the late 17th or early 18th century to represent a political philosophy that emphasized limited government with individual freedom and civil liberties. It promoted representative government and property rights along with

freedom of religion In economic matters it favored non-interference from government since the forces of the marketplace would provide the best results for the nation's people. Thus, at its prime liberalism represented limited government with a separation of powers among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches and economic free enterprise. Sounds like present day conservatism doesn't it?

The term "conservatism" was coined to represent beliefs that arose to counter "liberalism" . Essentially, it supported the existing distribution of power, wealth and attendant social status. These beliefs included emphasizing faith and tradition ahead of freedom of thought and speech, as well as, supporting the total interest of society over those of it's individual members. Sounds to a degree like present day liberalism doesn't it?

Unlike Europe, America in the process of enacting a Constitution had developed political beliefs that included economic individualism and the limitation of government power. This was incorporated into the Constitution. This did not follow the beliefs underlying European conservatism but was in fact closer to European liberalism. The American beliefs accepted the concepts of a free market and the personal acquisition of property by individuals. Individual freedoms and property rights were representative of attendant moral, religious, political, and civil rights. As the provisions of the Constitution decreed, the federal government was limited to acting in those areas wherein the states themselves did not have that ability, in inter-state matters and in foreign relations. Great importance was placed on separation of powers, judicial review, and states' rights as opposed to federal power. This then became the foundation of American "conservatism".

Entering into the 20th century Americans generally accepted these principles that were to carry the conservative label. However, there was a political movement evolving that could now be endowed with the new label of "liberalism", American style, that had beliefs that government should be more involved in social issues and in controlling the free market. . Since the economy had become more complex as it expanded these liberal elements began to support the idea that the government could best promote the interests of its citizens by regulating the economy and having government provide for the welfare of its citizenry. In addition they wanted government to correct economic deficiencies they believed to be caused by unregulated capitalism. They supported progressive taxation, antitrust laws, a minimum wage, social security, public education, safety and health regulations, consumer protection and environmental preservation laws. Some of them became socialists, although not necessarily openly supporting Marxism and Communism.

These elements eventually found a way, albeit gradually, to change the course of government. The federal government, supported by three quarters of the state legislatures, aided and abetted these elements in enacting the 16th Amendment to the Constitution in 1913 taxing the income of wage earners. Although at first it placed only a nominal tax on those with extraordinarily high incomes, with time it evolved into a broad based tax on virtually all income.

In the same year, this federal power was also aided and abetted by the passage of the Federal Reserve Act that placed control of the nation's money supply and entire nation's banking system in the hands of the central government. The federal government was now able to usurp "states rights" enumerated under the Constitution. Thus, redirecting income taxes collected from residents of one state to the benefit of residents of other states and to federal programs that in the past may have been entrusted to the actions of individual states. Created deficit spending was now able to be financed by the artificial creation of money by the Federal Reserve Bank.

The American "liberal" received another big boost with passage of a package of social programs entitled "New Deal". President Franklin D. Roosevelt introduced the New Deal in 1933 in an attempt to reverse the economic downturn and provide for those in society having been adversely affected economically by the great depression that followed the stock market crash in 1929. This New Deal legislation placed restraints on free market activities, allowed government to intervene in the economy, heavily increased taxes and increased the size of government. However, it took the sale of materials to our future allies and then later for our own use in WWII, and the tightening of the belts by those Americans supporting our troops, to bring the economy back to relatively normal.

During this period American conservatism developed adherents that did not approve of the New Deal and promoted the resurgence of a free-market economy. They continued on this pursuit and in the presidential election of 1964 conservative Republicans supported Barry Goldwater whose book "The Conscience of a Conservative" espoused the principles of conservatism. Although he lost the election conservative beliefs continued to be espoused and in 1980, Ronald Reagan a strong supporter of Goldwater, took over the conservative mantle, ran and won the Presidency. His call for patriotism, religious and moral values, as well as, strong opposition to high taxes, government controls, and federal spending was the motivation for his support by the majority of Americans.

With this background perhaps we have the foundation to simplify the meaning of the terms, as they apply to an individual American, with which we are dealing in the light of today's world. Let's try for definitions that can be easily understood after delineating and reviewing what has been stated heretofore.

Conservatism - from the foregoing we find that this term conveys the following:

1. A free market and the personal acquisition of property by individuals
2. Individual freedoms and property rights are representative of attendant moral, religious, political, and civil rights.
3. In accordance with the Constitution, the federal government is limited to acting in those areas wherein the states themselves do not have that ability, in inter-state matters and in foreign relations.
4. There is great importance placed on separation of powers, judicial review, and

states' rights as opposed to federal power.

Simplified Definition: An ideal "conservative" believes in the importance of the individual person and the family structure; that it is the responsibility for the individuals within each family to do as much as they can for themselves before asking for assistance. When assistance is needed the route taken is community, city, county, state and federal, in that order, with the federal government the avenue of last resort. A conservative believes in the least government possible.

Liberalism – from the foregoing we find that this term conveys the following:

1. Government should correct economic deficiencies caused by an unregulated free market economy
2. Government should provide social welfare
3. It is right for government to impose progressive income taxation
4. Government should impose a minimum wage
5. The social security system should remain a system where those working support those who are receiving social security payments
6. Government should only support public education. forcibly paid for by taxpayers even though some object to certain subject matter and the manner in which it is taught .
7. Stringent government imposed safety and health regulations.
8. Consumer protection and environmental preservation laws.

Simplified definition: An ideal liberal takes the completely opposite position to an ideal conservative vying for a socialistic form of government working from the top down wherein the freedom of the individual is compromised for the supposed good of the collective group.

Please note that these definitions do not include side issues such as abortion, gun control, immigration, campaign reform etc. Conservatives and liberals may have identical positions without compromising their basic principles with the following caveat. Conservatives generally believe these issues should be determined by the residents of each individual State whereas Liberals believe that they be addressed at the federal level.

In summation, the fundamental difference between a "liberal" and "conservative" lies in personal responsibility.

A conservative believes that when government assumes responsibility it takes away the freedoms and incentives that make an individual productive. Whereas, a liberal believes an individual's interests should be subservient to the collective interest of the members of society and thus minimizes reliance on personal responsibility.

One must either be one or the other because once the collective interests take precedence, the

individual's freedom is compromised and then it just becomes a matter of degree as to the extent. A "liberal" who compromises his principles may consider himself a moderate but it is impossible for a "conservative" to do so because any compromise makes him a moderate liberal.

Now, are you liberal or conservative?