

What Do You Mean by Liberal, Moderate, and Conservative?

We frequently hear people and positions described (often in rather overheated tones) as "liberal" or "conservative". Similarly, we see more and more people writing about "red state" and "blue state" America. Many people hearing these terms privately say "that doesn't describe me", and instead call themselves "moderates" or "independents", while remaining vaguely unsatisfied with this linear "left/right", "blue/red", "liberal/conservative" characterization of today's complex political situation. With that in mind, we'd like to try to clarify matters a bit, by summarizing a number of books and papers that shed more light on this situation.

Let's start with the classical, 19th century definitions of "liberal" and "conservative", from Dr. Paul Johnson's Glossary of Political Economy Terms. "Liberalism is a political viewpoint associated with strong support for a broad interpretation of civil liberties for freedom of expression and religious toleration, for widespread participation in the political process, and for the repeal of protectionist legal restrictions inhibiting the operation of a capitalist free market economy." At the other end of the spectrum are reactionaries, who want to move in the other direction. Standing in the middle are conservatives, defined as people "with a general preference for the existing order of society, and an opposition to all efforts to bring about rapid or fundamental change in that order." Sounds like what we call a moderate today, doesn't it? Clearly, someone arriving in 2003 from the 19th century would be more than a little confused by the political descriptions we use today!

However, most of us instinctively know that the political divisions in our society go well beyond what we term liberal and conservative (which is probably why a growing number of people identify themselves independents or moderates). Perhaps the best recent attempt to clarify the nature of the different groups that make up our body politic was put forth by the political scientists William Maddox and Stuart Lilie in their classic 1981 paper "An Alternative Analysis of Mass Belief Systems" (which was later published as a book titled Beyond Liberal and Conservative).

Maddox and Lilie began their analysis by noting that voters have to deal with two broad groups of issues. The first concerns the economy, and the extent to which the state should be involved in it, either to ensure its smooth functioning, or to limit the extreme inequality that capitalist economies, left unchecked, tend to produce. The second concerns the social/cultural dimension, and the extent to which the state should concern itself with regulating people's behavior outside the economic realm. To oversimplify, this comes down to a question of people's views on the issue of tolerance -- is tolerance (or, perhaps more accurately,

affirmation) of individual differences in behavior an absolute standard, or is it one that should be weighed against other considerations?

Maddox and Lilie's economic and social dimensions lead to four basic political outlooks. People we currently call "liberals" are more comfortable with the state intervening in the economy than they are with intervention in the realm of non-economic behavior. Like John Maynard Keynes (and John Stuart Mill in his later writings), they don't believe the economy is naturally self-righting (e.g., they cite the Great Depression as an example), but do believe that its smooth functioning is a critical enabler of individual freedom. Hence, government has a natural, and important role to play in its operation.

In contrast, "conservatives" believe the economy is too complex for anyone to understand, and that any intervention is therefore likely to make things worse rather than better. On the other hand, they see social order as a precondition for economic freedom. As Maddox and Lilie put it, "the conservative position, as it has developed in the United States, has been that human nature is sufficiently deficient that, without the constraints imposed by society, the individual is likely to behave in deviant and socially harmful ways. Thus, some restrictions on individual liberties are in principle desirable. In additions, they argue than in the economic realm, perhaps again because of man's selfish nature, the workings of the market should be relatively free from government intervention in order to be efficient and productive."

Maddox and Lilie term the third political orientation "libertarian" (which is not to be confused with the party of that same name). People holding this view take a view similar to classical liberals like John Locke and John Stuart Mill that government should have a minimum role in both economic and social/cultural affairs. In their view, "the least government is the best government."

Maddox and Lilie have an easier time describing the fourth political orientation than they do naming it (they use the term "populist", but admit it doesn't quite fit). Like libertarians, they hold consistent views, agreeing with liberals on the need for government intervention in the economy, and with conservatives on the need for government action to balance the community's collective right to social order with the individual right to personal freedom. Perhaps this makes them what other writers have called "communitarians."

Maddox and Lilie's work gives rise to an obvious question: can it be extended to people's views about foreign policy and national security? In his book Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World, Walter Russell Mead also identifies four different viewpoints that characterize American's views, and indeed that run throughout our history. "Wilsonians" support a high level of American involvement in world affairs, driven by a moral desire to spread American values around the world. Given this, they also tend to prefer multilateral to unilateral action. "Hamiltonians" are also multilateralists, but

their support for American involvement in world affairs is primarily driven by a desire to expand commerce and make money. "Jeffersonians" are the most isolationist group, whose belief in limited government leads to a desire to minimize America's involvement in the affairs of other nations. Finally, "Jacksonians" support foreign involvement mostly due to national security concerns, and tend to prefer unilateral action.

It doesn't take much of a stretch to overlay Mead's Wilsonians with Maddox and Lillie's Liberals, the Hamiltonians with the Conservatives, the Jeffersonians with the Libertarians, and the Jacksonians with the Communitarians.

But is this overlay valid? To help answer that question we turn to a third work, the historian David Hackett Fischer's book Albion's Seed, which identifies (you guessed it!) four different American cultural groups, and traces their roots back to four waves of early immigrants which came from very different areas of England.

The first group came from East Anglia, and settled in New England. Their dominant religious denomination was Calvinistic Puritan/Congregational, with its desired to build a highly moral "regime of ordered liberty", or John Winthrop's ideal "city on a hill." The second group came from the English Midlands, and initially settled in the Delaware Valley. Their dominant denomination was Quaker, and they sought to build a society based on reciprocal liberty -- respect for each other's right to go about one's business. The third group came from the Southwest of England, and settled in the Virginian and Carolina tidewater region. Their dominant religious affiliation was Anglican, and their ideal was a society high in individual freedom (e.g., characterized by the largely self-reliant English manor or southern plantation). Finally, from the Scottish Borders region of England came a group that we, mistakenly, call the "Scots-Irish", which initially settled in the upcountry/backcountry south. Their dominant religious affiliation was also Calvinistic, but of the Presbyterian variety. Fischer identifies their goal as wishing to build a society characterized by a high level of community fellowship.

Again, while the alignment isn't perfect, it is still not hard to see the connections between Fischer's four groups, and those identified by Mead and Maddox and Lillie:

- East Anglians/Wilsonians/Liberals;
- Midlands/Hamiltonians/Conservatives;
- Southwest/Jeffersonian/Libertarians, and
- Borders/Jacksonian/Communitarians.

Taken together, the works we have cited point to a larger lesson: the four different viewpoints they identify have always been a part of America, and working out the conflicts between them has always been the underlying dynamic

of our culture, rather than a symptom of its decline. For example, consider the divisions within American Christianity. Leaving the underlying theological differences aside for now (which is a very interesting topic in itself), it isn't hard to identify four major groups on the basis of their political orientations (at least in the pulpit; the views in the pews are sometimes different!). Broadly speaking (and one can always cite specific contradictions to generalizations like this), the Mainline Protestant denominations align with liberal orientation, Evangelical Protestant denominations with the conservative orientation, Roman Catholics with the communitarian orientation, and non-denominational churches with the libertarian orientation. In short, the closer you look, the more you come to the conclusion that these four different orientations permeate American culture.

So where does this leave us? Hopefully with a better understanding of the real divisions within our body politic, and perhaps a greater appreciation of the challenges faced by politicians trying to form successful electoral coalitions. Beyond this, we think the various four part typologies we have reviewed also raise important questions for each of our four groups to answer:

- Liberals must ask themselves, "what are the limits to effective government action in the economy?"
- Conservatives must ask, "what are the limits of markets?"
- Libertarians must ask, "what are the community's legitimate rights, in contrast to the individual's?"
- Communitarians must ask, "what are the individual's legitimate rights, in contrast to the community's?"
- Finally, members of all four groups should ask themselves, "what are the individual behaviors we should not tolerate, and which are those we should affirm?"

These are certainly not easy questions, but they strike us as ones close to the heart of many of the tensions you see, hear, and feel in today's political discussions.