

The morphology of American politics

What are we really talking about when we talk about American politics? The stock labels of "liberal" and "conservative" have been so misused in today's political discourse that they frequently fail to mean anything at all. Because of this, it's worth taking time to break these terms down into their component parts.

It is arguable that American political ideologies are comprised of six basic categories. Most people tend to fall somewhere between the positions described below, rather than being ideological purists, but these definitions provide a good starting point for discussion. These six categories encompass the following:

Government's role in providing for the common good

This category charts one of the basic metrics of the liberal-to-conservative ideological spectrum. In general, conservatives favor limited government intervention on behalf of the public welfare, preferring free market and charitable solutions to many social problems. Libertarians tend to share these same proclivities. Contemporary liberals, on the other hand, view private sector initiatives as insufficient to address many social ills, and advocate for proactive, state-sponsored solutions to problems like endemic poverty or environmental degradation.

Conservatism's newest iteration - neo-conservatism - tends to fall somewhere in the middle of this debate. The neo-conservatives, due to their ideological roots on the left (witness the late Pat Moynihan) have made a certain amount of peace with aspects of the modern welfare state, but they wish to constrain its growth (witness the Clinton-era welfare reforms). Some argue for the existence of yet another classification - neo-liberalism; a political posture that seeks to enlist government aid on behalf of large corporate institutions, while attempting to shed state entitlement programs for individuals.

The proper scope of the federal government

This category deals somewhat less with what government should do, and more with what level of government should do it. Libertarians and traditional conservatives favor a federalist arrangement - a small central government tasked with limited duties, with state and local governments

carrying out most other functions. Many conservatives, however, have carved out an exception to their small government preference in the arena of national security (see the Reagan administration). Libertarians, by comparison, are more skeptical of governmental bloat in this area. For their part, the neo-conservatives are generally not adverse to a sizable federal government - either in the form of the national security state, or in the form of federal programs like No Child Left Behind.

Modern liberals have long been comfortable with an expansive federal government, as they were its chief architects during the New Deal period. The Cold War liberal consensus over a large national security state, however, broke down during the Vietnam War, when the New Left became skeptical of the purposes to which this enterprise was being put. This "New Left" variant of liberalism is often called "progressive" today. "Progressive" is a slippery term, though, and subject to mis-use, with candidates such as Hilary Clinton (who is in many ways a neo-conservative) trying to claim it as their own. Interestingly, some of today's Green Party progressives advocate vigorously for local control, not unlike the Barry Goldwater conservatives of decades ago.

Methods of constitutional interpretation

One's degree of fidelity to the original understanding of the Constitution has consequences for one's choices in the policy realm. Conservatives tend to favor "originalism", meaning that they choose to tie the meaning of Constitutional provisions to their understanding at the time of ratification. Originalism, then, limits the realm of possible interpretations, and precludes Constitutional protection for activities not expressly addressed by the document - such as abortion. Originalism also takes a narrow view of federal power, holding that Congress, for instance, only has the ability to pass laws that fall within the limited categories set out in Article I of the Constitution.

Liberals have largely embraced a "living" view of the Constitution, wherein new rights (or powers) can be inferred from the document, even if they do not appear in the original text. For instance, the much-cited "right of privacy" does not flow from the specific language of the Constitution. However, the Warren court found such a concept therein, and used it to protect certain activities (such as buying contraceptives) from legislative restrictions. Liberal jurists have also expanded the Constitution's Commerce Clause power, allowing Congress to pass laws in areas beyond those

expressly set out by the Constitution.

Neo-conservatives, while ostensibly arguing for an originalist view of the Constitution, in fact give wide berth to federal authority, by broadly interpreting the President's Article II "commander-in-chief" powers to extend beyond those set forth in the text of the document.

Libertarians fall into two camps - those who adhere to an originalist Constitutional view, and those who adopt a uniquely libertarian Constitutional analysis. Some libertarian Constitutional theorists - like contemporary liberals - argue for an expansive interpretation of the Ninth Amendment, seeing it as a generator of "unenumerated natural rights" that do not appear explicitly in the document.

Government regulation of consensual activity

This category is, admittedly, an imperfect catch-all. It is, to some degree, a gauge of where one falls in the various "culture war" debates. Conservatives often seek to enlist the government's aid in banning consensual activities that are seen to offend some interpretations of Judeo-Christian moral sensibilities, such as gay marriage.

Liberals hold a variety of positions along this spectrum. Many support the legality of expressive activities such as gay marriage, but at the same time seek to ban consensual activities that pose a public health risk, such as smoking. Illicit drug use is condemned by conservatives, but tends to split liberal opinion. Libertarians, by and large, oppose the regulation of most activities that only impact direct participants - ranging from drug use, to seat belt use.

Neo-conservatives generally side with conservative attempts to restrict public behavior that might offend certain socio-religious sensibilities. However, neo-conservatives are more likely to accept certain personal behaviors (such as homosexuality), so long as they remain private, and do not threaten to change cultural institutions.

The reach of the national security apparatus

Debates over the scope of the government's search, detention, and surveillance powers have come very much to the fore in recent years. As such, this area of discussion deserves its own category. On one hand, this area is a subset of one's views regarding Constitutional interpretation. On

the other, it is a gauge of one's opinions about the propriety of a whole range of policy choices. On the Constitutional issue, the category breaks down like so:

Without explicitly saying so, neo-conservatives have applied the principles of the "living Constitution" to the arena of Presidential power - something which liberals have been hesitant to do in recent years. Although the President's enumerated Article II powers are limited, the neo-conservatives have chosen to cull many more from the document, divining "inherent" powers to conduct certain types of wiretapping for national security purposes, for instance. The neo-conservative Constitutional analysis also places some expressly legislative powers within the President's purview, such as the powers to declare war, or to suspend habeas corpus.

Opposition to this form of Constitutional analysis comes from many quarters: from liberals of all stripes, from libertarians, and from strict, originalist conservatives as well.

The policy choices that frame this debate turn largely upon questions about the collateral effects of national security policy. Neo-conservatives tend to advocate for more vigorous (and sometimes invasive) security measures, and some consider the resultant constriction of liberties as a necessary price to pay for the preservation of social order. Consequently, concepts such as individualized suspicion and due process tend to be impacted by neo-conservative policy makers, as they adjust political policies to allow for expansive surveillance, preventative detention, and "enhanced interrogation techniques." These policy choices are justified by the argument that the present enemy is so cunning, ruthless, and cruel, that extraordinary measures are needed to vanquish it.

As with the constitutional issues at work here, liberals, libertarians, and some originalist conservatives find much common ground in opposing these policies, and tend to advocate for more narrowly tailored security measures.

The proper international role of the United States

This category measures one's views about the proper relation of the United States to the rest of the world. Liberals once endorsed a proactive, internationalist posture for the United States, wherein American military might was viewed as a global stabilizing force. The era of Cold War containment drew heavily upon this vision. In the decades since Vietnam,

however, liberals have tended to be more circumspect about U.S. military intervention abroad. This is particularly true of progressives. At the same time, there are some liberals who advocate for foreign military intervention in the context of humanitarian missions.

Libertarians are largely suspicious of foreign military deployments, unless there is a direct threat to the nation that requires them. An older, isolationist view of conservatism joins them in this, while hawkish "hard-line" conservatives tend to support a muscular, results-oriented foreign policy, in service to both economic and geo-political objectives.

Neo-conservatives hew to the hard-line approach, but they attach a more involved ideology. For the neo-conservatives, the United States has a duty to use its military might not only to fend off present enemies, but also to transform recalcitrant regions of the globe which might spawn future threats. There is a nation building enterprise, with all the challenges which attend that effort. Despite its costs and difficulties, retreating from this duty is not an option for the neo-conservatives, who believe that American military predominance must be maintained for the good of the United States, as well as the world.

In summary

In large measure, these categories describe the major trends in American political thought today. However, there are many people who don't fall neatly within these boundaries. Because of this, these categories can (and often should) be mixed, in order to best match one's unique political profile. For instance, one can be a liberal with some libertarian leanings. Or the converse can be true. Moreover, it should also be noted that the profiles created by these categories do not necessarily hue to partisan structures. A neo-liberal, neo-conservative can find a home in either the Democratic or Republican party, as the past two administrations have clearly demonstrated.

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