Liberal vs. Conservative Values

Liberal and conservative values in conflict
If you listen to liberal or conservative commentators exclusively, you may think there’s only one correct point of view, and the other end of the political spectrum is populated by wackos, evil schemers, and fools. It’s comfortable to think that truth resides exclusively on your side of the divide—but let’s try a mental experiment. Let’s assume that most people, whatever their politics, sincerely believe in their ideals, and that those ideals aren’t all misguided. Let’s look across the chasm and try to see what those other people are thinking.

[Note: Not all liberals and conservatives would agree with every tenet listed here—but these are the beliefs that generally define the two groups.]

On the social safety net

The liberal view
• There are people in this world who need help. They struggle to put food on the table, or can’t afford medical care—and many of them live in the United States. A civilized society would try to help them, instead of leaving them to fend for themselves. (Someday, the one who needs a helping hand may be you, or someone you love. All it takes is a serious illness, an injury, a lay-off, or a death in the family.)

The conservative view
• People are responsible for themselves—and, given the chance, they’re capable of supporting themselves and their families. If the government makes a practice of providing for people (with welfare, for example), they become weak and dependent, and lose their will to work. Nothing could be more destructive to the health of our society.

On wealth, taxes, and the role of government

The conservative view
• Government should serve the people—not the other way around.
• “That government is best which governs least.” In business, this means letting the free market (the most efficient economic system ever devised) generate wealth without a heavy hand trying to direct it.
• Governments tend to grow like snowballs rolling downhill. We must work to reverse this trend, or the government will expand and intrude on our lives even more than it does now.
• “A rising tide lifts all boats.” When we allow the most dynamic, successful members of society to do what they do best, they create jobs and general prosperity. In other words, lowering taxes benefits everyone. The best way to improve America’s standard of living is to let people pursue their own goals, and reduce the bureaucratic obstacles that stand in their way.
• The legitimate functions of our national government are to provide security through a strong defense and to protect freedom for the individual, so that people can pursue their own goals.
• Private property means that what belongs to you is yours; if the government confiscates your property, that’s tyranny. Our most productive citizens—the top 10% of earners—already pay 68% of the tax revenues collected. These rates should be cut, not raised.
• No one has an obligation to help a stranger involuntarily. Charity should be a personal decision. Encouraging voluntary giving would be better for America’s soul than seizing our money against our will, for purposes we don’t approve of.
The liberal view

- The proper function of government is to solve problems: to reduce poverty, protect civil rights and civil liberties, keep us safe from preventable harm, and, as much as possible, ensure that all Americans have an equal chance to succeed.

- We aren’t isolated individuals, struggling for survival: we live together, in a society. Ignoring the problems around us is a narrow-minded way to live. A society in which everyone has enough is better than a society where some are rich and others starve.

- There isn’t enough charity to take care of everyone who needs it; therefore, government has an important role to play. The alternative is letting people go hungry, homeless, or without medical care, and that’s not acceptable in a country with as much wealth as ours.

- The vast difference in income and lifestyle between the wealthiest and the poorest in our society is damaging the social fabric. We wouldn’t tolerate an America where 1% lived in luxury while 99% couldn’t feed their families; but America today comes closer to that than we’ve ever come before. (Today, the richest 1% earn 24% of the income in the U.S., and the top 20% own 85% of the wealth.) Membership in a society that makes wealth possible comes with obligations. Those who benefit most from our freedoms must contribute their fair share to help those who haven’t been as fortunate.

- The rising tide analogy is misleading. While poorer Americans have made very modest gains since the 1970s, income inequality has surged. The richest fifth’s income has grown at a rate eleven times greater than the poorest fifth’s, and the proportion of families living below the official poverty line has stayed in the 12-15% range.

- Large corporations, if unregulated, will do whatever they think will maximize profits, even if that wreaks havoc on the environment or on the welfare of ordinary citizens. Even the most courageous individual can’t prevent or stop corporate abuses; only the government has the power to do that.

- If the government can help create job opportunities during a time of high unemployment (as it did during the Great Depression), that’s a perfect use of tax dollars.

On war and defense

The liberal view

- War means violence against innocent people, death and injury to young soldiers, and more pain and suffering than the news ever shows. We’re too quick to use our armed forces.

The conservative view

- There are violent people in this world, who hate this country and mean us harm. We have a right and a responsibility to defend ourselves. This is true on the national level, and on the personal level. If someone wants to keep a gun in the house to defend against intruders, that’s his or her right, and it’s guaranteed by our Constitution.

On families

The conservative view

- The family is the primary unit of society, and a sacred institution. People don’t have the right to define the word family any way they please, and to demand legal recognition for their personal preference.

- Officially recognizing a same-sex relationship as a marriage violates the moral and religious beliefs of millions of Americans.
The liberal view

• Not every family resembles the traditional model. Many include only one parent; others have two parents of the same gender. These are families, too, and deserve the same respect and recognition that traditional families receive.

• Sexual orientation is inborn, not a sinful choice. When heterosexual people get to know gay coworkers and neighbors, they usually learn to accept this, and move beyond anti-gay prejudice.

• Many families are under stress as never before, due to divorce, unemployment, financial strains, and disabilities. Instead of paying lip service to family values, our society needs to help families that are struggling.

On immigration

The liberal view

• Unless you’re a Native American, your ancestors came from somewhere else. As much as possible, we should welcome immigrants, who come here to escape poverty and oppression, instead of treating them like criminals.

The conservative view

• Past generations of immigrants came here legally; most present immigrants broke the law by entering the U.S., and therefore don’t have the right to be here, let alone to use social services that the rest of us have to pay for.

• There aren’t enough jobs in the U.S. for our legal citizens. Much as we might like to welcome newcomers, we have to draw the line somewhere. We must secure our borders.

On the environment

The conservative view

• The earth is ours to use responsibly. Some people make a religion out of preserving wild lands, but they don’t realize how much of the earth remains untouched. We’re nowhere near using it up.

• When clean energy can compete with fossil fuels in the marketplace—i.e., when it becomes affordable—then it may be widely adopted. Forcing people to pay a premium for “environmentally correct” energy is the wrong way to go.

The liberal view

• Our health, and our children’s, depends on the quality of the air we breathe and the water we drink. The environment is infinitely precious—and it’s not infinitely capable of healing itself. We need to protect our air and water from pollution, and to preserve unspoiled wilderness from thoughtless development.

• The challenge of global warming presents us with an opportunity: by investing in clean energy technology (as China already has done), we can prevent the worst consequences of climate change and reinvigorate our economy.

On overcoming racism

The liberal view

• The difference in income between white people and African-Americans is still significant, and directly linked to centuries of oppression. We haven’t overcome the legacy of slavery yet. Even if we can point to successful individuals, there’s still a long way to go.
The conservative view

• Past injustices are in the past. Current law protects equal rights for all races, and it’s up to individuals to work hard and succeed according to their abilities. There is no longer a need to tip the balance in minorities’ favor to make up for what happened long ago. To do so is reverse discrimination, and creates new injustices.

On women

The conservative view

• Women are biologically different from men. To pretend otherwise is a mistake. Of course women should be free to pursue careers if they wish—but they should also be respected for choosing to take on the traditional roles of wife, mother, and homemaker.

The liberal view

• Women deserve the same rights and opportunities that society grants to men. We’ve made progress, but when it comes to income and representation in elected offices, equality is still far off.

On prayer in schools

The liberal view

• Not everyone in every classroom has the same religious beliefs. Forcing every child to say the same prayer, or any prayer at all, amounts to coercion. Our Founding Fathers were careful to protect the religious freedom of minorities by making religion a private matter, separate from government.

The conservative view

• The Founding Fathers were not atheists. To forbid as innocent and commendable an act as praying in school for fear of offending a small number of people goes beyond separation of church and state, into the realm of suppressing religion.

On abortion

The conservative view

• Life begins at conception. No matter how inconvenient the pregnancy is for the mother, killing the unborn child is murder. If she can’t raise the child herself, adoption is the ethical alternative.

• Young people need to understand that sex is how people reproduce, and if they’re not ready to have babies, they shouldn’t have sex. Those who seek pleasure irresponsibly will eventually have to face the consequences.

The liberal view

• What begins at conception is not a human life but a process of development that culminates in the birth of a person. If a young girl or a woman becomes pregnant but isn’t prepared to be a mother, or to go through the process of bearing a child, she has the right to end the pregnancy. A fetus is not a baby.

• If you outlaw abortion, women will still abort unwanted pregnancies, as they have for centuries—and many of them will be injured in the process, for lack of qualified medical care.

• You can lecture teenagers forever about abstinence, but biology is stronger than lectures. Most people have sex by age 18, long before they want children. No sermons can change that. But we can reduce the number of abortions performed in the U.S. by teaching teens about birth control and making it easily available. That’s the ethical alternative.
On human nature and justice

The conservative view

- We have the power to choose between right and wrong, and are responsible for our choices. Those who violate the law must pay the penalties. Too much leniency results in a culture of disrespect for the law, and social disorder.

The liberal view

- Human beings are capable of both selflessness and brutality. Even the best of us is far from perfect. Knowing this, we rely on the rule of law—and ask that justice be tempered with mercy.

On America’s future

The liberal view

- Most of the world’s most successful, prosperous nations are liberal democracies that provide their citizens with a strong safety net. This represents the natural progress of civilization. It’s time for us to catch up.

The conservative view

- What made America great—what makes this the country so many people around the world yearn to live in—is the vastness of opportunity here. Freedom of opportunity requires freedom from government interference. We are not Europe, and would be wrong to follow in Europe’s footsteps. We can do better by going our own way.

The values we cherish

Conservatives

- Duty, honesty, hard work, self-sacrifice, love of country, loyalty, and self-restraint.

Liberals

- Justice, compassion, equality of opportunity, and honesty about what’s great in our country, and what could be better.

Favorite president

Of conservatives

- Ronald Reagan, who inspired America with optimism, called for a reduction in the size of government, and presided over the triumph of democratic capitalism over Communism.

Of liberals

- Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who used the government’s power to alleviate poverty during the Great Depression, and led the U.S. to victory over fascism in World War Two.

Why are some people liberals and others conservatives?

Where do political attitudes come from in the first place? Here are a few informal observations.

- **Family:** Though many people reject their parents’ political beliefs, most of us end up on the same side where we began.

- Geography: If you grow up surrounded by people who think a certain way, there’s a good chance you’ll think that way, too. Some states are heavily populated by liberals, others by conservatives. New England and the northern Midwest (Minnesota, Wisconsin) have a heritage of liberalism; the rest of the Midwest leans toward
conservatism. People in big cities are more likely to vote for Democrats; rural Americans tend to be more conservative.

• **Self-interest**: Low-income people tend to vote for Democrats, who support expanded social programs for those in need; among the wealthy, more vote for Republicans, who want to lower taxes. But self-interest is a factor that’s often outweighed by other values.

• **Ethnicity and religion**: Ethnicity and religion don’t determine political preferences, but there’s a good chance you vote for Democrats if you’re African-American or Jewish, and for Republicans if you’re a white Evangelical Protestant.

• **Self-image**: Which do you value more, compassion or personal responsibility? That’s a good predictor of your politics.

**Note:** The terms *liberal* and *conservative* have meant different things at different times. For an account of the historical meanings attached to these labels, see Wikipedia on [Liberalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberalism) and [Conservatism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservatism).