

the Daughters of the American Revolution Hall on Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday to hear Al Gore thunder on the topic of civil rights and civil liberties.

More broadly, the terms conservative and liberal will continue to be used and misused as we, who doubt we are a part of either, stumble in the swamp, looking for a solid place to put our feet. ■

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**James Kurth** It certainly now seems that the terms “liberal” and “conservative” fit the realities of American politics very poorly. The existence of such new, but also confusing, terms as “neoliberal” and especially “neoconservative” is one obvious illustration. However, we will argue that some version of this confusion has long characterized American politics, indeed is the essence of American politics, and that liberal and conservative still remain the most useful terms we are likely to have, now and in the future.

Suppose that one had to invent, to build from the ground up, new labels to fit the actual, contemporary, major divisions within American politics. We would first start with a specification of just what those divisions are. To begin with, there is the great divide over social, cultural, or moral issues (as in “the culture war” and “moral values”). Here there is a clear division between those Americans whose priority is the free choice and expression of the individual and those who prefer to subordinate this individual freedom to religious (specifically, biblical) teachings or traditional norms. The first tendency especially reveres the First Amendment of the Constitution; the second tendency especially reveres the Ten Commandments of the Bible. In addition, the first tendency admires the values now found among the political and cultural elites of other Western democracies (which they call “universal human rights”); the second tendency is attached to distinctly American values (American exceptionalism). Most political analysts, not only in the media but also in academia, are perfectly comfortable with applying the terms liberal and conservative respectively to these two tendencies (as in “social” or “cultural liberals” and “social” or “cultural conservatives”).

Second, there is the great and long-standing divide over security issues. Here there is a clear division between those Americans whose priority is individual liberty, particularly the freedom of movement and association of individuals and also of members of minority communities (civil liberties and civil rights) and those whose priority is national security,

who prefer to constrain the movement and associations of some individuals (and of some minorities), if that would enhance the security of the nation (and of the majority) as a whole. Again, most political analysts, not only in the media but also in academia, are perfectly comfortable with applying the terms liberal and conservative respectively to these two tendencies.

Thus far, our terminological construction project has been rather simple. Liberals are those Americans who prioritize individual freedom over anything else; conservatives are those who are willing to subordinate this to traditional values or community interests, e.g., a religion or the nation. However, in America confusion has always arisen when we turn our attention to economic issues.

This adds a third great, and very long-standing, divide in American politics. Here there is a clear division between those Americans whose priority is the freedom of individual entrepreneurs or corporate enterprises (“free enterprise,” “the free market”) and those who prefer to subordinate this individual freedom to government regulation and limitation. Today, and for many years, most political analysts have applied the term conservative to the first tendency and liberal to the second (as in “economic” or “fiscal conservatives” and “economic” or “fiscal liberals”).

We now can see why in America the terms liberal and conservative have often been confusing and awkward. The liberals generally favor individual expression on the social and security issues but government regulation on the economic ones. Conversely, the conservatives generally favor restraining individual expression by government regulation (or preferably by self-restraint informed by religious teachings or by traditional and patriotic values) on the social and security issues but free enterprise on the economic ones.

**“Liberals generally favor individual expression on the social and security issues but government regulation on the economic ones.”**

Social conservatives, security conservatives, and economic conservatives all tend to support the Republican Party. But their different priorities over the freedom of the individual make for a great deal of tensions, indeed divisions, within the party itself. Most obviously, richer, business (“country-club”) Republicans generally promote economic conservatism and downplay (or even privately despise) social conservatism. Conversely, poorer, employee (“Main Street”) Republicans generally prioritize social conservatism and downplay economic conservatism. The first tendency provides the campaign dollars for the Republicans;

the second tendency provides the actual votes. It is little wonder that the Republican Party has been a chronic schizophrenic, and is especially so today.

In the past three decades, moreover, the project of globalization has brought about the expansion of the American economy into the global economy, with the free movement of goods, capital, and labor across open borders. Some Americans have benefited from globalization (“the winners”) and some have been hurt (“the losers”). This has brought about a new division over economic issues. Some Americans, especially the winners from globalization, prioritize this new version of free enterprise operating across open borders in the global arena. Other Americans, not only the losers from globalization but also those whose self-identification centers upon the American nation, prefer to restrict the free movement of goods, capital, and labor in order to protect the American economy (or more precisely, the interests—not only economic but also social, cultural, and security—of Americans within the territory of the United States itself).

Some political analysts have applied the term liberal (or among some social scientists, neo-liberal) to the first tendency and conservative to the second. But this usage is haunted by the legacy, discussed above, of applying the term conservative to free enterprise, although now that enterprise has become global, and applying the term liberal to government regulation, but now that regulation includes protection imposed by government barriers. Consequently, other political analysts have been more comfortable applying the term “globalist” to the first tendency and “populist” to the second. Globalization and the new divisions that it has brought have therefore added even more confusion to, and erosion of, the terms liberal and conservative.

Nevertheless, what is true of all kinds of conservatives is that they are trying to preserve, to conserve, an existing and established state of affairs, be it involving the social, the security, or the economic realm. And what is true of all kinds of liberals is that they are trying to change this state of affairs, normally but not always in favor of more freedom for the individual (the exception being some kinds of regulation of the economy). The confusion arises from the fact that, as Tocqueville observed as long ago as the 1830s, in America what has always been the existing and established economic state of affairs has been free enterprise or the freedom of the individual. And, as Marx observed as long ago as the 1840s, it is the nature of this economic freedom, of capitalism, to undermine and eventually destroy the existing and established state of affairs in every other realm, including the social and security ones. Thus, in America, conservatism means conserving a liberal dynamic that is constantly in conflict with conservatism. American conservatism thus is simultaneously both conservative and

liberal. It always has been, it is now, and it always will be. Perhaps the best thing for American conservatives is to get used to it and to seek the best balance of the two for their particular time and place. ■

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**Michael Lind** The meanings of the terms “conservative” and “liberal” (and its synonym “progressive”) have been altered by two long-term trends in American politics. The first is the replacement of ideology by partisanship; the second is the alignment of partisanship and identity.

In living memory conservatism and liberalism referred to ideological movements, not political parties. The conservative movement was not identical with the Republican Party, nor was the liberal movement identical with the Democratic Party. This is no longer the case. Today conservative means partisan Republican and liberal means partisan Democrat. Ideological liberals who deviate from the Democratic party line of a given moment are ignored or vilified, as are ideological conservatives who deviate from the Republican party line.

Without ideological movements, there is no place for ideologues. Most of those who pass for prominent conservative and liberal intellectuals today are actually engaged in public relations. It is the job of these apparatchiks to sell a party line to the public, after the party line has already been determined in private by negotiations among donors, special-interest spokesmen, pollsters, and politicians.

The replacement of ideology by partisanship has been accompanied by the alignment of partisanship and ethnicity. The major divide between American politics is not geographic. Maps of how counties vote show that there are no red states and blue states, only red states and blue cities. But the city-suburb divide itself is merely a surrogate for an ethnic and religious divide.

Today the Republican Party is the party of the ethnic and religious majority, white Christians, and the Democratic Party is the party of ethnic and religious minorities—non-whites (blacks and Latinos) and non-Christians (Jews and post-Christian secularists). The fact that the Republicans get some non-white and Jewish and secularist votes, while the Democrats get a minority of white Christian votes, does not alter this pattern. The big cities are Democratic because that is where blacks, Latinos, Jews, and post-Christian secularists are concentrated, and the suburbs and small towns are Republican because that is where most white Christians live.