

Obama in 2008. It is sometimes hard to define liberal and conservative since they mean different things to different people, but there are some basic characteristics that are noted in the table below. Generally, Republicans are more conservative in their ideology while Democrats are more liberal. A strong defined ideology will create consistency over time in patterns of how individuals within that group vote and the stances they will take on issues. While fluctuations exist, studies show that moderates are the largest group among American voters, conservatives the second largest, and liberals the smallest.

### Political Ideologies Defined

Conservatives favor a limited-government approach and freedoms for the private economic sector. They believe in militarism and support military spending, free markets, prayer in school, and reduced taxes, and tend to oppose abortion, affirmative action, and government spending on social programs. They are more likely to support legislation that prohibits "unacceptable" social or moral behavior.

Liberals favor a larger government with social and economic responsibilities, more equal distribution of wealth, government spending, additional and restrictive regulation of big business, and women's rights. They oppose increases in defense spending and military actions, prayer in school, and tax breaks for the wealthy.

Women and minorities tend to be more liberal as a result of the oppression they endured and their long fight to attain more equal rights (and who see the need for a continuing struggle to reduce the differences that still exist). Women, who gained suffrage much later than men, have developed a gender gap that predicts the likelihood women will vote for a Democratic candidate.

The definitions of *liberal* and *conservative* have changed over time. Traditionally, a liberal was a person who favored personal and economic liberty that was free from the controls and powers of the government, and the term conservative was first applied to those who opposed the excesses of the French Revolution. The rise of the more recent definition of the term liberal in the United States coincides with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, and it was used to describe a supporter who desired an active government who would intervene on behalf of the people to provide economic relief from the Great Depression. Conservatives evolved from rugged individualism and desired a free market with little to no government intrusions at all. This is based on the belief that individuals have the ability to achieve the goals they need to survive.

Basic Differences between Liberals and Conservatives		
	Liberal	Conservative
<b>Economy</b>	Regulate	Hands Off
<b>Social Welfare</b>	More benefits for the poor	Less benefits for the poor
<b>Moral Concerns</b>	Differing life styles	Traditional Family values
<b>Civil Rights</b>	Affirmative action	No group rights
<b>National Security</b>	Prudent defense	Protect at all costs
<b>U.S. Role in the World</b>	Mutual engagement	Isolationist
<b>Purpose of Government</b>	Help the people	Very limited intrusion
<b>Private or Public Solutions</b>	Government solutions	Private charity causes
<b>Federalism Questions</b>	National solutions	State solutions

Those who define themselves as moderates fall somewhere between the typical liberal and the typical conservative in their views. Others may find themselves unsure of their general attitudes. For example, a classic liberal would oppose a government role in either the economy or in the area of moral concerns and would find himself or herself at odds with either party. The Libertarian Party in the United States tends to better reflect this set of beliefs. There are undoubtedly more “libertarians” in the country than the number of members of the party. Others might favor a more active government role to support those in need and the poor while still favoring an emphasis on traditional moral values, including active governmental programs to bring out these values or to enforce them. These individuals frequently are linked to a **populist** strain in the American political culture. The Populist Party of the late nineteenth century epitomized this particular combination of views. Other voters will simply defy labels. There are individuals who are social liberals (in favor of affirmative action, alternative lifestyles as a matter best left to the individual, etc.) but fiscally conservative (less spending, not only on defense but to some extent social programs as well). The diversity of opinions is one of the factors that have made for a population of voters (and non-voters) who are as likely to differ on their opinions as they are to share them.

## DID YOU KNOW?

Libertarians in the United States combine aspects of both the conservative Republican ideology and liberal Democratic ideology. They opposed government involvement in the economy and government involvement in matters of personal choice (marriage, life style, etc.).

Detailed Policy Differences of Liberals and Conservatives in the United States		
	Liberal	Conservative
<b>National Security</b>	Adequate	Strong
	Internationalism	Isolationism
	Multilateralism	Unilateralism
<b>Economic</b>	Keynesian theory	Economic liberalism
	Government regulation	Free markets
	Deficits	Balanced budget
	Progressive taxes	Low taxes
	Strong government	Limited government
	Private oligopoly	Relationship with corporations
	Government spending	Tax cuts
<b>Social</b>	Social safety net	Individual responsibility
	Public welfare	Private charity
	Extended Social Security	Privatize Social Security
	National healthcare	Private health coverage
	Government run prescriptions	Private prescription drug coverage
	Insurance medication plans	Insurance plan
<b>Family Values</b>	Various Types of Families	Traditional family
	Various Lifestyles	Marriage
	Tolerant of Many Religions	Judeo-Christian
	Freedom of Choice	Opposed to abortion

## Political Elites

**Political elites** are those who hold higher positions or have more status than the average citizen. The political elite is made up of those who have a disproportionate amount of money or influence or power in policymaking or all of these characteristics. Not everyone