

AMERICAN LIBERALISM AND CONSERVATISM *Continued*

more traditional "laissez-faire," or minimal, governmental role in the economy, where people would prosper through individual work and private charities would support the underprivileged.

The split over the government's role in the economy was the major difference between modern liberals and conservatives from the 1930s until the 1950s. During the 1950s, the cold war was a period of growing ideological consensus between liberals and conservatives because of shared anticommunism and acceptance of a limited welfare state. The events of the 1960s shattered the consensus, producing new splits between conservatives and liberals. Divisions over the political economy renewed, while liberals and conservatives increasingly differed over foreign policy and social policy. Liberals became critical of traditional cold war positions, while conservatives continued to adhere to cold war internationalism. For example, conservatives saw Vietnam as an honorable war lost through a failure of national will; in contrast, liberals tended to see Vietnam as a mistake and viewed the American use of force as counterproductive. Furthermore, while conservatives promoted traditional social norms and were concerned with maintaining social stability and order, liberals tended to favor greater individualism in social lifestyles. Therefore, modern American liberalism and conservatism have become increasingly distinct during the post-Vietnam War years, even though both sprang from the classical liberal democratic-capitalistic tradition.

The third point to keep in mind when discussing American liberalism and conservatism is that each ideological orientation is made up of many variants. Differences exist among liberals and conservatives. These differences are not easy to identify, for they change over time and vary with the issue; nonetheless, they do exist. Liberalism consists of a broad coalition comprised of a diverse set of people: New Deal liberals who favor more traditional forms of government intervention to support the economy and individuals; "neo-liberals" who prefer a more cooperative relationship between government, business, and labor in order to reinvigorate the economy and increase American competitiveness abroad; populist liberals who place greater emphasis on reforming the American economy to respond to the needs of the poor, the disadvantaged, and working Americans; social liberals who are more concerned with individual lifestyle issues, as well as protecting the environment and human health; and others. Likewise, conser-

vatism also consists of diverse elements: market conservatives who emphasize unrestrained market forces as the key to economic growth and prosperity; populist conservatives who want more private involvement to supplement governmental support in responding to the needs of Americans; “neo-conservatives”—usually ex-cold war liberals—who tend to emphasize the threat of communism abroad,^D social conservatives who want certain norms and moral standards to prevail in society, such as the need for school prayer and anti-abortion; and libertarian conservatives who emphasize individualism and limited government across all issues.

Fourth, liberal and conservative ideological positions differ in elite and mass publics. Most members of the elite public tend to be more liberal or conservative than members of the mass public. The mass public, on the other hand, tends to be more centrist and moderate, reflecting beliefs and positions from both ideological orientations. This distinction between the elite and mass publics in terms of the nature and intensity of their ideological beliefs is consistent with our earlier discussion of Godfrey Hodgson’s distinction in *America in Our Time* between the moral minority and the pragmatic majority.

Fifth, the growth of liberalism has been accompanied by the rise of the political Left, while the ascendance of conservatism has been accompanied by growing strength of the political Right. American liberalism and conservatism reflect a rather narrow range of ideological beliefs that have competed for power within American society over the last two centuries, especially when compared to the politics of European societies. For all their differences and variations, American liberalism and conservatism have much in common, although they have been challenged by other ideological traditions. The political Left has a long tradition in the history of the United States and there have been periods when it has grown in popularity and influence: democratic socialism became popular during the pre-World War I years, communism and pacifism grew during the 1920s and the post-Depression years, and the new Left was prominent during the 1960s and 1970s. The political Right, likewise, also has had a long history and has been able to attract support at different times, evident in the rise of McCarthyism during the cold war years and the prominence of the secular and fundamentalist Right during the post-Vietnam War era. Therefore, although small and often invisible to most Americans, the traditions of the Left and Right have played an active and sometimes important role in American politics.

This is a simple overview of the history and content of American liberal and conservative thought; but these five points should provide