EXERCISE 1.3 Contemporary American Political Ideologies

INTRODUCTION The labels we use to describe political thought are often loaded with connotations—either positive or negative—depending on who's wielding the label as a political weapon and on who's listening. Republicans, for example, have turned liberalism into a term of disparagement by associating that label with big government, moral irresponsibility, and a lack of will to defend the nation. Democrats have tried to discredit conservatism by linking that label to practices such as racism, the oppression of women, religious fanaticism, and favoritism for the rich.

A political ideology is a set of coherent, deeply felt political beliefs and values through which individuals interpret political events and decide what is politically right and wrong. Despite the utility of the labels in making sense of political issues and actors, most Americans are not ideologues: They may hold ideological positions on particular issues, but they do not think of their politics in ideological terms. Most Americans are pragmatists—positioned in the middle of the political spectrum—and are unlikely to judge issues or candidates by a set of consistent political beliefs. They care more about solving problems pragmatically than they care about ideological dogma about how to solve problems. Indeed, Americans historically have rejected political movements and candidates that appeared too ideological. Some public opinion polls suggest, however, that Americans have become increasingly ideological in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Ideological labels do help voters sort out a bewildering array of political arguments, and to some extent they do reflect political positions, especially among political elites, whose positions tend to be more ideological than other Americans. There is abundant evidence that elected representatives in Congress and in state legislatures have become increasingly more ideological than the electorate. This helps us to understand why legislative bodies are becoming more and more polarized and why they find compromises difficult.

The task of identifying ideological positions has become more difficult in recent decades as the relatively simple divisions of the New Deal era—based largely on the economy and the role of government in the economy—have fragmented into more diverse and complex thinking about the economy; moral, religious, and social issues; and foreign policy, especially in the wake of 9/11 and the war on terrorism.

Here are brief definitions of seven ideologies prominent on the American political landscape today. Recognize that the descriptions are simplified.

**Liberalism.** Liberals generally support strong government action in a broad array of contemporary problems, from economic policy to civil rights. But liberals are likely to oppose strong government action when they believe it threatens civil liberties—freedom of speech, for example, or the individual's right to privacy. Liberals believe that government must play an active role in creating equal opportunity, through antidiscrimination laws, through affirmative action programs, and through initiatives to assist the disadvantaged. Liberals pin their hopes for a just and progressive society on action by the national government because of its superior power, reach, and resources. Liberals favor progressive income taxes as a means of assisting the most disadvantaged, and they believe that all levels of government should prevent and punish market practices that hurt consumers and threaten the environment.
Liberals want foreign and defense policies that depend less on military and unilateral action and more on diplomacy and multilateralism, especially through the United Nations. Liberals were heartened by the presidential election of 2008 and the congressional elections of 2006 and 2008, when the Democratic Party gained large majorities in Congress and won the presidency. Many believed that these victories signaled the beginning of a new area of active government, perhaps a new New Deal. But their hopes were dashed by ongoing economic recession, by a president who often pursued a centrist approach, and by the Republican tidal wave in the 2010 midterm elections.

The Left Wing. From the 1930s to the 1960s, the American Left supported socialist, or Marxist, economics (public ownership of the means of production and the redistribution of Wealth to foster economic equality); opposed U.S. imperialistic, interventionist foreign policy; and sought to eradicate racism in the United States. In the decades since, with the increasingly conservative trend in U.S. Politics and the end of the cold war, the left has splintered into a number of movements, each with its own passionate critique or indictment of U.S. society.

Among those left-wing movements are radical feminism (denouncing patriarchy in all its manifestations), radical environmentalism (damning the ethos of acquisitiveness and the rape of nature), and radical multiculturalism (censuring social, economic, and belief systems that marginalize people of color). Recently, left-wing organizations have attacked economic globalization, which they believe cheats developing nations, hurts U.S. workers, and damages the environment. The left wing has opposed the Bush and Obama administrations' unilateral ("imperialistic") actions in world affairs.

Conservatism. Conservatives want to reduce the role of government in the nation's economic affairs. For conservatives, government's chief roles are to defend the nation from foreign attack, maintain law and order, and protect citizens from immediate threats to their health and safety. Conservatives decidedly favor government spending on national security over social programs. Although many conservatives have made peace with the main components of the welfare state Social Security and Medicare-many want those programs to be contained or even scaled back and partially or wholly privatized. Conservatives today are split on budgetary policy. Supply-siders, like George W. Bush, advocate across-the-board tax cuts—even a flat tax—which, they believe, will stimulate economic growth. Fiscal conservatives, on the other hand, worry about budget deficits. Rather than cut government revenues, they want to see existing programs downsized. Conservatives argue that affirmative action improperly creates special rights for minority groups. Most conservatives believe that individual liberties must be balanced against the government's responsibilities to protect national security and to defend core American values (e.g., the Patriot Act, which significantly broadened governmental powers of search and seizure and reduced fair trial rights), or Judeo-Christian values (e.g., government support to religious organizations that render social services). Conservatives support a foreign policy that muscularly advances U.S. interests abroad and protects U.S. prestige-unilaterally and preemptively if necessary. Conservatives worry that multilateral organizations, like the United Nations, may undermine U.S. sovereignty and constrain America's freedom to act on the world stage. During the Obama Administration, conservatives have broadened their attack on the growing responsibilities of the federal government, especially in the wake of the healthcare reform of 2010. The ambitious Obama Administration's package of federal programs led to the rise of the Tea Party movement-populist allegations that the Obama/Democratic program constituted a socialistic and anti-states' rights subversion of the framers' constitutional ideals. Some have proposed a
constitutional amendment that would allow a vote of two-thirds of state legislatures to nullify a federal program.

**Neoconservatism.** Neoconservatism took a prominent place in U.S. foreign policy after 9/11. Neoconservatives want to secure and advance the cultural and moral traditions of the United States particularly freedom and democracy. The justification for U.S. intervention in Iraq was largely the result of strong neoconservative voices in the Bush Administration. Neoconservatives call for a renewed commitment to individual responsibility a value that they believe has been eroded by liberal policies. Their influence in Washington has declined with weakening public support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and with the election of President Obama.

**Christian Conservatism/Evangelical, Born-Again Christianity.** Conservative Christians have been a major political force in the United States beginning in the 1980s. Their votes contributed significantly to George W. Bush's election in 2000 and his reelection in 2004. Adherents of this ideology/theology promote so-called traditional moral values against a perceived assault on them by a hedonistic, media-driven culture. Christian conservatives believe that the United States was founded on and owes its greatness to Judeo-Christian principles. They oppose abortion rights, they favor government aid to students who attend religious schools, and they have mobilized in opposition to gay marriage. With the rise of the Tea Party movement, the Christian Conservatives' center-stage role in U.S. Politics has been moved to stage right within the Republican Party.

**Libertarianism.** Libertarians are more consistent in their view of government activism than are either liberals or conservatives. Both liberals and conservatives favor government activism but in different kinds of policy. Liberals favor active government in enforcing civil rights, programs to help the disadvantaged, and government regulation of the economy, whereas they favor less government in civil liberties (e.g., free speech), in national security policy, and the vigorous pursuit of U.S. interests abroad. Conservatives, favor active government in protecting national security, maintaining law and order, and the muscular defense of U.S. global interests, whereas they favor less government in regulation of the economy, new programs to help the disadvantaged (e.g., healthcare reform), and the enforcement of civil rights. Libertarians favor minimal government involvement in all areas of policy. Although they recognize the need to defend the nation, their primary value is individual liberty, which they believe is threatened as much by the government's zealous protection of national security and economic regulations as it is by the government's attempts to restrict civil liberties or the right of same-sex couples to marry. Ron Paul, a libertarian and a longtime member of the House of Representatives from Texas, who ran for the Republican presidential nomination in 2008, criticized Republicans for their support of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as much as he criticized Democrats for their reliance on government to solve the nation's economic problems.

**The Right Wing.** The Right in the United States includes groups with different agendas, but it is united in its opposition to social diversity and to governmental encroachments on private property rights. Right-wing ideologues contend that the national government has established a tyranny over the individual; white Christian males are believed to be those most oppressed. Many right-wing groups embrace doctrines of racial supremacy: others are anti-Semitic. In recent years, several right-wing groups have come to believe that armed resistance including terrorism is necessary to liberate the United States from perceived sources of oppression. Timothy McVeigh, a self-described right-winger, was involved in the 1993 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma
ASSIGNMENT

1. Listed below are five hypothetical statements. Identify the ideology each statement reflects. Explain and support your answer.
   a. "Marriage must be legally defined as only between a man and a woman."
   b. "If elected, I will get government off your backs and release the great economic energy of the American people."
   c. "So long as I am president, no American shall go to bed hungry, no American shall suffer the burden of discrimination, and no American shall fall ill without the benefit of medical help."
   d. "To make America safe from terrorism, we must first make the Islamic world safe for democracy.
   e. "The war on terrorism should not provide a pretext for a governmental assault on the liberties of the American people."
   f. "The government that governs best governs least."

   NOTE: Web addresses sometimes change. If you can't locate a website, try an external search (e.g., Google) to find the website. Configurations within a website often change. If you can't find a particular link or article, for example, try an internal search of the website as well as an external search. Be resourceful! If you still can't find what you're searching for, move on to the next question.
   The site briefly describes the ideologies of the two major political parties in the United States, Democratic and Republican, and more than thirty minor parties. The site also provides a link to each party's website. Search the directory for a political party that exemplifies each of the political ideologies identified above. Explain and support your answer.
   a. Liberalism:
   b. The left wing:
   c. Conservatism, or neoconservatism, or Christian conservatism:
   d. The right wing:
   e. Libertarianism:

3. Web-Based Question: Go to the websites of the following organizations. Identify the ideology each organization exemplifies. Explain and support your answer. You might need to navigate around the website to determine the ideology.
   b. United for a Fair Economy: http://www.faireconomy.org/
   c. Minutemen Project: www.minutemanproject.com/
   d. Tea Party Movement: http://teapartypatriots.org/