

Political Ideology

What does it mean to be a Liberal or Conservative? What does it mean to be a Socialist or a Communist? These terms, or labels, refer to a belief in the way government should run within a society—also known as a political ideology. Political ideologies are belief systems that provide people with a perspective on the proper role of elected officials, which types of public policies should be prioritized, and how the various elements of society should be arranged. Whether or not they realize it, most people possess a definitive political ideology. In the United States, most citizens consider themselves liberal, moderate, or conservative. In other countries, you may find a majority of people who identify as Socialists, Marxists, or even Anarchists.

Most ideologies are identified by their position on a political spectrum—a way of comparing or visualizing different political ideologies. The political spectrum is usually described along a left-middle-right line.

L _____ M _____ R

It is important to recognize that many ideologies defy categorization, mainly because they encompass views on different parts of the spectrum. For example, conservatives can be “traditional” or “moderate” or “right-wing.” Political ideologies are complex, and some argue that the spectrum theory is an oversimplified view.

Liberalism (Left)

Liberalism is a political ideology that, at its core, denounces economic and social inequality. Equality of opportunity is viewed by liberals as essential, and to achieve that end, they believe that discriminatory practices must be eliminated and that the impact of great inequalities of wealth needs to be lessened. Liberals usually advocate vigorous public policies to reduce or eliminate these inequalities. They see government as the means to make this possible, while also preserving civil liberties/rights, and progressive values. Liberals believe that public policy should be egalitarian and that it is the government’s responsibility to ensure ALL citizens have access to affordable health care, quality education, a clean environment, and social safety net programs. They also generally believe in affirmative action programs, workers’ health and safety protections, progressive taxation, and unions’ rights to organize and strike.

Conservative (Right)

Conservatives have a general preference for the existing order of society and an opposition to most efforts to bring about rapid or fundamental change. In contrast to liberals, conservatives want to enhance individual liberty by keeping government small, except in the area of national defense. Conservatives maintain that people need strong leadership institutions, firm laws, and strict moral codes. Conservative ideologies most often base their claims on the teachings of religion and traditional morality and tend to downplay rational social theories propounded by secular philosophers, economists, and other intellectuals. They also prefer eliminating abortion, affirmative action programs, and labor unions. More extreme conservative ideologies accept all (or nearly all) of

society's inequalities of wealth, status, and privilege, often supporting a return to an earlier, more inegalitarian, and hierarchical political-economic order.

Moderates (Middle)

Moderates usually represent a mix of both liberal and conservative ideologies. The majority of Americans classify themselves as more moderate than liberal or conservative.

Other Political Ideologies

Communism

An ideology based on the communal ownership of all property and a classless social structure, with economic production and distribution to be directed and regulated by means of an authoritative economic plan that supposedly embodies the interests of the community as a whole.

Socialism

An ideology based on collective or governmental ownership and democratic management of the essential means of the production and distribution of goods. It can often be difficult to define, since different people have different ideas about what a socialist society would look like. There are a number of similarities between socialism and communism.

National Socialism (Nazism)

This ideology originated as a nationalist movement in European countries after World War I and refers to the movement of the National Socialist German Workers' Party under Adolf Hitler. Nazism rejects liberalism, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, and stresses the subordination of the individual to the state and strict obedience to leaders. It emphasizes the right of the strong to rule the weak, the inequality of individuals and "races," and the racial superiority of White Anglo-Saxons (Aryans).

Fascism

Fascism tends to celebrate masculinity, youth, mystical unity, and the power of violence. Often, but not always, it promotes racial superiority doctrines, ethnic persecution, imperialist expansion, and genocide. Usually, fascism espouses open male supremacy, though sometimes it may also promote female solidarity and new opportunities for women of the privileged nation or race.

Anarchism

Anarchism considers the state undesirable, unnecessary, and harmful, and instead promotes a stateless society, or anarchy. Anarchists seek to diminish or even eliminate reliance upon authority in the conduct of human relations, but thus have widely disagreed on what additional criteria are essential or beneficial to anarchism and human society. Anarchism is usually identified as the most anti-authoritarian of all political ideologies.

Libertarianism

Libertarianism is a relatively new political ideology which gained momentum in the mid 20th century. Libertarians believe that any legitimate government should be small and should play only the most minimal possible role in economic, social, and cultural life. Furthermore, libertarians believe that the individual should be as free as is practically feasible from government restraint and regulation in both the economic and non-economic aspects of life.

Marxism

Karl Marx wrote the seminal works of this political ideology, which described the strengths and weaknesses of the capitalist economic system and argued that it would eventually be overthrown in order to bring about a more just and equal society. This would mean first implementing a socialist system and inevitably a communist society. According to Marx, all injustices and inequalities in the world can be traced to the class struggle, or the inequalities inherent to the capitalist system. Marxists may consider themselves socialists or communists as there exists much overlap between these ideologies.