

Are Conservatives and Liberals Mixed Up?

by Kenneth A. Kuhn, Jan. 11, 2004, rev. Aug. 30, 2008

Introduction

This commentary explores some inconsistencies in conservatism and liberalism using four hot topics as examples: gun control, abortion, drugs, and welfare. I must disclose that I generally classify myself as a conservative (although moderate may be more accurate) so naturally any bias I have is in that direction. My pledge is to be very careful to avoid any wording, however subtle, that could be interpreted as promoting or demoting one philosophy over the other. For each issue I will point out the common themes, the conflicting themes, and the inconsistent positions relative to the definitions below. I also include details of my own personal opinion on these issues and I will let the reader decide which political camp I really fit in.

Definitions

The definition of conservatism and liberalism will vary depending on whom you ask so let me first provide the operating definitions for purposes of this commentary.

A conservative is someone who generally believes that government should be non-intrusive concerning their own pursuits and that life should be guided by high moral standards influenced by either religious or secular philosophies. Conservatives generally believe that moral standards should be law and imposed by government.

Conservatives also believe that people should live by their own mistakes rather than burden society for subsidies. Conservatives can be very compassionate and give large sums of money and leave large portions of their estates to various causes that generally increase the quality of life and provide opportunities for all rather than provide for direct subsidies to those without money. As a result, conservatives tend to have a reputation for greed.

A liberal is someone who generally believes that people should be free to do anything they want so long as someone else is not harmed. The role of government is to be non-intrusive except to maintain this broad freedom. Like conservatives, liberals may live by high moral standards influenced by either religious or secular philosophies. Liberals generally believe that moral standards should be self imposed rather than imposed by government. Since broad freedoms also enable people to be injured by their own mistakes, liberals tend to want government to take a supportive role to minimize self induced suffering so that all can pursue happiness. Liberals can be very compassionate and give large sums of money and leave large portions of their estates to various causes that generally subsidize those without money. As a result, liberals tend to have a reputation for generosity.

With the above definitions in mind it is interesting to examine conservative or liberal government as practiced. Conservative governments tend to be highly restrictive or even dictatorial. There is little personal freedom. Liberal governments tend to be characterized by an overwhelming number of laws and bureaucracy to micro-manage the country for

Are Conservatives and Liberals Mixed Up?

the supposed benefit of all. Personal freedom may be high but is constrained by the large bureaucracy. In my humble opinion, neither works well in practice. I think the best government is when there is a balance such that each is neutralized by the other.

Gun Control

The topic of gun control is a very polarizing issue. Conservatives swear absolutely by the Constitution and will not listen to anything else. Before proceeding, it is constructive to review the actual wording of the second amendment to the Constitution:

A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.

Note the use of the more general word, arms, rather than the specific word, guns. This is an example of excellent writing because the second amendment then applies to concept of arms (i.e. weapons) rather than to a specific weapon such as a gun. Specifics of the particular weapon do not matter - it is the concept of a weapon that matters. Weapon control is not necessarily about preventing the ownership of weapons although that is a common fear among conservatives. Weapon control is about the management of weapons. Management may very well mean that some people are deemed unsuitable and others are deemed suitable to possess weapons. The phrase, *well-regulated*, means that some kind of management is taking place - i.e. the Constitution mandates it.

Conservatives preach the last phrase but conveniently omit the first phrase of the second amendment. The first phrase strongly implies that the arms are to be *well-regulated* by some militia authority. Thus, the concept of regulating the ownership of anything that can be a weapon is not necessarily a violation of the second amendment. Conservatives at the extreme advocate that an individual should be allowed to possess any weapon up to and including a nuclear device. Liberals at the extreme advocate that an individual should not be allowed to possess any weapon period.

Liberals generally preach the theme that weapons should be regulated since weapons hurt people, thereby infringing their rights.

It is now time to review the theme of inconsistency of this commentary. Since weapons in the wrong hands can be used to commit acts of great immorality, it would seem that conservatives would be abhorrent to the concept of the wrong people having weapons and thus want weapons restricted to just those who would use them properly. Since that until a person had actually used a weapon such as to cause harm to others it would seem that liberals would be strong defenders of the *right to keep and bear arms*. Interestingly the exact opposite is true. I am amazed that liberals in favor of weapon control have not embraced the first phrase of the second amendment for its language strongly supports their case.

My personal opinion: I believe that until a person has demonstrated a malicious or irresponsible use of a weapon that that person should be allowed to keep various weapons

Are Conservatives and Liberals Mixed Up?

in a strength limited for the purpose of maintaining security of that person or the person's family. In keeping with the second amendment, it is proper for the State to know who has what weapons so that such people may be drafted into militia service for *the security of a free State* should an emergency arise. It is the *well-regulated militia* that defends the State, not the individual. So it makes no sense for an individual to have weapons beyond the strength necessary for personal protection or hobby pursuits such as hunting. Excess strength is not normal and is a potential threat to the pursuit of happiness by the society, i.e. the State.

Abortion

The concept of abortion rights is extremely polarizing and there appears to be no middle ground. The real argument is about whether abortion should be allowed or not.

Conservatives tend to be opposed to allowing abortion because that is killing and killing is wrong. A frequent exception is made if the pregnancy is endangering the life of the mother or was caused by rape or the very wrong concept of incest. This exception is inconsistent, however. If killing the innocent is wrong then it is wrong period and a true opponent of abortion would allow for no exceptions. Interestingly, a large majority of teenage pregnancy is the result of a technical rape. The rape may not be of the violent type commonly thought of but is the result of scheming seduction. That being the case, it would seem that those opposed to abortion but willing to make certain exceptions would not be so opposed to teenage abortion. But if anything, the intent is to severely restrict access to abortion for a teenager who may have been raped for real or perhaps only technically. These children born to teenagers often end up on the welfare rolls which is another issue that conservatives have problems with.

Conservatives tend to favor laws either eliminating or at least restricting abortion. They believe that government should either prevent or at least highly discourage abortion. Conservatives tend to distort the argument by implying that liberals favor abortions rather than stating the truth that liberals favor the choice of abortion.

I have never heard of any liberal that advocated abortion - only the right to choose. Liberals tend to favor the right of the woman to choose whether to have an abortion or not without the government being involved. This is consistent with their theme of broad rights. But, liberals generally are against extending rights so that someone is harmed. Liberals tend to advocate for those who can not advocate for themselves. Clearly, the unborn child is harmed by abortion. It would seem then that liberals would oppose abortion on the grounds that the unborn child is violated because that violation supersedes any broad right that liberals might otherwise advocate for the woman.

My opinion: One can disagree with and advocate changing the laws but if one lives in a society then one is bound by the laws of that society. If abortion is deemed legal by the broad society then it is legal. Whether it is morally right or wrong is another issue. Laws can and have been changed to reflect the moral beliefs of the broad society. No matter what one's political persuasion there can be no doubt that abortion kills an unborn child.

Are Conservatives and Liberals Mixed Up?

Forget religion; science clearly shows that life begins at conception. The religious issues are when does the "soul" enter into the life process and is it wrong to kill a living entity that does not (yet?) have a "soul". The religious commandment that "*Thou shall not kill*" is generally interpreted as not to kill needlessly rather than absolutely. Thus, killing is allowed if it is for a proper reason. Is abortion a proper reason for killing? The answer depends upon one's personal beliefs and may be strongly influenced by the issues surrounding abortion on an individual case rather than broadly.

My belief is that as long as it is understood that abortion is killing and that definite thought has been given to alternatives if appropriate then abortion should be allowed. Generally, abortion should be discouraged as excessive use demeans life. I believe that the woman or her agent if she is incapacitated should be able to decide if an abortion is proper in a given circumstance. In situations where the unborn is known to have severe defects or that the mother is likely to be badly harmed or even killed by the pregnancy then there is no question that abortion should not be denied if requested. In these situations the State should not be involved in either the decision or any financial consequence. But it should not be mandated either. In cases where the pregnancy was the result of rape then the option of allowing the birth to take place and then either raising the infant or placing it in the care of the State should always be considered as an alternative to killing an entity that is not guilty of anything. In this instance it is proper for the State to bear all of the costs associated with the pregnancy or abortion as it is clearly wrong to burden the mother for being a victim (the State should seek to recoup the costs from the rapist). In cases of incest, abortion should be highly encouraged but not mandated by the State. It is in the State's interest to pay for the cost of the abortion but not of the pregnancy. In cases where the pregnancy is just not wanted then I stand by the opening sentence of this paragraph. The State should not be involved in any way including financially.

Drugs

In general, both conservatives and liberals prefer that people not abuse drugs, legal or otherwise. Conservatives generally believe that government should outlaw drug use under the concept of imposing morality on society. Liberals generally believe that government should leave drug users alone except to help them when they are down.

This issue brings out an inconsistency in the working definitions of conservatism and liberalism stated in the opening of this commentary. Conservatives want little government except to impose moral law. Liberals want little government except to assist those who are in trouble because of their immorality. The "except" in both cases fuels the inconsistency. A government that is going to impose moral law can not be little. A government that is going to assist violators of personal morality also can not be little. In both cases the government must be sizable either for enforcement or assistance. I think the worst case is when the government is sizable in both arenas. A case can be made that if the government is going to assist those who have hurt themselves then it is in the government's (i.e. taxpayer's) interest to regulate personal destruction. The converse of this is that if government is going to let people pursue their happiness (however bizarre)

Are Conservatives and Liberals Mixed Up?

then it should not assist them when they hurt themselves. Neither of the two preceding statements neatly fits either the conservative or liberal camp.

My belief is that none are so stupid as those who abuse themselves. One of the reasons that I am a success today is that I have never abused myself. But, if abusing one's self is what makes one fulfilled, bizarre as that may be, then I say let the person do it provided they do not hurt someone else. If they are a threat to society then they must forfeit their freedom. I am in favor of simultaneously eliminating all laws against substance use and eliminating all government assistance to those who abuse themselves. If a private charity wants to fund treatment programs and other assistance then that is fine. I believe that it is immoral for the government (i.e. the taxpayers) to get involved. The legitimate role of government is to protect me from them, not to tax me to subsidize them. A fundamental law of Nature is that those who do wrong things should die. Call me mean-spirited but I fully believe in this - humankind should not interfere with Nature - the result is always more problems. If seeing someone who is wasted on some substance does not inspire one to not abuse that substance then there is nothing that will prevent that person from ultimately sinking into self abusiveness. Governments can suggest that people not abuse themselves but it is not the right of government to prevent it.

Welfare

Both conservatives and liberals want all to live fulfilling lives. Conservatives are often labeled as greedy, mean-spirited, capitalist pigs. Liberals are often labeled as dope smoking socialists who are very generous with other people's money. No one is in favor of suffering. Both conservatives and liberals believe in helping some one who has fallen down. The key difference between conservative and liberal belief is what to do when someone lies down rather than falls down. Conservatives generally believe in stepping around someone who lies down while liberals generally believe in helping that person. Conservatives generally believe that assistance should be handled by private charity. Liberals generally believe that social problems are too big for private charity and should be handled by government. Conservatives generally believe that all individuals have the right to better themselves. Liberals generally believe that by virtue of being born, an individual has rights to a fair share of the collective wealth of a country. Conservatives see economic division as the natural consequence of doing right or wrong things. Liberals see economic division as unfair without regard to any reasons. I could continue with these comparisons but by now you should recognize the theme of highly divergent views with little opportunity for middle ground.

This particular issue is interesting in that I can find no inconsistency on either side based on the working definitions as stated in the opening of this commentary. Thus, it would seem that this issue does not belong here since the theme is inconsistencies.

My opinion is that assistance should be handled by private charity and that government should stay out. When governments gets involved then people are forced to contribute via taxes and benefits tend to be too generous thus perpetuating the cycle of need. I believe that private charities are vastly more competent to handle the issues than government

Are Conservatives and Liberals Mixed Up?

officials. Imposing taxes on people to solve social problems naturally breeds contempt for the beneficiaries. There is a huge difference between willfully giving money to a charity and having money extorted via taxes.

Conclusion

The point I hope I have made is that many of the classic conservative-liberal issues do not neatly fit either camp. Each side tends to be so polarized in its position that it fails to recognize its inconsistencies. The ultimate inconsistency is to be for what one is against or against what one is for. I can envision an interesting test. With crafty wording the test would ask a number of questions concerning common conservative-liberal issues that people would indicate their positions on a scale of strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. The test would supposedly indicate how conservative or liberal a person was and the test taker would anticipate the result based on what they know of themselves. For reference, either the first or last question would be to indicate one's political leaning. After the final score was computed the test taker would be given the interpretation of the results and possibly be shocked that the test indicated their political views were quite opposite of how they classified themselves. Ultimately the test should inspire more thought about what one really believes.