The terms radical, liberal, moderate, conservative, and reactionary are among the words most often used in political discourse. The concepts of political change and political values must be discussed in relation to these five terms in order to gain a clear understanding of what they represent. Radicals are people who find themselves extremely discontented with the status quo. Consequently, they wish an immediate and profound change in the existing order, advocating something new and different for society.

Considerably less dissatisfied, but still wishing to change the system significantly, are the liberals. All liberals share a belief in the equality, intelligence, and competence of people. Moderates find little wrong with the existing society, and their reluctance to change it is exceeded only by the conservatives. Differing from liberals in most respects, conservatives are dubious about bold efforts to improve the world for fear that incompetent meddling might, indeed, make things worse. Only the reactionaries reject current institutions and modern values. They would see society retrace its steps and adopt former political norms and policies.

Being clear about the values people hold is usually more revealing about the place they occupy on the spectrum than simply knowing what policy changes they advocate. Basically, people on the right of the political spectrum revere authority, tradition, elitism, and property rights, whereas those on the left emphasize political liberty, social change, human equality, and human rights.

Beyond these philosophical convictions, there are several other motivations that cause people to lean to the left or right. Psychological factors about the need for change are important. Economic circumstances also play a part. Age is another factor. Finally, one’s view about the condition of human nature is probably the most important consideration in determining with which side of the spectrum one will identify. Each of these factors predisposes people’s political attitudes about certain policy alternatives.
UNDERSTANDING THE SPECTRUM

Before studying specific ideologies, we should develop an understanding of certain basic political concepts. The terms radical, liberal, moderate, conservative, and reactionary are among the most commonly heard words in political discussion. Any coherent explanation of these political terms must be couched in terms discrete to a particular society because liberal or conservative positions on issues can differ from society to society. In this chapter we shall study the spectrum of political attitudes as it relates in the United States because that is the dominant audience for this book. Also, in order to study the subject, we must include consideration of two basic concepts: change and values. We will begin with an analysis of the concept of political change, and then turn to an investigation of the meanings of these terms as they relate to intent, or political values. Before proceeding, however, we should arrange the terms radical, liberal, moderate, conservative, and reactionary along a continuum in order to gain a graphic perspective on them. (See Figure 2.1.)

![FIGURE 2.1
The political spectrum.](image)

When they are arrayed from left to right in this fashion, we can see certain relationships among the terms with which we are concerned. For instance, the radical is at the far left of the spectrum, and the reactionary is at the opposite extreme. This alignment tells us something important. In politics, the term radical means an extremist of the left but not of the right. In everyday conversation, on the other hand, the term radical is usually used simply to refer to something extreme, with no reference to either side of the spectrum or any particular philosophical conviction.

CHANGE, OR POLICY OPTIONS

People at each point on the political spectrum have an attitude about changing the existing political system (the status quo) by adopting certain policies or by pursuing certain courses of action. Political change is endemic to any society.

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1 The terms left and right come to us from the French political experience. Those who generally supported the policies of the monarch were seated to his right, and those who proposed changes in the system were arranged to his left.

2 While status quo means the extant conditions, one should take care not to be too literal about it when applied to positions on the spectrum. In this case, it should be understood to obtain only to fundamental things, like deep-rooted beliefs or foundational institutions. If a conservative, for example, wants to change a system in order to make it more conservative, or to make it conservative again, the wish for change is certainly conservative and not liberal or reactionary. Put differently, the mere fact that a conservative wishes a superficial change to an institution does not mean he or she is no longer conservative. Such an approach would make the terms we are studying meaningless. The deciding question is, is a particular policy intended to change society or keep it fundamentally the same?
By learning each group’s attitude about fundamental changes, we will be taking a large step toward understanding what the terms radical, liberal, moderate, conservative, and reactionary mean.

Political change can be a very complex subject. With reference to the spectrum of political attitudes, we must actually learn four things about the change or policy option desired. First, we must determine the direction, forward or back, in which a proposed change would carry society. In other words, is the change progressive or retrogressive?

At this point, the reader should be on guard. Our society generally has a favorable bias toward progress. This is so because our ideological origins are rooted in eighteenth-century British liberalism, *classical liberalism*, which advocated progressive change. But, in fact, progress is not necessarily good or bad. It has no intrinsic value at all. Progressive change simply means a change from the status quo to something new and different in that society. Conversely, retrogressive change refers to a return to a policy or institution that has been used by that society in the past. For instance, the adoption of a universal compulsory government medical insurance program in the United States is a progressive policy because most people until 2018 are required to go to the marketplace to buy insurance. On the other hand, one might agree with the majority of the current U.S. Supreme Court that the states of the union are in some ways “sovereign.” Such a stance has been rejected since the Civil War, so reasserting it at this point is quite retrogressive, or reactionary.

The watershed between progressive and retrogressive change lies between the conservative and reactionary sectors on the spectrum, and the line between these two sectors can be taken to represent no important change at all, or continuation of the status quo. (See Figure 2.2.) In other words, everyone to the left of the reactionary is progressive. Even conservatives are progressives in that, although they do not want a great deal of change to the status quo, the change they will allow is a transformation from what currently exists to that which the society has yet to experience. Only the reactionary wants a change from the status quo to something that existed previously.

Some people might protest that they consider themselves conservative or liberal, but that on a given issue they prefer a previous institution to the

![FIGURE 2.2](image-url)

The position of status quo on the political spectrum.
present one. Does this make them reactionaries? Yes, it does—in relation to that particular issue. Although they might correctly consider themselves to be elsewhere on the spectrum as a general rule, they—like most of us—will find themselves at several different places on the spectrum in relation to a variety of specific issues. Few of us are absolutely consistent in our views, nor is there any particular reason to be so. Indeed, upon careful scrutiny, most people will find it difficult to place themselves in any single category because their attitudes on various issues will range over two or even more sectors on the spectrum. Typically, however, we can identify a general pattern; that is, we might find ourselves supporting liberal policies more frequently than any other position on the spectrum, and consequently, we might correctly characterize ourselves as liberals, even though our views on a few ideas might not be liberal.

The second thing one must determine when trying to locate desired policy options on the spectrum is the depth of a proposed change. Would the desired change amount to a major or a minor adjustment in the society? Would it modify or replace an institution that is fundamental to the society as it now exists? If so, what is the likelihood that the proposed change will cause unforeseeable and uncontrollable effects once it is implemented? For example, a proposal at the state level to require a course in introductory political science for graduation from college would undoubtedly inconvenience and annoy some students. However, such a policy change would probably have almost no disruptive effect on the society as a whole. On the other hand, if a state were to greatly reduce funding for its college system, the long-term impact is potentially enormous, changing thousands of lives and perhaps eventually affecting the society as a whole.

Once again, as with the direction of change, the watershed for the depth of change is at the line between conservative and reactionary, or at the status quo point on the spectrum. The farther people find themselves from the status quo, the more dissatisfied they are with the existing order and the more intense their desire for change. (See Figure 2.3.)

With the questions of the direction and the depth of change settled, the third aspect we must consider is the speed at which people want change to occur. Obviously, the more upset people are with the status quo, the more impatient they are likely to be, and, therefore, as a general rule, the more rapidly they would like to see the existing order transformed.

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**FIGURE 2.3**
The desire for change as shown on the political spectrum.
The last factor we must consider regarding the concept of change is the method used to accomplish it. Political change can take place in a multitude of ways: officially or unofficially; legally, illegally, or extralegally; smoothly or abruptly; peacefully or violently. It is tempting for some people to conclude that those who would use violence to gain their political objectives are extremists. This, however, is not necessarily the case. True, violence is a major tool of certain extremist political groups. However, violence is used by people at practically every point on the political spectrum. The death penalty, property expropriation, chokeholds and certain other police techniques, and warfare itself are examples of forms of violence supported by people distributed all along the political continuum. Thus, it is unwise to jump to conclusions about the methods others use to accomplish their political goals.

It is possible, however, to make some generalizations about the methods employed for political change. For example, the farther we are from the status quo on the political spectrum, the more likely we are to find ourselves in opposition to the laws of the society. This is so because the law is a form of communication that sets forth the purposes, goals, and structures of the society. People who are opposed to those purposes, goals, or structures will necessarily be at odds with the law. Consequently, it is usually easier for conservatives to be law-abiding and patriotic, since they are satisfied with the system. Radicals, liberals, or reactionaries, by contrast, find it much more difficult to abide willingly by all the laws or to wave the flag as enthusiastically as their conservative counterparts.

Nevertheless, one should not assume from this discussion that conservatives would never violate the law to gain their political objectives. It sometimes happens that even those who control the laws of a society may not benefit from them at a given time. In such circumstances, it is not unlikely that an otherwise upstanding “pillar of society” would ignore or even violate the law. Examples include the refusal of corporations to comply with legally mandated health and safety requirements, stock market wizards and energy magnates defrauding ordinary people of billions, and ordinary people cheating on their taxes. It should be clear that the methods people use to achieve political change are complex. It is inaccurate to conclude that certain methods are the monopoly of a single sector of the political spectrum.

With the preceding general guide in mind, let us now turn to a consideration of each term on the political spectrum to determine the specific attitude of each group toward the concept of political change.

Radical
In general terms, a radical may be defined as a person who is extremely dissatisfied with the society as it is and therefore is impatient with less than extreme proposals for changing it. Hence, all radicals favor an immediate and fundamental change in the society. In other words, all radicals favor revolutionary change. The criterion that distinguishes one radical from another most clearly is the methods they would use to bring about a particular change.
All radicals want *immediate* change at society’s *foundation*, but the less extreme among them do not insist on violence as the necessary vehicle by which to bring about social transformation. Indeed, one group of radicals, the *pacifists*, completely reject violence as a means to achieve justice. These people hold human rights to be of such great importance that no one, they believe, has the right to injure or kill another in pursuit of their political goals. Excellent examples of this attitude can be found in the careers of Mohandas Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and labor leader Cesar Chavez. Each leader organized great movements demanding immediate and profound change, yet each refused to use violence to reach his goals, even after he had suffered violence at the hands of supporters of the status quo.

Even though not all radicals are violent and not all revolutions provoke conflict, radicals tend to be received by their adversaries with inordinately severe reactions. Owing a great debt to the philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), contemporary radicals make the establishment terribly uncomfortable. Extreme leftists challenge the most cherished values and assumptions of society. They reject the institutions of the establishment, calling for a more humane, egalitarian, and idealistic social and political system. In fact, they demand a society which many of us desire in the ideal but which, for practical reasons or for reasons of expediency or lack of commitment, we have been unable or perhaps unwilling to create. Put differently, the radical causes us to wonder if indeed we did not fail—if we settled for a less than perfect world because it was more convenient. Thus, the idealism of radicals tends to place the rest of us on the defensive.

The radicals’ contempt for society’s values is so complete, their remedies so unorthodox, and, perhaps, the establishment’s feelings of guilt at the thought that it may have failed so threatening that radicals are often feared with an intensity far beyond what is necessary to deal adequately with the challenge they pose. Accordingly, even though their numbers and influence do not demand such severe action, radical movements are often abjectly crushed. Examples of overreactions would be the official surveillance and harassment of leaders of the civil rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s, the same for leftists calling for peaceful relations between the United States and the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China during the Cold War, and the same again for protesters of the Vietnam War (1960s and 1970s) and Afghanistan war. In some cases violence was used, like the 1968 brutalization by government officials of demonstrators at the Democratic National Nominating Convention in Chicago, who, while loud and vulgar, hardly constituted a clear and present danger to the republic. Even more egregious was the 1970 National Guard shooting at Kent State University of students protesting the war in Southeast Asia.

It must be quickly pointed out that extremists on the right have also suffered egregiously at the hands of the authorities. The FBI shootouts with the Weaver family on Ruby Ridge, Idaho (1992) and with the Branch Davidian sect in Waco, Texas (1993) are examples. But they were apparently the product of boorish and arrogant government officials, rather than frightened ones.
CHAPTER 2  The Spectrum of Political Attitudes

In 1970, protesting students were fired upon by National Guard troops at Kent State University in Ohio. A 2010 analysis of an audiotape of the shooting revealed that someone may have given the order to fire on the students. (Kent State University News Service)

Liberal

Liberals are placed closer than radicals to the status quo point on the continuum because they are less dissatisfied with the fundamentals of society. Indeed, the liberal supports the basic features of that society. However, liberals are quick to recognize deficiencies in society and therefore are anxious to reform the system, favoring rapid and relatively far-reaching, progressive changes.

Today the term *progressive* is often used by liberals when describing themselves, because the term *liberal* has been effectively vilified in the United States by the right. However, there was a time when progressive had a discrete meaning. At the turn of the twentieth century the progressives, while remaining basically isolationists in foreign affairs, demanded leftists reforms in domestic policy. When President Woodrow Wilson led progressives to an internationalist foreign policy, liberal became the word of common currency for the mild left in American politics.

One of the most fundamental differences between the radical and the liberal is the attitude of each toward the law. Radicals are basically opposed to the political system that governs them, so they are apt to oppose the law because they see it as an instrument with which those who dominate the society maintain their control. Liberals, on the other hand, generally appreciate the concept of the law, and although they may want to change certain specifics
of it, they will usually not violate it to accomplish their political objectives. Instead, they try to change the law through legal procedures. Liberals seek change in the system by several important means, but they reject attempts to revolutionize the system because they support its essentials.

Liberalism is one of the intellectual by-products of the Enlightenment, of the scientific method, and ultimately of the Industrial Revolution. During the medieval era, people looked heavenward for Divine relief from their wretched earthly existence. Faith in human potential, as well as esteem for humankind in general, was very low. However, the discoveries of inquisitive people such as Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton revolutionized people’s attitudes toward themselves and their function in life. Through use of the scientific method, people began to make improvements in their material existence, and in so doing, they began to develop confidence in their ability to solve many problems that they had previously borne with little complaint. It was not long before people began to conclude that if physical difficulties could be solved through the use of human reason, perhaps the same could be done with social and political problems.

This speculation led to the keystone of liberalism: Optimism about people’s ability to solve their problems through the use of reason. Accordingly, liberals are apt to apply reason to problems and to be confident that, if a solution can be found, it will be discovered by rational exercise, rather than by means less responsive to human will. Liberals, therefore, tend to address social difficulties with a vigor that conservatives see as meddlesome and dangerously overconfident. The liberals’ willingness to “trifle” with “tried and true” social institutions in efforts to improve them causes conservatives—those who do not share such confidence in human reason—anxiety and disquiet.

Classical and Contemporary Liberalism Change has remained the major tool of liberalism throughout its long history. Consequently, its specific objectives have been revised from time to time. What was once desirable to liberals may be passé and unacceptable to them today, so that the exact meaning of liberalism has evolved over the years. For example, the original, or classical liberals, whose principal spokesman was John Locke (1632–1704), believed that all human beings were capable of being moral, competent, and intelligent. Further, Locke asserted that natural law (that is, certain rules of nature governing human conduct that could be discovered through the use of human reason) applied to all people in equal measure, thus assuring their fundamental moral equality.3 Revering the individual above all things in society, classical liberals believed that government oppressed people when it had too much power—therefore, the less government the better, thus Thomas Jefferson’s famous admonition, “That government governs best which governs least.” In addition, private property

3 Please note that “moral equality,” as Locke understood it, meant only that all people were subject to the same moral prescriptions and limitations. No one had a greater right to kill or steal. The democratic implications of this belief are obvious. It should not be understood that Locke believed all people were equally moral.
was held in high esteem. Indeed, classical liberals believed that property was a natural right and that an individual's possessions were to be protected from government confiscation. But, liberals have since moved beyond Locke's views.

Contemporary liberalism, as will be seen in Chapter 5, was fathered by Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), and its followers continue to uphold several of the notions developed by their classical predecessors. Still viewing people as intelligent creatures, contemporary liberals remain optimistic about our ability to improve life through reason. Change, therefore, is still a major tool of the liberal. Human equality is another concept that the liberal continues to support, but the basis for the assumption of equality has changed. Few liberals still believe in the concept of natural law. Instead, the contemporary liberal is more likely to argue that although there is a wide variety of differences among individuals, all people are equally human, and their equality with one another is a matter of great importance. Therefore, since no person is more or less human than any other, and since equals have no moral right to treat one another unequally, all people have the right to expect certain treatment and consideration from other people. These are called the human rights and are fundamentally the same as the natural rights.

In addition, contemporary liberals disagree with their classical counterparts about the nature of government. Modern liberals note that the concentration of wealth has deposited vast power in the hands of those who control the means of production, distribution, and exchange, and they posit that people with economic power will use it, in part, to sustain and increase power in their own hands, thus placing at a disadvantage those without economic power. Thus, it is logical to assume that, through time, the rules and power structure of society become increasingly unequal, with the well-to-do enjoying privilege and advantage over others. Thus, contemporary liberals are concerned that economic power can be as oppressive as political power.

In response to this bias, contemporary liberals believe government can be used by the economically weak to protect themselves against the oppression of the powerful. Discovering that some people have used their control of property to unfair advantage over less fortunate individuals, contemporary liberals temper their belief in the individual's right to accumulate property with their concern for the happiness of the society as a whole. Thus they tend to be more egalitarian (those who wish power and wealth to be more equally shared by all people) than the classical liberal. Moreover, rather than believing that government tends to deny human liberty, contemporary liberals believe they can use government to expand liberty by limiting oppression the wealthy would ordinarily impose on the poor.

Moderate

It is somewhat awkward to write about moderates because, unlike the other positions on the political spectrum, there is no philosophical foundation for this category. One could cite Aristotle's advice about seeking the Golden Mean,
of course, but even this goal is more one of temperament than philosophy. One must be moderately something, either moderately liberal or moderately conservative. I introduce the moderate category only because it is so often used in political discussion to describe those who find themselves liberal or conservative about some things but not really committed with any degree of intensity to either side of the spectrum.

**Moderates** are fundamentally satisfied with the society, although they agree that there is room for improvement and recognize several specific areas in need of modification. However, they insist that changes in the system should be made gradually and that no change should be so extreme as to disrupt the society.

To say that being a moderate is only to take a mild stand on the issues is not to suggest that being moderate is always easy. Being moderate on an issue that engenders in most other people a highly emotional response can be very difficult indeed. For example, holding a moderate position on whether abortion should be legal could be problematic. Affirmative action, the death penalty, feminism, and the war in Afghanistan are other examples of issues on which the pro and con sides have so hardened that a less-than-absolutist stance can be unfairly seen as faint-hearted, ambivalent, and uncommitted.

Interestingly, like beauty, ideology often depends on the eye of the beholder. This phenomenon can currently be seen in relation to President Barack Obama. Petulant conservatives view his foreign policy in the Middle East; his pledge to vacate the alleged terrorist prisoners from the American naval base at Guantanamo, Cuba; his effort to reform the health care delivery system; and his policies to rejuvenate the economy as irresponsibly liberal and unconscionably disruptive. Meanwhile, bitterly disappointed, liberals regard his decision to send more troops to Afghanistan; his delay at closing down the prisons in Guantanamo; his refusal to completely end the “extraordinary renditions” (kidnapping suspected terrorists and sending them for “aggressive interrogations” to Syria, Egypt, and other places known for using torture); and his willingness to make huge compromises on public health reform as betrayals of liberalism. Disgruntled, they remind the president of the title of Jim Hightower’s book, *There’s Nothing in the Middle of the Road But Yellow Stripes and Dead Armadillos*.

Of course, either of these observations about Obama’s policies may be true. In fact, both may be true. But it is also possible that, rather than being a stubborn ideologue, insisting his way is the only right way, he may simply be swallowing hard and behaving like a pragmatic, practical politician who wants to get something done. Politics, as the perceptive French politician Georges Clemenceau observed, is “the art of the possible”: In politics, the ideal is often not possible.

**Conservative**

**Conservatives** are the most supportive of the status quo and therefore are reluctant to see it changed. Being content with things as they are does not suggest that conservatives are necessarily happy with the existing system, however.
Conservatives are often accused of lacking vision, but this charge is unfair. The difference between conservatives and liberals is not founded on the fact that the latter dream of achieving a better world, whereas the former think the status quo is the best conceivable existence. In fact, conservatives may desire a future no less pleasant than that of the liberals—a future free of human conflict and suffering. The essential difference between the two viewpoints rests on their respective confidence in when (or, indeed, whether) the ideal can be accomplished. Conservatives support the status quo not so much because they like it but because they believe that it is the best that can be achieved at the moment. Put differently, conservatives oppose change because they doubt that it will result in something better, not because they do not desire improvement.

Lacking confidence in society’s ability to achieve improvements through bold policy initiatives, most conservatives support only very slow, incremental, and superficial alteration of the system. The most cautious of them often resist even seemingly minor change. They tend to see an intrinsic value in existing institutions and are unwilling to tamper with them, claiming that to do so might seriously damage that which tradition has perfected.

Of course, not all conservatives are equally resistant to change. Obviously, those closest to the status quo point on the spectrum are the least inclined to desire change. And, although it seems unlikely that many people are absolutely content with the system and are opposed to any change whatsoever, some people do take this position, and each of us could probably find some issues in which we would prefer no change at all. Still, most conservatives will accept some deviation from the status quo, be it ever so slight, and the change they will accept is progressive.

The primary reason conservatives are suspicious about the prospects of improving society through deliberate political policy is that they do not believe human reason is powerful enough to even completely understand, let alone solve, society’s problems. Although they do not deny the existence of reason, they are wary of relying too heavily on it for solutions to human problems. Liberals and conservatives agree that people have complex natures composed of moral and immoral, rational and irrational impulses. They differ, however, on which attributes dominate. Liberals believe that human reason is powerful, that it can be successfully used to solve society’s problems, and that it can also be employed by people to overcome impulses to do harm. Thus, liberals see human beings as trustworthy creatures who will normally behave themselves when left alone. Conservatives have less faith than liberals that people can use reason to restrain their animalistic impulses and their emotions; they mistrust human nature. Conservatives see people as relatively base and even somewhat sinister. They suspect the motives of others and tend to believe that, unless somehow deterred, people will take advantage of their unsuspecting or weaker fellows. Consequently, whereas liberals believe that little government control is normally necessary to ensure human compatibility, conservatives tend to favor authoritarian controls over the individuals in society. This explains why conservatives are the “law and order” advocates in society. They believe that
unless police forces are large, laws harsh, and prisoners uncomfortable, people will not be deterred from crime.

Because they mistrust reason, conservatives often rely on irrationalist solutions to problems. To conservatives, reason is of limited use in making life better. They believe that human reason is severely limited. Although it can be used to deal with minor difficulties—technological improvements, for example—it cannot be counted on to successfully solve difficult problems such as eliminating poverty or ending war. Therefore, conservatives tend to place great reliance for dealing with society’s problems on the passage of time, authority, institutions, religions, and traditions. For example, whereas liberals might try to solve a social problem such as poverty by creating a government program to eliminate it, the War on Poverty for example, conservatives are apt to eschew this rationalist approach and counsel that the matter be left to the “market” to decide. The market is beyond anyone’s direct control. It operates in response to the demand and supply of hundreds of millions of individuals with no overriding scheme or management. Yet, conservatives often talk about the market as though it is guided by some sort of superhuman wisdom. Whether the approach works or not—strong arguments can be made on either side of this case—the point here is that conservatives prefer to leave the solution to major social problems to phenomena uncontrolled by deliberate rational acts.

Moreover, conservatives value longevity for its own sake and believe that one of the justifications for preserving a practice or an institution is the fact that it was worthwhile in the past. Obviously, this attitude encourages very little change in society.

Liberals and conservatives differ also with respect to the concept of human equality. Here again, we find a difference in emphasis dominating the debate between the two. Liberals recognize that people differ from one another: Some are stronger, more intelligent, better looking than others, and so on. But, the leftist argues, these are only superficial differences. The most important and determining feature of people is that they are all human, and they are each equally human; no one is more human than the other. Thus, if humanity is the most important of our features, and we are each equally human, equality must be the condition that predisposes our conduct toward one another. “When a black man bleeds, he bleeds red,” they argue, emphasizing that beneath the surface all people are alike. Conservatives take the opposite view. They are quick to recognize the biological similarity among people but argue that this fact is relatively unimportant given the enormous variation in qualities among people. To the liberal protestation about everyone having red blood, conservatives respond by asking, “So what?” Emphasizing that crucial inequalities have always existed among people, conservatives insist that to attempt to construct a society on any other assumption is folly.

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4The term irrationalist is not intended to imply that conservatives lack the rational or intellectual prowess of their opponents. In this book, the term irrationalist applies only to persons who see severe limitations in people’s ability to solve problems through the use of reason.
Far from a simple academic debate, questioning the importance of human equality is fundamental to politics. Politics is largely caught up in the problem of how to distribute wealth and power justly in society. If one believes that human equality is fundamental, then there can be few moral arguments for distributing societies’ benefits unequally. If, however, human equality is inconsequential—or does not exist at all—it would hardly be just to insist on an equal distribution of wealth and power.

Because liberals believe all people are equal, and further that human equality is the most compelling fact about people, they are egalitarians, believing a just society will take steps to distribute wealth and power equally. Just how equally wealth and power should be distributed depends upon one’s view about how important human equality is. While all leftists believe it is the most compelling feature, only the most extreme leftists, certain radicals, demand that equality virtually eclipse all other qualities in determining the distribution of society’s benefits. Whereas most other conservatives agree with reactionaries that human equality is a myth, because of the heavy influence of classical liberalism in the United States, American conservatives accept the principle of human equality. However, they oppose society’s doing much to reward human equality because, although they agree that people are equal, they do not agree that human equality is important. Life, they aver, is like a race or contest. Equality is only the beginning point and therefore should not be rewarded. Instead, people’s accomplishments throughout life should be rewarded. Although people are equally human, the rightists say, they did nothing to become human or equal and therefore deserve no particular political or social benefits because of it. Both of these are powerful arguments, and indeed, the way you come down on this issue will go a long way toward determining where you might find yourself on the spectrum.

Conservatism has, of course, long been a prominent political position, but it was not until Edmund Burke (1729–1797) put pen to paper that it was given a formal philosophical base. The well-governed society, Burke argued, is one in which people know their place. “The rich, the able, and the well-born” govern, whereas the people of lower social rank recognize their betters and willingly submit to their rule. Should they refuse—should the ordinary people try to govern themselves, as in France during Burke’s time—the ultimate result can only be disaster, for nothing noble can come from the mediocre.

Burke was not content, however, to see the elite rule with no admonition for temperance, for although they were the best in society, they too were human and were afflicted with the same frailties as the commoners, albeit to a lesser degree. The elite, according to Burke, are responsible for ruling benevolently and effectively. Power is not to be used by the rulers to suppress the masses. Still, nothing good will result if either group pretends that inferior people share equal political rights with the ruling group. Decrying the “false” values of liberalism, Burke put his case bluntly when he wrote:

The occupation of a hair-dresser, or of a working tallow-chandler, cannot be a matter of honor to any person—to say nothing of a number of other more
servile employments. Such description of men ought not to suffer oppression from the state; but the state suffers oppression, if such as they, either individually or collectively, are permitted to rule.

Interestingly, the present conservative position on private property is, to some extent, quite close to the classical liberal attitude, in that both regard private property as an inalienable right of the individual. The similarity ends there, however, since the conservative goes on to suggest that wealth is one of the important factors that distinguish one person’s value to society from another’s. Conservatives believe that the property right dominates virtually every other right. Consequently, government has no legitimate power to interfere with the individual’s accumulation or use of private property unless this activity causes injury, death, or the destruction of another’s property, and even those conditions are allowable under certain circumstances. For example, the American Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers are among the most vociferous opponents of the government mandating dramatic action to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, which heavily contributes to global warming, even though the deleterious effect of climate change on human health, while debatable as to its exact extent, is indisputable as to its existence.

On the other hand, persuaded that people with great wealth often use their influence to stack the deck against the less fortunate, liberals tend to favor using government as an equalizer. Accordingly, they usually favor government regulation of business, arguing that likely irresponsible corporate behavior encouraged by the profit motive should be tempered by the law. In the case of pollution, liberals might assert that most people when shopping focus on the finished product, and its price, rather than the conditions under which it was produced. This lapse, however, should not be used as an excuse to allow manufacturers to knowingly endanger consumers.

Just as there are two distinctly different kinds of liberals, classical and contemporary, conservatism can also be divided. Whereas liberals tend to be egalitarians, conservatives tend toward elitism, favoring a stratified society based on one or another perception of merit. Those who are referred to as Tories closely follow the prescriptions of Burke. They make no bones about the fact that the excellent of society should rule, but at the same time, they should govern with dignity and benevolence. Tories look for leadership in a ruling class, one that has a civic duty to govern the less able. They call upon the rulers to ignore selfish impulse and govern in the interests of society as a whole. As Burke’s statement above directs, the mediocre should certainly not rule, but neither should they be oppressed. Although it is a paternalistic approach, Toryism at least demands that the elite rulers govern with a social conscience and strive to do what is “best” for all people in society.

A second group, who are called the entrepreneurs, are much more individualistic and sometimes almost populist in their approach. Whereas the Tories look to an elite class to rule, the entrepreneurs might be seen as “democratic elitists,” believing that the nation’s leaders can come from any stratum
of society. “The cream rises to the top,” they believe, and the government and other social institutions should allow the greatest latitude possible for individual accomplishment. Otherwise, they might impede the excellent from excelling. In contrast to the Tories, the entrepreneurs demand less self-restraint and see government not as an obligation of one’s station, but as an instrument by which superior individuals can better express their own authority. Instead of viewing government as a tool to shepherd society to noble goals, entrepreneurs want to limit government restraint on individual economic behavior so as to facilitate the elevation of the excellent and the devolution of the uncompetitive. Hence private enterprise, unregulated by the government, is the principal objective of the entrepreneurs. Columnist George Will and, to a much lesser extent, former president George H. W. Bush are American examples of Toryism. But the number of American Tories is very small today. Much more numerous are the entrepreneurs, who are led, at least symbolically, by former president Ronald Reagan, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, and talk-show host Rush Limbaugh. Curiously, former president George W. Bush was also an entrepreneur. His policies were much closer to Ronald Reagan’s than to his father’s in that he had a simple “good” versus “evil” approach in foreign policy, and on the domestic side he pursued a classic supply-side economic policy (explained later in this chapter) and each sacrificed the environment at the altar of economic development. (See Chapter 12.)

Complicating the mix further is the recent emergence of two other strains of American conservatism: the social conservatives (sometimes called “theocons”) and the neoconservatives (neocons). Focusing largely, although not entirely, on domestic policy, the social conservatives are closely associated with fundamentalist religious groups (Pentecostals, Evangelicals, Southern Baptists, Jehovah’s Witnesses), who comprise about 25 percent of the U.S. population, Mormons, and Roman Catholics. Brushing aside the constitutional requirement of separation of church and state, these “true believers” insist that public policy unerringly reflect their Christian beliefs and insist that financial support of the U.S. government be given to their social organizations. (These efforts were remarkably successful under President George W. Bush, and, perhaps surprisingly to the theocons, many of their values and objectives are also endorsed by President Obama; witness Obama’s support of Bush’s faith-based initiatives, regardless of the entanglement of government funds and religious organizations.) Thus, the social conservatives are less interested than economic conservatives in tax cuts, low government spending, and balanced budgets. Instead, they focus on government support of Christian social issues (faith-based institutions), outlawing teaching Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection, securing government supported school vouchers and tax write-offs for students attending parochial schools, prohibiting abortion, banning same-sex marriages, and so forth.

While certainly mobilized before 2000 through Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition led by Pat Robertson and Ralph Reed, the election of George W. Bush to the presidency galvanized this movement.
Bush’s election and his fundamentalist rhetoric energized this element in the American body politic, and it became a powerful force in his support and a critical factor in his 2004 reelection. Since then, these religious extremists have become very aggressive in advancing their agenda.

It is important, however, to quickly note that while social conservatives agree on many things, they do not march in lockstep on all issues. For instance, Catholics oppose the death penalty, while fundamentalists strongly favor it. Fundamentalists are sure “the end time” (Armageddon) is near and that government policy—including the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, which are seen as “crusades against radical Islam”—should reflect that the end of the world is near.

Of course, not all Christians are extremists, but, a growing number of social conservatives, energized by the belief that their views are a manifestation of God’s will, have led to two other interesting results. First, their emotional commitment to these issues have caused these activists to pursue them even to the extent of leading them to support pandering politicians who mouth desired platitudes about abortion, same-sex marriage, prayer in schools, and so forth, but then cast votes against the economic interests of these supporters. Second, pursuing God’s will, as they believe they do, they have grown dangerously impatient with other points of view. Dangerous because democracy is based on tolerance of ideas with which one might disagree. Some of these extremists, feeling themselves divinely deputized to defend the “truth” and that it is therefore not debatable, have increasingly resorted to obstructing meetings, shouting down opponents, and even doing violence (murdering doctors who perform abortions, for instance). This growing incivility and righteous extremism has also infected other elements of the right wing such as the Tea Party movement, thus causing more temperate people to turn away from the public discourse on some of our most important contemporary issues.

The Tea Party movement was a spontaneously formed group that in 2010 managed to dominate the Republican Party nominations in some states. A Libertarian-like group opposed to taxes and big government managed to get people with unorthodox views nominated—some elected—to office. Some of their candidates advocated seceding from the union, urging states not to enforce national law unless it is ratified by the state, the First Amendment does not apply to Muslims, Muslim children born in the United States are moles who will someday engage in terrorism, the national government’s growing power may need a “Second Amendment solution,” and ending popular election of United States senators. The list, by the way, goes on and on.

The second group of recently emerged conservatives is the neoconservatives who focus on foreign policy and were the most influential advisors to President George W. Bush in that field. Although a tiny group of people, the

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neocons are well financed and creative intellectually. These intellectuals posit that American values and institutions are superior to all others throughout the world, and with the demise of the Soviet Union, the United States is the victor of the Cold War and the world’s sole superpower. It therefore has a responsibility to use its might to bring American virtues to the rest of the world. The 2001 American invasion and occupation of Iraq is a manifestation of this imperialist policy. Vice President Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, I. Lewis (Scooter) Libby, Richard Pearl, Robert James Woolsey Jr. (CIA director under President Clinton), John Podhoretz, and William Kristol are leading neocons and all held high government posts and/or exercised substantial influence during the Bush administration.

Their differences aside, all conservatives share similar goals. They revere tradition, history, and established institutions. Most important, because they are suspicious that human beings cannot make great improvements in society through rational and deliberate efforts, conservatives of every stripe are very reluctant to foster substantial change.

The foregoing positions among conservative camps have appeal, of course, but the conservative resistance to change is in itself very appealing to many people. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to suggest that of all the arguments made by conservatives to justify their ideology, the most attractive is the promise of political order. Radicals and liberals offer change, new ideas, and different institutions, but even if these were to succeed, the process of change itself would disrupt the society for a time. As it happens, large numbers of people have very low thresholds for political and social disorder. Thus, change—even though it might be for the better in the long run—disturbs them and they resist it. They are even willing to suffer a system that is somewhat harmful to their interests rather than go through any kind of abrupt dislocation in the pattern of their everyday lives. Order, then, is a powerful selling point for conservatism.

**Reactionary**

Of all the political actors discussed here, only the reactionary proposes regressive change; that is, reactionaries favor a policy that would return society to a previous condition or even a former value system. For example, we witnessed a reactionary revolution with the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979. Without going into detail about the nature of the movement formerly headed by the Ayatollah Khomeini, we can see that his advocacy of a return to a literal application of the ancient laws in the Koran was clearly a reactionary legal posture. The policies of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Taliban’s emergence in Afghanistan in the 1990s are also quite reactionary, as is the extreme Islamism movement. (See Chapter 11.)

In the United States, three movements with reactionary beliefs have recently become popular. The Libertarian Party lionizes the rights of the
individual and thus calls for the reversal of the New Deal reforms of the 1930s and a return to the laissez-faire policies that preceded them. Laissez-faire and the New Deal will be explained in detail later; for now, it is enough to point out that Libertarian ideology advocates a kind of rugged individualism and the abolition of government policies that try to mitigate the ill effects imposed on the less well-off when the well-heeled use their economic and political power. Although the Libertarian Party itself has not succeeded in winning many elections, the extreme right in the Republican Party espouses the Libertarian ideology, and that faction has, since 1994, been very powerful in both the Republican Party and its efforts in Congress. Another movement at the far right of American conservatism is the Tea Party movement.

Before we go further with the definition of reactionary, however, we should return to Figure 2.1 through 2.3 and note that they are distorted in one important respect. In these diagrams, the reactionary sector is no longer than any other sector, leading one to believe that a person at the extreme right of the reactionary sector is not more dissatisfied with the system than a person at the leftmost point of the conservative sector. In fact, the person farthest to the right among reactionaries is just as frustrated as the person at the leftmost point of the radical sector. To be accurate in this respect, the reactionary sector should actually be extended so that it is as long as all the progressive sectors combined. (See Figure 2.4.)

The closer reactionaries are to the status quo, the less impatient and frustrated they are and the more socially acceptable are their methods. However, just as the Marxist at the far left insists that no change without violence can be valid, the fascist at the extreme right argues that war is good in and of itself. All reactionaries reject claims to human equality and favor distributing wealth and power unequally on the basis of race, social class, intelligence, or some other criterion. By definition, reactionaries reject notions of social progress as defined by people to their left and look backward to other, previously held norms or values. Examples of reactionary movements beyond those just mentioned are various right-wing survivalist groups, neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan, and extreme Christian fundamentalist sects like the Christian Identity Movement.
CHAPTER 2  The Spectrum of Political Attitudes

VALUES, OR PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY

Having dealt with the concept of change, the reader is now prepared to distinguish among radicals, liberals, conservatives, and reactionaries. But the perceptive reader has probably begun to wonder whether one must know more about people than their attitudes toward change in order to completely understand their political orientation. For example, is it possible for a liberal and a reactionary to support exactly the same policy even when it proposes a basic change in the society? Yes, of course it is, thus the source of the old saw “politics can make strange bedfellows.” The change itself is important, but not critical; much more significant is the anticipated result. Intent or expectation strikes at something much more fundamental in politics than simply the concept of change. It leads us to an investigation of basic political values and motivations.

For purposes of illustration, let us consider the volatile issue of abortion. On what grounds might abortion be supported or opposed? Although a pro-choice stance is usually seen as a liberal position, some conservatives have supported abortion, arguing that such a policy would reduce the number of unwanted children among the poor, thus indirectly reducing welfare costs. Liberals supporting a woman’s right to choose an abortion do so for an entirely different reason, claiming that deciding whether to have an abortion is a totally private matter, one in which the government has no business interfering. Some people’s notion of morality, it is argued, should not be allowed so much authority that it denies the individual’s right to privacy.

Yet, are there not opponents of abortion? Of course, there are many; they also come from both sides of the continuum. Taking a traditionalist stance, conservative opponents assert that pregnant women are morally obliged to bear their children to term and that, except in extreme circumstances, they do not have the right to abort. On the other hand, liberals who oppose the death penalty because they reject society’s right to take human life could oppose abortion for the same reason. Related issues, such as legalizing euthanasia, prostitution, narcotics use, and same-sex marriage, can be argued on similar grounds by the various antagonists. Clearly, then, intent, or the question of political values, is important to our study and bears further inquiry. Most people in our society have a fairly good understanding of human rights, since such rights appear in general terms in the Declaration of Independence and in specific terms in the Constitution of the United States, especially the Bill of Rights. Human rights include life; liberty; the pursuit of happiness; freedom of expression and religion, freedom from torture, habeas corpus; and so forth. These rights and liberties were incorporated into our political tradition by our country’s founders, who were classical liberals.

The private property right was originally thought to be an inalienable right proceeding to each individual from the natural law. Thus, it was referred

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6 Please note that in this book the term property is used in the broadest context. Hence, property refers not only to real estate but to all material items including money, clothing, furniture, and so forth.
to as a *natural right*. Classical economists such as John Locke, Adam Smith, and David Ricardo were convinced that people could not be truly free unless they were allowed to accumulate private property. It was not long, however, before liberals observed that the control of property by some people could be used to deny liberty to others. Accordingly, the property right was quickly relegated to a secondary position in the priority of rights. Today’s liberals consider it a *social right*—one that can be granted, regulated, and denied by society based on its needs. Thus, the property right can be alienated from the individual if the group deems it appropriate. *Eminent domain* is a long-standing principal at law. It allows government to force an individual to sell private property if society has a pressing need for it—to build a freeway, for example.7

Indeed, leftists as close to Locke’s time as Thomas Jefferson and Jean Jacques Rousseau refused to recognize property as an inalienable right. One of the most hotly debated phrases in the proposed Declaration of Independence of 1776 was “life, liberty, and the *pursuit of happiness*” (emphasis added). People more conservative than Jefferson, its author, argued that the phrase should be changed to read “life, liberty, and *property*” (emphasis added), just as John Locke had originally written.8 Jefferson prevailed in that debate, of course.

Liberals challenge private property as a human right on the basis that no necessary logical link exists between human well-being and *private* property. Human rights are those things that are necessary to the species in order to lead a decent human life, and therefore cannot be justly denied by one human to another, since the two are equal. Close examination of the constituents of the phrase “life, liberty, and property” reveals that life is obviously an essential factor. Liberty is also fundamental if one accepts human equality as a reality. If people are equal, then no person has the moral right to subjugate another without consent. People, therefore, have the right to be free. Private property, however, does not enjoy similar status since it is not essential for people to lead a decent human life. Food, clothing, and housing are, of course, necessary for people to enjoy life, but these things need not be privately owned. Yielding to this logic, and impressed by the fact that some people use their control of property to the disadvantage of others, Jefferson penned the more general phrase “pursuit of happiness,” and he successfully defended it against those who wished to substitute for it the term “property.” Eleven years later, in 1787, while Jefferson was serving as U.S. ambassador to France, a much less liberal group of men gathered in Philadelphia to write a new constitution. Only scant mention was made of the rights of the people. Indeed, it was not

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7 Indeed, in a very controversial case, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that local governments had the right to force the sale of private residential property so it could be developed for commercial use, thus increasing the city’s tax base. (*Kelo vs. City of New London*, 2004.)

8 Locke actually used the word *estate*, but *property* is commonly substituted for the term.
until the Fifth Amendment was adopted in 1791 that any general statement of inalienable rights appeared in the Constitution; that reference would read “life, liberty, and property” (emphasis added). Clearly, conservatives were in control of the country at the time.

As a general rule, we can conclude that those toward the left on the political spectrum tend to give the greatest emphasis to human rights, whereas those on the right tend to emphasize property rights. For example, if one were to ask a liberal whether a person has the right to refuse to sell a piece of property to an African American, he or she would certainly say, “No! As long as the African American has the money to buy the property, the seller has no right to refuse to sell.” Notice that liberals are not unappreciative of the property right. Clearly, they insist that the prospective buyer have the amount of money asked by the seller. With that condition satisfied, however, the liberal would require that the sale be completed. In this case, the liberal’s position is predicated on the assumption that an African American is morally equal to any other person and, therefore, should not be discriminated against because of race. The emphasis here is definitely on human rights.

On the other hand, if the same question were put to conservatives, their response would be different. They would probably say that although racial prejudice is unfortunate, if property owners insist on refusing to sell their property to a particular person on the basis of racial prejudice, they have every right to do so. Why? Because it is their property. Here the conservative recognizes the conflict between human rights and property rights, but the property right obviously supersedes the human right; property ownership prevails over equality. The conservative, unlike the contemporary liberal, might even argue that the property right is one of the human rights. Even if that were the case, close scrutiny of the conservatives’ attitude toward various human rights would show them insisting that the property right dominates all other human rights.

The balance between human and property rights becomes increasingly one-sided as one moves toward the ends of the political spectrum. On the far left, Karl Marx predicted that communism would be democratic, allowing absolutely no private property or inequality. Benito Mussolini (1883–1945), at the opposite extreme, denied human rights entirely, insisting that people had no justification, no rights, no reason for being that was not bound up with the nation-state. Indeed, the individual’s only function was to produce for the good of the state, and anyone who failed to do so could be liquidated.

To further dramatize the philosophical differences between left and right, let us consider the various goals that arise from their respective values. As mentioned earlier, the left is inclined toward egalitarianism. Socialism, generally thought to be a leftist economic theory, tends to level the society and produce material equality because one of its main goals is to reduce the gap between the haves and the have-nots in the society.
Politically, leftists advocate an egalitarian society as well. Radicals tend to propose pure democracy. Both Rousseau, the founder of modern radicalism, and Marx demanded that political power be shared equally by all people.⁹ Liberals, on the other hand, accept representative government but insist that ultimate political power remain in the hands of the people.

By contrast, the right is unabashedly elitist. Capitalism is today a conservative economic system. This was not always so. Adam Smith (1723–1799), who fathered capitalism, was a classical liberal of the eighteenth century. Capitalism represented a liberal challenge to the mercantilist status quo of that time. (More will be explained about the conflict between capitalism and mercantilism in Chapter 5.) Today, however, capitalism is the status quo; consequently, support of this system in a capitalist country is necessarily a conservative position.

Capitalism tends to stratify society. Those who are successful are respected and rewarded. Those who are not are abandoned as failures. The net result is that society becomes hierarchical, an elitist circumstance thought desirable by people on the right.

Politically, rightists advocate an elitist structure as well. Believing that people are somewhat unequal and in need of guidance, conservatives and reactionaries favor a society in which superiors command and subordinates obey. The farther to the right we look, the more structured and authoritarian is the desired society, until at the extreme right we come to Mussolini’s fascism. Mussolini saw his society as a sort of social pyramid. At the base were the masses, whose duty was to perform their functions as well as possible. At the top of the pyramid were the party members and, ultimately, the leader. The leader’s function was to perceive good, justice, and right and to rule the society accordingly. The masses were expected to obey without question.

Leftists, by contrast, want to maximize personal liberties. Believing that people will generally be well behaved when left alone, liberals tend to want government to use a light touch in regulating individual activity. Another reason liberals tend to want the police power restrained is that they usually define acceptable human behavior more broadly: They tend to view fewer things as being wrong than do conservatives. Many liberals, for example, believe that “victimless crimes” should not be crimes at all. Prostitution, an act between consenting adults, is no one else’s business, some leftists argue. On the other hand, most conservatives insist that prostitution is morally repugnant and must therefore remain illegal. Similarly, most conservatives believe that unprescribed use of narcotics should remain illegal and that the “drug

⁹Here each was referring to “relative equality,” not “absolute equality.” That is, ordinary people should enjoy the same political authority, possessing only one vote, for example, but obviously leaders need more power than do private individuals.
war” should continue. By contrast, most liberals contend that education and treatment are more effective than is police intervention in fighting drug abuse. A growing number of leftists argue that the drug war—this nation’s longest war, having been declared by President Richard Nixon in 1972—clearly is not working and that it is actually counterproductive, because in their zeal to discourage drug abuse, the authorities are trampling on the civil liberties of innocent people. Some of them go on to suggest that the problem might be best solved by legalizing drug use. This, they aver, would take the profit away, thus removing drug pushers from the streets.

To suggest that liberals tend to be libertarians (people who wish to enhance individual liberties, but not to be confused with the Libertarian Party) and that conservatives tend to be authoritarian, using the police power more is true, so far as criminal law and civil liberties are concerned. However, the two switch sides when economic matters come to the fore. As a general rule, conservatives tend to fear people who do not have wealth, whereas liberals tend to be suspicious of people who do have it. Conservatives believe that people with wealth have it because they deserve it and that government power should protect them from attempts by the underclasses to take it from them. By the same token, they believe that government power should not impede people from using their property as they wish. Liberals, on the other hand, believe that people with economic power tend to use it unfairly to the disadvantage of the less fortunate. Accordingly, liberals are quick to use government power to regulate individual or corporate economic behavior. Here we see the right being the more permissive of the two.

Uncharacteristically, the left has recently demonstrated that it can be less tolerant than the right even about the exercise of civil liberties. Normally, the left accords people the greatest latitude in free expression, for example. Yet, over recent past years, in an attempt to discourage expressions of racism, sexism, and homophobia, the left has demanded that universities adopt language codes for students and that the media and public figures avoid the use of words that certain people may find offensive. These efforts to enforce a certain political correctness (PC) on society have been stoutly resisted by the right, and the controversy has treated observers to a curious reversal of roles: the left trying to muzzle free speech and the right defending it.

Finally, today’s left tends toward internationalism and the right toward nationalism. Leftists speak of all people being sisters and brothers, arguing that national boundaries are artificial and unnecessary divisions setting people against one another. Marx, for instance, asserted that national boundaries were only artificial separations designed by capitalists to divide ordinary people and to distract them from their commonalities. Under socialism these frontiers would disappear because, he said, “working men have no country.” Eventually the world would become a single socialist brotherhood. In an earlier generation, French revolutionaries borrowed from Rousseau, demanding a system dedicated to “Liberty, Equality, [and] Fraternity”
Motivation

Conversely, fascists exalt differences between individuals within a state and dissimilarities among states. As people are ranked according to their value within a society, fascists argue, so too will state dominate state until one state rises above all others. Less extreme rightists do not necessarily demand imperialistic dominance, but they are clearly nationalists, believing that their nation is better than others and that their national interest can be placed above others. (You will recall the neocon proposition about American superiority.) These ideas will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.

MOTIVATION

Many people suspect that economic pressures are the primary motivation for choosing a particular political position, and, indeed, this does appear to be an important factor. People who are doing well in society usually do not want it to change. By contrast, the poor have little to lose materially and much to gain from progressive change. Or so it can be supposed. Economics is not the only factor in the choice of political beliefs, however. There are plenty of poor conservatives, and one can easily find rich liberals. In fact, there is no single motivation for people’s political attitudes. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss the most important factors besides economics that influence people’s political choices.

Age is often a significant factor. Although we may have just emerged from an era (1980s–2007) in which young people tended to be among the most conservative people in society, this is rare historically. Usually, the young are more likely to be liberal than the elderly. This is probably because the older generations have a vested interest in the status quo that the younger generations have not yet acquired. Young people lack not only wealth, but also a sense of commitment and belonging. Fifty-year-olds are likely to feel that they have a stake in society, not only because they have helped create it, but also

10It is worth noting here that the fraternal, or social, aspects so prominent in the French Revolution were almost completely absent in the American Revolution. Because America enjoyed an abundance of land and natural resources, opportunity was not as severely restricted as in the more stratified European societies. Hence, the American Revolution was almost completely political in nature. No serious attempt was made to realign the social structure or to redistribute the wealth in America. Because our revolution simply constituted a transfer of power from the English to the American elite, it has not been a model for European revolutions. It is true that the success of the American Revolution encouraged Europeans to seek change in their own lives, but the changes needed in Europe were far more sweeping than those desired on the American side of the Atlantic. European revolutions became vehicles for economic and social change as well as for political transformation. Hence, the French Revolution is second only to the Industrial Revolution as the modern world’s most influential upheaval, and it became the model for all subsequent European convulsions. Indeed, due largely to our unique social and economic environment, American politics has never been very similar to public affairs in Europe, a fact that sometimes causes serious misunderstanding on both sides.
because they have become used to it. The young have neither of these reasons to be committed to the system.

Some people are also more psychologically suited for liberalism or conservatism than others. To be a liberal, one must have a relatively high tolerance for disorder. Many people do not, so that even though they may not benefit materially from the system, they resist change because they fear disorder, and because they cannot be sure that the prospective change will actually leave them better off than before. Yet, some people seem to need almost constant change; the status quo never satisfies them.

Perhaps the greatest single determining factor in whether one will tend to the left or right is what one feels the nature of people to be. If one believes that people are essentially bad, selfish, and aggressive, then one is likely to lean to the right of the spectrum. Anyone who thinks that people are inherently evil will tend to rely on strict laws and firm punishment for violators in the belief that such measures are necessary to control errant behavior. On the other hand, people who believe their fellows to be essentially well meaning and rational will lean toward the left. They will try to avoid impeding human liberty by “unnecessarily” severe laws, and they will try to reason with offenders. People on the right tend to believe that prisons should be institutions for punishment, forcefully teaching transgressors to behave, whereas leftists see prisons as institutions for rehabilitation. Believing that denial of liberty is punishment enough, leftists hope to use penal institutions to school criminals in socially acceptable behavior and to give them skills that they can use to make a living honestly, thus avoiding a life of crime. The crux of the matter rests in assumptions about human nature: Are people impelled by greed and selfishness or are they motivated by more innocent aspirations? How one comes down on these questions will have a great deal to do with one’s political views.

A practical example might help. Illegal immigrants are a growing problem, with an estimated 12 million undocumented people living in the United States today. What should be done to deal with this problem Mr. Conservative? “Get tough: Stop coddling these people. Make life here hard on them. Deny the interlopers health care, welfare, education, and other amenities. If need be, seal off the border and even use the military to intercept illegal crossings.” Further, maybe we should reduce welfare payments to Americans, forcing them to go to work rather than leaving all those jobs to be done by foreigners.

Your solution Mr. Liberal? “Look, the illegals don’t leave loved ones and familiar surroundings because they like to live in the bushes outside of our towns. They are attracted here by the money they can earn from people who illegally hire them. To keep them home, we should do what we can to help their native countries develop economies that are able to employ them, and we should adjust the wage scale here sufficiently so that American workers willingly take the jobs they now forfeit to foreign workers. If one can make more money from welfare than from taking menial jobs, is that the fault of welfare, or the wage scale in this country?”
THE CHANGING SPECTRUM

Just as people's views can modify over time, thus changing their location on the continuum, the spectrum can shift to the left or right while a person remains stationary. Ronald Reagan was a liberal New Deal Democrat in the 1930s. By the 1960s, he had become a reactionary Republican, and as such, he served two terms as governor of California (1967–1975) before becoming president of the United States (1981–1989). During Reagan’s first term as governor, a reporter asked him why he had left the liberals. His answer was, “I didn’t; they left me.” Reagan was arguing that the things he wanted in the 1930s had been enacted and that he was satisfied with the achievement and did not want further change. Whether Reagan’s assessment of himself was accurate is not important here; the critical thing is that if we were to remain unchanged in our political attitudes for thirty or forty years while the world changed around us, we might very well become reactionary after having been liberal because the status quo would have shifted so much in the meantime.

It is also appropriate to point out that the political spectrum of one society bears no particular similarity to that of any other society unless the status quo is the same in each. A given policy could be conservative in one society, liberal in another, and radical in a third. (See Figure 2.5.)

Let us assume that the issue we are dealing with is whether a pregnant woman has the right to have an abortion if she chooses not to carry the fetus to term. In the Netherlands, the right to an abortion is commonly accepted and quite legal. Some people in the society certainly oppose allowing abortions on demand, but there is a strong national consensus on the issue. Thus, a person in Holland supporting legal abortion on demand would be quite conservative on the issue, since this is supportive of a long established status quo.

In the United States, on the other hand, while the right to abortion is legal, the public is far from a consensus on the issue. And, unlike the Netherlands, it is usually illegal for federal funds to pay for abortions. Therefore, assuming...
one in the United States supports abortion on demand is normally thought to be liberal on the issue, because it has not become a settled matter.

In Saudi Arabia, however, all induced abortions are illegal. Therefore, to support legalizing abortion on demand would be so far removed from the status quo as to be a radical position. Put differently, as far as induced abortions on demand are concerned, the political spectrum of the Netherlands is to the left of the United States’ spectrum, while the Saudi spectrum is far to its right.

**SPECIFIC POLICIES**

At this point, it might be helpful to translate some of the previously discussed general ideological points into practical policy as related to U.S. politics. Basically, the politics of any country can be divided into two main arenas: foreign and domestic. Let us assume that the goals of our society can be generalized in the form of two major objectives: peace and prosperity. What specific policies might one expect from the establishment right and left in the United States in pursuit of the goals described above?

**Foreign Policy**

Believing that people are self-oriented and competitive, conservatives are likely to assume a relatively suspicious posture in dealing with foreign governments. Resorting to cliché, we can readily identify the slogan “The way to preserve the peace is to be prepared for war” as a distinctly conservative approach to foreign policy. Given this view, the hallmark of their relations with other states will be a strong military posture buttressed by mutual defense alliances with their friends against those whom they perceive as adversaries. Their foreign aid programs will tend to emphasize military assistance, thus strengthening their allies. The thrust of their policies will be directed at guarding against the incursions of their foes. Essentially, the world is viewed in adversarial terms, with the opponent seen as the aggressor. Because conflict is considered inevitable, little hope is held out for sustained amicable relations until the adversary conforms to the conservatives’ views.

The liberal approach to foreign affairs is considerably different. Liberals do not believe that people are aggressive by nature. Further, they hold that people are capable of resolving their differences rationally. Warfare is regarded as abnormal, whereas peace and cooperation are considered natural to human beings.

Although liberals certainly do not ignore the martial aspect of foreign policy, they place much less emphasis on it than do their conservative counterparts. Their confidence in human reason is clearly apparent when they counter conservative militarism with the attitude that “the way to preserve the peace is to discover and eradicate the causes of war.”
Deemphasizing military solutions, liberals tend to rely heavily on economic and technical aid to strike at what they conclude are the causes of war: poverty, disease, ignorance, intolerance, and so on. Further, liberals look to exchange programs among intellectuals, artists, and ordinary people as a means by which tensions can be reduced. This approach is based on the assumption that people will generally get along better if they understand one another; ignorance breeds fear, mistrust, anxiety, and conflict. Accordingly, liberals are likely to place great store on institutions such as the Peace Corps and the United Nations, institutions that conservatives view with suspicion. Liberals support these organizations because they believe that they give the greatest promise of letting rational beings solve their problems peacefully.

Obviously, neither of these positions is without contradiction. The right’s suggestion that armed nations won’t go to war is easily disproved, and one could argue with the left by asserting, “I know many people well whom I don’t like. In fact, the better I get to know and understand them, the less I like them.” Still, the generalizations introduced above are at the base of conservative and liberal foreign policy. The operative question is, are people rational and well intentioned, or are they incapable of controlling sinister impulses in their own nature?
CHAPTER 2  The Spectrum of Political Attitudes

Domestic Policy
As a general rule, it can be assumed that, all other things being equal, liberals will spend more on domestic programs than will conservatives. This principle also pertains to foreign policy, but to a lesser extent. Liberals not only spend more money but they also release it on a broader base in the society, among people who are apt to spend it again quickly. For their part, conservatives usually spend much less on domestic policy, and they release money among far fewer people—people who are also least likely to spend it again quickly. Consequently, liberal policies tend to place inflationary pressures on the economy by increasing the volume of money (the number of dollars in circulation) and the velocity of money (the frequency with which dollars are spent). Conservative policy reverses the liberal emphasis, thus exerting deflationary pressures on the economy.

Specifically, conservatives argue that ours is an advanced economy, one that needs a high degree of capital investment. The health of our economy is therefore dependent on a sound capital base. Although government involvement in the economy should be kept to a minimum, government should act to protect capital, the life’s blood of the economy.

This view, referred to as supply-side economics, calls for money to be funneled from the government directly to big business by various means. (See Figure 2.6.) The theory suggests that the captains of industry will use the added revenue to increase productivity through capital investment (the purchase of factories and machinery, research and development, and so on) and will also improve the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Consumers</th>
<th>Big Business</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Higher Taxes on the Poor and the Middle Class</td>
<td>• Indirect Government Aid to Consumer (Trickle-Down Effect)</td>
<td>• Higher Salaries, Better Working Conditions and Fringe Benefits, More Competitive Products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lower Social Security Benefits</td>
<td>• Supply-Side Economics</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Reduced Regulation of Business</td>
<td>• Direct Government Aid</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Lucrative Government Contracts</td>
<td>• Tax Benefits to Industry and the Wealthy</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Subsidies (Outright Grants of Money)</td>
<td>• Free Gifts of Government Research</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Fewer Job Training Programs</td>
<td>• Restrictive Import Quotas</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Reduced Welfare Benefits</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Less Aid to Education</td>
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FIGURE 2.6  Supply-side economics.
condition of the workers by increasing wages, improving working conditions, and augmenting fringe benefits. Opponents call this largess “corporate welfare” and derisively refer to its purported benefits to the poor as the “trickle-down effect.”

These policies must be paid for by someone. Thus, conservative economic policies usually increase taxes on the poor and the middle class while reducing government services to them through cuts in social programs such as government aid to education, job training programs, Social Security, and so on. A classic recent example of policies like these can be seen in President George W. Bush’s tax relief policies. In three separate tax reform laws, President Bush and the Republican Congress cut taxes by more than $2 trillion over a ten-year period. Meanwhile, critics argue that over 60 percent of the tax cuts have gone to the richest 20 percent of the public, with about 40 percent of the “recaptured” dollars going to the richest 1 percent of the public, who in fact assume only about 20 percent of the total income tax burden.

For their part, liberals argue that people, not big business, are the nation’s principal resource. The benefits of direct government support should go to the people as a whole rather than to the wealthy. Having their spending power increased by government programs, people will purchase the goods produced by industry, thus affording it revenue to increase wages and capital investment.

However, these policies must also be paid for. So, liberals would reverse the policies of the supply-side approach, substituting what might be described as the demand-side, which increases government regulation and taxation of big business. (See Figure 2.7.) But since liberal policies are so much more

![Figure 2.7: Demand-side economics.](image-url)
Progressive Change

Radical
Desires immediate, fundamental change. Is frustrated, impatient, and revolutionary. Some insist on violence, whereas others only tolerate it or reject it altogether.

Liberal
Desires rapid, far-reaching change. Believes people can improve their lives through the use of reason.

Classical Liberal
Believed in natural law. Believed private property was inalienable. Believed government oppressed people.

Contemporary Liberal
Believes private property is a social right. Believes government should be used to improve life through social engineering.

Moderate
Fairly contented with the society. Supports gradual change.

Conservative
Is active defending the status quo against change. Is pessimistic about human capacity to improve life through the use of reason. Depends on "tried and true" institutions. Believes private property is an inalienable right. Desires order.

Reactionary
Wishes things to be as they were. The frustration level of the extreme reactionary is equal to that of the extreme radical.

Status Quo

Retrogressive Change

Supports: Support human rights
Are rationalists
Support egalitarianism
Are suspicious that police power is used to oppress common people
Will use government to protect people against the economic elite
Are internationalists

Supports: Exalt property rights above all else
Are irrationalists
Are elitists
Rely on police power to control threats to the status quo
Oppose government involvement in the economy
Are nationalists

FIGURE 2.8
Spectrum of political attitudes.
expensive than conservative programs, reversing the flow of money alone is not enough to cover the costs. Accordingly, besides increasing taxes on the wealthy, liberals would require the middle class to pay more taxes as well. Comprising the bulk of the taxpayers, and being less protected than the very wealthy or the very poor, the middle class is asked to carry the bulk of the tax burden under either plan.

The arguments by each side against the other’s programs are familiar. Conservatives assert that liberal programs put everyone on the government dole, destroying individual initiative and making the recipients wards of the state. Liberals respond by contending that if individual initiative is destroyed by the grant of government aid, what happens to initiative in business under the supply-side approach? Quoting George Bernard Shaw, who said, “American capitalism is really socialism for the rich,” liberals ask whether business is not made dependent upon government protection against competition by the supply-side model.

Liberals go on to argue that the trickle-down approach will not necessarily work. The government may release money to business in order to increase employment, for example, but business is likely to spend that money for its own purposes. Thus, the industrial owners may take greater profits from money the government meant for increasing jobs. After all, was it not just such a malfunction of the supply-side approach that caused the Great Depression and now the Great Recession?

“Oh,” the conservatives respond, “if the supply-side is an inefficient method of releasing money into the economy, what of the demand-side? The government may give the poor money with which to buy milk for the children, but, all too often, it is spent on beer and cigarettes!” Round and round go the arguments. Each of us must decide to what extent either side is right.

Finally, the chart in Figure 2.8 is offered in the hope that it will give you a more complete picture of the spectrum and thus help you understand the material in this chapter.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are the fundamental factors that precondition a person’s attitude about the need for political change?
2. How can reactionaries, conservatives, liberals, and radicals be defined relative to their respective attitudes regarding change?
3. What fundamental values are common on the right and the left of the political spectrum, and how do these beliefs translate into public policy?
4. How do economics, belief about human nature, age, and psychology influence people’s association with the political spectrum?
5. How can liberal and conservative approaches to foreign and domestic policy be compared and contrasted?
SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING