

Introduction

The quote, “If you are young and not *liberal*, then you have no *heart*; but if you are old and not *conservative*, then you have no *brain*,” is most often attributed to Disraeli or to Churchill—although its true ownership remains cloudy. In this book, we shall examine the worthiness of that assessment of the correlation between age and political philosophy as it applies to the people of the United States in the first decade of the 21st century. First of all, is it reasonable to expect the imagination and political passions of America’s youth to be fired by the ideas and axioms of modern liberalism, and is it equally reasonable to expect the middle aged and elderly population to adhere to the more conservative tenets of political thought? If so, does the reality match the expectation? Do most people complete a journey, as they advance in years and accumulate experiences, from the left end of the political spectrum to the right side of that spectrum? In fact, I have made the journey myself—from a classic, dyed-in-the-wool, liberal in my teens and 20s to a rock-hard conservative in middle age, and now senior citizen status. Am I typical? If not, why not?

These are the questions that I shall explore in this book. In order to do so, I begin in Part I with a description of what I perceive are the core or touchstone issues and positions that separate a liberal philosophy from a conservative one. I will identify 24 such issues. (The number is not meant to be iron-clad—others might produce more, still others, fewer.) The 24 issues are identified in tabular form in Chapter 1. For example, the first issue is *government spending*, wherein clearly the liberal position is in favor of extensive government expenditures, whereas the conservative position favors limited government spending. Other issues involve taxes, welfare, foreign affairs, abortion, diversity, gun control, capital punishment, etc. Please consult the list for a fuller accounting.

Next, I shall backtrack slightly in Chapter 2 and examine *dictionary definitions* of the terms liberal and conservative. While useful, the definitions are a little too vague or general. Therefore, I rework them in five different ways, incorporating into the basic definitions, respectively, the notions of human nature, religion, government, history and business. This results in the formulation of five funda-

mental statements that encapsulate what I understand as a liberal, or a conservative, view of the world. As you will see, they differ sharply, and so throughout the book I use the term *liberal/conservative divide*. Nevertheless, the country is not coming apart at the seams, and I illustrate that by offering a dozen areas of commonality or points of agreement between the two political communities. Next, in Chapter 3, I continue the exploration of the liberal/conservative divide by presenting a compartmentalization of the two dozen touchstone issues. I group the 24 of them into five broad categories or compartments, two of which have to do with the assignment of roles:

- The role of the government in the country
- The role of the USA in the world,

and three of which have to do with personality factors:

- Absolutist or Relativist
- Opportunist or Egalitarian
- Pragmatist or Idealist.

I will discuss how each of the issues fits into its respective compartment in Chapter 4—although, as we shall see, there are some overlaps. The first part of the book concludes in Chapter 5 with a concise history of the liberal/conservative divide in the USA during the twentieth century.

In Part II there is an examination of the issues and compartments in the context of age. Is it reasonable to associate the liberal stance on the touchstone issues with a young age or youthful outlook? Is it appropriate to associate a conservative viewpoint with a mature or experienced personality? We shall examine in depth in Chapters 6 and 7 those issues and compartments where this is indeed the case, as well as some where it is not. Our overall conclusion is that, indeed, there is a correlation between age and political philosophy—although, it is not as strong as the opening quote might suggest. Our work also leads to the renewed observation that there is a rather substantial divide or dichotomy between the liberal and conservative positions on the issues. Chapter 8 presents an assessment of the relative strengths at the present time of the liberal and conservative camps. In fact, the bitterness and animosity between the two camps seems to be as great as any time in our nation's history. It is not clear whether conservatives “hated” Clinton any

more than liberals “hate” Bush, but it is clear that the depths of feelings were/are not imaginary. In Chapter 9, I briefly compare the current division to those in other periods in US history. Then I concentrate on a comparison with the situation in the early twentieth century when the roles were reversed, that is, liberals were gaining power at the expense of conservatives.

Finally, in Part III, we shall confront the fact that not all youth are liberal, but more seriously the fact that many middle-aged and elderly Americans are not conservative. If there were no substance to the correlation, then neither of these phenomena would be particularly surprising. But if one accepts my assertion (in Part II) that the correlation is legitimate, then the existence of the former (i.e., conservative youth) may be nothing more than a manifestation of precocity (sayeth the Right), or it may be unfair parental influence (as a Leftist might surmise). Either way, it does not disprove the correlation as a conservative youth may maintain or strengthen her conservative principles as she ages. But the latter phenomenon (i.e., liberal elders) is more problematic. It flies in the face of the correlation. A stark, controversial and short explanation would simply be, “people who refuse to grow up.” I shall go deeper and offer five possible reasons why this “anomaly” occurs, ranging from immaturity (as the Right might charge) to idealism maturing into wisdom (as the Left would assert). I also offer some special insights into the “aging liberal” phenomenon for my two special communities (Jews and academic faculty). All of the preceding is in Chapters 10 and 11. I conclude the book in Chapter 12 with a glimpse into the future and a prediction of the relative strengths of the liberal and conservative communities in the coming decades.

To recapitulate, we have four objectives in this book:

1. to argue for a correlation between age and political philosophy, which asserts that young people tend to gravitate toward liberalism while older people are usually more comfortable with conservatism; and that, additionally, among the people who change their political preference over time, more go from liberal to conservative than vice versa; and finally, to assess the strengths of these trends;
2. to examine the most interesting counter-examples to these trends—namely, premature conservatives and aging liberals—and to explain what motivates them;

3. to present a history of the liberal/conservative divide and then to augment it with an assessment of its current status as well as a prediction of its future;
4. to describe, through personal vignettes (found at the conclusion of each chapter), the experiences that resulted in my conversion from liberal to conservative.