

WHAT ARE LIBERALS?

Liberals are for personal responsibility and the constitution. In fact, all of the foremost defenders of the Constitution are liberals while the biggest assaults on the constitution come almost universally from conservatives.

The one thing conservatives get right, sort of, is smaller government. But where you go wrong is in believing that smaller government is an end and not a means. In a conservative context, small government should be a means, not an end. You should want small government not because small government is virtuous in and of itself but because small government maximizes human freedom. But because small government is a means and not an end, it should be abandoned when it doesn't maximize human freedom and happiness. But interestingly enough, when conservatives hold power the size of government usually increases.

Modern American conservatives trace their descent, in some ways, to classical liberalism, which is a political ideology which developed in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Classical liberalism emerged in a European political milieu where pretty much all governments, with the partial exception of the United Kingdom, were monarchies which frequently used the power of the state to oppress their citizens and lavish favors on their approved individuals and groups. In 18th century Europe the state was mostly a tool that the powerful used to oppress the powerless. In that context, classical liberalism seemed to make sense since it advocated for limited government which would lack a lot of power to oppress people. The most famous expression of this is laissez faire capitalism which sought an economic system regulated mostly to preserve the rights of property owners and where the government would act as an impartial arbiter, rather than picking winners and losers based on political connections (as was common in Early Modern Europe).

The big innovation in liberalism over the 19th century was that as the industrial revolution progressed it became ever more clear that government was not the only tool which the powerful used to oppress the powerless. Economics, and the laissez faire capitalist system could be used to oppress people as well. By the late 19th century, liberals, or progressives, had realized that a democratic state could be actively used as a tool of liberation for the people against oppression committed by wealthy elites who controlled the economic system. They also came to realize, especially in the early 20th century, that the negative freedom envisioned by classical liberalism could be pretty hollow. Classical liberals envisioned freedom as a negative, in that it meant freedom from restraint. But by the 20th century, liberals realized that negative freedom had its limits. A homeless person starving in the street may be free from restraint but no one would consider their lot enviable or desirable, and they wouldn't even really consider it free. So liberals increasingly came to embrace the welfare state, which had been created by conservative European politicians to buy off workers who might be tempted by Marxism.

Modern American liberals come out of this tradition. They recognize that government can increase liberty and not merely curtail it and believe that the government has an important role to play in ensuring liberty from economic elites and general prosperity for all people. Another innovation which has taken root since the mid 20th century, is the realization that racism and other forms of

social inequality are a major problem. I mentioned before that the classical liberals of the 19th century wanted to create a government which could not oppress people. In the US that may have been more or less true for white people, but was definitely not true for non whites. The 19th century US government pursued a genocidal campaign of ethnic cleansing against Native Americans and worked for decades to preserve slavery of African Americans. This narrative upends the neat and tidy idea that classical liberalism is an unalloyed good. So does the African-American experience after slavery. The federal government in the 20th century ended up working in favor of black freedom against local governments which wanted to keep people of color oppressed.

This is where we get to the crux of the issue. Liberals believe that government, and the federal government can play an important role in preserving and expanding human freedom. It has been stated that conservatives believe in "small government" but that's only really partially true. Conservatives believe that the government should be weak when it comes to enforcing economic rules on powerful economic actors such as corporations and the wealthy, but many of them believe that the government should be very strong when it comes to enforcing conservative social mores. Conservatives have often argued that government should be used to enforce things in the social arena that they believe are important. A key example of this is immigration, where conservatives want the government to have very expansive powers. Maybe that's a good thing and maybe that's a bad thing but one thing that it's not is "small government".

It appears Conservatives have been listening to the Fox news definition of a liberal.

Proper liberals believe in personal freedom and to be able to do pretty well whatever you want as long as it does not hurt other people (either as individuals or collectively), the nation, the economy or the environment. No, they do not hate America.

We believe in helping out those who, through no fault of their own, need help but are by no means offering free stuff to everyone.

We believe in a playing field that is as level as possible. Both for individuals and corporations

We believe that Social Security, Unemployment Insurance, a free basic education and health care for all are a good thing.

We believe that the free market system, while the best wealth generator man has ever developed, is prone to abuse and can sometimes spin wildly out of control if not regulated to make sure the playing field remains fairly level. Therefore some government regulation is required.

We prefer to have a government that is as small as possible but big enough to do the job.

We believe those who have made out really well need to pay a higher percentage in taxes on profits as they are also consuming a larger proportion of the public infrastructure than a middle class person

does.

We believe that a nation is only as good as its infrastructure and the talent of its people, Both need constant strong investment in them.

I could go on but I think you should realize that this is basically the stance of the pre-Reagan GOP.