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FREEDOM AND LIBERTY: LIBERALS and CONSERVATIVES HAVE VASTLY DIFFERENT IDEAS!



By Stephen L. Bakke  September 14, 2016

A few years ago, when I started trying to understand public policy and politics, one thing I tried to do was identify key differences between liberal and conservative thinking. I read a lot and wrote a bit. I lined up many sources of conflict between the competing philosophies dominating our nation and became convinced they tended to fall into a few categories. This is an update to an earlier analysis. Here are the most obvious “mother issues” which tend to philosophically separate liberals and conservatives:

- The role of the U.S. government in our lives
- The role of the United States in the international community
- The definition of equality
- The definition of freedom and liberty

While some would include “freedom and liberty” in the first category, I include it separately. I do this because one’s definition of “freedom and liberty” actually helps define feelings about each of the other three. This analysis tries to focus on differences of opinion about freedom and liberty.

Most often, commentators see no real difference between the terms “freedom and liberty.” Nevertheless, many pundits (me included) attempt to make scholarly, nuanced, and much labored intellectual distinction between the two. For this discussion, let’s use the two terms interchangeably.

I came across a related analysis by former Obama Administration official Cass Sunstein. In that account he referred to a recent study which I believe gives an excellent introductory summary for this subject:

In his later work, (New York University psychologist Jonathan) Haidt has rightly emphasized a sixth moral foundation, one that conservatives and liberals both respect, but that they understand differently: liberty. He finds that conservatives are more likely to emphasize the right to be let alone, while liberals emphasize the rights of vulnerable groups, such as racial minorities, whose freedom requires (in their view) government support.

That leads me to the following statements contrasting the ***liberal, social justice view*** with the ***conservative view*** of freedom and liberty:

- ***Liberals*** see that freedom and liberty exist significantly within a framework of financial security. ***Conservatives*** argue (often pretentiously) that freedom only exists if given the chance to achieve financial security exclusively on their own.

- **Liberals** tend to believe that freedom brings with it a sort of safety net to mitigate individual failures in life's pursuits. **Conservatives** would argue that freedom brings with it the "freedom" to fail, and to have an economic structure amenable to someone bouncing back from those failures.
- **A liberal philosophy** would support the "freedom" that comes from eliminating external worries and concerns. **The conservative** would claim that any program that eliminates one's worries is automatically imposing controls on an individual that seriously conflict with true freedom!
- **Many liberals** believe that by encouraging government programs to provide their version of financial security, they are promoting freedom. **Conservatives** would argue that this is not an example of choosing freedom. Rather, their argument would be that a government financial assistance program, however worthy, achieves its goals at the expense of some aspect of freedom.
- I recently heard a liberal speaker say that the greatest employment and corporate opportunities come from strong involvement by the Federal government. This demonstrates the common **liberal belief** that the greatest tool for creating prosperity is government. For **most conservatives**, government is the greatest threat to creating prosperity.

On which side of this debate do you fall? Making that determination will tell you a lot about whether you are a liberal or conservative. You may be surprised!

Where do I stand? As a hint, here's a quote that rings true to me:

The right to be let alone is indeed the beginning of all freedom. – Justice William O. Douglas (1898-1980)