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Terms 'liberal' and 'conservative' are just too fuzzy

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We use generalizations to simplify complicated concepts for the sake of everyday conversation. We also know that doing so is inaccurate, since the human condition is complex.

The generalizations "liberal" and "conservative" are firmly embedded in American political discourse. Unfortunately, current usage of the terms is so misleading that often meaningful communication fails to take place.

Many of the ideas espoused by "conservatives" are radical, and hence not conservative at all, and many of the ideas espoused by "liberals" are conservative. For this reason, confusion reigns throughout much discourse in contemporary American politics.

For example, my students are usually shocked to learn that embracing the ideals of "liberal democracy" and "liberal education" are in fact very conservative. Liberal democracy, the foundation of American government, upholds individual freedom and the right to pursue lifestyles free of government intrusion as long as those choices do not interfere with the liberty of others. Within the context of American politics, nothing could be more "conservative" than liberal democracy.

Liberal education is also conservative. Public education enables each citizen to become freed, or "liberated" - hence the adjective "liberal"- from ignorance, dogma and prejudice.

My students often respond to this claim by asking, "You mean, if I am truly 'conservative,' I should endorse the principle of liberal education?"

"Yes, oddly enough," I say.

Thomas Jefferson argued forcefully that public liberal education is absolutely necessary for democracy so that each citizen can make informed decisions on complex public policy issues independent of one's vocation.

Generally, "liberals" and "conservatives" alike embrace the ideals of liberal democracy. Confusingly, however, some self-proclaimed "conservatives" are critical of the individuality of liberal democracy and emphasize the importance of community values over individual choice. Historically, then, this political orientation is hardly "conservative."

Many alleged "conservatives" are in fact far from conservative in the sense that they argue against the foundational tenets of American civil government. Nor do the accruing gargantuan war expenditures in Afghanistan and Iraq conform to the purported "conservative" value of small government and reduced tax burden on American citizens so that we may have the liberty to spend our money the way we see fit.

And while Jesus berated those who worship money, or mammon, most contemporary "conservatives" embrace free-market capitalism and the accumulation of wealth with almost religious fervor, as if Adam Smith's "invisible hand" is God's hand.

Further, some self-anointed "conservatives" such as Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity shut down civil discourse - the underpinning of any open society - through divisive rhetoric. For example, at UVSC, Hannity used the word "liberal" in a very derogatory way, explicitly equating liberals with dogs, reminiscent of Nazi usage of "Jew" at propaganda rallies.

Such "conservatives" are far from being authentically conservative in that they repress, rather than foster, civic dialogue. They are, in reality, overtly un-American.

As a partial solution to the myriad equivocations associated with the labels "liberal" and "conservative," I propose to my students that we instead use the terms "progressivism" and "traditionalism." A "progressivist" is a person who casts off the shackles of tradition in hope of improving the human condition, while a "traditionalist" favors preserving the wisdom of the past based on the assumption that what has worked in the past will continue to work well in the future.

In this light, it is easy to see that persons who currently are identified as "liberal" or "conservative" often hold both ideals.

Since it is unlikely that we will abandon the terms "liberal" and "conservative" anytime soon, when we use these problematic generalizations we should at least remind ourselves of their fuzzy nature.

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