

From: Writing the World

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EVALUATING CIVIC STANCES



We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

– The Declaration of Independence,
July 4, 1776

We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

– Preamble to the Constitution
of the United States, 1788

The statements on the preceding page are two of the most famous statements in U.S. history. Memorable, moving, and eloquent though they are, these statements are open to multiple interpretations when applied to specific issues. Note, for instance, the various ways the Declaration or the Preamble might be interpreted in the following cases:

- Does the right to liberty include the right to hold large, noisy parties in a quiet neighborhood or the right to smoke cigarettes in restaurants?
- Does the right to pursue happiness include the right to ride a motorcycle without wearing a helmet or the right to use heroin?
- What happens to the idea of “we the people” when citizens cannot agree on how much of the federal budget it takes to “provide for the common defense”?
- Does mandatory sex education in the schools “promote the general welfare” or intrude on the right to liberty?
- Does the government “promote the general welfare” or violate individual liberty if it collects taxes from all Americans to fund public parks or a National Endowment for the Arts?

You have probably heard or argued about some of the issues on this list. Each issue reveals some tension between allowing the individual absolute freedom of choice and allowing government to act on behalf of its members. Whether the government involved is at the town, county, state, or federal level, there will be differences of opinion about the decisions that are made. These differences result in different general beliefs about government—or different civic stances. In this chapter, the term *civic stance* refers to the most frequently adopted beliefs about government size, individual rights or liberties, and economic policies. The term *stances* implies that people’s beliefs about government tend to follow particular patterns, and the term *civic* implies the relationship between citizens and their government.

This chapter includes an assignment to write an essay in which you evaluate a civic stance. In this context, *evaluating* means judging one of the three stances to be preferable, on the whole, to the other two and giving reasons why you prefer it. To make such an evaluation, you will need to understand the possible arguments for the stance you prefer and be able to use them to support your own argument. You will also, however, need to understand the other two stances well enough to explain them to a reader and to argue against them.

As you read, concentrate on two things: understanding what a conservative, a liberal, and a libertarian are likely to advocate, and evaluating each of the positions. Ask yourself, What is this writer’s argument? What belief is central to this stance? What do I find convincing or unconvincing? Developing your essay will involve constant comparison and contrast as you weigh these competing stances and evaluate their benefits for society.

READINGS

The readings in this chapter are organized according to three prominent and commonly held civic stances: conservatism, liberalism, and libertarianism. You may at first be tempted to say, “I am an individual, and my civic choices don’t follow any pattern at all.” Frequently, however, people’s underlying beliefs do follow consistent patterns, and the civic choices available to them come in packages anyway, not as separate issues. When you vote for a senator or a mayor, for example, you vote for someone you hope will represent your wishes on a broad array of issues, not just on one issue. The three civic stances you will read about—and choose among—in this chapter are sets of beliefs on a broad array of issues. They are stances you will often encounter in political discussions.

The conservative stance, in general, may be summed up in the words of late Republican U.S. senator Barry Goldwater, an outspoken conservative who ran for president in 1964. In 1960, Goldwater wrote: “The Conservative looks upon politics as the art of achieving the maximum amount of freedom for individuals that is consistent with the maintenance of social order.”¹ In other words, the conservative expects government to carry out tasks that individuals cannot do, such as building highways and maintaining police forces and armies. Beyond such tasks, however, the conservative would guarantee a maximum of freedom for individuals.

The liberal, on the other hand, is likely to assign a more active role to government, as revealed in this statement by liberal philosopher Ronald Dworkin:

Liberals believe, first, that government must be neutral in matters of personal morality, that it must leave people free to live as they think best so long as they do not harm others.[...] The second side of liberalism is economic. Liberals insist that government has a responsibility to reduce economic inequality, both through its management of the economy and through welfare programs that redistribute wealth to soften the impact of poverty.²

Both the neutrality toward moral issues, which Dworkin values, and the desire to redistribute wealth would be likely to displease conservatives, who see government as a necessary evil. Liberals, however, generally believe that government regulations are good if they can have good results. Liberals are less likely than conservatives to think that the economy will produce equality all by itself if it is allowed to work freely.

Libertarians are likely to agree with liberals about neutrality toward personal morality but to agree with conservatives—and even more vehemently—that government should not manage the economy. Influential libertarian economist Milton Friedman encapsulates the libertarian argument when he writes:

¹ Barry Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative* (Shepherdsville, KY: Victor Publishing, 1960) 13.

² Ronald Dworkin, “Neutrality, Equality, and Liberalism,” *Liberalism Reconsidered*, ed. Douglas MacLean and Claudia Mills (Totowa: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983) 1. [Reprinted with permission from the *New York Review of Books*, 1983.]

The free man will ask neither what his country can do for him nor what he can do for his country. He will ask rather, "What can I and my compatriots do through government" to help us discharge our individual responsibilities, to achieve our several goals and purposes, and above all, to protect our freedom? And he will accompany this question with another: How can we keep the government we create from becoming a Frankenstein that will destroy the very freedom we establish it to protect?³

The libertarian is more likely than the conservative to view government as a necessary evil to be kept under control—or a misshapen Frankenstein monster likely to haunt those who allow it too much power. Some extreme libertarians have even argued that roads could be built and owned privately or that income taxes should be abolished.

You are probably aware that these three civic stances have some strong connections to current political parties. The Democratic Party is frequently associated with liberalism, and the Republican Party with conservatism. Such associations, however, can be misleading. Some Democrats are relatively conservative, and some Republicans are relatively liberal. Some Republicans have been deeply influenced by libertarianism, whereas others have not. Moreover, political candidates often move in more conservative or more liberal directions during elections, depending on how they think they will best gain votes. And there are always periodic redefinitions within parties of what it means to be conservative, liberal, or libertarian in relation to specific current issues. For all of these reasons, then, it is best to focus on the three civic stances without trying to line them up with particular parties or candidates.

It may be clear to you by now that three basic areas of disagreement among conservatives, liberals, and libertarians are about size of government, individual rights or liberties, and government's role in the economy. These topics are discussed within each group of readings. First, writers for each of the stances have an opinion about the appropriate size of government. From the time of the framing of the Constitution, Americans have disagreed about whether government should be larger or smaller and whether the most important governmental bodies should be the local ones (towns, cities, counties, states) or the federal government. This question has generated controversy throughout U.S. history—from the time of the framing of the Constitution, through the time of the Civil War, and continuing to the present day. For example, citizens often question whether national or local educational policies will foster better schools or whether state welfare programs will be superior to those run by the federal government.

Second, conservatives, liberals, and libertarians are likely to disagree about whether the government may regulate individual behavior. One view is that the right to "the pursuit of happiness" can be interpreted to justify government regulation. For instance, some people who assume that heroin addiction causes unhappiness for the individual might also believe that government is justified in preventing heroin use. At the same time, some who champion the individual's

³Milton Friedman with Rose D. Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1962) 2.

right to *liberty* (or *freedom*, a word used interchangeably with liberty) might deny government the right to regulate heroin use. The Preamble to the Constitution contains similar potential conflicts—the problems of using government regulation to “insure domestic tranquillity” or “promote the general welfare” while also guaranteeing “the blessings of liberty.” Many arguments have been waged—and continue to be waged—concerning this tension between individual liberty and the government’s right to regulate individual behavior. When can one person’s free speech be abridged for the good of another? Is cigarette smoking an individual right or should cigarette smoking be prohibited in public places to safeguard the health of nonsmokers and of smokers themselves? If the government acts to limit access to pornography over the Internet, is it promoting the general welfare or curtailing individual liberty?

A third issue that conservatives, liberals, and libertarians are likely to disagree about is whether the government should intervene in economic affairs. The government already intervenes by taxing Americans to finance Social Security benefits, health care for the poor and the elderly, and public schools and highways. Taxes also support government regulations about workplace safety, environmental protection, fair hiring, and the safety of foods and medicine. Not all of these government interventions are popular, of course, yet many Americans want the benefits they might be entitled to individually, such as unemployment compensation, Social Security, or federal disaster relief.

As you read the various arguments on these issues, you may find it difficult initially to choose one of the three civic stances as preferable to the other two and then to defend your choice. You may even be tempted to choose part of one stance and part of another. This difficult choice is a reflection of the difficult choices individuals are often required to make in their civic lives. When you see the taxes taken out of your paycheck, for instance, you may be tempted to adopt a libertarian stance and say, “No more taxes!” At the same time, you may want the improved roads, college loans, federal disaster relief, or farm subsidies that your taxes support. One thing you will learn in this chapter, then, is that any civic stance involves trade-offs.

You may be aware that conservatism, liberalism, and libertarianism are only a few of the civic stances possible. Anarchism, communism, communitarianism, and democratic socialism are other possible stances that have gained popularity at times in U.S. history. Closely related versions of a civic stance often go under different names. For instance, there are people with roots in liberalism who might nevertheless refer to themselves as “progressives” or “Leftists” or “populists,” depending on what kind of policies they prefer and how they see themselves in relation to liberals. There are also conservatives who would disagree with current conservative programs and would distinguish between neoconservatives and paleo-, or traditional, conservatives.

For your essay in this chapter, however, you need not be concerned with any of these other views. Just choose among the three alternatives of conservatism, liberalism, and libertarianism. You should find it challenging and interesting to defend one of these three civic stances.

Stop Here

To aid you in this process, the writer’s notebook tasks following each