

Conservatives vs. liberals: Before you indoctrinate your kids, read this



By Michael Laser

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Montclair, N.J. – Without intending to, I've indoctrinated my kids.

I first realized it a few years ago. Seeing a bumper sticker that read "No Hope in Dope," my then-8-year-old asked, "Is that about Bush?"

It happened in the most natural way. They heard me groaning at every word and deed of that "misunderestimated" president, and absorbed my attitude until they could mimic it perfectly.

I'm glad my children share my political orientation, but it bothers me when I hear them unthinkingly mock and dismiss the other side – as when my son recently said, "If Republicans want smaller government, they should quit their jobs in Congress."

Lately, I've found myself in the odd position of explaining and even justifying the conservative point of view on taxes, abortion, and regulation of private enterprise, just so my children will understand that people have reasons for their beliefs, even if we disagree.

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To my amazement, I've found that some of my political opposites' ideas make sense. This doesn't mean I've reversed my thinking, but it's eye-opening. If you shut out the noise of talk radio and your own unshakable faith, you can find persuasive arguments on both sides of the divide. Here are a few that I came up with:

On the social safety net
The conservative view

- People are responsible for themselves – and, given the chance, they're capable of supporting themselves and their families. If the government makes a practice of providing for people (with welfare, for example), they become dependent and lose their will to work. Nothing could be more destructive to the health of our society.

The liberal view

- There are people in this country who struggle to put food on the table or can't afford medical care. A civilized society would try to help them, instead of leaving them to fend for themselves. (Someday, the one who needs a helping hand may be you, or someone you love.)

On taxesThe liberal view

- We aren't isolated individuals struggling for survival: We live together, in a society. And membership in a society that makes wealth possible comes with obligations. Those who benefit most from our freedoms must contribute their fair share to help support and protect our society.

The conservative view

- Private property means that what belongs to you is yours; if the government confiscates it, that's tyranny. Our most productive citizens – the top 10 percent of earners – already pay 68 percent of taxes collected. These rates should be cut, not raised.

On the role of governmentThe conservative view

- Governments tend to grow like snowballs rolling downhill. We must work to reverse this trend, or the government will expand and intrude on our lives even more than it does now.
- "That government is best which governs least." This means letting the free market do its work without a heavy hand trying to direct or restrain it.
- The legitimate functions of federal government are to provide national security through a strong defense and to protect individual freedoms.

The liberal view

- Our government's job is to solve problems that private institutions aren't solving – and there's no shortage of problems that need addressing.
- Large corporations, if unregulated, will do anything to maximize profits. Even the most courageous individual can't prevent corporate abuses; only the government has the power to do that.
- If the government can help create job opportunities during a time of high unemployment, that's a perfect use of tax dollars.

On overcoming racial discriminationThe liberal view

- The difference in income between white people and African-Americans is still significant and directly linked to centuries of oppression. We haven't overcome the legacy of slavery yet. There's a long way to go.

The conservative view

That story. Conservatives vs. liberals. Before you make up your mind, you should know the following:

- Current law protects equal rights for all races, and it's up to individuals to work and succeed according to their abilities. We no longer need to tip the scale toward minorities to make up for what happened long ago. To do so is reverse discrimination, and creates new injustices.

On human nature and justiceThe conservative view

- We have the power to choose between right and wrong and are responsible for our choices. Those who violate the law must pay the penalties. Too much leniency results in a culture of disrespect for the law and social disorder.

The liberal view

- Human beings are capable of both selflessness and brutality. Even the best of us is far from perfect. Knowing this, we rely on the rule of law – and ask that justice be tempered with mercy.

On America's futureThe liberal view

- Most of the world's most successful, prosperous nations are liberal democracies that provide their citizens with a strong safety net. This represents the natural progress of civilization. It's time for us to catch up with northern Europe.

The conservative view

- What makes America great – a country so many yearn to live in – is the vastness of opportunity here. Freedom of opportunity requires freedom from government interference. We aren't Europe, and it would be wrong to follow Europe's lead.

On idealsThe conservative view

- Duty, honesty, hard work, self-sacrifice, love of country, loyalty, and self-restraint.

The liberal view

- Justice, compassion, equality of opportunity, and clear vision: what's great about our country, and what could be better.

The middle zoneThis list of polar disagreements leaves me with – fittingly – two opposite reactions. The first, more obvious conclusion is that there's no hope, common ground, or room for compromise. And so nothing will get done in Congress over the next two years.

But these opposing viewpoints also suggest a different idea: Contradictory statements can both be true. Yes, America's success lies partly in its dynamism and opportunity – and yes, progress requires that we provide for those who have lost their jobs or their health. In other words, if you set your dogma aside, you may find some truth in the ideals of people you've always disagreed with.

Which reminds me of something the extreme partisans would prefer we forget: governing in America has happened mainly in the middle zone, between the far left and far right. Yes, the differences are significant and worth negotiating over, but what we're really talking about is a few percentage points in tax rates, not a choice between socialism and the abolition of all taxes.

Contempt for the opposition may be profitable on talk radio, but it doesn't help the rest of us. All it accomplishes is to drive people further into their angry, fanatical corners.

This is the next political insight I'll be sharing with my kids.

Michael Laser is a novelist and the creator of News-Basics.com, which provides concise overviews of major news topics. More notes on liberal and conservative values can be found there.