

## Political Polarization in the United States and Canada

By Philip Carl Salzman

Political polarization in both the United States and Canada seems to increase every year. Those on the left appear to move ever farther to the left; while those on the right find less and less in common with their fellow citizens. The political rhetoric has, in fact, escalated to a toxic level. From the highest political level in the U.S. half of American citizens are labelled sexist, racist, homophobic, and Islamophobic, a basket of deplorables,<sup>1</sup> redneck failures who cling to their guns, fundamentalist religion, and fear,<sup>2</sup> and white supremacists.

American opponents of the progressive left view it as consisting of traitors of America, betrayers of Western civilization, haters of Christianity and apologists for Islam, violators of the Constitution, advocates of open borders who wish to bring a flood of Third World immigrants, even those dedicated to destroying the West, enemies of capitalism who openly revere socialism, and champions of a dominant state apparatus that aims at suppressing freedom.

Canada is also increasingly polarized along the same lines, with Parliament denouncing the non-existent psychiatric condition "Islamophobia" in order to suppress criticism of Islam, the press driving out conservatives, such as Kellie Leitch, whose advocacy of "so-called "Canadian values," [was] widely viewed as anti-immigrant and nativist,"<sup>3</sup> as racists and fascists, and with "Human Rights Commissions and Tribunals" suppressing speech that hurts someone's feelings. In Canada too, at the highest political level, Canada's heritage in Western Civilization is denied<sup>4</sup> in favour of "diversity,"<sup>5</sup> and minorities favoured over majorities. Canadian government programs exclude religious organizations who do not subscribe to progressive ideology.<sup>6</sup> Radical feminists who demand that all female allegations of male misbehaviour be believed without the support of evidence can count on the highest echelons of Canadian politics to support them.<sup>7</sup>

While the current polarization seems to indicate that choices of affiliation and policy must be either extreme progressive or extreme conservative, in fact there are a wide range of positions between the extremes. One of them, arising from the Enlightenment, is classical liberalism. The point of this essay is the exploration of classical liberalism as a moderate alternative to extreme progressive and conservative politics.

Our most commonly used political labels, such as liberal and conservative, are multivocal concepts; that is, they contain or can be attributed multiple meanings. So to be sure what we are talking about, we or those with whom we are speaking must specify what we or they mean by the terms.

<sup>1</sup> <http://time.com/4486437/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-basket-of-deplorables/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/mayhill-fowler/obama-no-surprise-that-ha\\_b\\_96188.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/mayhill-fowler/obama-no-surprise-that-ha_b_96188.html)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2018/01/24/failed-tory-leadership-candidate-kellie-leitch-to-quit-politics.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.macdonaldlaurier.ca/yes-canada-does-have-a-culture-philip-carl-salzman-for-inside-policy/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.macdonaldlaurier.ca/why-diversity-isnt-canadas-strength-philip-carl-salzman-for-inside-policy/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://nationalpost.com/news/politics/how-the-canada-summer-jobs-program-became-a-freedom-of-religion-controversy>

<https://globalnews.ca/news/3914528/canada-summer-jobs-anti-abortion-anti-gay-groups/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/trudeau-careful-metoo-1.4511093>

Of course, Canadians are familiar with the terms as the names of the two main Canadian political parties, the Liberals and Conservatives. What these parties mean by their labels is not always obvious, and must be clarified by them, rather than by a general discussion about small “l” liberalism and small “c” conservatism. In the U.S., the Democrats are often thought to be liberal, and the Republicans, conservative, but what these terms mean in political party terms is ambiguous at best, and usually covers a wide range of views, some incompatible with one another.

What we can say is that under each label, “liberal” and “conservative,” a variety of different orientations are recognised. For example, there are fiscal conservatives, who wish to restrict government spending; social conservatives to wish to retain established rules of behaviour; religious conservatives, who have a strong commitment to a traditional religion; and foreign policy conservatives who wish to limit foreign entanglements, or, alternatively, to pursue foreign influence more energetically. Fiscal conservatives may not be social conservatives, social conservatives may not be religious, and advocates of a muscular foreign policy may not be fiscal conservatives, while social conservatives may not be any of the others.

So too with liberalism, but even more so. “Liberalism” has come to be used for a wide spectrum of leftist opinion, from moderates of the centre, to government interventionists, to wealth redistributionists, to democratic socialists, perhaps stopping short of communists. So the meaning of “liberal” in terms of specific ideas, policies, and programs is very unclear and uncertain. From the label alone, it is impossible to know what a person’s or party’s views are.

The confusion can be seen in David Sirota’s attempt to distinguish liberals from progressives:

Traditional ‘liberals’ in our current parlance are those who focus on using taxpayer money to help better society. A ‘progressive’ are [sic] those who focus on using government power to make large institutions play by a set of rules.... Let’s be clear - most progressives are also liberals, and liberal goals in better funding America’s social safety net are noble and critical.<sup>8</sup>

Sirota places both liberals and progressives well into the leftist range, and then argues that progressives are liberals, but liberals are not progressives. Sirota’s formulation, obscures rather than clarifies the distinction, and it is at odds with historical usage.

In order to clarify the views in this wide range of opinion, I would suggest that the broad spectrum of opinion now labelled “liberal” be broken into two narrower ranges of spectrum, one more centralist to be labelled “liberal,” and the other more leftist, to be labelled “progressive.” Let us now define more specifically the views, policies, and programs that fall under each of these labels.

According to Britannica, Liberalism:

[is a] political doctrine that takes protecting and enhancing the freedom of the individual to be the central problem of politics. Liberals typically believe that government is necessary to protect individuals from being harmed by others, but they also recognize that government itself can pose a threat to liberty.<sup>9</sup>

According to Philosophy Basics:

Liberalism includes a broad spectrum of political philosophies that consider individual liberty to be the most important political goal, and emphasize individual rights and equality of opportunity. ...They are, however, generally united by their support for a number of principles, including extensive freedom of thought and freedom of speech, limitations on the power of governments, the application of the rule of law, a market economy (or a mixed economy with both private-owned and state-owned enterprises)

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<sup>8</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-sirota/whats-the-difference-betw\\_b\\_9140.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-sirota/whats-the-difference-betw_b_9140.html)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/liberalism>

and a transparent and democratic system of government.<sup>10</sup>

The most important distinction within liberalism, as discussed by Philosophy Basics, is as follows: There are two major currents of thought within Liberalism, Classical Liberalism and Social Liberalism:

**Classical Liberalism** holds that the only real freedom is freedom from coercion, and that state intervention in the economy is a coercive power that restricts the economic freedom of individuals, and so should be avoided as far as possible. It favours laissez-faire economic policy (minimal economic intervention and taxation by the state beyond what is necessary to maintain individual liberty, peace, security and property rights), and opposes the welfare state (the provision of welfare services by the state, and the assumption by the state of primary responsibility for the welfare of its citizens).

**Social Liberalism** argues that governments must take an active role in promoting the freedom of citizens, and that real freedom can only exist when citizens are healthy, educated and free from dire poverty. Social Liberals believe that this freedom can be ensured when governments guarantee the right to an education, health care and a living wage, in addition to other responsibilities such as laws against discrimination in housing and employment, laws against pollution of the environment, and the provision of welfare, all of which would be supported by a progressive taxation system.” (Emphasis added.)<sup>11</sup>

Social liberalism is positioned along the leftist continuum from welfare statism to democratic socialism. Is social liberalism distinguishable from progressivism? According to the Center for American Progress, “progressivism as a reform tradition has always focused its moral energy against societal injustice, corruption, and inequality.”<sup>12</sup> The entry in Wikipedia agrees:

Progressivism is the support for or advocacy of improvement of society by reform. As a philosophy, it is based on the Idea of Progress, which asserts that advancements in science, technology, economic development, and social organization are vital to the improvement of the human condition.

The meanings of progressivism have varied over time and from different perspectives. The contemporary common political conception of progressivism in the culture of the Western world emerged from the vast social changes brought about by industrialization in the Western world in the late 19th century, particularly out of the view that progress was being stifled by vast economic inequality between the rich and the poor; minimally regulated laissez-faire capitalism with monopolistic corporations; and intense and often violent conflict between workers and capitalists, thus claiming that measures were needed to address these problems.<sup>13</sup>

Progressivism too has different streams, but the main two are described by Nate Silver, himself a progressive, at the website fivethirtyeight:

The first type of progressivism [“**rational progressivism**”] ... believes that through the use of reason and the exchange of ideas, human society will tend to improve itself through scientific and technological innovation.

Rational progressivism tends to be trusting, within reason, of status quo political and economic institutions — generally including the institution of capitalism. It tends to trust these institutions because it believes they are a manifestation of progress made by previous generations. However, unlike conservatism, it also sees these institutions as continuing works in progress, subject to inefficiencies

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch\\_liberalism.html](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_liberalism.html)

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch\\_liberalism.html](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_liberalism.html)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/democracy/reports/2010/04/14/7593/social-movements-and-progressivism/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progressivism>

See also <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/guideDesc.asp?catid=93&type=issue>

because of distorted or poorly-designed incentives, poorly-informed or misinformed participants, and competition from ‘irrational’ worldviews like religion. It also recognizes that certain persons who stand to benefit from preserving the status quo, particularly elected officials but also corporations, may seek to block this progress to protect their own interests. The project of rational progressivism, then, is to propagate good ideas and to convert them, through a wide and aggressive array of democratic means, into public policy.

The second type of progressivism is what I call **radical progressivism**. It represents, indeed, a much more radical and comprehensive critique of the status quo, which it tends to see as intrinsically corrupt. Its philosophical tradition originated in 19th Century thought — and specifically, owes a great deal to the Marxist critique of capitalism and the Marxist theory of social change. ... Its project is not reform but transformation.”<sup>14</sup>

Classical liberalism advocates in favour of individual liberty, limited government, voluntary contracts and the market economy, free speech, equality before the law, and democracy. Social liberalism and progressivism advocate in favour of strong government intervention, equality of result, obligatory redistribution of wealth, restrictions on speech, and, treating people according to their racial, religious, gender, ethnic, and sexual identity categories. Radical progressivism dispenses with democracy in favour of one party states.

### **Classical Liberalism**

### **Rational or Moderate Progressivism**

individual liberty  
individuals restricted by census category

equality before the law  
equality of economic result

limited government  
strong, interventionist government

market economics  
redistribution of wealth

free speech  
speech restrictions

The values of “social liberalism” and “progressivism” seem much the same, and both differ as opposites from “classical liberalism.” It makes no sense to call diametrically opposed ideologies by the same label, “liberalism.” The use of the term “liberalism” should be restricted to classical liberalism, and contrasted with “progressivism,” which is identical with what has been labelled social liberalism.

Liberals and progressives are currently at odds over several important issues:

- Progressives are obsessed with equality of result, and wish to redistribute wealth so that everyone has the same. They focus on the so-called “one percent” who allegedly have wealth that they do not deserve, and are great supporters of “progressive taxation” to claw back wealth of the successful, and of programs that redistribute wealth to those without it. Liberals believe in the market place, in the security of property, and in the right of those who earn wealth to keep it.
- Progressives also demand equality of result in university admissions, in hiring, and in political posts. They want representation according to population, so that an equal number or more of women, and at

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<sup>14</sup> <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/two-progressivisms/>

least the percentage according to population of blacks, Hispanics, gays, transgenders, disabled, and homeless. Liberals are in favour of individual merit, and oppose giving people special privileges or benefits according to census categories; they thus oppose reverse sexism, reverse racism, and all such programs as so-called “affirmative action,” or special favour or disfavour depending upon your category.

- Progressives insist that speech that they do not like be banned, calling it “hate speech” or even “violence.” Anyone disagreeing with progressives are likely to be accused of being “racist,” “fascist,” and the like. Liberals are in favour of individual freedom, and freedom of speech is the freedom on which all public rights are based.
- Liberals favour rule of law, and thus do not support allowing law breakers to have free rein, as progressives advocate, for example in their active support of illegal immigrants in universities and so-called “sanctuary cities.” Progressives call for open borders, to allow anyone in the world to enter the country. Many progressives have condemned whites as “oppressors,” and wish to admit and unlimited number of people of colour to swamp the hated whites. Liberals prefer to think of people as unique individuals with many characteristics and qualities, rather than reducing individuals to general categories.

Liberals tend to think that human nature is given and mixed, while progressives, especially radical progressives, think that human nature is perfectible. Liberals think that social arrangements need to be open, such as in market economies, to allow individuals to seek their own destinies, although some liberals would concede that there is a need for a limited “safety net” for people who are in dire need.

Progressives, on the other hand, think that social arrangements hold people back, and that perfecting social institutions would lead to individual perfection. Progressives, especially radical progressives, are most often utopian in their philosophical orientation, seeing human being as perfectible, while liberals see human nature as fixed with both good and bad characteristics.

Conservatives, keeping in mind that some take conservative views of only one aspect of society, tend to believe that human nature is flawed, and that evil flows from those flaws. Therefore, conservatives expect social reform or transformation will always be disappointing because, due to human nature, there will always be crime, poverty, corruption, social hierarchy, and war. Conservatives look to religion, family, and traditional heritage to ameliorate people’s lives and fend off the worst aspects of human nature.

Classical liberalism is a moderate, heritage-based political stance that is quite distinct from, and in most respects opposed to, progressivism. There is nothing “liberal” about extreme progressivism, so we should stop distorting the term “liberal” by applying it to progressivism. It is time for those with more moderate views to take a stand against the increasing extremism we see today.

## About the Author



Philip Carl Salzman B.A. (Antioch), M.A., Ph.D. (Chicago) is Professor of Anthropology at McGill University, appointed in 1968. He founded the Commission on Nomadic Peoples of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, and its international journal, *Nomadic Peoples*, for which he received the IUAES Gold Award. In recent years he has also served as Senior Fellow at the University of St. Andrews, Open Society International Scholar at the American University of Central Asia, Erasmus Mundus International Fellow at the University of Catania, and Visiting Professor at the University of Sydney. Extensive ethnographic field research in Baluchistan (Iran), Gujarat and Rajasthan (India), and Sardinia (Italy) provided the foundation many articles in academic journals, and for book publications such as *The Anthropology of Real Life: Events in Human Experience* (1999), *Black Tents of Baluchistan* (2000), winner of the Premio Pitr–Salomone Marino, *Understanding Culture: An Introduction of Anthropological Theory* (2001), *Pastoralists: Equality, Hierarchy, and the State* (2004), *Culture and Conflict in the Middle East* (2008), *Postcolonial Theory and the Arab-Israel Conflict* (2008), and *Thinking Anthropologically 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.* (2010). His latest book publication is *Classic Comparative Anthropology: Studies from the Tradition* (2012). In public affairs, he was a member of Middle East Strategy at Harvard (2008-2010), a member of the Board of Directors of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (2004-2012), and is currently a Senior Fellow at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy, a member of the Academic Council of the Canadian Institute for Jewish Studies, a Fellow of the Middle East Forum (2015-), and a member of the Board of Directors of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (2016-). His articles have been published by the Frontier Centre, the Middle East Forum, the Gatestone Institute, the Canadian Institute for Jewish Research, the Macdonald Laurier Institute, and Areo Magazine.