

The Birmingham News

Are Alabamians really conservative?

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A recent Gallup poll characterizes Alabama as the nation's most conservative state. The assertion is misleading and reinforces a negative caricature of Alabamians. Words, like people, get bad reputations.

To many, a conservative is viewed as backward and narrow-minded. Likewise, a liberal is often viewed as a simple-minded person who gravitates toward extremist views. Both are wrong. The terms liberal and conservative have been morphed or hijacked and often contradict their actual meaning.

Why would so many people describe themselves as conservative? A valid question. The reason is pundits have referred to the conservative South for decades. The word has been reinforced in our political genes. I do not contend that many people are not conservative. I only argue that Alabamians are more ideologically diverse than frequently labeled.

Gallup erred in asking those sampled only how they viewed themselves ideologically in the broadest sense, rather than questioning them on specific issues. Examples range from government involvement in gun control and abortion to interest rates and civil liberties. Other published studies asked citizens about their views on a wide variety of economic and lifestyle issues. The reality is Alabamians, like others, are conservative on some issues and liberal on others. The generic label (liberal or conservative) that people give to themselves is not always a good indicator of their response to a particular issue.

In 1984, Maddox and Lillie's *Beyond Liberal and Conservative* was published by the Cato Institute, a leading libertarian think tank. Maddox and Lillie gave an academic definition to the terms that date back to at least the late 19th century. They argue that the central question is how people view the role of activist government.

Two broad questions determine a person's ideological leaning, (1) should the government be involved in regulating the economy and (2) should the government be involved in guaranteeing civil liberties.

Maddox and Lillie wrote that people responding yes to government involvement in economic issues and yes to government involvement in civil liberties would lean liberal.

Laissez faire-oriented respondents would answer no to each question and would lean conservative. However, Maddox and Lillie said Americans are too complex to fit into just two ideological labels, and thus they added libertarian and populist labels, not to be confused with political parties by the same name.

Laissez faire-oriented libertarians would respond no to economic involvement of government but yes to civil liberties involvement. Populists would answer yes to economic involvement of government and no to government involvement in civil liberties.

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Note the populists emerged in the late 19th century era of industrialization and advocated regulating business monopolies but were not active in social movements. Maddox and Lillie concluded that 80 percent of Americans fit into one of those four ideological labels. The remaining 20 percent were too complex to fit into an identifiable ideological label.

Barry Goldwater, arguably the quintessential modern American conservative, was very critical about the misuse of the term conservative. He argued that true laissez faire conservatives did not believe in activist government involvement in economic or social/lifestyle issues. The Arizona senator viewed the use of government to enforce anything, the economy or religious beliefs and morals, as Statist, not conservative.

While some describe Alabamians as conservatives, we are not always practicing conservatives. This is especially true in north Alabama where the construction of the U.S. government-owned Tennessee Valley Authority, not exactly a conservative creation, transformed Huntsville and north Alabama from a third world existence into a vibrant technological giant.

Today, Alabama is among a small group of states that receive significantly more dollars from the federal government than we pay in taxes collectively. I have read numbers as high as \$1.66 we receive to every \$1 that we pay in federal taxes.

Some of that is attributed to our high poverty rates in many parts of our state. A large portion of that is, however, the greater Huntsville military and space complexes where some 35,000 people are employed by the U.S. government or government contractors. Some say Huntsville is second only to the greater Washington, D.C., area in such spending. Others have called our community Federalville and Keynesian economics on steroids. I have heard those who say government does not create jobs. Perhaps they have not been to Huntsville, Alabama.

That is not to say that hard-working entrepreneurs have not used conservative economic principles to build successful businesses and laid a solid foundation for our prosperous valley. Every time I see government contractors, I want to hug their necks. Their successes helped make my hard-working family middle class.

What is bothersome is the portrayal of our state as backward based largely on flawed interpretations and terms. As a student of political science, I understand the use of rhetoric in our political process. The reality is we like some things government does and we don't like other things government does.

However, we should all be concerned when the rhetoric suggests that we do not like anything government does. In that scenario, if we get what we claim we want, the last person to leave Huntsville please turn out the lights.

That would not be good.