



President Trump? Flake? Romney? Lee? Who gets to decide who is a conservative?

Republicans can't agree on what it means to be a conservative. Here's why the concept is so hard to define

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He's been called "the most pro-life president in history," has been photographed embracing the U.S. flag and holding a Bible, and infused the federal judiciary with a historic number of conservative judges.

Legal analysts say his latest Supreme Court pick, Judge Amy Coney Barrett, could tilt the nation's highest court to the right for decades.

So why are some Americans still challenging President Donald Trump's conservative credentials?

In recent weeks, people as diverse as former Arizona Republican Sen. Jeff Flake and Catholic comedian Jim Gaffigan have said flatly that Trump is not a conservative, a charge that seems incongruous given the president's positions on issues such as abortion and school choice.

This isn't just because Trump hasn't always been a Republican (he's been registered as a Democrat and an independent), but also because people who identify as conservatives don't always agree on what a conservative is.

"Yes, Trump has done certain things that any Republican president would have done," said George F. Will, the nationally syndicated columnist and author of the 2019 book "The Conservative Sensibility."

But he adds: "Is Trump a conservative? No. Is he a liberal? No. He's a nihilist."

The position of Will and Republicans like Flake — some of whom support Democrat Joe Biden for president — rankles and angers Trump supporters who themselves identify as conservative. They point to the president's actions while in office, such as reducing government regulation. Small government has long been a central part of conservative canon.

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"There are areas in which his political worldview and mine diverge and he sometimes states things in a different way than I would and pursues different policies than I would pursue. But a

lot of what he does is conservative,” said Utah Republican Sen. Mike Lee, who has evolved from Trump opponent in 2016 to staunch ally.

And issue for issue, even the Republicans publicly opposing Trump have much in common with the president.

Utah GOP Sen. Mitt Romney, the former Republican presidential candidate, famously challenges Trump over and over again. He was the only member of his party to convict Trump in the Senate impeachment trial earlier this year. Yet Romney votes the Senate’s conservative agenda, aligning with the president 81.6% of the time, according to the website FiveThirtyEight.

In announcing his support for Biden in August, Flake said he believes the conservative cause will suffer under four more years of Trump, a man who said in 2015, “When you get down to it, I am a conservative person.” Others have pronounced American conservatism dead.

Here’s why Flake and Trump — two self-described conservatives in the same country — can so vehemently disagree on what that means.

Living by principles

In Gallup’s most recent polling on ideology, 37% of Americans identify as conservatives, compared to 35% who say they are moderate and 24% liberal.

But the survey makes clear that “conservative” and “Republican” are not synonymous, even though conservative columnist Jonah Goldberg has observed, “For most Americans, conservatism basically means the stuff Republicans are for, and liberalism means whatever Democrats are for.”

That’s the popular perception, but it’s more complicated than that. For example, about one-quarter of African Americans who are Democrats describe their views as conservative, according to Pew Research Center. And 4% of Republicans identify as liberal in their views, according to Gallup.

Politics, however, is just one part of what is known as classical conservatism, which traces its roots to the French Revolution and 18th century Irish philosopher and statesman, Edmund Burke.

The late Russell Kirk, who published “The Conservative Mind” in 1953, argued for a conservatism that informs every aspect of a person’s life, not just how they vote. Politics, he famously said, is “the diversion of the quarter-educated.”

“For Kirk, conservatism could not be reduced to an ideology, that is, a sort of party platform to which every political or social issues should submit,” said Gerald Russello, editor of The University Bookman and author of “The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk.”

Instead, being a conservative means living by 10 principles, the first of which is belief in an enduring moral order.

Similarly, Burke saw conservatism as a disposition, one that honors and respects the past in what he called “the contract of eternal society,” said Wilfred M. McClay, a history professor at the University of Oklahoma.

President Donald Trump walks along the colonnade with Judge Amy Coney Barrett after a news conference to announce Barrett as his nominee to the Supreme Court, in the Rose Garden at the White House on Saturday, Sept. 26, 2020, in Washington. *Alex Brandon, Associated Press*

That is, “We don’t just exist for ourselves; we exist for the generations that came before and the generations that will follow, the unborn,” he said. Conversely, McClay said, “A progressive sees the past in large measure as something to be overcome, to be transformed into something new and different.”

Three stages of conservatism

Modern conservatism is an amalgam of ideas advanced by people that include Russell, the late Sen. Barry Goldwater of Arizona and National Review founder William F. Buckley — and later, by President Ronald Reagan. Different strains developed because people disagreed on what mattered most: for example, “the importance of traditional values vs. minimalistic government involvement in the economy vs. military spending and foreign policy activism,” wrote Shay Khatiri for The Bulwark.

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But Robert Goldberg, a history professor at the University of Utah and author of a biography of Goldwater, said that “the litmus test for being a conservative over the past 50 years has shown both consistency and evolution.”

From the 1950s through the 1970s, what Goldberg calls the “Old Right” was distinguished by stances against communism, a strong military, fiscal conservatism, small government and state’s rights. “There was also a strong belief in personal responsibility and freedom,” he said.

The “New Right” began to emerge in 1970s and continued through the 1990s, as the movement drew support from evangelical Christians and think-tanks advocating conservative positions emerged. The New Right emphasized families, prayer in schools and traditional gender roles, Goldberg said, in addition to supporting the positions of the Old Right.

During this time, the phrase “law and order,” which President Trump frequently tweets, began to show up in conservative discourse, often with racial undertones, he added.

The third iteration of modern conservatism came after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, when the theme became “America under siege,” accompanied by support for strong borders, gun rights and opposition to illegal immigration.

In 2016, every Republican candidate for president embraced these values to varying degrees, Goldberg said.

“Trump, I think, is an authoritarian,” he added. “But looking at his stances with regards to foreign policy and domestic policy, I see a consistency in the conservative message.”

However, Jennifer Rubin, a columnist for The Washington Post, does not see a conservative message in the current administration, at all. She recently stopped identifying herself as a conservative on Twitter because she believes the movement has abandoned its core principles.

“Let’s be honest: There is no conservative movement or party today. There is a Republican Party thoroughly infused with racism and intellectually corrupted by right-wing nationalism,” Rubin recently wrote.

Trump’s credentials

Research by Emily Ekins, policy director at the Cato Institute, has shown that people who identify as “staunch conservatives” comprise the largest percentage of Trump voters — 31% — followed by “free marketeers” with 25% and “American preservationists” with 20%.

And his base is deliriously happy that he is able to select a third Supreme Court justice. After Trump announced his nomination of Barrett Saturday, Kyle Smith, a writer for National Review Online, tweeted, “This is one of the greatest days for conservatism in my lifetime.”

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The president’s conservative resume is also enhanced by his opposition to abortion and his judicial appointments, which include more than 200 federal judges who are appointed for life.

His efforts to reduce government regulations also aligns with the conservative desire to keep government in check. The president promised to cut two federal regulations for every new one imposed; the White House says that Trump did more than promised by eliminating nearly eight regulations for every new one imposed.

And on the matter of abortion, Trump has been touted as the “most fearlessly pro-life president in history.”

“Trump has stood up for the humanity of the unborn child like no president in recent memory. And this is why so many Christian conservatives stick with him,” wrote Marc Thiessen in The Washington Post.

But Will, who also opposes abortion, says a person is not a conservative just because he or she aligns with conservatives on a few issues, and that conservatives themselves err by focusing on an issue narrowly.

“To be a single issue voter in a complicated world is not responsible citizenship,” Will said. “The one issue that gives me pause is the life issue, because we’re talking about the destruction of persons. I get that. But even so, I don’t think you can sacrifice everything to one value; that’s not sensible moral reasoning.”

Any Republican president, he added, would choose conservative justices, and Trump supporters ignore the larger picture at the expense of society, Will told the Deseret News.

“Conservatives believe that because the basic political problem is to get people of differing views and life goals to live in harmony in one society, that you have to have a certain level of civility. And of course, Mr. Trump believes that civility is for weaklings,” he said.

“I believe and have written that you cannot unring a bell, you cannot unsay the things he has said, and by making it acceptable and normal and expected now that there will be name calling, lies and other crudities, he has done more damage, lasting damage, to America’s civic culture than Nixon’s surreptitious felonies and Watergate did.

“Nixon’s felonies were exposed, punished, and we moved on. You can’t do that with what Mr. Trump has done to our civic culture,” Will said.

‘Broader than politics’

Flake, too, is among Republicans who are actively working to oppose the president. Anti-Trump groups include [The Lincoln Project](#), [Republican Voters Against Trump](#) and [Stand Up Republic](#), an organization headed by former independent presidential candidate Evan McMullin.

(McMullin’s group broadcast its own counter-convention, called “The Convention on Founding Principles,” concurrent with the Republican National Convention in August.)

In his Aug. 24 announcement to back Biden, Flake derided Trump’s policies and behavior, saying the president does not embody conservatism.

“Indifference to the truth or to the careful stewardship of the institutions of American liberty is not conservative. Disregard for the separation of powers — the centerpiece of our constitutional system — is not conservative. Governing by tweet is not conservative. It’s not even governing,” he said.

In an interview, Flake said he believes that three principles define conservatism: belief in limited government, commitment to free trade, and recognition that strong American leadership around the globe makes America more secure and the world a better place. Yet he channels Kirk when he says, “Conservatism, as I see it, is broader than politics, the desire to preserve institutions that we know work.”

Michael Barber, an associate professor of political science at Brigham Young University, agrees that the issues Flake identifies are commonly held notions of conservatism today, but notes that despite its grounding in the past, conservative ideology is fluid, and can be influenced by personalities.

“The things we consider conservatism today may not have been considered conservative in the past, and in some ways, the definitions of conservatism and liberalism are defined by whoever happens to be in control of the party or the movement at that particular time,” Barber said.

And Lee, in Utah, said conservatives should make room for people whose priorities are different.

“I don’t think we should dissuade people from joining the Republican Party because they don’t check every box. You’re not necessarily going to get everyone to agree on every point of what conservatism is.”

You also can't get everyone to agree on what liberalism is, said Elkins of the Cato Institute.

"Research has shown that a wide range of beliefs among people who identify as conservatives and liberals, and a minority check all the boxes of the major ideas associated with both groups," she said. "The number of people who fit straight down the line is maybe 11% or 10%."