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## Language, labels and laws

By Richard W. Rahn

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What does a “progressive” stand for? How does this differ from what a liberal, conservative or libertarian stands for? More so than in most years, the presidential candidates are debating about labels. Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders got into an argument last week about what a progressive is, and Mrs. Clinton enlightened everyone by telling us “the root of that word, progressive is progress.”

There are two conflicting philosophical views as to the proper role of government. One sees the role of the state to protect the individual from the transgressions of others, while at the same time protecting the individual from the state in order to ensure individual liberty. The other view is that the function of government is to protect the collective, and to directly provide for individual needs.

Correctly said, there is an endless struggle between the “libertarians” and the “statists.” The statists tend to look to government — more regulation or spending — to cure every perceived ill, while libertarians tend to look to the private sector to solve most problems. Sloppy journalists often refer to this struggle as being between the right and left, which loses much of its meaning. Most of the Republicans refer to themselves as conservatives — whose standard definition means those “who adhere to traditional methods or views.” Yet, there are real differences between the policies of the conservative candidates when it comes to foreign policy, immigration, marijuana decriminalization and the role of the states versus the federal government — demonstrating how elastic the term “conservative” has become.

The classic definition of “liberal” is “one who is open-minded or not strict in the observance of orthodox, traditional or established forms or ways.” In Europe, the liberal parties normally lean to less intrusive government, while in the United States the statists captured and perverted the word as a synonym for bigger and more intrusive government. The big-government programs, which began in a major way in the 1930s, were beset with so many failures that by the Reagan era, “liberal” had become almost a dirty word, so many statist politicians fled from it and captured the word “progressive,” which had a much better but meaningless ring to it.

The “progressive” Hillary Clinton wants more government regulation, spending, and taxation, while the “progressive” Bill Clinton told us two decades ago that the “era of big government is over” — and did, in fact, preside over a relatively smaller government in his second term. The progressive politicians say they want government actively involved in creating new jobs — primarily through more government spending. Yet, at the same time, they push for much higher minimum wages that kill job opportunities for the least skilled (which only those in complete denial of reality refuse to admit). The progressives tell us they want to break up the big banks.

Yet, because the costs of all of the new financial regulations, which are often the brain children of the progressives, fall much harder on small banks than the big banks, the number of banks in the United States has fallen by 30 percent in the last 15 years. Labels such as liberal, progressive and conservative tell us little about which laws a politician is actually going to promote. Most people to some extent have both some libertarian and some statist views, e.g., students who are in favor of drug legalization but want “free stuff” from government to be paid for by others. Note how many Iowa farmers are in favor of smaller government and free markets, but push for ethanol subsidies.

Libertarians, in contrast with anarchists, see a necessary role for government, including the promulgation and enforcement of laws necessary for the common defense and a civil society. Few of even the most ardent statist (including socialists and communists) want to see a return to only government-owned restaurants, particularly among those who had dined in them in the old Soviet Union. Even Cuba now has many privately owned and operated restaurants.

It would be useful if those who write on politics would replace the terms “right” and “left,” and “liberal,” “progressive,” “moderate” and “conservative” with “libertarian” and “statist” — where appropriate. By using language and labels more carefully and precisely, it would help the public to understand why the “conservative” Rand Paul and the “socialist” Bernie Sanders can agree on drugs but strongly disagree on government entitlements. There are many issues where people have strong disagreements — which do not fit neatly in all cases into a libertarian-statist dichotomy — such as abortion and the necessary level of defense spending.

The great philosopher-economist F.A. Hayek, beloved by most conservatives, referred to himself as an “Old Whig” like the conservative icon Edmund Burke, rather than as a conservative. John Locke noted the Whigs fought for “a standing rule to live by, common to everyone in society and not to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, arbitrary will of another man.” Hayek, like Burke, believed in the importance of tradition and argued that existing institutions should not lightly be overturned — a position held by most conservatives and many libertarians. The American Founders and the Constitution largely reflected the beliefs of the Old Whigs. Better to be an “Old Whig” on most issues, rather than a “new socialist.”

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