

# Ideological Conflict Among American Elites

by Robert Lerner, Althea K. Nagai and Stanley Rothman

The words “conservative” and “liberal” or “right” and “left” in everyday language imply that political ideology can be outlined along a simple spectrum. Yet, political scientists and sociologists have long known that ideology is a multidimensional concept, pitting economic issues against social, moral, civil liberty, and foreign policy concerns.

Despite this knowledge, most discussions of ideology treat non-economic controversies as ad hoc additions to the conflict over the proper extent of the welfare state. While not wishing to disparage the importance of economic issues, in this essay we treat ideology as consisting of four independent dimensions placed, at least initially, on an equal footing.

Our findings are based on a unique set of survey data on American elites. Stanley Rothman and others have systematically sampled American economic, political and cultural leaders during the late 1970s and 1980s. These include American business elites, American labor leaders, partners in the nation’s most prestigious corporate law firms, high-ranking members of the federal civil service, the American military elite, congressional aides, federal judges, leaders of public interest groups, the media elite, the creators of the nation’s most popular movies, the makers of prime-time television, and American religious leaders.<sup>1</sup>

“*There are no consistent conservative or liberal ideological camps among American elites. Depending upon the issue—or more broadly, the aspect of ideology involved—elite alignments change dramatically.*”

## Four Dimensions Of Elite Ideology

The statistical technique of factor analysis allows us to begin with the survey responses and to extract the underlying dimensions that constitute core beliefs. The dimensions are ideal-type abstractions meant to represent and partially explicate the underlying link between otherwise disparate issue positions.

From our analysis, four underlying dimensions of ideology emerge: *laissez-faire individualism* versus *collectivist liberalism*; *moral Puritanism* versus *expressive individualism*; *system support* versus *system alienation*; and *regime threat* versus *liberal cosmopolitanism*.

### Laissez-Faire Individualism vs. Collectivist Liberalism

Four agree/disagree items from the surveys tapped into this dimension:

- \* *The government should work to substantially reduce the income gap between the rich and the poor.*
- \* *It is not the proper role of government to insure that everyone has a job.*
- \* *Less government regulation of business would be good for the country.*
- \* *Our environmental problems are not as serious as people have been led to believe.*

Disagreeing with the first item while agreeing with the other three is the conservative response. The liberal position maintains that government should reduce

the income gap, insure jobs, increase regulation, and, at the same time, believes in the seriousness of environmental problems.

### Traditional Puritanism vs. Expressive Individualism

Four items are associated with this dimension of ideology:

- \* *It is a woman’s right to decide whether or not to have an abortion.*
- \* *Lesbians and homosexuals should not be allowed to teach in public schools.*
- \* *It is wrong for a married person to have sexual relations with someone other than his or her spouse.*
- \* *It is wrong for adults of the same sex to have sexual relations.*

Disagreeing with the first item while agreeing with the rest signals traditional values, while the opposite set of responses indicates the core position of expressive individualism.

### System Support vs. System Alienation

Six questions from the studies constitute the third dimension of ideology:

- \* *The American legal system mainly favors the wealthy.*
- \* *The American private enterprise system is generally fair to working people.*
- \* *The United States needs a complete re-structuring of its basic institutions.*
- \* *Big corporations should be taken out of private ownership and run in the public interest.*
- \* *The structure of our society causes most people to feel alienated.*
- \* *The main goal of US foreign policy has been to protect US business interests.*

Agreement with the second question and disagreement with the remaining items constitute system loyalty, while the opposite set of responses comprises the system alienation position.

The second factor analysis was done on eight groups of elites which were asked an additional set of 30 questions. This richer set of questions yielded, in

addition to the same three dimensions as before, one additional ideological dimension which we label regime threat.

**Tough Mindedness versus Tender Mindedness<sup>2</sup>**

Tough vs. tender mindedness is intriguing and, in its present incarnation, novel. This dimension measures the degree to which a person feels threatened by certain forces in the outside world, whether in the international sphere or domestically. It also measures the extent to which s/he is ready to respond to the threat by the use of force. The following four questions gauged this dimension.

- \* *It is sometimes necessary for the CIA to protect US interests by undermining hostile governments.*
- \* *We should be more forceful in our dealings with the Soviet Union even if it increases the risk of war.*
- \* *It is important for America to have the strongest military force in the world, no matter what it costs.*
- \* *There is too much concern in the courts for the rights of criminals.*

Agreement with these questions constitutes the conservative response, while disagreement constitutes the liberal response. The items which comprise this dimension cohere even without including the Soviet Union question in the factor analysis, indicating that the underlying dimension remains intact despite the demise of Communism.

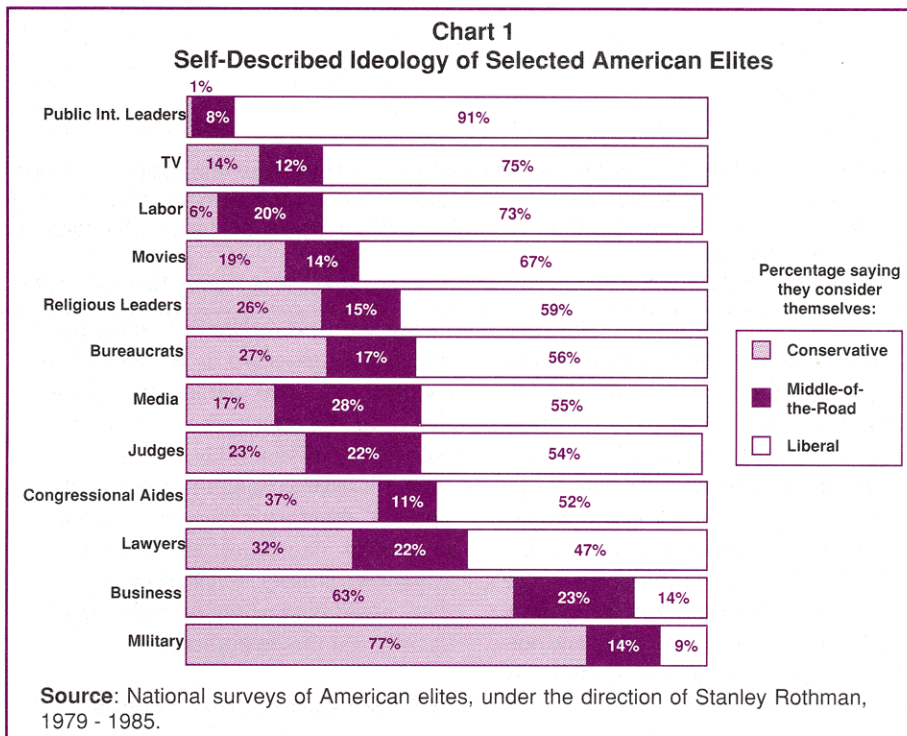
**Self-Described Ideology**

Respondents were asked to describe their political views on a seven-point scale, from 1 (“conservative”) to 7 (“liberal”), with 4 labeled as “middle of the road.”

Based on their self-descriptions, American elites are somewhat divided along the conservative-liberal continuum. Overall, 18% are middle-of-the-road, while 51% label themselves liberal and 31% think of themselves as conservatives. Ideological differences are even greater when elites are divided by occupation (see Chart 1). Ninety-one

percent of the public interest elite, roughly three out of four makers of prime-time television and labor leaders, and majorities of religious leaders, movie makers, bureaucrats, the media elite, federal judges, and Congressional aides call themselves liberal. At the other end of the ideological scale, 9% of military leaders, 14% of business executives, and 47% of corporate lawyers refer to themselves as liberal.

Significant differences among elite groups emerge when we compare them along the four aspects of ideology. Factor scores were created for each respondent for each of the ideological dimensions. The scores are normalized so that the mean of each



scale for the entire sample is set at 100 and its standard deviation at 10. Scores greater than 100 indicate greater liberalism while scores less than 100 indicate greater conservatism. The mean scores for each elite group are reported in Chart 2.

On the collectivist liberalism dimension, contrasting “rugged individualism” with collectivist welfare state liberalism, individual respondent scores range from an extremely conservative score of 70.65 to an extremely liberal 126.21. There are large, statistically significant differences between elite groups on this dimension. The public interest and business elite are on opposite ends of the ideological continuum, with a difference in mean scores of nearly two standard deviations. Not surprisingly, labor leaders are almost as liberal as the public interest elite, while military leaders are as conservative as business executives.

On the expressive individualism dimension, the elite occupational groups fall very much along an occupational divide: traditional (business, labor, military, religious) versus new class (media, entertainment, public interest group). Conservatives accuse new cultural elites of being far to the left of most Americans; they are also to the left of most elites. Public interest leaders and the elites of popular culture (television, journalism, and movies) are more liberal than everyone else, including labor leaders, again with statistically significant differences.

On the dimension of system alienation, the differences among elite groups are

**Chart 2**  
**Mean Ideological Scores of Selected American Elite Groups**

Collectivist Liberalism		Expressive Individualism		System Alienation		Tender Mindedness	
Business	92.91	Religious	90.89	Lawyers	93.06	Military	91.09
Military	93.91	Military	92.30	Judges	94.88	Labor	96.94
Cong. Aides	98.53	Labor	96.06	Military	95.49	Cong. Aides	97.83
Lawyers	98.94	Judges	97.43	Bureaucrats	97.71	Bureaucrats	99.17
Bureaucrats	99.54	Business	98.09	Business	97.80	Lawyers	101.43
TV	100.26	Cong. Aides	99.63	Cong. Aides	98.93	Judges	103.48
Movie Makers	100.83	Bureaucrat	99.92	Media	101.10	Religious	103.54
Media	101.27	Lawyers	103.36	Religious	102.74	Public Int.	106.60
Judges	101.78	Media	105.69	TV	104.11		
Religious	103.96	Movie Makers	106.05	Labor	104.93		
Labor	105.33	Public Int.	106.17	Movie Makers	106.50		
Public Int.	108.88	TV	106.48	Public Int.	107.53		

**Note:** The factor scores for each individual were created from the factor score coefficients for each factor. The scores are normalized so that the total sample mean is 100 and the standard deviation is 10. Scores greater than 100 indicate greater liberalism, while scores less than 100 indicate lesser liberalism (or greater conservatism). The Chart reports mean scores for each elite group.

**Source:** National surveys of American elites, under the direction of Stanley Rothman, 1979 - 1985.

also statistically significant. The least alienated groups are in government (congressional aides, judges, bureaucrats and military) and in business (business leaders and corporate lawyers)—a cluster of elites resembling C. Wright Mills' military industrial complex. In contrast, groups on the outside--the public interest leaders, labor, and cultural elites--are significantly alienated from the system. The differences between insider and outsider groups are almost all statistically significant.

The tough vs. tender-minded dimension apparently contrasts the conservative position of wariness and willingness to use force against those outside the defined moral community, including those who violate the law, with the position of liberal cosmopolitans who do not see these groups as a serious problem ("we are the world"). The latter are less likely to see the need for strength or the use of force. Not surprisingly, military leaders are the most likely to see the existence of regime threat, but they are followed closely by labor leaders. Public interest group leaders have the most favorable view of regimes hostile to the US. In fact they gave a lower approval rating to Ronald Reagan than to Fidel Castro. This last finding suggests that some of those whom we identified as operating on the basis of tender mindedness might respond in a more wary and tough minded manner when

facing regimes (such as Fascist regimes) which they perceive as threatening in terms of their own ideological assumptions. In short, attitudes toward criminals or other nations may, in some cases, reflect less of a "tough-minded/tender-minded" dimension than one of a lesser or greater degree of alienation from American society. Unfortunately our data, while suggestive, do not permit us to fully test this hypothesis.

### Self-Identified Labels & Voting

Given that ideology is composed of these four dimensions, what do elites mean when they call themselves conservative, moderate and liberal? Self-identified ideology is highly correlated with scores on each dimension: with collectivist liberalism (.61), with expressive individualism (.33), with system alienation (.41), and with regime threat (.53). All correlations are statistically significant at the  $p < .0001$  level or better.

The four dimensions taken together predict self-identified liberalism extremely well (a multiple regression including all four measures explains 62% of the variance). Self-identified ideology is a composite of the four dimensions, as shown below by the standardized coefficients (all individual coefficients are statistically significant). The greatest weight is placed on collectivist liberalism (.42), followed by system

alienation (.31), expressive individualism (.28), and regime threat (.21).

The ideological differences between elite groups are reflected in voting behavior. Not surprisingly, public interest elites, labor leaders, and cultural/media elites vote for Democrats, while military and business leaders vote Republican (see Chart 3).

### Elite Ideological Pluralism

Our analysis highlights a substantial amount of ideological pluralism among American elites. A singular focus on economic issues, typical in discussions regarding ideology, gives an oversimplified and incomplete impression of conservatism versus liberalism among American elites. For instance, a purely economic perspective in examining ideology places labor leaders in the same liberal camp as public interest leaders and cultural elites. This, however, is only part of a far more complex picture. If we look at issues of expressive individualism (e.g., abortion, gay rights) or regime threat (e.g., crime, strong military), labor leaders are in the conservative camp alongside military leaders.

The same ideological "switching" is true of business executives, who are the most conservative group in terms of collectivist liberalism, but are moderate on the expressive individualism and sys-

tem alienation measures. Religious leaders show even more variation. They are squarely in the liberal camp for three of the four dimensions. However on one, expressive individualism, they are the most conservative of all elite groups.

Only two groups in our study show unwavering consistency along all of the four aspects of ideology. Military leaders remain decisively conservative on all ideological dimensions. On the other side, public interest group leaders are overwhelmingly liberal on all four aspects (in fact, they are the most liberal of all groups on three dimensions, and the second most liberal on one).

Elite groups differ sharply in their ideological views, and these cleavages are drawn along a variety of distinct ideological dimensions. The traditional, economy-oriented aspect of ideology (collectivist liberalism) finds, not surprisingly, the conservative end of the spectrum anchored by business executives, and the liberal end anchored by labor and public interest leaders. The configuration changes dramatically when cultural/value issues are measured (expressive individualism). Here, a traditional occupations versus "new class" divide is evident. Labor leaders join military and religious elites in the conservative camp, while cultural and en-

tertainment elites create a solid liberal block.

Alignments change yet again when system alienation is measured. The political and legal insiders (lawyers, congressional aides, civil servants and the military) strongly support the system, while elites who are mainly on the political outside (public interest leaders, labor leaders and media elites) voice the most alienation.

In sum, there are no consistent conservative or liberal camps among elites. Depending upon the issue — or more broadly, the aspect of ideology involved — elite alignments change dramatically. Ideology is both particular and multi-dimensional, and the complex and fluid alignments of elite groups on various issues reflect this.

**Endnote:**

<sup>1</sup>The business leaders were a random sample of middle and upper management executives at four Fortune 500 companies and three Fortune 50 companies (response rate = 96%; final sample size = 242). The labor leaders were a random sample of presidents and secretary-treasurers of national trade unions and major local unions (response rate = 54%; final sample size = 95). The lawyers were randomly sampled from partners of leading New York and Washington law firms (response rate = 66%; final sample size = 150). The civil

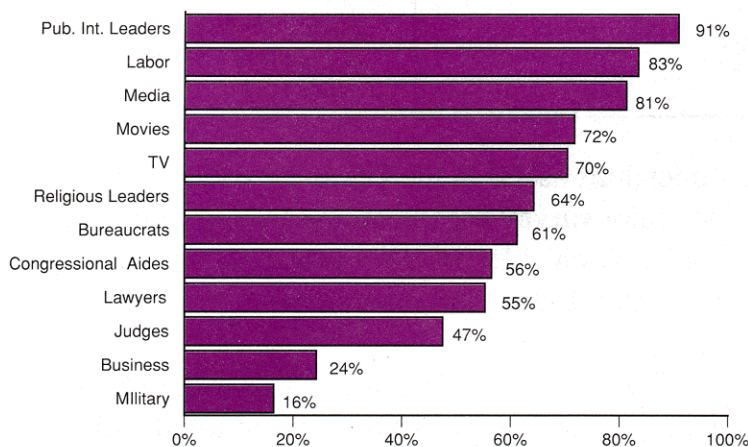
service sample consisted of a random sample from the Office of Personnel Management's list of senior executives (response rate = 85%; final sample size = 200). The military elite consisted of a random sample of field grade officers from the Pentagon and from the national Defense University (response rate = 77%; final sample size = 152). Congressional Aides were randomly sampled from lists of key committee and personnel staff (response rate = 71%; final sample size = 134). Federal judges consisted of a random sample of federal district and appellate judges (response rate = 54%; final sample size = 114). Public interest group leaders were randomly sampled from lists of lobbying groups and public interest law firms (response rate = 84%; final sample size = 158). The media elite was a random sample of journalists and editors from leading print and TV news outlets (response rate = 74%; final sample size = 238). The movie creators were randomly sampled from a list of producers, writers, and directors of top grossing movies. The television creators were randomly sampled from a list of producers, writers, and directors of successful prime-time shows (response rate = 60%; final sample size = 178). Religious leaders were sampled from a reputationally derived list of leading Protestant and Catholic figures (response rate = 77%; final sample size = 128). The samples and methods of interviewing are more fully described in Robert Lerner, Althea K. Nagai, and Stanley Rothman, *American Elites*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996. The surveys were conducted between 1979 to 1985, with a total sample size of 1,830. Although a decade or more old, the data, we believe, remain relevant to understanding the current ideological situation of America's elites.

<sup>2</sup> The terms used in our book are Regime Threat vs. No Regime Threat.



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**Chart 3**  
**Presidential Voting of Selected American Elites:**  
**Mean % Voting Democratic in the 1980 and 1984 Elections**



**Source:** National surveys of American elites, under the direction of Stanley Rothman, 1979 - 1985.